

*THE GIRL DISAPPEARED: THE PROSTITUTE OF LA ISLA DE SANTA FLORA*

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The novella, *The Girl Disappeared*, focuses on the life of Emalia, a street kid from Mexico. She is taken from the streets of Veracruz and forced into a life of prostitution on the fictitious island of La Isla de Santa Flora. The primary conflict that drives the action of the story is her pending choice between escaping her life of slavery and saving another young woman who is on the verge of being forced into a life of prostitution as well. The novella, as a literary piece, dwells on the question of character agency and explores the multilayered nature of code switching. Language for these women becomes a tool in their struggle against their captives and a means of self-preservation, or sanctuary, as they use their growing bilingualism to foment a limited agency, to act in their own defense.

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PART I  
UNDERSTANDING THE NOVELLA

Word count plagues every beginning writer. The short story writer shoots for five thousand words and the novelist for as close to one hundred thousand as possible. But, this does not define the form. The last short story written by Jorge Luis Borges, “La memoria de Shakespeare,” is very close to twenty-seven hundred words, and in the Spanish tradition, one would be hard pressed to find a more accomplished writer of short fiction. On the other hand, *Dear Life*, Alice Munro’s latest collection of short stories, contains at least two stories that push beyond the thirty-page mark. Assuming the low range of 250 words per page, both of those stories exceed seven thousand words. The point is, accomplished writers push the boundaries of convention and word or page length has very little or nothing to do with the form.

Ian Watt, in his seminal work *The Rise of the Novel*, spends the entirety of his second chapter discussing the reading public of the eighteenth-century and the growing power of the booksellers. Granted, he is doing more in this chapter than delineating this growing power of a group of tradesmen, but the point cannot be ignored. He writes:

Once the writer’s aim was no longer to satisfy the standards of patrons and the literary élite, other considerations took on a new importance. Two of them, at least, were likely to encourage the author to prolixity: first, to write very explicitly and even tautologically might help his less educated readers to understand him easily; and secondly, since it was the bookseller, not the patron who rewarded him, speed and copiousness tended to become the supreme economic virtues. (Watt 56)

The free market and economic considerations changed the structure of how writers performed and the very works that they produced. What Watt is suggesting is that three hundred years ago booksellers were in the publishing business to make money. Length determined earnings. The ideal story would be long enough to divide into serials and sold separately. The intervening centuries have defined the standards and established the novel’s length between fifty and one hundred thousand words. The booksellers’ tendencies have not changed, however; they are quite happy to publish a moderately well written trilogy.

The novella too is defined by length, but it is also misunderstood because of it. The medium for the short story is the literary journal. This medium is what dictates its size. To publish a reasonable quantity of stories per issue, the publishers must insist on a standard length. Similarly, to make a novel economically viable, the publishers must insist on a minimum standard of length as well. Because there are few business models, if any, that “turn a profit” in the case of the novella, it has historically been ignored, except in the case of the writing masters: Hemingway, Steinbeck, Tolstoy, Capote, Woolf, James, Fitzgerald, and the list goes on. Even so, many of their novellas were first shelved as short novels or incorporated within story collections.

The length of the novella is often defined today as between fifteen and fifty thousand words. John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, states that “most novellas run somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 words” (Gardner 179). *The Seattle Review*, the literary journal of the University of Washington and one of the primary journals to publish only longer works, defines the length of the novella as “stories between forty and ninety pages long.” Revisiting the earlier formula, this puts the novella by *The Seattle Review*’s standards between ten and twenty-two thousand five hundred words. The Paris Literary Prize, the largest international contest to solely consider the novella, defines the length of the novella in their guidelines as “a minimum word count of 17,000 and a maximum of 35,000.” In a way, these are industry standards and, as such, must be understood as bookseller terms. However, the form itself does have expectations beyond length.

Robert Silverberg, in his introduction to *Sailing to Byzantium*, argues that the novella “provides an intense, detailed exploration of its subject, providing to some degree both the concentrated focus of the short story and the broad scope of the novel” (Silverberg vii). For him it allows room for the author to work through the problems inherent in his theme and intrinsic to his

character without getting lost in subplots or overwhelmed by a cast of characters. It then becomes a thematic, character driven story that by necessity must spend an extended time exploring problems of character and identity.

John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, also explores some of those expectations of the novella form. He writes:

The novella can be defined only as a work shorter than a novel...and both longer and more episodic than a short story. I use the word “episodic” loosely here, meaning only that the novella usually has a series of climaxes, each more intense than the last, though it may be built—and perhaps in fact ought to be built—of one continuous action. (Gardner 179)

Without going into the consideration of the form of the short story and that of the novel, Gardner attempts to define the nature of the novella. He does explore the other two forms in detail, but what is important to this discussion is his insight into the novella. By the above limited definition, the writer can assume that the story that is a novella takes a greater and lesser time to tell than a short story or novel and must proceed through “a series of small epiphanies or secondary climaxes to a much more firm conclusion” before it can fully resolve its conflict (183). He explains further that the novella takes on the greater scope in order to chronicle the life of one character during the “one important action in his life” (183). This is differentiated from the other two forms by specifying that the story could not be told fully without encompassing all the many character-building events that carry the plot to its inevitable end, but it also excludes any unnecessary or extraneous characters or plotlines typical of the novel.

To use an example, Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* tells the story of an old Cuban fisherman who, at the end of his life, catches a fish the like of which no living, other fisherman of his community has ever caught. It is not enough to tell the story that surrounds the catching of this gigantic fish, one so large that the old has to fold it in half and lash it to the



outside of his boat. However, in order to fully understand the import of the catch to him, Hemingway necessarily has to dig into the relationships of this ailing man. His human condition is forever changed by this encounter, but this change is dependent on the people that remain close to him and the episodic climaxes that detail his catch and subsequent loss of the fish. This is what John Gardner is discussing when he suggests that the novella moves through a tightly grouped and linear set of epiphanies.

Similarly, Steinbeck's George was forever changed when he killed Lennie, his friend and ward, at the end of the novella *Of Mice and Men*. However, the full impact of this event could not be understood without the episodic events of the killing of the mouse, the fight between Curley and Lennie, the killing of the puppy, and then Curley's wife. Lennie's innocence and brute size plague George. However, it is the lost hope of the group at the end of *Of Mice and Men*, which carries the full weight and impact on George's character. Thus, the linear telling of a story in the novella form is the most effective. However, he also takes note of the many exceptions to his understanding of the form.

His primary example for this is *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* by William Gass. Gardner uses this story to help define his idea of fictional pointillism. *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* depicts a mid-west town as it slowly decays. The language is beautifully poetic and the story has the feel of a long prose poem, but it embodies this idea that place and space can be a living things and impact one's identity. The character of the town becomes the changing protagonist, and the depiction of it becomes a mosaic that is the human condition as it is expressed in this community. Gardner's point is that exceptional art is not limited in form.

Writers should never begin a writing project with the limitations of the booksellers. They should begin with form. Each idea that becomes a story carries its own form. "La memoria de

Shakespeare” by Borges explores the code switching nature of language’s effect on character—identity—and the effects of those changes on personality. *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* is a novella even if it does not follow a linear plot like *Of Mice and Men* or *The Old Man and the Sea*. It personifies a town and chronicles its decaying life, but it could only do so if it had the space to episodically explore the many elements of its life. It is not the length that defines the boundaries of the form, but the nature of the story being told, and it is the writer’s ability that makes it live as a form.

The writing of my novella, *The Girl Disappeared: The Prostitute of La Isla de Santa Flora*, presented me with three very specific problems: character agency, the effect form has on a story, and the problem of code switching. Character agency played the largest role in the beginning because it helped define the story’s form. The protagonist’s life dictated that the space of the story needed the room to explore her past as fully as possible. A short story, even a series of short stories, would not accomplish my goal if character agency were one of the major problems I was exploring through this story. Not only did the question of agency help push this toward the novella form, it also gave my story an unconventional structure. I quickly abandoned Gardner’s linear structure for the framed story with flashbacks. I wanted the middle of the story to focus on the life events that brought the protagonist to the present action. Also, I attempted to retain the tight structure of the short story for each of the chapters because they were developed in workshop, but also because each of these moments in the protagonist’s life was instrumental in her development as a character. The code switching is an ongoing component of my writing. I struggle with identity as it exists in the marginal spaces of culture, and, more specifically, I believe that culture marginalizes space and identity. The point at which those two intersect and affect one another is of great interest to me as a writer. Language and the points on the map

where multiple cultures come together are the ideal environments to explore this problem of identity in relation to culture.

## The Question of Agency

The Oxford English Dictionary defines agency as the “ability or capacity to act or exert power; active working or operation; action, activity.” Chris Barker, in his textbook *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, develops this concept to greater depths. He writes:

[A]gency is a culturally intelligible way of understanding ourselves, and we clearly have the existential experience of facing and making choices. We do act even though those choices and acts are determined by social forces, particularly language, which lie beyond us as individual subjects. The existence of social structures (and of language in particular) is arguably a condition of action; it enables action so that neither human freedom nor human action can consist of an escape from social determinants. (Barker 183-84)

Agency, as defined by Barker, speaks directly to the interesting problem I faced with my protagonist. Even a slave or prisoner has the capacity to choose to eat, wash, and take care of her body, but it is not the choice of whether one will have a bagel before class. It is the decision to remain alive in spite of the conditions of life.

I wanted to develop a character that maintained a modicum of personal agency in spite of the conditions of her life as prostitute, a forced sex worker. Her ultimate choice, I knew, would be between the life of a young woman and her own freedom and life. It was while considering these two points that I came to understand that I was writing a novella. A series of short stories would not maintain the continuity of tension needed to make this story whole and complete. A novel would have forced the story into areas that might have added depth to the overall plot, but it would have taken the focus off the plight of my character.

The present action of the novella takes place on the island La Isla de Santa Flora where Emalia, the protagonist, is imprisoned as a prostitute in a brothel. Because of her education, she performs as one of high priced call girls for Romero, the owner of the brothel. Emalia has worked for him for around fifteen years and has known him for most of her life. Also, he has promised her freedom if she can successfully train a replacement. The story opens on the scene

where one of her protégées has been murdered for some infraction, but the second is on the verge of meeting Romero's demands. In Emalia's eyes, she has tried to help this woman, and all the ones before her, to survive her life as sex slave.

This is her constructed agency. Her intelligence, which affords her some latitude with her captors, gives her a place of prominence within the brothel. She is more than just a body for some drunk to use; she is a companion for an entirely different class of john. This allows her to passively struggle against Romero and his men. Her value, ability to make money and control men in positions of power, exempts her from the majority of the type of treatment her protégées experience. The second element of her agency is the assumed promise of her possible freedom; it is unimportant if the promise is real. She believes and is, therefore, complicit in her captivity and that of the women she trains.

The ultimate conflict is that Emalia is to help traffic a young woman into Europe as a final act before Emalia is released. In the past, she has only been involved with the women Romero intended to keep in the brothel. She has always had time to help these women prepare and learn to survive. This is not the case with this young woman, Ana. Emalia's problem is further complicated because she can more fully identify with Ana. The choice is to do as Romero expects and go free or help this woman escape and potentially die.

There is a second element to consider in this concept of agency, and it comes to mind retroactively—almost accidentally—from the subtitle of this section: The question of agency. This second element brought to mind Homi Bhabha's discussion of agency in *The Location of Culture*. As a street kid from Veracruz, Emalia is the embodiment of Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Sonia Saldívar-Hull discussing this in her book *Feminism on the Border* during her discussion of the legend of La Llorona. It is a discussion of the doubly marginalized Latina as

she exists on the edge of western culture. Emalia further becomes the problem of a subaltern ever having the ability to speak to the hegemonic culture in which she exists the more she is indoctrinated into the customs of that culture. In my process to give Emalia some self-determining power, I have allowed my first world understanding of the nature of the world to dictate what gives a third world woman power. In this case, I do not believe this is a faulty construct. She is no longer an element of her culture; she exists outside it, and, while I believe that one carries their culture with them throughout life, she does not have the agency to perform as a member of her culture because of the nature of her existence. She is not in a place to speak for the street children of Veracruz or the women of Mexico or Latin America. In the case of this novella, she is performing a different culture than the one into which she was born.

This is where Homi Bhabha enters the discussion. As I understand his discussion of the location of culture in his chapter on “The Postcolonial and The Postmodern: The question of agency,” there is an element of culture, life, existence in the use of language and in the space it (the language) inhabits. Language carries a trace of the life it represents. It is agency. Preceding his discussion of Barthes’ concept of ‘outside the sentence’, he states:

[T]he performative structure of the text reveals a temporality of discourse that I believe is significant. It opens up a narrative strategy for the emergence and negotiation of those agencies of the marginal, minority, subaltern, or diasporic that incite us to think through—and beyond—theory. (Bhabha 260)

Authorial intent seldom has weight in any discussion. A text, or the life it suggests, maintains a type of agency I did not consider as I began exploring these ideas of marginalized identity and the effect the space it occupies has on that identity. I choose to write in a tradition that I do not have more than an academic connection to because I believe the nature of existence for the Latina possesses a truth fundamental to all humanity. Disenfranchisement and issues of legitimacy are universal concerns of the human condition. I do not want this discussion to turn

too heavily into the theoretical, but I thought it was worth mentioning that I understand the tension associated with my assertions and the work I produce.

## The Question of Form

Initially, I had the idea that Emalia's character was somehow collapsing into this existence of the prostitute. The more I consider this idea, the more I come to realize that it was a misperception on my part. The girl who was Emalia living on the streets of Veracruz evolved into the woman who became the prostitute of La Isla de Santa Flora. It is difficult for me to perceive this as an evolution; I wanted to believe that this was a 'devolution of character', and as such, I constructed my middle chapters to represent that kind of development.

I had in mind the confusing aspects of memory and the poor links between the triggers that incite memories and the memories themselves when I began writing these chapters, and have yet to recover from this design. I felt the need to allow Emalia's memories to drive the action of these flashback chapters. Chapter two gives the story of how Emalia meets Marcos. He is her mentor and first john. He is also the father of her daughter. Chapter three covers her life for four summers with Marcos and his eventual murder by Romero. This functions as her education quite literally. Marcos teaches her English and introduces her to literature, giving her the tools to continue her education on her own. He is also the first man to use her sexually. It is important that I mention that this was as much her choice as it was his. Chapter four deals with the loss of her daughter and Emalia's disappearance into the lifestyle of the forced sex worker. A few weeks after the death of Marcos, her daughter is born and taken away from her. The end of this chapter is the point that she discovers a will to live.

These are all memories for the present Emalia introduced in the first chapter, and I wanted the central three chapters to function as such. I also maintained the idea that she as a person was devolving and the confusing element of movement of time seemed to support that function within the writing. I no longer accept that she was devolving as a human in spite of the life she finds



herself living. It was an evolution. I accept that her humanity was being stripped away from her, but this speaks to the identity that she as a marginalized human was becoming someone else because of the space she was inhabiting and performing within.

## The Question of Code Switching

There are two primary registers in this story—English and Spanish. However, each of these takes on multiple layers. As a text, this story is written in both English and Spanish for an English speaking audience, but the code switching functions as a conduit to draw the reader into a larger world of not just bilingualism, but multiculturalism. It is an exercise in liminality of culture and individual existence. As such, it functions on both the local and global aspects of this existence.

The multiculturalism is expressed through the suggested vocalization of both English and Spanish. Initially, these two languages are at odds. The English language and culture is represented as hegemonic and it becomes a place of refuge for Emalia and Andrea, by default.

Andrea is Emalia's protégée at the beginning of the story and the one who has fulfilled the requirement for Emalia's freedom. Their bilingualism also functions as the expression of their growing intellect. However, English is not represented as ideal or beautiful, but as a means of achieving safety and escape. It becomes apparent that Emalia is not using English as the higher language, but for its camouflaging utility. She often remarks on its obtuseness. Spanish, on the other hand, becomes a language of beautiful diversity. Emalia uses it as a means to express or to identify the cultural diversity of Latin America. She has an ear for languages and can detect a person's cultural identity in the way he or she speaks the language.

The confluence of the two languages also highlights the liminal nature of the text. It is intended to be an expression of the welding, but not diluting of the two cultures. Too often, the cultural mixing is one of consumption and not sampling to elevate a visitor's knowledge. A good example of this is the female tourist that Emalia speaks to at the end of chapter three. Both sides become users, and I wanted to express that in the interaction of the two languages.

There is a second element of liminality that I was hoping to express using language.

Emalia's existence, as a prostitute, is one of marginalization if not ostracism. There is a moment in the opening chapter where she is at the dinner party and her faculty of language is used to dehumanize her. The innuendo references her tongue to her trade and to her fluency as a polyglot. She is a tool to the men she is speaking with. The irony is that she explained earlier in the chapter that language was the one tool that she and Andrea possess that could be equalizing if not liberating.

I chose to write this story bilingually not because I was solely looking for some element of authenticity, but because of the discussion I have lightly engaged in earlier. It is not enough to delve into the global aspect of language within a written text like this. It must have a greater function as well. I, as a writer, am intrigued by the problem of the incorporation of the subaltern. Questions of legitimacy are universal. An individual's discomfort that is experienced when he or she moves between social or economic or racial or gender statuses is an interesting dilemma. We all feel that discomfort; we all feel illegitimate in the face of our difference. For me, the Spanish language as it comes into contact with English is the perfect environment to explore these issues. I have no claim to the Latino culture, but I find it beautiful, and I have yet to discover another cultural divide that is as beautifully divergent.\

## Future Works

This novella is by no means complete. There is work and revision that could still be done with it. However, it is close to what I was hoping to accomplish when I began this project. I still may consider either of the other two projects with this story in mind. There is merit to writing this as a collection of short stories or as a novel, but I will leave that until a much later date.

I do intend to start two more novellas within the next year. This first is a revisit to a short story I wrote some time ago. It focused on a Mexican-American man that was disconnected with his culture due to his lack of knowledge of the Spanish language. Originally, this short story was titled, “La Niña.” The arc of the story centers on a little Mexican girl that the protagonist finds in the desert of West Texas and develops as he and a social worker help this girl rediscover her home in Mexico. This story is about the man’s discovery of his parents’ culture through learning Spanish and his developing relationship with the social worker.

The second novella is a speculative piece. I want to explore language and racial identity in the liminal space between humans and chimpanzees. The story will be told from the perspective of a mother chimpanzee as she comes to grips with the loss of her son who is sold into the military for his verbal or communicative abilities. This of course is the speculative nature of the piece. There is a current novel that is not unlike this, but it does not function as an exploration of language and its affect on personal identity, which is what I want to explore with this story. Thematically, it is about a mother’s loss of her son to war.

The first novel that I want to write is a historical fiction piece about La Malinche. She was the slave given to Cortez as a prize of war. She performed as his interpreter between the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Spanish. La Malinche, or Mariana as she is known to the Spanish, is seen as the ultimate betrayer in Mexico. I want to write a fictional account of her life up and to the point

when she returns to her home on the Isthmus. The full circle of her life mirrors the mythical hero's journey and is a wonderful representation of the perseverance of the human soul. There is a non-fiction book that covers these years by Anna Lanyon, *Malinche's Conquest*, but it does not explore what it must have been like for the woman Malinche, at least not in the detail I feel it needs. Laura Esquivel did write a novel about this topic, but in spite of the title, it did not dwell fully in the life of Malinche. While it was a wonderful novel, it missed out on the richness of what it could have become if it solely had embodied the character of Malinche. The narrator was too distant to capture the pain and beauty of this woman's life.

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PART II

*THE GIRL DISAPPEARED: THE PROSTITUTE OF LA ISLA DE SANTA FLORA*

## Chapter 1

### The Prostitute of La Isla de Santa Flora

Emalia sat on the broad sill of the window that overlooked the side yard where Federico shoveled the dirt back into the hole. The crown of La Isla de Santa Flora rose just above the two story house and wrapped around the length of the property on its way north. A two-meter wall of yellow stucco topped with red brick and glass shards hid Federico and the little grove of orange trees from the street. From her perch, Emalia could see the whole of the town of Santa Flora where it was tucked into the lee of the island—into the crook of its crescent shape. She could see the beach, the natural harbor, and the haze of the greater island of Guadalupe in the clear afternoon. This spot was her pew. The citrus grove was her chapel and the graveyard of all the women she had failed. Federico straightened and pitched the tip of the spade into the diminished pile of dirt. The hole was still a meter deep. He was waiting for Paulette’s tree.

“Dulce madre,” Andrea said.

“In English, please.” Emalia didn’t need to look down at where Andrea sat on the floor, curled against the wall, to know that the young woman was glaring up at her. Andrea’s knees were pulled up, tucked against her chest with her arms wrapped about her legs—gorgeous and angry and scared.

“¿Por qué? Why should I speak that language? Es feo. Es repugnante,” Andrea said.

Her Spanish was a rich, full-bodied Colombian that was, at the moment, beautifully dark with emotion. Emalia turned away from the yard where Federico sat on the ground with his legs in Paulette’s hole. They were the only two in the private lounge on the second floor, but the inner walls were hollow and the other girls were moving about, getting ready for the evening.

“Escucha. What do you hear?” Emalia asked.



Andrea buried her face in her knees. La Malinche had cursed her as a woman. She was European tall and thin. Her face was a valentine of dark skin, high cheekbones, and her eyes were mestiza—alluring. Emalia slid along the windowsill to close the distance, reached out with her right hand, and stroked Andrea's dark hair. Andrea jerked away and turned those eyes against her.

“Yo sé, Emalia. I know. Las putas, they are everywhere. They are in the walls listening to me, hearing me, talking about me. No más. No puedo hacerlo. I am going crazy, Emalia. I can't live this way. Federico should have killed me.”

Emalia slid back along her seat until her back was against the window frame. The house was two hundred years old and built to withstand a hurricane. It had survived time. The outer wall was half a meter thick and allowed for the teak framed windows that served Emalia as perch, pew, and confessional. She set her hand on the sill in the space she wanted between Andrea and her. Like a chastized child, Andrea climbed into the box of a window with her.

“Breathe,” Emalia said. “Remember what I taught you. Stay calm and think. Unless you want to join Paulette in that hole, you must stay calm. Think and breathe.”

Andrea looked down at the yard where Federico still sat with his legs in Paulette's hole. “He beat her in the face.” Andrea closed her mouth. She tilted her head, inhaled through

her nose, exhaled, and looked into Emalia's eyes. “He punched Paulette in the face so much, so many times that I thought she was dead. She tried to stand, but he grabbed her hair and pulled her into the bathroom.” She hesitated, thinking. “¡Mierda! ¿Cómo se dice *la ahogó*?”

“Shh,” Emalia said to calm her, to quiet her. Federico was looking up at the window. “¿La ahogó?” she asked again. Her voice was as sharp as the leaves of cut sugarcane. “He drowned her,” Emalia said.

“Cabrón,” Andrea said and started to look back down into the yard, but Emalia cupped her left cheek with her right palm and kissed the other side of her face. Andrea tried to pull away, but Emalia forced her into a hug. She held her close, intimately close, and stroked her hair.

“Putas, las chingadas,” Federico said from below. Emalia knew his hate. She understood it and had watched it grow and consume his life. The easiest way to deflect that hate was to be tender. He could not tolerate a woman’s sexuality—a feminine gentleness. He controlled it or it angered him.

“When Federico is watching, be a woman. When he is angry, be a girl—be unseen,” she whispered into Andrea’s ear.

Emalia knew him from the streets of Veracruz. He had been a typical boy back then. He worked hard selling lottery tickets or flowers or fruit or whatever Señor Delgado put into his hands to sell. His mother had taught him well; she had taught him to be a diligent boy, but his father had taught him to be a good man. His mother and his grandmother were saints, but other men’s daughters were at best useful. They had their place. Even then, he was quick in temper when he thought a girl might challenge him. Somewhere during the past fifteen years, he had lost any ability to be kind—to slip an apple or two to a couple of hungry street kids like Emalia and her little bother. Any chance at a normal life had disappeared for Emalia and even Federico the day Romero had come into their lives.

“You promised me a way out,” Andrea said. “¡Mierda! You promised Paulette she would be free too. Is that my future, Emalia, the roots of an orange tree? Is there a woman’s soul tangled in the roots of every one of those trees?”

Emalia looked down at the five trees that made up the small grove. Paulette’s tree would be the first in two years. She had thought that Romero had finally found the right women, the

women that might help her earn her freedom. Federico was opening the gate for Romero's truck and the new tree.

"Hombre pequeñito. Your little man is here," Andrea said. "Is that how I become free? Do I swim out to sea like that poet you love?"

Emalia considered Andrea—considered backhanding her, considered hugging her again, considered lecturing her. She was older at eighteen than Emalia had been when she had first been given for a summer to a rich man's son. It was the first time that Romero understood the value of certain women. A supply of bodies for drunken men to use was one thing, but a rich man's toy was an asset.

"Go get dressed, you stupid girl," Emalia said. "Did you not see the American Navy ship today? Your sailor is back. You should be praying that he has Romero's money."

Andrea stood from her seat at the window, but did not turn away from it or the scene of Federico pulling down the tailgate of the truck to get at the tree. Her height made Emalia feel small. She looked down at the grove and watched the tiny birds that played in the hedge that followed the length of the wall.

"I think that I will wear your yellow dress," Andrea said. "Seré su canario and I will have loved you for half an hour."

"Señor, perdóname," Emalia prayed on the windowsill. The remainder of the dirt was piled around Paulette's tree in a mound not unlike a fresh grave. The dirt would settle and the tree would bear fruit. "Forgive me, Father," she said again and crossed herself.

Emalia twisted around on the windowsill, taking Andrea's seat. She wanted to be able to see the north end of the island without turning her head. La iglesia de las vírgenes y mártires was the only structure on the top of the hill, older than anything else on the island. Originally, it had

been a monastery populated by monks from Córdoba, built from imported stone—stone brought from México by the Spanish a hundred years before the French had taken the Island of Guadalupe. It now served as the church for the town of Santa Flora, and the islanders climbed the stairs up the steep hill every Sunday morning.

Emalia sat in the window as the bells for Vespers rang and she watched the church lights come on. She liked to sit there as night approached or a storm clouded the day. The only light to the north would be in the church windows and the ring of sunlight that circled the horizon—encased the world. The Passion scenes stood out against the night like a blessing and a curse.

Their truth stained the darkness and mirrored her thoughts. *Was He given time to think about his sacrifice?* She looked down at the town as its lights came on. La Isla de Santa Flora was tormented by the carnal and the devote.

The door to the side stairs opened and Romero entered the private lounge. He was a squat man, more Mayan than Mestizo, and was always on the move. He claimed to be from Matamoros, but at other times, when it was convenient, he was also from Monterrey and Nogales and Mazatlan. He also claimed Santiago de Cali in Colombia, but Emalia knew his Spanish was too rapid for him to be from Sudamérica. He crossed the full length of the lounge, dodging the plush chairs and long couch, and pulled a ring of keys from his pocket. He locked the opposite door that led out onto the second floor of the rest of the house. He turned and re-pocketed his keys. Here he hesitated and watched Emalia at the window. She looked back out at the church on the hill and slowly made the sign of the cross the full length of her torso and then kissed her fingers where her rosary should have been.

“Oh, sweet Mother of God!” His English was quite good. “Get your ass up and get ready. I have a million people to meet tonight. Andrea’s sailor will be at the casino by nine, the mayor wants you for dinner, and I want you with Andrea by ten in case that cabrón brings a friend.”

“Am I to eat with or be eaten by the mayor?” Emalia asked. She liked to play with Romero’s words to show him she had a greater command of her tongue than he did of his mind.

“No me importa,” he said. He had thrown his short arms into the air and started back across the room. “Where is Andrea?”

“Putting on my yellow dress.” “Why yellow?”

“She thinks she’s a canary.”

“¿Qué?” he said. His voice was becoming taut. “What the hell have you whores been doing all day?”

*Mourning.* Emalia smiled and stood. “I asked if the mayor is expecting me for dinner or wants me before dinner. It affects what I wear.”

Romero stopped at the liquor cabinet, poured rum into a tumbler, and then sipped. Emalia waited. He was in control and he knew it.

“You are to be eye candy,” he said, “for dinner with the mayor and some of the officers from the three navy ships sitting in the harbor. But, if the mayor pushes you to your knees while everyone is sipping their Port and shoves his cock in your mouth, then you had better let him stain whatever trampy dress you pull from my closet.” The baritone of his voice had remained steady, not raised, and there was no indication that he was upset, but Emalia could sense something new had entered their lives. He stepped close to her and fingered the collar of her blouse. “There is still room for a dozen orange trees in my yard.”

Emalia never knew what to do with her hands when Romero chose to be this close to her.

She clasped them in front of her. For most men, this would have put her hands right in front of his crotch, but as it was, Romero's belly brushed her knuckles. He tilted his head the way a woman might wait for a kiss, but he waited for her to respond.

"No? Are you out of funny things to say to me?" He stepped back. "Now, if you would please go get ready for the night, I have things I must do."

Emalia bowed her head and waited until he was through the door to the stairs. Andrea stepped out of her room at the north end of the lounge. The yellow dress fit her better than Emalia. Andrea had better shoulders.

Dinner was in a private dining room on the top floor of the Hotel and Casino de Santa Flora. The west wall was essentially made of glass. Two tall, broad windows framed a pair of French doors that stood open and the ocean breeze drifted in from the balcony. White curtains also drifted with that breeze while men in white uniforms drifted about the room. These men told stories and joked with the mayor and the other rich men of Santa Flora. Emalia stood by the mayor's side and allowed all the men in the room to watch her.

"That is a very beautiful red dress, Emalia," Captain Miller said. He was tall, taller than Romero, and his hair was thin and gray and the temples. His teeth were crooked, which gave him a carnivorous look. He spoke slowly, pulling the words of his language together the way men of the southern United States. "Muy bonita," he said. His Spanish hurt her ears.

"Muchas gracias, Señor Capítan," Emalia said. She twisted back and forth slightly so the fabric of her dress would move. She must have seemed pleased because both the Captain and his Executive Office, Commander Davis, smiled.

"Don't let Señora García fool you, Captain Miller," the Mayor said. García was not her surname. It was Romero's or at least the one he was using in Santa Flora. "She is fluent in three

languages that I know of, but Spanish is the most beautiful tongue that she employs.” His pun was not lost on the two men, but while Commander Davis was embarrassed by the comment, his Captain’s smile had grown lusty. “Commander Davis,” the Mayor said, “have you met Father Rivera? That is his beautiful church on the hill that you mentioned earlier. He is also the closest thing we have to a local historian.” He took the Commander by the arm and led him toward Father Rivera and the bar on the far side of the room.

Captain Miller stepped closer to Emalia. She half-smiled up at him and shifted her weight, eliminating the remaining distance between them. She hooked her arm into his, applied a little pressure with her hip to turn him fully toward the windows, and waited to see how he would react. He cleared his throat.

“So, Señor Capítan, which of those little boats is yours?” she asked and led him out onto the balcony.

Andrea and her sailor stood close together on the far corner of the balcony. Andrea and Emalia ignored one another.

“The destroyer in the middle is mine. You can tell by the Union Jack flying at the bow. That’s the front of the ship. You can’t see it, but the American ensign is at,” he stopped. Emalia was looking up at him and not out at the ships. “I have a feeling you already knew all that.”

“So why are the Dutch and the British in port with you, Señor Capítan?” she asked.

Emalia leaned on the rail with both elbows, smiled, and tilted her head up at him. Her place at the rail gave him a clear view of her neck and cleavage and the curve of her hips. She did not need to seduce this man. Some men had to be coached past their morality or scruples or fear. Most only needed to feel her warmth beside them and have a clear view of her neckline.

“We’re part of the UNITAS NATO fleet on its way around South America. Most of the NATO countries have a ship in the fleet, but the majority of them are in port around Guadalupe.”

“So you will spend your summer drinking cervezas con las mujeres en las cantinas de Sudamérica, Señor Capítan?” She spoke her Spanish slowly and with words he would know. He chuckled.

“How did you come to be living on this little bitty island?” the Captain asked. “You’re too smart to be stuck in this forgotten place. You should be traveling the whole world.”

“This little bitty island is my whole world,” she said. “But you went to school, a university somewhere?”

She shook her head. Andrea’s sailor had taken her by the arm and led her toward the Captain and Emalia. He hovered at a respectful distance.

“I have not been to the university, but I did have a wonderful friend years ago who spent his summers with me while he was attending university.” Emalia took her time explaining that half forgotten life to the Captain without telling him the truth. She enjoyed making the sailor with Andrea wait. She painted a romantic image of the rich man’s son who had been her first.

She did not tell the Captain that Marcos had been the first man to rent her for a false life or that she had lived almost free. Marcos had studied literature and taught Emalia English. He brought her books and read them to her on the beach as if they were on vacation. In the end, she thought she might have loved him if she had had a second life to live. She cried on her knees while Federico and Romero drowned him in the ocean. He was the first person Federico had murdered.

“What happened to this man of yours—your first love?” Captain Miller asked. “I bet he wishes to this day that he had married you.”



“That was his plan,” Emalia said, “but life stole him away from me.” “He was a fool,” Captain Miller said.

“Yes he was,” she said and looked at Andrea’s sailor.

Captain Miller turned toward the pair. “Williams,” the Captain said. “Have you met Ms. Emalia García?” The sailor shook his head and glanced oddly at Captain Miller. “Ms. Emalia, this is Lieutenant Commander Williams. He is my Chief Engineer and the man I yell at if my ‘little boat’, as you put, it doesn’t get up and go when I want to get gone.”

Emalia knew this man. They had never spoken, but Andrea and Romero had given her enough details for her to know his nature. Entitled is how Marcos would have explained his character. Andrea was a game and a toy and he would grow bored with her before they reached the Straits of Magellan. He stood in front of her, and she remained concealed by his crisp, white uniform. Captain Miller stood sideways with his right hand in the small of Emalia’s back and his left hand extended toward his CHENG. His eyes never left her face while he made the introductions. Captain Miller was like an excited, little boy dancing around on the beach because he had found something shiny in the wet sand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Ms. García,” Lt. Commander Williams said. “Igualmente,” she said. “I hope you are enjoying your stay on La Isla de Santa Flora.”

“It is a beautiful island, but it is not my first trip here. I was here last year when I was stationed on another ship.”

The explanation that followed seemed rehearsed to Emalia’s ears. He was at ease with himself, but not with his lie about Andrea—a local find that he intended to rescue from this provincial island. He liked his new toy and couldn’t wait to play with it. But, Andrea was not the

shiny something the Captain had found, and it was obvious to the Captain if Emalia read his expression correctly. Even his introduction of Andrea was watered down and lukewarm.

“Do you two know each other, Emalia?” the Captain asked.

“Sí, Señor Capítan. Andrea is a pupil of mine,” Emalia said. Her hesitation straightened Lt. Commander Williams with concern. She thought he might snap under the tension and she wished she had a glass of wine. A slow sip might have made the man run screaming from the balcony. She looked up at the Captain just as Andrea was about to explain their relationship. “I am her language tutor,” Emalia said.

“So you are a teacher?” the Captain asked.

“Yes, but I only give private lessons.” Her smile was playful. “How is your Spanish, Captain?”

Emalia never looked back at the pair, but returned the conversation to the Captain’s life at sea and the many places he had seen during his career. She ignored Andrea’s sailor when he begged his leave of Captain Miller. Andrea played her role of legitimate woman well, but Emalia could sense her frustration with her. It was always some degree of heat with this woman. The Captain took little notice of their departure now that his shiny something was leaning close to him again.

Emalia carried her shoes by the straps as she walked down the hotel hallway. The carpet was comforting to her bare feet. She could still feel Captain Miller’s weight against her hips and the smell of his sweat lingered with the memory of him and his effort. Emalia pulled her brown, curly hair over her right shoulder and lifted it to her face. His aftershave mingled with her shampoo and perfume. She dropped her purse and shoes to the floor, flipped her hair forward, shook it out with both hands, and then flipped her hair back into place. She retrieved her shoes

and purse from the floor, found her perfume in the purse, and sprayed it into the air in front of her. She laughed as she walked through the mist. The image of a whore perfuming herself as she walked away from a john's room seemed more than ridiculous. But her mood was light.

Andrea had succeeded. Lt. Commander Williams had returned with the money Romero expected. She would follow his ship as it circled South America meeting him when he came into port like a lovesick girl. Andrea's plan was to disappear in Argentina or Chile or whichever port she could slip the attention of the man Romero sent with her to maintain her. She only needed to be on the continent. But whether Andrea escaped or not, Emalia had done what Romero had asked her to do. She had trained the replacement Romero had found for her. She would get to go home and disappear into México.

Emalia entered the main casino and crossed to the bar. She set her purse on it and strapped her shoes on while she waited for Juan to bring her a red wine. Juan was a good friend. They shared their taste in men—studious, intelligent, and calm.

“Hola, Chica,” Juan said. His Spanish was Iberian lisp. “¿Cómo te estaba, mi Amor?” he asked and hugged her across the bar.

“I am fine, Juan,” she said. “It has been a good night. But you should be practicing your English with so many sailors in town.”

He put his hands on his hips feigning disapproval. She laughed. It felt rich and warm in her throat.

“Oh, you did have a good night,” he said and flitted away down the length of the bar.

Something felt off in the casino. There were clumps of Santa Florians near the many televisions hanging around the huge room, but the casino tables were still full with so many sailors in town. The groups of locals seemed agitated. Juan returned.

“What’s happening?” she asked indicating the group by the nearest television. “Oh, Sweetie, they kidnapped María Cisneros’ daughter from her school in Miami.

María Cisneros was a writer for the Associated Press, a feminist activist and outspoken critic of the Mexican government and the activities of the cartels. The people loved her, but she had few friends. She and her family fled to the United States after someone had blown up her house in México City.

“Why do we care?” Emalia asked.

“Ha,” he laughed. “You heartless bitch.”

“How much money are they asking for?” Emalia asked.

“Nada,” he said. “There was a note left behind that said: *Your daughter will know her place in the world.*”

“Oh, Sweet Mother, Juan. Are you sure this isn’t just another one of your telenovelas?” He was laughing. “What the hell is going on?”

“The first tropical storm of the season is on its way,” he said. “And all the straights are clucking around like a flock of chickens.”

Emalia smiled. “Did they name it?” she asked.

“No, but that didn’t stop them,” he lifted his chin at the Santa Florians around the televisions while he was washing a mug, “from crying about the sky falling.” Emalia sipped her wine and waited for him to go on. Juan looked up at her. He snorted. “Ana, they are going to call it Ana. You are getting boring in your old age,” he said.

“You’re older than I am,” Emalia said. “True, but I have less to get droopy.”

She threw a wet napkin at him. He caught it and pitched it into a wastebasket under the bar.

“Have you seen Federico or Romero?” she asked.

“No, Chica, but Romero left a note for you earlier tonight.”

It was weird for one of them not to be in the hotel while she worked. What or who was to stop her from going down to the harbor and catching the next ferry for Guadalupe? The last time she had tried to run away was after the summer she gave birth to Marcos’ baby. Romero had beaten her with a stick bad enough that she prayed for death. The only mementos she had of her baby and Cozumel were the scars and the three pictures Federico took of her and her daughter.

That feeling that something new had entered her life returned and reminded her of Paulette.

Emalia scanned the room. It was red and gold and the gambling tables formed a giant oval in the center of the room. Tables in white linen dotted the far wall. It was like the private dining room where she had dinner with the Mayor, but here there were eight or so pairs of French doors opened to the salty night and the beach. The breeze reminded her of the Veracruz of her childhood. Andrea stood by Lt. Commander Williams’ chair and watched him play poker. Her hand played with the nape of his neck.

“Here you go, Chica,” Juan said.

The first line of the note read, *Stay*. Romero’s written English was rough. The letters seemed strained and too upright for a practiced hand. *Help Andrea. Federico will be there soon*. The R he used to sign his name might as well have been an X. And, *soon* could mean anything. Emalia looked over her shoulder at the main doors to the Hotel and Casino de Santa Flora.

“Cuidado, Emalia,” Juan said. “Cállete, Juan.”

She circled the room with her wine and stepped out the first of the French doors. The night was bright and active. The lights from the ships skipped across the water. The outdoor

tables were mostly full. A band played island music on the far right with a mostly drunk Santa Florian on the dance floor twirling around for her date. A group of half drunken sailors walked past on the beach. Their English was a guttural, British twist and difficult to understand.

The Mayor sat at a table with Commander Davis and Father Rivera. The Commander and the Father were deep in conversation and the Mayor was watching her. She would not perform for him, not again tonight, but that would not stop him or any of the men in the room from using her with their eyes. The half thought of escaping down the beach faded, and she returned to the noise of the casino.

Federico was at the bar. He held an empty shot glass in his right hand and had just motioned Juan for more. His drink was cheap Tequila and it made him mean. Andrea refused to look at her, but Emalia could tell she knew that Federico was at the bar. A few more days and they would both be gone. Federico pitched back the second shot, glared at her, and then headed for the front door of the casino.

It had been eight years or so since Federico and Emalia had had anything resembling a conversation, and the ride to the brothel was no different. Something had changed for him when they had come to La Isla de Santa Flora. After Marcos' death, they had spent close to three years in San Miguel and the ocean had surrounded the land beneath her feet ever since. She would never walk a beach again if she could get back to México.

The second floor lounge of the brothel, Romero's home, was mostly dark when she entered behind Federico. Romero was lying on the long couch smoking a cigar. At least, he had opened the windows.

“¿Está bien?” he said to Federico. Federico did not respond. He went to the bar and pulled the tequila from underneath. Romero sat up to face Emalia, crossed his legs, and spread his arms

across the back of the couch. “How was the Captain?” he asked. His smile accented by the cigar made her angry.

“Sleeping when I left,” she said.

That odd feeling that had followed her all day kicked in her womb. It rolled and stretched, vying for more room as if time was getting short. It took all of her will not to put her hands over her stomach to protect it. She crossed to the window she and Andrea had used earlier that day and sat with her back to the night. She folded her hands on her lap and waited.

Romero smiled and then laughed out right. He pulled the cigar from his mouth and then turned toward Federico. “¿Tiene miedo, no?” he said and turned back. “Why do you look scared, Emalia? Is there anything I should know?”

Emalia bit down on the natural response that jumped to the front of her tongue. This was the only man in the whole world that she could not manipulate. He was the only one who seemed immune to her body, neckline, or the play of her hand across his forearm. The thought of seducing him made her sick.

“No, Romero. I know of nothing that you do not already know,” she said.

“Bien. ¿Está bien, no? I am the man of the house. ¿Sí? I give you a big home and food and pretty clothes. Es la vida buena. Is that not true, Federico?”

Federico sipped tequila from a tumbler. He said nothing.

“I have been thinking about the day I found you in Veracruz,” he said to Emalia after a moment of waiting. He pulled on the cigar and blew the smoke out into the room. He was no longer looking at anyone. He was facing the door to Paulette’s room. Federico was staring into his cup. “I took you in. I fed you. I gave you clothes. I even let you go to catechism. Do you

remember the pretty white dress you wore? What was the name of the restaurant that we went to after your baptism? Why can't I remember the name of that stupid restaurant?"

He looked at Emalia and then at Federico. Neither of them moved.

"What the hell is wrong with you two?" he asked. "This is a good night, Emalia.

¡Tranquilo! You have done everything that I have asked of you. You can go home to México. You should go to Cuernavaca and find your little girl. She will be twelve soon; I think. A little older than you were when we met. There I go again being nostalgic. I'm going to cry." Romero laughed again and pulled on his cigar. He exhaled and picked tobacco from his tongue. "Sin embargo, I need one more thing first, Emalia," he said.

She would not protest. She would do what he asked. Never before had he said the words *you can go home*. She watched the cherry of his cigar flare and him exhale. She eased her breath out through pinched lips, trying to remain calm so she could think, and waited for him to speak.

Romero waved his cigar in the air to get Federico's attention. When the man looked up from his cup, Romero pointed toward the door of what had been Paulette's room. Emalia stood as Federico abandoned his tumbler and crossed the room. He unlocked the door and pushed it in without looking within. Emalia walked around behind the couch to see into the lamp lit room.

She knew what to expect. This was how they all came into Romero's house.

A girl sat on the floor. Her hands were tied together, pulled over her head, and tied again to the footboard of Paulette's bed. Her hair was a mess, but trimmed and dyed with blond highlights. She was Latina, Emalia could tell, but only by the shape and color of her eyes. Her skin seemed too fair, too European, to have been born under a southern sun. Those eyes cut across the distance, the space between, and Emalia knew she understood. This girl knew her life



was over. She was gagged and the right side of her face was swollen and blue—the birthmark of a backhand—Romero’s mark. Federico used his knuckles and preferred the eyes to the cheek.

This poor girl looked twelve, maybe.

“Romero, she’s too,” she said. The last word was lost in her throat.

“No, no, no,” he said. “She’s much older than she looks and too fucking smart for her own good, but you misunderstand. She is not to be your protégée. I don’t want you to do anything except go with her to St. Maarten.”

He continued to talk and wave his cigar, but Emalia could do nothing but see the little girl tied to Paulette’s bed. She did not struggle against the rope the way Paulette had. She did not try to yell around the gag—to draw attention—hoping for rescue the way Andrea had. She sat and watched and studied the three of them. This was a woman Emalia could save. But to do so, she would have to teach her to hate herself.

“Emalia,” Romero said from behind her. His voice was raised and a little stressed. At some point, she had walked around the couch and crossed to the open door. “Have you heard a word I said?”

On some level, she had heard every word, but it was just noise. She had understood that this girl was not Romero’s property. Another man owned her, but Romero was being paid to get her to the other island. The details were trivial. She was a rich man’s daughter, the daughter of a man who had crossed the wrong men. And, Romero was being paid more money than Emalia and Andrea and Paulette were ever worth. He had a new career and was offering Emalia her life back for helping him make this girl disappeared.

Romero was suddenly at her side and his hand was on her shoulder. She pulled away and stepped back from the door. Romero put a hand on each side of the doorframe. The cigar burned

in his right hand. He looked eager, almost impatient. The girl had yet to move anything but her eyes.

This was the new thing. Emalia could not save this girl in the amount of time it took to ride a boat across the Caribbean. She could not teach her to forget herself long enough for a man to expend himself within her womb. She could not teach her how to coax a man to caress her and not beat her. She could not teach her to be a woman she was not—to split her mind between the forgiven and the damned. She could not know this girl's end whether tangled in the roots of an orange tree or escaped into Sudamérica. The price of her freedom was a lifetime of begged absolution—a lifetime of praying to the light in a window on a hill.

## Chapter 2

### A Rented Life in Veracruz

Emalia sat on the beach with her ankles crossed and her arms around her knees. Her toes were close enough to Marcos' left hand that she thought he might touch her at any moment. He liked her feet. He said that he loved her ankles. She liked his dark hair most of all. It was an unkempt, thick mass that he pulled at while he read. Now, in the surf and covered with sand, she wanted to wash it and take a brush to it. She wanted it out of his eyes so she could see his thoughts, but only the tide moved him now as it eroded the sand beneath his body.

Her baby pushed against her womb, vying for room or warmth or food. Emalia could hear people talking in the distance. The police were on the beach, someone was in Marcos' house, and the sun had finally climbed out of the ocean. It felt warm against her dark skin and harsh against her face. It did not make her feel alive. She wanted to go to sleep or to crawl into the ocean and be forgotten. The feeling pulled a poem out of the back of her mind and made her sob.

“Voy a dormir, nodriza mía, acuéstame,” she said. A second sob broke her voice and she lurched forward onto her hands. The tide rolled in, swamped her fingers, and her hands sunk deeper. It was a kind of twilight—this space where the ocean was eroding the earth beneath her grip, beneath Marcos, carrying her life away. She understood that everything had changed and the final words of Stroni's poem left her like a wish. *Le dices que no insista, que he salido.*

“¿Chica? Por favor, Señorita, venga aquí. Piense de su niña.”

“What?” she asked. Her voice felt like a squeal in her throat. “What do you say to me?” She rolled over and sat in the water. She knew the policeman that stood on the beach. He had been to the house many times in the four summers that she had lived at Marcos' summerhouse, but she thought he had worked for Marcos' mother. He was the only one that knew the truth.

Marcos had told him the week before that he was taking Emalia to Austin before it was too late for her to fly. How had Romero found out? She looked at his expensive suit and perfect hair. He stood just beyond the high tide mark. “Did,” she said. Marcos would no longer be there to correct her English.

“Emalia, please. Come out of the water. Come into the house and let us care for Marcos before his mother arrives from Cuernavaca,” he said. His English was as clear as Marcos’.

His name was Javier. He was a head taller than Marcos with manageable dark hair, a pleasant smile, and an athletic build. Marcos liked to be around the man and went out of his way to cater to him, but he always seemed arrogant to Emalia. He never spoke or looked at her when he was at the house. She was not sure that he had ever spoken in her presence. Marcos always took him to the garden or down to the beach. They had spent an evening every June, late in the month, drinking and playing in town. Emalia was never a part of this night.

“Please, your uncle Romero will be done with the police in a moment, and then they will need to move Marcos.”

“Is that who he is, ¿mi Tío?” she asked. Javier’s expression changed from concerned to nothing. He set his jaw and studied her. It was unsettling. Emalia raised her hands for him to help her, but he hesitated and looked down at the water that had just flooded past her. “Cristo!” she said and climbed to her feet.

He guided her up the beach as if they were old friends, as if they had spent days in the sun discussing the future of his friend’s baby, as if he knew the name Emalia would call her little girl, and she let him. Behind her, Marcos was still lying half in the ocean—clinging to the beach.

Had she let him read his book all those years ago, he would probably still be alive and could have been a father one day.

Marcos, the man Emalia was stalking, made the act of reading a struggle. He pulled at his thick, black hair and rubbed at his massive eyebrows—eyebrows that looked like they would crawl away if spooked. He read quickly and fiddled with the pages when not torturing his hair.

His nose, like his hair, clouded his face and stood out like a monument or a sundial from his head. His mouth, while a pathetic thing compared to his nose, was still too large for his jaw, which was the only thing about the man's face that Emalia found attractive. It was firm, a solid square, and from the side, it countered the bow of his nose well enough to make her think that there was still hope for love in his future.

She first saw him in the Zócalo on the day after she turned fifteen. Her birthday had gone unnoticed by the few people she knew. She had thought Romero or Federico, at least, would have remembered. Federico always brought her ice cream on holidays. Sometimes he would bring her a trinket of some sort from the Mercado and at other times he might carve her a saint from a piece of wood he had found. She still wore the shell bracelet he gave her the Christmas her brother had been murdered.

The man she was following had been slowly walking through the rain on that day after her birthday. He was heading for the café where he read most mornings. He wore a gringo's hat. It was whitish and floppy and only kept the rain out of his eyes. He was hunched over to keep the drizzle from ruining his book. She too had been walking in the rain. They were the only two not following the covered walks of the buildings that boxed in the central square. She had chosen the rain because she could not be near people, but he just seemed distracted like the old priest that taught her catechism classes.

Her shift in direction to follow him had been unconscious. His distracted state pissed her off and she wanted nothing more than to grab his book and throw it into a puddle. Everyone else

had the common sense to stay out of her rain. She did not snatch his book. She did not speak to him or let him see her or even get close to him that first day. She hovered in the trees and watched him pick at his book, pull at his hair, and mumble to the thing as he wrote in it.

That rainy day had been three weeks before and since then, she had followed him to the bookstore twice, the cathedral every Sunday, and his large house, a bus ride down the beach, every evening he came downtown. He did not seem to own a car. People came to him or he walked, caught a city bus or taxi, or left town by bus. His life seemed to be consumed with his books.

The morning was bright and Emalia expected the day to get hot. She sat on the bench opposite the café and had a clear view of the table where he was opening his new book. They had just come from the bookstore where he had spent a long time discussing it with the clerk. She did not know why he would be buying a book he had already read twice, but he seemed eager and ready to rush right out and start it again. The conversation gave her enough time to pick through the stacks, wind her way through the tables as if she was looking for something specific, and run a finger along the spines of books on the shelves. She pulled one at random, a white one, and dropped it in her bag. She circled a table of poetry books and selected two of these for her bag.

She had never read poetry or stolen a book before. It seemed easier than fruit from the Mercado or money from an Americano. She took one last book—a novel, *La casa de los espíritus*, thinking she might be able to sell it. She had seen people reading this book on the bus and beach and in the cafés.

She walked past the man as she left the store—close enough to brush against him, feel his warmth, and smell the soap he used on his hair. She expected the clerk to stop her or challenge her, but, like an actress, the woman seemed to be reciting something from the story they were

discussing. It was a description of a city early in the morning and it seemed like a ridiculous thing to be talking about while Emalia was robbing her. She wondered if the two would notice if she opened the register and stole the money as well.

She did not wait for the man to come out of the store. She knew he would go to the café next. Emalia had never been so close to him before. He was a weird little man, but there was an energy about him that reminded her of sculpted stone or the excitement she always felt when standing next to the horses that pulled the carriages of tourists through the city. They felt freer than her or, maybe, capable of breaking free.

His café was an outdoor restaurant with a little fence that surrounded the tables forcing customers to enter a gate and be seated by the waitress. The dining area filled an alcove on the north side of the Zócalo. The building's walkway and a green awning that hung out over the cobblestones protected the tables from the sun and rain and birds. His table was in the corner made by the street and the bar. The same waitress always served him even when she was busy. Emalia was close enough to hear them speak for the first time.

“Buenos días, Señor Diego,” the waitress said. She looked skinny in her white shirt and black apron, but Emalia could tell that her hips were a decade or a baby away from being huge. She was pretty with long, curly black hair and she would probably be married before her hips spread.

“Por favor, Thalia. Mi nombre es Marcos. Solamente Marcos.” He was still standing when he said this. He was not much taller than her five-six in comfortable heels and he smiled warmly for her. For Emalia this was brilliant, but the waitress looked away and down and fiddled with the menu while he seated himself. He laid the new book in the center of the table; his

enthusiasm was gone with the waitress' disinterest. He looked out at the square and caught Emalia staring at him. She thought he might run away.

He nodded when the waitress suggested coffee and a pastry. She left a little too fast and Marcos watched her go. Emalia wanted to throw the white book, which turned out to be a history of Tepoztlán, at the waitress. Marcos was rich and intelligent, but plain. The gangly clerk at the bookstore would have gladly listened all day to him explain the stories in the book he had just opened. The pretty young waitress would prefer to marry a handsome waiter or a policeman or possibly a cab driver, have a few children, and die poor. Emalia was still studying Marcos when he looked back out at her.

"She's stupid," Emalia said. She measured her Spanish and spoke slowly, hoping to sound like she was from anywhere but the streets of Veracruz and anything older than fourteen.

"What?" he asked. He looked toward the kitchen door where Thalia had disappeared. "No, no she is." The last word of that sentence never came. He just closed his mouth.

"Stupid." Emalia said.

"Why do you say that?" he asked. He had recovered and his Spanish shifted to sound more like the voice he used with the woman that worked at the bookstore.

Emalia just gave him a look. "Why would you consider her?"

"Thalia? She is very nice," he said. The flustered edge was back in his voice. "No, she isn't. Maybe I made the mistake and you're the dumb one," she said.

Marcos laughed. It was kind of nervous and somewhat amused. "How old are you?" he asked.



Emalia snorted, frowned at him, and turned her attention to the book of poetry she had on her lap. She couldn't read it with him staring at her. She lifted her eyebrows and looked at him.

“What?”

“Your shadow's still in pigtails and you think you understand me or this thing that didn't happen between Thalia and me?”

“I understand that the woman at the bookstore would wash your feet like Santa María did for Christ and you're worried about this waitress.”

He cocked his head to the side and she mocked him with the same movement. “Have you been following me?” he asked.

“No, I was sitting here first. I was at the bookstore while you were babbling away with the clerk, but I came and sat here long before you were trying to flirt with your Thalia. Should I be concerned, Señor Diego? Are you stalking me?” She couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. He just stared at her. Emalia grabbed her bag and book of poetry, stood, and left in the direction of the harbor.

“Wait,” Marcos said. Emalia stopped with her back to him. Her heart was pounding as she turned back. He was pointing at the bench and the white book she left there. “Your book,” he said.

She had not forgotten it. She didn't want it, but she recognized that this would bother him. She forced a look of surprise and relief onto her face and retrieved the book. When she turned back, his eyebrows were drawn and he was staring at the ground near her feet. She couldn't tell what he was struggling with, but it pleased her that he was having a hard time looking up at her. Emalia crossed the walk to the wrought iron rail that marked the boundary of the restaurant and street. Thalia was just now returning with his coffee and pastry.

“Gracias, Marcos,” she said as she put her hand on the rail close to his shoulder. He looked up and smiled for her. Emalia glanced at Thalia and walked away.

Javier led her across el Boulevard Manuel Ávila Camacho, through the gate to the pool and garden, and into Marcos’ summerhouse. In the dining room on the left, two policemen were sitting at the table looking over Marcos’ paperwork for his dissertation and another in the room on the right sat at the desk where he was boxing up the computer.

¿Qué están haciendo?” Emalia asked. “Don’t touch that,” she said to the policemen at the table and she started toward them.

Javier took her by the arm and told the three men to leave the house. She yanked free. She did not know if she could trust this man. Her first thought when she saw him on the beach was to tell him that Romero had killed his friend, but she remembered that the only person that knew Marcos and her were running away to the United States was Javier.

Romero stepped through the front door and looked at the two of them. He was a squat man with short arms and big hands, but only a fool dismissed him as not a threat. The last time she had seen him this close, he was standing waist deep in the ocean holding Marcos under the water. He had him by the hair and right arm while Federico held him by the belt and left shoulder. She had pleaded with both of them—begged them not to kill him, promised she would never leave.

“Buenos días, Javier. ¿Cómo está?” Romero said. He looked a little tired. “One day, I will kill you, Romero,” Javier said.

Romero looked at the two of them and pocketed his hands. Emalia could tell he was impatient. “It was a regrettable mistake,” he said. “It was not my intention for him to die. But.

He was taking something that did not belong to him. Had he come to me, we might have come to an understanding.”

Emalia had lived with Romero off and on for the past six years and had thought of him like an older brother or uncle for some of that time. She, her brother Pedro, and Federico had met Romero outside the Mercado the summer she turned eleven. Federico was selling flowers. Pedro was kicking a soccer ball against the wall and Emalia was sitting on a box watching the traffic circle by. Romero had paid each of them twenty pesos to watch a blue car and remember the man that got out of it. He bought dinner for them and listened quietly as they described the gringo in a suit that had followed him into the Mercado. Pedro died that Christmas, and Federico had taken Emalia to Romero’s apartment promising that he would keep her safe. Federico had already stopped working for Señor Delgado at the Mercado and went everywhere with Romero.

Emalia ran little errands for him and cleaned his apartment. She cooked his food once he taught her how. And when he found her sitting in front of the cathedral one Sunday morning, he insisted that she finish her catechism classes and take communion. It was the kind of thing an uncle would do. He even bought her a new white dress and took her and Federico to a restaurant in the Zócalo para la comida after the service. It was not until he found out about Marcos a year later that she realized what he intended for her.

At first, she did not know that Marcos gave Romero money. Marcos spent the rest of that first summer reading to her on the beach and by the pool. He took her to restaurants and the movies when she insisted. He bought her books and clothes and started teaching her English. He wrote her almost weekly while he was in school the following year and spent most of his Christmas break with her. They had sex for the first time a week before he returned to Austin at the end of that following summer, and then a dozen times more before he actually left for the

airport again for school. She liked the awkward feeling of him on top of her—his quick, apologetic movements. She loved to hold him there in place with her ankles locked behind him, her arms around his back, and her hands netted in his hair when he collapsed against her.

She discovered the money when Romero arrived to get her the morning Marcos left. She knew something was different. She normally took the bus back to Romero's apartment, and it was not like she did not have a key to the summerhouse. Romero filled the doorway.

"Why are you here?" Marcos asked. His tone surprised Emalia.

"I thought I would come and say goodbye and give Emalia a ride home. You have not changed your mind have you?"

"No, of course not. I will send it before I leave for the airport," Marcos said. "Just give it to me now," Romero said.

Marcos turned toward his luggage and hesitated. He looked at Emalia on the couch, lifted his hands as if he had something to explain, and then left the room. Romero was smiling. Emalia uncrossed her legs and sat forward. She heard the slow rip, the distinct sound of the checkbook, and she stood. The exchange was half hidden from her by Marcos' body, but Romero held the check up for her to see after he read it.

"Muy bien," he said and he shook Marcos' hand. "We will see you this December. Have a good time at the University. I will be in the car, Emalia."

Marcos looked over his shoulder, turned slowly, and Emalia thought he might cry. He turned his back on the sitting room and faced away from her. Emalia didn't move. He spoke to the dining room.

"At first, I thought you knew all about it and that I had been your target all along," he said. "But, when Romero told me the price to spend the summer with you, I knew that couldn't

be the case.” He turned sideways so he could see her if he looked to the left. “He could have asked for five times what he did. He obviously didn’t know what I was worth. And, then he gave me the rules. You weren’t to know about the money and sex was only to happen when you were ready. Which was fine, I just wanted to get to know you and to have someone to spend time with and make me feel human. Lo siento, Emalia. I have paid him so you don’t have to do this with anyone else.”

“You mean so that nobody but you can fuck me for money,” she said and hurried out the still open front door. He caught her before she was fully down the stairs to the pool area.

“Emalia, please. I did not know this was your life when we met—when I fell for you.”

“It wasn’t my life until you made it my life,” she said and yanked her arm free of his grip.

“I didn’t know what else to do. He said I would be saving you from a worse life.”

Emalia knew that Romero worked for the family that controlled the brothels in Veracruz.

She had been to many of them on errands for him, but it never occurred to her that he would force her into one of them. She looked out at Romero’s car that sat on the street and then at the ocean beyond and felt trapped.

“Emalia, please wait for me,” he said as if he could read her mind and as if he knew she would try to run away. “I will send you letters to my house here again this fall. I will work something out and we will get away this Christmas.”

\* \* \*

“I did not want him to die. I wanted to scare him, no more,” Romero said again.

Both men seemed to be waiting for the other to do something that would warrant violence. Romero’s hands were still in his pockets. Javier’s right thumb was hooked in his belt

close to his holster. Only the creaking of the house, which moved under the slightest wind, complicated the silence in the room.

“What you intended, and whether you regret your mistake or not, only matters to my uncle,” Javier said. “You owe him money or you would be dead.”

“Ah, eso es verdad,” Romero said. “Emalia, did you know that Javier is a Moreno as in la familia that I work for? Javier Moreno Vargas, detective. He is the man you trusted to help you escape Federico and me. He is the man that Marcos told that I was your pimp. He even told him how much money I had made from selling you to that rich pendejo. Now Marcos is dead and I owe Don Moreno money.”

“Do you have the money?” Javier asked. “Some of it, maybe half.”

“Then you will give it to me and I will pay the rest when you deliver Marcos’ baby to his mother’s house in Cuernavaca.”

“No,” Emalia said. Javier’s hand shot up, but he did not hit her. She covered her womb with her hands and raised her chin to him. “You can’t have my baby.”

“¡Cállate!” You stupid girl. What do you think happens to you when I’m dead? Now, go get your things,” Romero said. He nodded to Javier. “Está bien, Javier, but I will take her to San Miguel to deliver the baby and send Federico with it to Cuernavaca.”

Emalia listened to the rest of their deal about her baby from the top of the stairs. She was leaning against the wall looking out the tall, cathedral like arched window that framed the stairwell. The ocean was a stark grey against the sky and she prayed to Santa María to save her baby and to let her escape this place.

## Chapter 3

### A Life and A Death

The Magnificat echoed into the street as Emalia approached the cathedral's baptismal doors. The day was hot and still heavy with the rain that had fallen earlier in the afternoon. She was moving slow not because of the heat, but because Bellarosa kept turning and shifting in her womb. It was still too early for Vespers. The singing was coming from the pair of altar boys preparing for the evening service. She hesitated at the opening and used the heavy, carved wood of the doors to support her as she caught her breath.

She loved these doors. None of the stucco or brick or stone buildings anywhere in Veracruz could match the solid comfort of this wood. It was from this point that she oriented her place in the city. Even in the warren runs of the Mercado, she could feel the weight of this building in the distance like a mountain depressing the earth. Its presence even contended with the ocean that was only blocks away and salted the air everywhere in the city. She was eight the first time she stood here, put her little hand against the wood, and peeped into the church.

Back then, ten years ago, fifty or so people stood in the pews for Vespers and sang the words of the Blessed Virgin. She had gripped Pedro's hand so he would not wander off and she could watch the service without worrying about him. He was on her left side right in front of the opening, but he was looking in the direction that their father had gone.

"I can't see him," he said. "Where is he?" "Shh," she said.

"Emalia, I can't see Papá."

"It's okay, Pedro. He'll be back."

The music in the church had changed. The priest would sing by himself and then the fifty people would respond by sing back to him. It was pretty and Emalia wanted to go in and sing with them, but she did not know the words they were saying. She pulled her brother's hand.

“Look, Pedro. Look at them sing,” she said.

He pulled back at her. “I don't want to look. I want to find Papá. It's starting to get dark.”

She had not been worried. They had not moved from the church doors since their father told them to wait there. She had even made Pedro pee in the bushes so they would not miss him when he came back. She had been so certain that he would come back, but that was ten years ago, and she had stopped waiting for him long ago.

Emalia straightened letting her hand slowly trail down the wood door. It was smoother than it looked. Her heart had steadied, and Bellarosa had calmed down. She wanted to sit and needed to get off her feet. She stepped into the shade of the church.

It was cool inside. The full length of the church stretched before her interrupted only by the giant, stone bowl of the baptismal. She always entered here at the back. Most people entered on the side where the cross of the church let out on the cathedral yard. It was not the view of the murals on the walls or the sweep of the church toward the altar or the stained glass of the saints beyond it that drew her to this spot of the cathedral. She preferred the loneliness of the back of the church. It was as far removed from people as she could be and remain inside. The red walls, the white marble floors, and the wooden pews were a home she could never possess, but she always felt welcome here. She always felt safe in this back corner of the cathedral.

Emalia settled on one of the marble benches that circled the baptismal. This is where the parents would sit as their children were consecrated. Last spring while Marcos was still away at school, she had sat here imagining her daughter being baptized. Now she was waiting for Olivia



to meet her here so she could convince her to take Bellarosa. She was afraid that Olivia would hate her and refuse to save her baby if she found out that Romero had turned her into a prostitute. She hated the idea that Olivia might know that Romero had been making Marcos pay to be with her, just to spend time with her.

If she closed her eyes, she could still see his panicked expression the last time Romero and Federico lifted him out of the water. The surf pulled at his black shirt. His once unruly thick hair hung limp about his face. She could still feel the scream that had ripped apart her throat on the beach. She crossed herself afraid the altar boys had heard her sob, but they continued to sing the Magnificat over and over.

The sound of the singing was different here. It was muffled in the doorway, but here on the marble pew there was an odd echo like a poorly sung round. That echo changed as the speaker or singer approached the baptismal. It became one voice and it went from echoed to the clear ringing of a bell. It was her warning long ago when she was just a girl and she learned to listen for it even in her sleep. The sound of the boys singing had that dual quality that she had experience that first night alone with her brother in the city. She came to this spot as that little girl of eight the morning after their father had told them to wait at the church doors for him. They had waited for him all night.

They had been standing in the corner, hidden in shadow, when a priest pulled the baptismal door closed. The bolt of the lock shot through the close night and Pedro took her by the hand. Emalia never really liked the dark of the bedroom she had shared with her brother, but there were even fewer walls here. There was not just a window open to the night and to the things that crawled through it. She pulled him along behind her while she followed the cathedral wall until they were hidden behind the bushes.

“How will Papá see us when he comes back?” Pedro asked.

The bars, the café, and the restaurants were still open on the other side of the square. A salsa band played in one and a number of people twirled on the cobblestones of the Zócalo. A group of young men stumbled away from the dancers. Emalia pushed Pedro father down the wall away from the lights and noises.

“We’ll just have to stay awake and watch for him,” she said.

But Pedro fell asleep with his head on her lap, and she woke in the middle of the night still sitting with her back to the wall. She had heard a man talking, but could not see him. The bars were closed and the lights were out. Emalia put her arm around her brother. She sat still and watched the night until she thought she saw a man walking away from one of the benches. He was slow and stayed out of the moonlight. A scrawny dog sniffed its way along the bushes sometime after the man had left the square. She felt it stop. She felt it watching her, and she picked up rock and threw it in the direction she had last heard it. It trotted away. Dawn was slow to come, but she must have slept some more, because when she heard the baptismal door unlocked, she snapped awake. She almost ran to it. The square had a soft blue tinge to it, but it was still empty. She woke Pedro and when they heard the priests singing, they slipped into the back of the cathedral.

At first, she slept beneath the corner bench from Lauds to mid-morning prayers. No one came to that part of the church, and it was not until she found the little pillow and blanket made up like a bed on the pew did she know that anyone knew she was even there. They had waited for their father to come back for over a week of nights. She hid Pedro in a small hollow of bushes in the corner of the churchyard and learned to stay awake while he slept. She would join him after the last of the drunks left the square, but Pedro always woke her with the sun.

He seldom slept with her in the church, but was always there just before the bells rang for Terce and, most days, he had found something for her to eat—fruit or cheese or half a sandwich. She stopped waiting for her father sometime during that first summer. The need for him to come back was lost in the routine of her days, the search for food or money. She often thought of her mother at night when she was sitting by the bushes watching the men and women play and dance in the Zócalo. Her parents never behaved that way. She only ever saw them working or cleaning or sitting in the dark getting ready for the next day. Her mother never drank like these women and her father was never happy when drunk. Dancing was only something Pedro and she did when they played.

She stopped sleeping in the church shortly after the day Pedro was not there to wake her with the bells. The panic that swept through her was not fear for Pedro; it mirrored her nightmares where she woke to an empty world. She was afraid of having no one in her life.

Emalia found Pedro in the courtyard playing fútbol with one of the younger priests. They were both laughing. The priest tossed Pedro's hair teasing him and smiled at her in the doorway of the church. She felt like their mother watching the two play and laugh. She could not remember the last time she had laughed.

“Buenos días, Señorita,” the priest said. “Su hermano es un futbolista fantastico.”

She smiled at him out of fear. She did not know what he would do or what he wanted.

She had seen this priest with the other boys that worked in the church. He made her uncomfortable the way the drunks did when they happen to see her in the square after dark. Pedro's mood shifted with her smile, and the priest looked back and forth between them. The priest sighed and gave Pedro the fútbol. He said something to Pedro that she could not hear and

that had made Pedro chuckle. The man left heading for the rectory, and Emalia was happy to see him go.

She found them a little forgotten closet, a room just longer than a mattress, in an abandoned building attached to the Mercado. It was behind a bookstall in a less traveled part of the bazaar. The old woman that sold the books was bent and gnarled like a tree. She acted like they were stray dogs when she first found them. She left food on paper plates and bottles of water by the door. She watched them come and go always acting like she did not see them. Pedro befriended her first. He carried a box of new books from her truck to the stall and then sat and talked with her most of the morning. By that winter, Emalia was watching the stall while Abuela Hernandez went to Mass or chatted with the women of the Mercado or to lunch with her son.

She would read to Pedro when no one was in the stall, which was most of the time, and she let Emalia read the books if she was careful to not break the spine. Her son, a frail, bald old man, changed the lock on the door to Emalia's room and then gave her the key. He never said much to them, but gave Abuela Hernandez money to buy them food when he stopped by the stall. Abuela bought Emalia a washtub and then showed her how to wash her clothes. She and Pedro were already using the deep sink in one of the mop closets to wash their hair and as much of their body as they could get wet.

"You have to put your back into it, Emalia," Abuela Hernandez said. She had a soaked and soapy shirt against the washboard and rubbed it hard enough to worry Emalia that it would not survive. Abuela chuckled at Emalia's expression, and then began to sing as she worked on the shirt. "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," she sang.

It was there in her closet home that Abuela Hernandez taught her Santa María's words.

She still visited her grave on the outside of the city. She would bring her flowers when she could, but she would always sing the Magnificat in prayer for her soul.

That first year is what always came back to her when she sat in the cathedral or she heard the bells ringing from across town. It followed her like a shadow. Emalia rubbed her firm, round belly, and her baby pushed against her womb. Her daughter would never know her father, she would never know her mother if Javier and Romero had their way. Hopefully, Bellarosa would never have to live in a closet, sleep on a pew, or hide in the bushes from the drunks.

The boys finished singing as a pair of priests entered the chapel and began preparing for Vespers at the other end of the cathedral. Emalia prayed to María for strength. She was still waiting for Olivia, Marcos' mother, to arrive at the church. They were to meet after Vespers, but Emalia needed to be here, in this place, alone before she arrived. It felt like the last day she would ever spend with her baby. Her daughter would have the life she could not. Marcos' mother would make sure of it if she could convince her to take Bellarosa. She hoped that even if Olivia hated her now that she would want this one part of her son.

As the priests began the chant to open Vespers, Emalia moved into a side chapel to pray. The small niche smelled of smoke and incense. She lit a candle for Marcos and set it at the feet of the statue of María. She knelt on the small step, pulled her rosary from around her wrist, and crossed herself.

“Por favor, Dulce Madre,” she said. “Intercede por el alma de Marcos para que su hija, Bellarosa, pudiera reunirse en el cielo.” She crossed herself again and then prayed for help with his mother, but only to save her daughter. She would sacrifice herself for Bellarosa, but she needed this help with Olivia.

Their first meeting had been here in the church as well just as a service ended and the incense was still fading from the walkways. It was the first full summer she had spent with Marcos and a few weeks after her sixteenth birthday. Marcos had orchestrated the day like a director might a play or a movie. They had been shopping, and while her clothes were modest in appearance, she could have fed herself for a month on what he paid for them. Her shoes were practical, but still new and painful. The necklace she wore was the first she had ever owned—a simple, gold chain with a pearl. She felt clean and alien and fake.

The day after their shopping spree, he had Emalia meet him in the park by the library. He had a blanket spread out on the grass by a tree and a wicker, picnic basket holding down one corner. He seemed pleased with himself. His mother, Olivia, always visited the cathedral when she came to Veracruz, and Marcos thought it was the perfect place for them to bump into each other. After they ate, he pulled out a notepad and began talking about the lie he needed to tell his mother. Emalia was his lie.

The high school she had supposedly graduated from was in a part of the city she had never visited and nowhere near where she lived in the apartment with Romero. He pointed to the library behind her.

“I thought you could be studying with a tutor each Wednesday here at the library for the college exams. We could tell my mother that you want to study languages and literatures. That’s true right? You are almost as good in English now as I am. It’s really impressive.” He smiled. He was just talking like this was the only way his mother would like or approve of her. “Besides, she’s not going to care about all this little stuff. She is going to want to know how we met and how we ended up dating.” He was so confident and completely wrong. “We’ll just tell her the truth there. We met at the café after we had been at the same bookstore. We’ll tell her we

discussed books and that you teased me about flirting with the waitress. And, we kept bumping into each other last summer until we had dinner and went to the movies, but we hadn't seen each other yet this summer." He was looking at her, but was not seeing her.

Emalia had stopped paying attention to him. She was watching a little boy play with a puppy and a stick. He had a great laugh and loved when the puppy yelped his tiny bark. She smiled at the two, and knew that Marcos had a childhood like that boy. How could that boy tell his mother that he was dating una niña de la calle? How could she say to that boy's mother that she had lived on the streets for the last eight years and had not seen a classroom since she was seven? At least, she had been to catechism, right? She had nothing to offer that boy. Many of her opinions were even his words, not even Spanish words. She would protect that boy or become a ghost again. She smiled and patted Marcos' hand. She would try to make this work.

She did not know what to do with his need to hide her and make her fake. She thought she understood, but once she saw Olivia sitting with him in one of the pews in the front of the cathedral, she was glad for his ruse and the mask he had constructed. She could be a woman she was not to avoid pain.

When the service was done, she waited at the crossroads of the cathedral with the safety of the baptismal at her back and the main door to the churchyard to her left. Marcos and his mother and sister materialized out of the crowd in front of her. She continued to look past them as if she were waiting for someone. She did not look at them until Marcos' hesitation had made his mother turn and question why he had stopped walking. His sister, Teresa, had made the connection to Marcos' pause and the woman standing in front of them much quicker than her mother. She was not unlike her brother—skinny and mousy. She had a confidence that he lacked, but she could not tell how she fit into Emalia's social realm.

His mother was a Mexican mother—stout and stern. She followed her son’s gaze and then set her jaw. She had few of Marcos’ features except the monument of his nose. She folded her hands in front of her, studied Emalia, and waited. Emalia looked at the woman she did not know still pretending to not have recognized Marcos. She looked at the sister, the family nose, and the intelligent study of her eyes. This would never work. She looked at Marcos.

“Ah,” she said. “Marcos, ¿cómo estás? ¿Cómo has estado?”

He flushed and Emalia thought he would blow it. His mother and sister looked at him. “What, what are you doing here?” he asked.

“Wow,” she said. “Charming as ever.” When they rehearsed this part, she had become excited by the English word *charming* and had used it all day with everything he did. It had gone from playful, to tender, to affectionate, to sarcastic. He had to bribe her to not use it again. “When did you get home?” she asked.

“A few weeks ago,” he said and Emalia knitted her brow. The rehearsal of this was lost on him, but the reality of it was clear to his mother and sister. They both looked over at him forcing a hesitation in his script. She had left this one element of her plan unvoiced. She wanted him confused. She wanted him to know that she understood a thing or two about human behavior as well, and that a good friend would call or stop by as soon as he could. It was crude to wait to bump into her to restart their friendship. He was suppose to say, *how have you been*, and ask questions about her progress for getting into college. This was to lead to introductions.

“Well,” Emalia said. The interruption confused him further and he stuttered the question he was supposed to ask. “I can see you’re busy,” she said. Emalia looked over their shoulders like she was still looking for someone. When he did not leave, she looked back at him.

“Um,” he said. “I’m sorry, Emalia. How have you been?”



She let him back in, but kept the air of irritation about her. She recited his script and waited. The introductions went as he said they would. His mother's hand was firm when they shook, and she had not hesitated to invite Emalia to lunch. It went as he hoped, but too long for Emalia to maintain the ruse. Her street vocabulary filtered into her descriptions, but played well to her lack of seriousness about school until now. Teresa no longer cared about this inferior girl and Olivia seemed torn. Marcos had thought his mother would love her, appreciate Emalia's candor, and encourage the relationship. He was wrong. For the second half of the lunch, his mother told stories of the women from Cuernavaca that went to school with Marcos and had yet to marry—women who asked about him every time Olivia bumped into them in town. The roll of Teresa's eyes told the lie of that, but the message was clear. Emalia was wrong for her son.

Marcos was wrong about most things that did not originate in a book. He understood characters, but not people. He knew how to tell a story, but not a lie. The streets would have been harsher to him than Pedro. Her brother had been too accepting and giving and genuine. It had probably gotten him killed. Marcos had been too intelligent, but not smart enough to lie to a friend, and it had gotten him killed as well.

As the priests concluded Vespers, Emalia lit another candle for her brother and a third for Bellarosa. She prayed for their souls and for forgiveness. She wanted to give confession, but could not miss Olivia if she was to make sure the woman would take in Marcos' daughter. Her baby rolled and Emalia groaned. She climbed to her feet wondering if she could use the toilet before Olivia arrived.

"Emalia," Olivia said from behind her. Emalia crossed herself and begged help de la Santa María. She fixed the black scarf more firmly over her head and breathed. She turned around, and Olivia's face fell open when she saw Emalia's stomach. Javier stood behind her,

glanced up at the statue of María, and crossed himself as Emalia caressed her belly. “Ay Dios Mío. Please, Emalia, let’s sit,” Olivia said.

“Gracias,” she said and led them to the baptismal benches. “Where is your uncle?” Javier asked.

Emalia almost did not answer him. It took her a minute to get comfortable, and this exercise of settling herself seemed to agitate Olivia. The woman ran around looking for a pillow and settled for an old blanket she found in a closet by the door to the rectory. Emalia hugged the blanket to her chest afraid it was the same blanket she had used all those years ago. She wondered if there was some street girl using this blanket every morning like she had.

“Al café,” she said and pointed toward the doors she had come in.

Javier looked over his shoulder, but did not leave. He hovered just behind Olivia. His expression had not changed since the day before when he fought with Romero. His disdain for her was complete. He showed no sign of leaving, but Emalia needed him out of the way. She needed Olivia to believe in her innocence even if she had none.

Emalia smiled at Olivia. The woman stood a pace away with her hands wrapped tight together—taut enough to make her knuckles bleed white. The smile was intended to make her relax and to act as a prayer for absolution. Emalia thought she would cry.

“What can I do?” Olivia said.

“I’m fine. I’m as comfortable as I can be.”

“No, that is not what I mean,” Olivia said. “How can I help you?”

The years since their first meeting had seesawed back and forth. Olivia wanted Marcos to sell the house in Veracruz and never return to the city. At the other end of that hell, she wanted Marcos to marry Emalia and give her grandchildren. There was a time during that third summer

that Emalia thought Olivia was going to have her shot in the street. Last winter, when Marcos had told his mother that Emalia was pregnant, the woman had cried and left town and did not speak to him again until Easter. Emalia had never told him that Olivia had come to visit her after he had returned to school in Austin.

Their meeting had been short. It was plain that Olivia was in Veracruz out of duty to her son and her grandchild. She had come to Marcos' summerhouse suddenly that February. Emalia had been living there since they had found out she was pregnant. Olivia called from a payphone somewhere in town and sounded frantic on the phone. The request to come by surprised Emalia. It was Olivia's home, and Emalia never felt as comfortable in it as she had once felt behind the bookstall. The woman knocked on the door only minutes later and wrung her hands when she requested to come in.

"Please, Señora Diego," Emalia said. "This is your home. I am only here because Marcos insists. Otherwise, I would be at my uncle's home across town."

Olivia stepped into the house and to the side of the door like a delivery person. "How are you?" she asked.

"I'm good," Emalia said. She had to take Olivia by the arm and lead her to the couches.

"I wanted to apologize to you, Emalia," she said suddenly as they sat. "I've been a bitch.

I know my son is odd. I know that he is too into his books. I worried that he was gay."

Emalia laughed. "Why?" she asked.

"Because I want grandchildren."

"No, I mean why are you apologizing?"

“Because you have been with him for three, almost four years now. You obviously care for him. But, I’m his mother. You will understand when you have your baby. Oh God. When you have my grandchild.”

Emalia did care for Marcos, but she did not know that she loved him. She did not know that she could love any man. She could not tell this woman the truth about her life with Marcos. There was no need. Marcos could worry about the details if they could get away to the United States. If not they would be dead, and Emalia would not have to worry about having hurt this poor woman whose only crime was being too picky of the woman her son was dating.

The awkwardness of that moment seemed slight to the anxious woman standing by the baptismal. Emalia was too heavy to try to comfort her the way she had back in February. The baby moved and Emalia held out her hand to Olivia. The woman just looked at it. Emalia insisted and then took Olivia’s hand a little too harshly to put in on her belly. Her baby moved again, and Olivia cried out. She put both of her hands on Emalia’s womb and began to cry. Javier took a step toward the two as if he were planning to pull Olivia away from her. He seemed determined to make this ugly. Emalia put her hands on top of Olivia’s and smiled at Javier.

“I want you to name her Bellarosa María García Diego,” Emalia said to Olivia without taking her eyes off Javier.

Olivia collapsed onto the bench and pulled Emalia into a hug. The embrace was shocking. The last woman to hug her had been her mother on the day her father brought her and her bother to Veracruz. Emalia let it happen. Her hair smelled sweet like the flowers in the Mercado.

Emalia had taken Marcos there the day after her first encounter with Olivia. He had been quiet during the walk from the Zócalo. He was often moody when his mother was in town, and

Emalia ignored him and his sulk. She rarely had patience for him when he was like this. She left him to wonder by himself once she stepped into the shade of the tarps and covered aisles.

He found her in the back corner of the Mercado where the booksellers kept their stalls.

Emalia had lived here for more than three years. She could sense her closet at her back just behind the stall that had once belonged to Abuela Hernandez. She would never buy a book from the small man who took over Abuela's bookstall after her death. He was mean spirited and treated los niños de la calle like vermin.

"Lo siento, Emalia," Marcos said. He held an armload of roses. She leaned in and smelled the flowers, let her fingertips play across the petals, frowned up at him, and turn back to the books without taking the flowers from him. He cleared his throat.

"¿Por qué, Marcos?" she asked. "Why are you sorry?"

It was weird to have him back in town. They had spent nearly everyday of the last five weeks of the previous summer together, and he had written her a letter almost every week in the fall. Christmas had been a pair of connected weekends spent at his house. He had held her hand for the first time as he led her into the living room to see the tree. It sparkled like shards of colored glass catching the sun. The spring passed like the fall, and she met him at the airport in May.

"I was wrong about my mother and I am sorry if she made you uncomfortable at lunch yesterday."

"Of course you were wrong," Emalia said. She could feel his confusion without needing to look back at him. "You are wrong more than you know especially about women."

She set the book she wasn't going to buy back on the shelf and walked away from Marcos. She did not know what to do with him. He had been intriguing last summer when she

was following him around the city. He had been kind and funny for those few weeks of July and August. His letters had grown more and more personal through the fall. They were rambling, messy fragments of his childhood and life at the University of Texas. He was lonely—had always been lonely.

Christmas was like a first date. He was awkward and often confused. His sole accomplishment was to take her by the hand and lead her to the Christmas tree. She remembered her squeal and how she had hugged his whole arm in delight. She often thought about how his arm felt pressed against her breasts, his strong hand knotted to both of hers, and how close she had come to kissing him on his shaven cheek. His discomfort and quick escape from that first half embrace amused her.

She had spent the rest of the week touching him on the arm when they were walking and talking or on the shoulder when he was sitting in his chair discussing a book with her. She stood close enough to feel his warmth every time he came to a stop on their walks. She had even come up behind him while he was lying on the couch reading and wound her fingers into his thick, dark curls. His hair was always a heavy mess. The short scalp massage froze him. She had thought it would relax him and that maybe he might look up at her with a pleased smile. He sat up instead and looked at her, and then left the room.

Marcos was nine years, three months and a day older than her, but somehow she always felt ancient around him. His inability to know her plagued her. That day in the Mercado when he bought her roses was no different. As a girl, she had often hung around the flower stalls watching the women weave wreaths. She loved Calla lilies—white and delicate like the moon. It would never occur to her to buy a cut flower. To her it was a waste of money. To him it was an

indulgence—an afterthought. She felt him follow her from the bookstalls and the thought to run sprung into her mind. The idea of him chasing her excited her.

“Emalia, por favor,” he said. “Let me explain.”

She turned a dark corner that would lead through the tunnel of clothes and to the toys by the south opening. The pull to run was building in her chest. He grabbed her by the shoulder, swung her around, and held her by the arms. Her face went hot, and she tried to jerk away. His kiss was sudden and not unlike the slap she had expected. It seemed to surprise them both, and for a moment Emalia thought Marcos would be the one to run away. His lips became needy, his hands found her face and hair, and as she tilted her head and lifted herself to her toes, his tongue slipped into her mouth and she moaned. He pulled away a moment before her breath was completely lost. He stepped back into the hanging piles of jeans, stumbled, and caught the thin metal pole that served as pillar to the market. She laughed at his discomfort, but wanted more of the Marcos that had grabbed her. She stepped close, lifted herself to his lips, and kissed him slowly. She stepped back and waited for him to react.

“I have wanted to do that since Christmas,” he said. “I have been waiting since August.”

The memory of that first kiss always made her think of roses and how it complicated their lives. And now, with the smell of flowers enveloping her from Olivia’s embrace, she would always remember this woman’s acceptance. Bellarosa shifted in Emalia’s womb and Olivia laughed.

“Wow, she’s really moving,” Olivia said. She pulled back and looked Emalia in the eyes. “I want you to come to Cuernavaca and live with me and we can work out the rest of what life means as it comes.”

Javier cleared his throat. His pistol was clearly visible under his suit coat. He even put his hands on his hips to expose it fully. His smile did what hers had not. Emalia schooled her face.

“No puede ser. I cannot. I would love to live in Marcos’ home, your home, but my uncle will not let me. He says I have to go to stay with family in San Miguel on Cozumel. He says it is best if I give the baby up, and I want you to have her. Please take her. Don’t let him give her to the church.” She said this more to Javier than Olivia.

Olivia patted her hands. Emalia could not tell if this woman knew the truth, but her emotion was real. She did not want her baby living in an orphanage or worse, being raised by Romero. She would rather Bellarosa die than live on the streets and be forced to do the things Romero wanted. If that happened, Bellarosa would never know a summer like her first full summer with Marcos. She would never have a first kiss that would always remind her of roses or nighttime walks on the beach or brunch in a café discussing Borges or the excitement of kissing in the dark of a movie theatre or all of life as she fell in love.

The thought of those last days of August from that first full summer churned in her stomach like a twin to Bellarosa. There wasn’t a day of that July that they didn’t kiss or hold one another or nap the afternoon away on the white linen of his bed. August became intense. She knew he was struggling. He pulled at his hair as he brooded much like he did when he read. She wanted him, had almost taken him a dozen times, but he would always pull away in the end.

Their first time began with anger. She had walked down the beach to his house from the Zócalo. It was not long after dawn, and she had been up most of the night playing with the thought of him on top of her, inside her, of them clinging and pulling their way to collapse. She had a key, but she knocked at his door.



He opened it in his blue satin robe. His hair was battered by sleep and he seemed confused by the watch on his wrist. She pushed him inside and kissed him. She ran her hand up the back of his neck, dug her fingers into the mat of his curls, and pulled harshly down. He gave in at first and pawed at her. His left hand found her loose breasts under her shirt, his right wound around her waist and pulled her hips close. His mouth was somehow simultaneously both warm and cool to the touch of her tongue. She felt him rise. She pushed against him, slipped her free hand into his robe, and took hold of him through his boxers. His eyes shot open, and he jumped backwards.

“Emalia,” he said.

She stepped toward him. She was tired of this game or shame or fear. His hands came up as to ward her off or to calm her down.

“Emalia, stop,” he said. “Listen to me.” “Don’t you want me?” she asked.

“No. I mean yes, but.”

The slap was cannon like in the near dark of his living room. She wanted to yell at him, wanted to punch him, wanted to pull his clothes off, knock him down, and mount him. She reached out and touched the spot where her handprint was still growing red on his cheek. She ran the back of her fingers across it and then lightly kissed it.

“I will leave if you don’t,” she said.

Her voice felt too big for the room. He studied her for a moment, took her by the hand, and led her to his bed. They fumbled with one another as the morning claimed the room. She had not expected it to hurt at first, but then her heart began to pace faster, her chest tightened, she could feel the sting of the breeze from the fan across her nipples, and the push of him both inside her and on top of her made it hard to breath, hard to see, hard to think. Her muscles tightened, but

it would be another year before she felt them throb, contract, and pull at him; she would know that flood of warmth roll through her, but by then she would hate herself. As it was, the two of them collapsed onto the pillow and she laughed at his full grin. It was a short sound and it caught in her throat as he convulsed inside her again; she felt that pulse deep within her, and she moaned with the pleasure of it.

For that last week, they replayed that moment again and again. He was at times intense and lusty, at others moody, and still others happy enough to sing while he cooked her eggs, poured her a drink, or scooped ice cream into a bowl. On the morning that he caught his flight for Austin, she took him one last time. He had been reluctant, but he gave in and she wasn't surprised to see tears in his eyes when they were done and lying together on the pillow.

Her world would be a different place if only that last moment in that August had been the moment they had conceived Bellarosa. It had been almost two years since that morning. Her time with Marcos had come and went. Olivia would be taking his body back to Cuernavaca in the morning. And in another month, Bellarosa would follow them and Emalia would be alone.

“Come with me to the funeral at least, Emalia,” Olivia said. Javier cleared his throat. “The doctor has said that she needs to leave for Cozumel as soon as possible or she will not be able to travel,” he said. “And, certainly, going up into the mountains could not be a good idea for her or the baby.”

Javier would have his way, but Emalia turned her head from Olivia's hard expression to look down the length of the cathedral and then back to the baptismal. She never wanted to leave this place. The backdoor where Emalia had first entered the cathedral opened and Romero stepped into the church. Olivia stood and helped Emalia to her feet.

“Well, if you won’t come with me, Emalia,” she said. “Then I am coming with you.”  
Javier was starting to shake his head, but Romero’s presence forced him to be still.

Emalia had watched the two nearly kill one another yesterday morning, and she was certain that Javier was determined to keep the truth from Olivia. Romero would tell her in a heartbeat to hurt everyone involved, but he needed the money that Javier agreed to pay for his silence. Olivia was studying her face. She pulled Emalia into another hug.

“Bellarosa will always be your daughter,” she said. Her voice was soft and warm on her ear. “And, if you can ever get away from that little man, you are always welcome in my home.”

The poem by Alfonsina Storni jumped into Emalia’s mind and she barked a laugh.

Romero was definitely a little, little man. She held onto Olivia when she thought the woman would pull away.

“Gracias Dona Diego. Gracias,” she said, but the similarity between Marcos’ and the poet’s deaths terrified her. She could not look either of the men in the eye, but neither took their eyes from her.

## Chapter 4

### Birth in Cozumel

The cenote was dry. Emalia's bare feet hung in the hole, and she swished them around as if the cooling, healing water of Tantun was waiting for her in those depths. The tour guides with their trailing packs of white people—los americanos—slowly passed her heading for the gift shops. She was in the swimsuit and wrap Romero had given her just weeks after the birth of Bellarosa. The men that walked behind their wives and girlfriends stared at her. The others studiously watched the tour guide interjecting now and again with interested nods of their heads; they were hiding nothing. She could feel their eyes on her too. Their minds ran their hands over her shoulders down to her breasts, breasts that were no longer swollen with Bellarosa's milk, and then suffocated her with the weight of their bodies. The women that looked at her hated her. She understood that hate.

She only had three pictures of her daughter. She would bring them with her to this place to think about and pray for Bellarosa. Federico took all of them with a disposable camera. In the first, Bellarosa lay in her arms wrapped like a tamale in a yellowish blanket. It was moments after she had delivered her daughter. She had sobbed, nearly burst into tears, and the nurse had patted her shoulder and smoothed her hair back from her forehead. The same strong voice that guided her through the cloudy, impossible darkness of the pain that was the delivery would always stay with her. *Esta bien, Chica. Su hija es hermosa—muy preciosa.* And then she was gone.

It started five weeks after Marcos' death some time in the middle of the night just a week into their stay at the InterContinental Presidente. Olivia had insisted and paid for the two-room suite. Romero took the room overlooking the ocean leaving her with the balcony above the pool and Federico on the couch. Javier and Olivia were in a separate suite. The two of them had

become her constant companions. Olivia had shown her how the pool would take the pressure off her lower back, and if not for the need to eat and pee, she would have stayed in that pool. But, Olivia wanted her to go around the island like a family on vacation. They ate at expensive restaurants surrounded by los americanos from the cruise ships, and visited the Mayan ruins.

San Gervasio, the Mayan holy site of Tantun, was their last stop, and had been that afternoon. Javier paid a private guide to walk them around. He was elderly and kind and spoke to Emalia like she was important to him. He stayed by her side through the whole walk and smelled of sweat and jalapeños and beer—a combination that reminded her of her father.

“This, my beautiful lady, is where the young women like yourself would come to be blessed by the priests and priestess of Ix Chel.” It was an open square with a manicured lawn. The remains of the buildings were stacked rubble, white stone that resembled a life she felt uncomfortable in. “This was a place of pilgrimage for the Maya,” the guide said. “Women would make the trip at least once in their lives so the goddess would grant them a large family of healthy, beautiful children. Many of those women would come here infertile. They gave gifts of coca and silver, and they would pray for children.”

Emalia wondered if she could pray to Ix Chel to make her barren. The image of La Virgen de Guadalupe loomed heavy in her mind, and she crossed herself in fear and repentance. Her guide chuckled and patted her arm.

“Even the white women from America say that same prayer when they visit here, Señorita. Even la dulce de madre de Dios embarazada de Jesús would have prayed your words if she had stood here. El Señor knows your heart.” Emalia felt like she would puke. Her guide looked concerned and hurried across the openness and into the darkness of the one building with

a roof. He came back with a bottle of water and a stone. It was polished and bright white.

“¡Tómalo!” he said.

Emalia took it and knew she would keep it in her box with her rosary. It was light and smooth and she gripped it hard enough to bruise her palm. “Gracias,” she said, but she failed to look him in the eyes when she said it.

Later, she woke in the middle of the night with a sharp pain in her back that pulled her belly taut and then consumed her being all the way around to her navel and down to her groin. When the pain went away, she climbed out of bed, pulled on her swimsuit, and slipped through the living room. She entered the enormous pool at the far end away from the small party of drunken couples.

She sighed and let the water pick her up off her feet. Emalia rolled onto her back and watched the clouds drift through the night. She had time to say a short prayer for Marcos, to think about what Bellarosa would be like as a little girl, and what she would think of her mother before the pain in her lower back returned and swamped her. She could not move or breathe or even think until that pain released her. She stood and then glided over to the wall by the light.

It was another fifteen or twenty minutes or so before the pain took her again, but this time the pool water clouded—yellowed—as if she had peed. Emalia sobbed and wished she had drowned during that first contraction under the water. Soon every part of Marcos would be gone from her. She would be alone in the world with Romero and Federico.

The time between the pool and Federico’s first picture escaped with the night. Bellarosa was born at 7:02 a.m. Emalia held her at 7:05 and whispered her name to her for the first time. She lay there with her daughter and rehearsed again and again the events of the night so that she would never forget: the pointless conversations with Olivia as she walked the hospital halls, the

room with its ponies and balloon wallpaper, the darkness of the hours of contractions that consumed her, the constant steady voice of the nurse, the ripple of Bellarosa's shoulders and arms and legs as she flooded out past her cervix, and the sudden, sole second of relief that followed. She would never forget the sharp pull of the umbilical as the doctor prepared it to be cut. She was confused that the pain came from the left side of her womb just above her hip and not from behind her navel.

With her baby in her arms and Bellarosa's name only moments old, Federico took his first picture. He was excited and hovered like a doting brother, but he was just a street kid only slightly older than her. He seemed happy though. Emalia let him hold Bellarosa's hand, touch her small head, and even hold her for a moment before the nurses took her away to the nursery.

Emalia had not known that Federico had taken the second picture. It was some time during the last two weeks that they spent in the hotel. She sat in the balcony's wicker chair with her knees bent and her feet supported by the matching stool. Bellarosa was cradled in the crook of her legs. Her little gloved hands waved in the air. It could have been any one of the nights, but this picture did not only remind her of her baby. It always carried Marcos' shadow and her many betrayals of him.

It is the picture she held when she begged for forgiveness. With Marcos' daughter on her lap, how could she not think of her and Marcos' first morning together in Veracruz? Marcos had begun so hesitantly and then was consumed by his need. He was like that, full of questions and remorse and doubt, in those first days and weeks before he went back to school, but he always gave into her.

It was not until he was gone and his letters started arriving that she realized that he was in love with her. She was not the kind of person that planned for the future. After she moved into

the closet at the Mercado with her brother, life had only been a series of days where her only concerns were for food and safety. Occasionally, children in school uniforms would come into the Mercado, and she would watch them. They talked about homework and boys and the exams for the university, but it was like watching the tourists shop or sightsee. They were not real. She did not know what to do with his love. And then, Romero ruined it all.

It had reached that part of September in Veracruz where one begins to think that the rainy season will never end and that the humidity will finally make a puddle out of every living thing. Romero came into her room and told her to get dressed. They were going to dinner with a business partner of his from Texas. He then crossed to her closet and pulled out the blue dress that Marcos had bought her. She had worn it for dinner on his birthday. Romero threw it onto her bed.

“Wear this,” he said.

She almost asked why, but he had that look that said he was about to lose his temper. She had done this before. Romero did not speak English well back then, and he often had her translate for him. This was the first time he had her wear a dress to dinner with him though.

Normally, they met these men at bars or coffee shops. Before they left the apartment, he grabbed her by the elbow hard enough to hurt and leave a mark. With her heels on, his forehead barely reached her lips, but somehow she felt small.

“You will do what I say when I say. Is that understood?” he said. She nodded. “This man is very dangerous and could have us all killed.”

Romero was always making deals, selling drugs and information, behind the family’s back. More than once, he and Federico had come home to the apartment bloody and hurt, but



nothing had ever happened when she was with them. She mostly just talked or delivered notes to hotel rooms.

His name was Eric, and he wore a loose, white cotton shirt and blue jeans. His light brown hair was long and wavy and still wet from the shower. Most of Romero's business partners looked like the other man at the table, big and greasy or sometimes, skinny with rotten teeth. Eric spoke his English slowly and ate just as slowly but with both hands. His fork remained in his left hand and periodically delivered food to his mouth. His knife, when not cutting his food, was used to gesture and point and to illustrate whatever story he told. The utensils only came to rest on the plate when Eric was using his napkin. Just before they ordered desert, Romero and he agreed on a price, but on what Emalia did not know.

"Take Bill with you," Eric said to Romero pointing with his knife at the big greasy guy to his right. "Emalia and I will finish our dinner and then wait for you in the room."

Romero took her by the bruised elbow again. "Remember what I told you. Be nice to him." She nodded.

The room was small with a bed, a chair, and a long, waist high dresser that ran the length of the wall. The tall, door like windows opposite the door stood open on the wrought iron rail that gave Eric a foot of space to lean out into the night. He set his third bottle of wine on the bare dresser top and threw himself onto the chair. He did not look dangerous. He looked like a man that was used to being obeyed. Emalia stood by the door to the hall. His steady gaze was making her uncomfortable.

"Pour us some wine," Eric said. Emalia moved to the bottle and glasses. "So what's your story, Emalia? Why are you with that toad Romero?"

Emalia thought he meant frog and made the mental note to look up the definition of toad when she returned to the apartment. She just smiled and handed him his glass of wine.

“Have a seat, Emalia,” Eric said. She looked around the room before sitting on the corner of the bed. “What do you think of the merlot?”

It was bitter, and she imagined Marcos pouring it down the sink. “It is fine,” she said in English.

“It’s shit,” he said. “But now I know how you lie.”

Emalia wanted to leave. She had not felt this exposed since she and her brother slept in the bushes by the cathedral. She stood and set the glass on the dresser.

“Do you think I am cute?” he asked. Cute translated to pretty in her mind, and she chuckled because he thought of himself as pretty. He smiled too. “Am I a handsome man?”

She shrugged not wanting to lie to him.

“I think,” he said and held out his glass for more of the wine, “that you standing there in that blue dress is one of the finest things I have seen in a long time.”

Emalia had not moved to refill his glass. She was trying not to run.

“Take it off,” he said and her left foot shifted toward the door. His eyes narrowed. “¿Por qué?” She shook her head. “Why?” she asked.

“Because I think you are beautiful and I want to see what that dress is hinting at. Now take it off.” She just watched him. Her ability to understand his English was fading. She could not think. “I’m not going to hurt you, Emalia.”

“I have a boyfriend,” she said. “Of course you do.”

His expression changed, and Emalia saw the dangerous man Romero warned her about. She started to step out of her heels and he shook his head. She unzipped her dress and it fluttered

down around her ankles. She crossed her hands in front of her for comfort. He stood, filled his wineglass, and moved as close to her as he could without stepping on her dress.

“Lie down on the bed,” he said. She started to shake her head, but he smiled and touched her face with the back of his fingers. “Please.”

She did as she was told and closed her eyes while he undressed. His weight on the bed made her lip tremble, but she did not make a sound. He kissed her right ankle and whispered the word perfection. What followed was not quick. It was not the pleasure or the tension before the release that she felt with Marcos. It was sloppy and noisy and disturbing. The weight of him on her hips hurt, and she was forced to lift her knees or cry out from the pain. He thrust deeper within her, and her breath caught in her throat. He mistook it for pleasure, and he burst inside her. He groaned and collapsed on top of her. His sweaty weight kept her from being able to breath. She shifted beneath him. He throbbed within her, and Emalia almost threw up her dinner.

He rolled onto his back by her side still breathing heavy. She started to get up. Her only thought was to hide in the bathroom until Romero came for her, but Eric grabbed her right wrist.

“I’m not done, Sweetie,” he said and Emalia froze.

When she held the second picture and thought about Marcos, it was Eric’s voice she heard in her head. It was deep and strained and still terrified her. There were a dozen men that Romero gave her to during that school year, but none of them plagued her like Eric.

The last picture was taken after Emalia was alone with Romero. Olivia, Javier, and Federico took Bellarosa to Cuernavaca. She and Romero moved into an apartment not too far from the piers used by the cruise ships. Federico returned with the pictures and a suitcase for Romero. That was three years ago.

Emalia shuffled the picture of her and Bellarosa on the balcony to the back of the others. The final picture of her daughter was of Olivia holding her in front of a gate and a three-meter high stonewall. There was a large house beyond the open gate. It had a pool and garden on the side. There was a guesthouse beside the garden and a pair of dogs on the lawn. The address on the gate read 481 Compositores. It was Bellarosa's home, and she had disappeared from Emalia's life.

This picture reminds her of her early days on the island with Romero. She had tried to run away twice. The first time Romero had caught her on the ferry heading for the mainland. That night they had stayed in a hotel near the beach. He beat her, tied her to the bed, and found two teenage boys to use her. The second time, she tried to hide on the island in a little shack owned by a fisherman. She thought she would slip onto the last ferry to Playa Del Carmen after a week or two when Romero had stopped looking. Somehow he found her. He forced her to her knees, put a gun in her mouth, and pulled the trigger. The fact that the gun was not load did not change the fact that she died that day. He told her if she tried to run away again, he would find her daughter and kill her.

Her first year alone with them was a drunken mass of memories and men and lasted until she tried to kill herself with a needle of heroin. She woke up at the cenote where she comes now to pray. The dealer that sold her the drugs fell off a building a week later. And the following week, Federico was twitchy and angry.

She returned to confession and sat at the back during Mass. She went back to the books that she took from Marcos' house. She studied his poetry, moved on from English to French, and started looking for another way out—a way to her daughter.

She shuffled the last picture back into place so that she was back to Bellarosa's birth. The tourists were hurrying away now. They had only a half an hour to shop before the bus was due to leave for their cruise ship. A young woman, white and pretty, remained after the crowd headed for the shops. She stood on the path and watch Emalia for a moment.

"Hola," she finally said. "Soy Beverly. Um."

Emalia could tell she was digging deep for what remained of her Spanish. Many of the businessmen that paid Romero to use her had the same expression. Emalia put her pictures away in her purse.

"I speak English," Emalia said. The wash of relief that always followed that statement used to bother her. Now, she just felt sorry for them.

"I'm sorry. I was wondering. Well, I mean you look like you belong here, are from here I mean, and I want to take my boyfriend out to a really authentic Mexican Food restaurant for dinner. I thought you might know of a place."

Emalia looked at the woman and considered pulling out the pictures and showing her the picture of the baby her pimp stole from her. She thought about telling her how a metal gun barrel feels against your teeth and its oily taste on the tongue. She thought about telling her about Eric. She pulled her feet out of the cenote and stood instead.

"Try the restaurant in the InterContinental Presidente. It is expensive, but easily the last place I had a good meal."

## Chapter 5

### The Girl Disappeared

Emalia bit her lip and watched the girl tied to the bed. Her name was Ana Cecilia, but that is all that Emalia had learned about her in the three hours since she had returned from the Hotel and Casino de Santa Flora. Ana was struggling not to fall asleep. Federico had left the tequila on the side table by the long couch and had gone off to someone's bed—his or una de las putas elsewhere in the house. The ice in his abandoned tumbler was a puddle of chunks devolving as gravity and heat claimed its clarity.

Ana's frame jerked awake and her one good eye opened. Her exhaustion was clear. Her brown eye seemed to beg—plead—for sleep or death or some end. Emalia waited. She wanted Romero to leave before she began to pull this girl back from the edge, but the man was pacing around by the bar on the phone. He was always like an old lady on the phone, chatting and telling stories until he became angry. Emalia continued to wait and watch Ana. The girl looked at her hands. They were tied in a bundle with a rope above her head and fastened to the footboard of Paulette's old bed. Maybe she had misread Ana's plea. Did she still think she might find a way out and back to her old life? Did she still want to live?

Emalia stood and turned toward Romero. The bar of the second floor lounge hid the majority of his short, fat body. His conversation was growing heated and he was beating the bar top with the weighted glass of his tumbler. The full length of the deep-red, Amazonian hardwood was scarred from his many conversations over the years. She stepped to the far end and turned the mantle clock around to face him. He had brought it back from his most recent trip to Spain and it had sat there on the bar ever since.

He pulled the phone away from his mouth. “¿Qué?” he asked. Emalia tapped the face of the Spanish clock. He turned away and proceeded with his threats. Emalia waited until he turned back. She had no idea what he saw when he looked at her like this. Was she still the little girl from the mercado in Veracruz or the whore that helped make him a rich man? She heard the man on the other end of the call ask if he was still there. “Sí, pero, I’m done talking with you. Get what I want before I am done with you completamente.” He hung up.

Emalia smiled. There was never a hint of warmth in their shared expressions. She often wondered what he saw or thought when she was performing for a john. Her smile for Captain Miller earlier in the night had lit her whole face, colored her cheeks, and filled her eyes. It was the kind of smile that made men fidget. Romero was still trying to divest himself from the phone conversation and would not be bated by her.

“Do you want Ana to stay tied where she is for the night or may I make her comfortable—treat her eye and take her to the toilet?” she asked.

His expression cleared. He was excited again. He moved to her side and put his hand on her folded forearms where she rested against the bar top. She fought the urge to pull away.

“Do what you need to do with her?” he said. He pulled a pair of keys from his pocket and set them by her arms. “Here is your down payment. This is to her door and this one opens the outside door. Help me get her,” he pointed at Ana, “to St. Maarten and on that plane and you’re free.”

Some johns would play a game where they teased her with more money. They mistakenly thought she was working for herself. Take the money too quickly and they became frustrated, even angry. If she waited too long to take the money, they would become angry, even violent. It was a game of power and submission, and each man was a little different. Romero wanted to see

her, all women, subjugated first; it reinforced his belief in his power. She picked up the key to Ana's door and left the second key where he set it. She waited without meeting his stare.

Romero lifted her chin with the forefinger and thumb of his right hand. She struggled not to bite him. He picked up the second key and held it up by its teeth. He was in control.

“Keep this close or I may think you want to stay,” he said.

Emalia studied his face, but did not take the key. He released her chin, slipped his fat finger under the straps of her red dress and black bra, ran it down into the lace cup, and pulled the cloth from flesh. The key was oddly warm against her nipple. He caressed her tit briefly. He had rarely touched her in a sexual way and never used her for sex. Emalia shivered in revulsion and fear. He chuckled and stretched the straps back into place.

“It would not be so bad between us,” he said. He had stepped back a pace.

They had known each other for almost twenty years. Never had he done more than look longingly at her. Emalia stayed still.

“I have been thinking about how you will get home and how you will survive. I worry in my own way. I've known you since you were ten or eleven. I fed you, protected you, sent you to catechism, and even made your life as easy as possible in spite of your hatred of me. In spite of all your bitchiness and arguments and crude comments.” Romero looked up into her eyes. “I would give you anything, but you have to ask for me. I don't need you to pretend you want me, but you must ask me to your bed. And, you can name your price.”

He stepped back again, searched her body with his eyes, and let them rest at her ankles.

She did not breathe until he had gone out the side door to the second floor of the brothel. He would hurt one of the other women before dawn.



Emalia hid the keys in a hole behind the wood paneling of her room. Seldom was she able to sneak money into the hole, but there was enough to live quietly, painlessly for a time. She changed into cotton pajamas, picked a pair for Ana, and returned to the other doorway.

“¿Está despierta?” she asked.

Ana raised her head. Emalia wondered if she would pretend to not understand. The girl did not bother to respond.

“¿Habla inglés?” Emalia asked.

There was a moment where Ana studied Emalia’s face. The conversation would be safer in English; she needed this girl to be honest and want to live. She could not help her if she fought her for as long as Paulette and Andrea.

“Do you understand me?” she asked. “These walls are alive with ears,” she said. It was a deliberate misconstruction of the phrase. Ana’s face constricted with the translation and then in pain. Her left eye and cheek were a mess from Romero’s lesson. If they had waited to bring her into the house until Emalia had returned, she may have been able to save this girl the pain she was in. “So you do understand me.”

“You should have said, ‘these walls have ears’,” Ana said. Her English was clear of the Latin. She spoke like Marcos had before the summer saturated his tongue with Spanish and the lilt of home.

“Have you spent time in the U.S.?” Ana stayed silent. “If I’m to help you, you must speak to me. I can’t wait until you accept your place here and give up on hope. I have waited months in the past, but you have days, maybe.”

The girl did not move or speak.

“I can tell you what you need to know. I can teach you how to forget your self long enough for, for the worst of it to pass. I can help you plan for the one day you can run for your life, and I can teach you the patience of a woman, but you do not have the time to fight the truth. Your life is not about school or marriage or some job you hoped to do in the future, not any more. Your life is only about staying alive now. ¿Entiende?”

The girl did not blink.

“My life and your life are now one and the same. This is important. I will not let you kill us both, but I will fight to keep you alive. ¿Entiende?”

Ana looked at her feet. She had been sitting on the floor with her feet stretched out in front of her for hours. She would be in pain for some time, and Emalia knew she would have to carry her to the toilet.

“Otra vez. I can tell you what you need to know. I can tell you how to forget your self long enough for, for the worst of it to pass.” Emalia stopped. Ana’s head had snapped up.

“¡Cállete! I get it.” The right side of Ana’s face was turning red—flushing the color of her Latin blood. It was the first uncalculated emotion Ana had shown.

“Do you know what is happening?” “Sí.” The word was small and deflating.

“You do not have time for that. If this were months ago, I would have let you spend days right here in this moment so you could mourn or pray or accept this reality, but you do not have that kind of time,” Emalia said. Ana’s face had paled. “Should I go through it all again?”

“No.” It was almost a growl. “But tell me why? Why me? Do they know who my father is?” Ana asked.

Emalia hesitated. This girl was no niña de la calle. She knew that as soon as Federico had opened the door, but she was something more. She was somebody who could claim a father. She had someone looking for her and not just praying for her.

“Should I assume that you mean for some other reason than they will want to fuck you?” Emalia had used this statement before, on most of the women she had tried to help, in order to break their need to hold onto the past. Ana would never start looking for a safe way out until she accepted her present situation. She would not escape them, but she might save her life in the end.

Ana’s arms tensed and for the first time Emalia watched as she pulled, trying to free herself from the ropes. Emalia let her continue to struggle until she was certain Ana’s wrists were bruised. Emalia knelt on the floor by the girl’s side. In the past she had had to resort to slapping some of the women to get them to settle down. She chose a calm, quiet voice for Ana.

“Let me help you, Ana,” Emalia said.

Ana burst into tears and Emalia waited for her to get control. She had yet to touch the girl.

“I can teach you to survive. If you survive now, you can get away. I have seen it. I have helped others like you, but you must accept that you are here and that it will get much, much worse.”

It took a moment, but Ana returned to the calculated, thoughtful young woman that Emalia had been studying all night.

“Will you be with me?” Ana asked. It was a first for Emalia. None of the women ever believed anything other than the worst about her; they believed her complicit in their plight. “I don’t know that I can do this alone.”

Emalia touched her on the leg in comfort. She looked at her hand on Ana’s leg. It was too early to give into her need to mother her. For Ana, Emalia almost considered staying, but neither

of them would be here in three days. Neither of them would even be in the islands by the weekend. Emalia would be in México and Ana would be somewhere in Europe.

“For as long as I can?”

By the last hour before dawn, Ana’s face was treated; she had had a bath and some food.

Emalia had made her walk around the private lounge for ten minutes or so, and while she was eating, Emalia had removed everything from Ana’s room that could be used to harm herself or that might help her escape. She had a bed, but no blanket or pillow. Everything else, including the nail that held Paulette’s painting, had been pulled from the room and walls.

The girl had been fetally curled on the bed when Emalia turned out the light, pulled the door closed, and locked it. Emalia had retreated to the window overlooking the yard and its orange grove. She sat on the wide, teak windowsill and waited for the light to breach the night. She had her rosary and the keys held tightly between her hands.

The night was black—like death, like a coffin, like a forgotten body in the ground.

Emalia frowned at her morbid and trite thoughts. Marcos loved to play the simile game. They were “as happy as larks” and “as hungry as bears.” And, she was always “as busy as a bee.” It had changed in her loneliness from as to like and from trivialities to desperate triteness. She needed to go find his grave and her daughter.

Ana’s sobs carried through the dark lounge arresting Emalia’s hope for home. She had to try to save this girl. She could not lose her like Paulette or any of the others. Emalia could almost see Paulette’s tree below the window. Had its roots started pulling Paulette’s body closer and closer to its womb?

“Dulce Madre,” Emalia prayed. The wind rushed onto the island from the east. It was hot and whipped over the hilltop, around the corners of the house, and through the branches of the

orange trees. She waited and listened. There had been years that the only thing to mark a change in her life was the endless tropical storms of summer. La Isla de Santa Flora waited always in the dawn for their coming wrath.

On the far north end of the island, the lights of La iglesia de las vírgenes y mártires lit its stain glass passion scenes against the night and coming dawn. Soon its bell would call for morning prayers, and Father Rivera would hold mass.

“Dios te salve, María. Llena eres de gracia.” Lightning cut through the dark, and for the first time Emalia could see the dark clouds hanging over the island. If this were the first of the tropical storms of the summer, it would pound the island with heavy rain for days. Lightning and its thunder shuddered the whole island again. Emalia could hear the other women in the house, and the few patrons that remained, moving below the lounge. The doors to the church opened to reveal the tiny figure of Father Rivera, and for the first time Emalia wanted to go to him in the dawn.

When he first came to the island five years before, he had come to the brothel to meet with her. Romero had teased the man into it, but he had come and had never forgot Romero’s impertinence. He had sat with her here at the window and heard her confession. They had knelt at the window as if the frame of it was an altar, and he had blessed her and the space.

“At dawn, between the light in Saint Peter’s window and the ringing of the bells, I will say a prayer for you Emalia, and if you should ever need the church, I will hold the door open for you,” he had said.

While she prayed the Ave María, he had walked around the crown of the hill that is La Isla de Santa Flora. He had never returned and Romero had refused to let her go to him to confess, but only because he disliked the priest. They did not speak in public. Romero spread the

rumor that the priest had taken advantage of her, and Father Rivera had nearly been recalled because of the incident. But, she always watched him say his blessing at dawn from her seat at the window.

Emalia looked at the keys in her hand, at the door that held Ana, and the door that led to the garden of the hilltop. She moved like a ghost. She dressed in black, found a headscarf, and waited by Ana's door until she heard the bells begin to ring. Ana's sobs had quieted into the heavy breathing of the exhausted. Emalia checked the door; it remained bolted. She hurried to the side door. Never had she gone through it without Romero or Federico escorting her. It was hard to breathe.

Emalia pulled and locked the door behind her. She descended the stairs slowly—a step per dozen heartbeats. She stepped into the garden and locked the lower door. She would have gone to Paulette's tree to pray for her soul, but she did not dare look back or hesitate in the grove. Instead, she moved through the wind and dark and climbed the hill onto the roof of La Isla de Santa Flora. There she did hesitate and stare at the vastness of the Atlantic beyond the hill.

She had always believed that she would have to follow Storni into the ocean to be free of Romero's life.

The house looked smaller from above. Her window was still un-shuttered and was a dark hole she had been buried in for over a decade. If not for Father Rivera and the women of the grove, she would have happily swam into the east long ago. Ana was still behind those shutters. She lay sleeping behind those locked doors—doors Emalia had locked. She looked back out at the Atlantic and finished her prayer.

“Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén.” She crossed herself and let the wind push her around the crown of the hill toward the church.