

Redemptions WARRIOR

JENNIFER
MORSE

WILLIAM
MORTIMER

Redemption's Warrior

By

Jennifer Morse and William Mortimer

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: THE KILO

CHAPTER TWO: JUANITA

CHAPTER THREE: ISLAS TRES MARIAS

CHAPTER FOUR: *LA LUNA*

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CHICKEN AND THE EGGS

CHAPTER SIX: THE PUTAS

CHAPTER SEVEN: A FIRST DATE

CHAPTER EIGHT: REDEMPTION'S WARRIOR

CHAPTER NINE: THE FIRST AND LAST LESSON OF REDEMPTION

CHAPTER TEN: DANIEL'S SHAME

CHAPTER ELEVEN: DOUBLE DREAMING

CHAPTER TWELVE: FROM FAMINE TO FEAST

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A GIFT FROM *EL JEFE*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: OLIVIA

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: RECONSTRUCTION

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: *ADIOS AMIGO*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: RECOMPENSA

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: BANDITOS

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE CROSSING

EPILOGUE

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CHAPTER ONE

THE KILO

Do you believe in beneficence? Can you fathom a goodness requiring you to create acts of power and truth that resonate out into the world forming waves of intention where the impossible encounters the possible?

Redemption's Warrior is the story of Christopher Marcos and his journey into beneficence and beyond. His transformation begins in the shadows of deceit, betrayal and violence.

Stars fade as light edges the horizon. Dawn of Christopher's eighteenth birthday, to celebrate, he's driving his restored Chevy to Tijuana, Mexico. His errand is a journey to the Tuck and Roll upholstery shop. His Chevy will have a new interior before afternoon. Tonight friends and family will gather. Votive candles in glass jars will sparkle and light each guest's path to the front door. Lights already strung through the rafters of the back porch will twinkle. *The barbeque...* Christopher's mouth waters in anticipation.

His nagging worry: His parents don't know what he's up to. *Should I have left a note?* No, he decides. If no one knows the errand no one can discourage him. He'll be back before his party. The Chevy's wicked interior something to celebrate. Pushing the uneasiness to the back of his mind, Christopher's hands squeeze the steering wheel. Palms flatten pounding out a rhythm. This is his first trip across the border solo *I need to focus. Stay focused.*

Master Jojo's words echo across time, "Focus Christopher! Focus a resource of mastery. No one can take it away from you."

Visible through the wind shield, Christopher watches stars withdraw, light expands. Night recedes. For a fleeting moment they blend and balance. The world highlighted in sunrise, his Chevy drops into the curve. He loves how it hugs the road. Together, he and his Dad have worked on this car since he was thirteen. Accelerating onto Interstate 5 he reaches into the cooler gripping a thick molasses cookie, dusted in sugar, rich. Christopher closes his eyes for one inhale of appreciation. Looking down he sees sugar and crumbs covering his shirt. He brushes off white sugar from his blue shirt and reaches for another cookie.

The International Border is surprisingly free of traffic. He's waved through one of the five lanes designated "nothing to declare." Slowing down through the tourist area, friendly vendor's wave as his shiny car passes their booths. Further on, the road deteriorates. Garbage cans overflow. Woman bent with fatigue hang laundry on lines strung between houses patched with cardboard. They glare as his car passes. Old men leaning back on front porch chairs scowl behind half closed eyes.

A group of kids race after his car throwing stones and cans. They yell, "Go home *gringo!*" Punching the accelerator the Chevy leaps forward. Out of range of the missiles Christopher slows once again to navigate the potholes. The Chevy chugs up the hill, its growl subdued. His car is too

bright in this impoverished landscape, Christopher sinks deep into the seat. Catching himself he sits up straight. He will not shrink.

The rumble of the modified camshaft and dual exhaust vibrates off the asphalt announcing the car's muscle. The Chevy's power music to Christopher's ears he never tires of hearing.

At the top of the mesa he finds the warehouse and the sign: Tijuana Tuck and Roll. He has arrived. Anxiety and excitement stream through his body vying for his attention. *I should have left a note.*

Once the tuck and roll is installed, he imagines his Dad running his hands over the smooth leather and nodding. He can picture the smile they will share.

In stark sunlight bins overflowing are sentinels guarding the three garage bays. Women sit at sewing machines stitching tubes of leather. Teams of men rip out old upholstery and staple in rolled leather. Christopher parks as directed in the empty bay. Circling the car he pats the hood before walking thru the door marked Office. Sweat heavy with bacteria and glue bombard him, a toxic perfume.

He stands behind two surfers with sun bleached hair paying the owner. They are peeling money, overflowing, into the man's hands. The tallest blond says, "Thanks for the smoke. It helped pass the time."

As the surfers turn to leave, Christopher reads their red rimmed eyes. *These guys look like dirty pennies.*

He spent too many years fleeing gangs. Under the influence of drugs gangs used violence to intimidate, steal, and silence. Whatever the conflict drugs and violence was their solution. As a boy he watched his small neighborhood, collapse under the strain of thefts, drugs and violence.

In high school united with dojo buddies they formed a patrol. They freed the neighborhood shops and streets of drugs and violence.

Watching the surfers climb into their black van he glimpses through the open door *pale blue leather, flawless.*

Turning back to the counter, Christopher swallows hard. The owner is bordered in a grainy black haze. The man pounds his fist on the worktop. "Hey *gringo!* You have an appointment? *Dinero?*"

Christopher spots a skunk wrapping the man's neck. It has glossy black hair, two white stripes. Front paws have long, arching, dangerous nails.

"Um," Christopher's mouth goes dry. He feels too young, too vulnerable to decode the man's hostility. "Yes. I have an appointment. I wired a deposit."

The skunk's tail waves, Christopher smells skunk spray. Out of the corner of his eye a blue dragonfly darts at the door. Too much is happening. He doesn't feel safe. *Should I leave?*

Pounding the counter the owner's face darkens, "My *dinero!*" Christopher flinches. *Do I forfeit my deposit? Drive home?*

They are alone in the office. The surfers with their pale blue upholstery are gone, probably already at the border. A few blocks—but another world—away. Remembering the glimpse of blue leather, Christopher thinks *the upholstery was flawless.* Entangled in his dream, he visualizes his black and

white leather interior and hands over the remaining money.

The owner smiles, teeth stained dark with tobacco. "Leave your 'shiny car.' Come back in a couple of hours."

A lurch in his stomach and Christopher wants to be away from this man and his small office. But he will not leave his car. Through the window he watches. The Chevy is surrounded by a hive of men buzzing around the seats, material flying. Sitting at the sewing machine a woman folds black and white leather. It disappears between her fingers, reappearing as perfect rolls. Christopher sighs with relief.

The redeeming feature of the dirty office is a stack of hot rod magazines. Making eye contact with the owner he says, "I'll wait here until my car is done." Picking up a magazine, it remains unopened. His attention is riveted on his car as he studies the transformation of his Chevy's interior.

Out of the corner of his eye he senses movement. The owner is dangling a shrink wrapped bag of marijuana. Christopher is stunned. The man yells, "Hey *gringo!* Would you like to buy a kilo of dye-no-mite?"

Is he crazy? Golden tipped buds are visible across the room through the clear plastic. *A kilo!* Looking the skunk straight in the eye Christopher says, "No thanks, man." He pats empty pockets. "I only have money for gas."

Face flushing, the skunk tail waves perfuming the air. Replacing the kilo under the work table the owner calls out, "Your loss, *hombre.* It's sweet stuff."

A line of sweat trickles down Christopher's back. He feels the man's menace. As if he is the bull's eye of a target. The man's aggression is sticky and smelly. Christopher longs for a shower. If his car wasn't torn up he'd get in, right this minute. He'd drive down the hill back through the tourist market place. Crossing the border he'd never come back to Mexico. He's seen the true face of Mexico's poverty. He's seen their hatred for a *gringo* in their midst. He will never return. Sitting in the grimy office he waits for his car's interior installation to be complete. Every muscle in his body aches.

• • •

Christopher exhales pure relief. The installation of tuck and roll upholstery complete he slides behind the Chevy's wheel. Alternating white and black leather, he runs his hands over the seats. They are smooth to his touch. He sniffs the rich odor, elated. His relief settles in his gut now the errand is complete.

The Chevy responds eagerly as he maneuvers the car down the hill. Driving the bumpy road his thoughts track to his party. It will be crowded with relatives and friends. His Filipino dad will make *lumpia*. In a moment of reverie Christopher imagines wrapping the Filipino burrito, stuffed with pork, rice and sweet sauce. He loves the ritual of rolling the ingredients. Eating, the flavors and textures blend and the sweet sauce will spill out the corner of his mouth pooling at his chin until he wipes it off.

His mom will make challah. Dojo buddies will show up for the food! Shop owners serviced by Iron Fist Security will stop by. His excitement builds while hands beat a rhythm on the steering wheel. The soft leather interior, only one word describes the color and texture, *flawless*. Christopher's happiness soars.

At first glance he doesn't notice the faded Buick pulling up beside his Chevy. Lights flash. The driver presses a badge to the glass pane. Pointing to the side of the road, he gestures Christopher to pull over.

Squeezing the steering wheel, his anxiety surges, and Christopher mutters, "What the.....?"

When the Chevy and Buick are parked, a big bellied cop followed by his thin partner approach. Gauging his options, stalling for time, Christopher offers, "Do you need to see my passport?"

Standing just behind the driver door the officer peers in, and says, "Step outside *Senor*. Keep your hands visible."

Christopher cannot read the micro-indicators, the small muscles of eyes, covered by the man's mirrored sunglasses. He repeats, "Do you need to see my passport?"

Before he can say another word the car door flies open. The oversized cop grabs the front of his shirt and wrenches him out of the car. Christopher stumbles. The big bellied officer steps to the side. The thin cop blindsides him with a club, slamming him below his buttocks. Christopher looks over his shoulder. Theirs is a well-practiced step in the dance of detainment.

In a flash of neon blue the dragonfly appears. Within the dragonfly's light Christopher sees the vicious pleasure of a man who enjoys inflicting pain. Gravity catches up with him. The final third of his fall plunges him face first into the dusty road. His mouth fills with blood. He has bitten his lip. "What's going on here?" He croaks, spitting dirt and blood out of his mouth.

The first cop shoves his foot into the small of Christopher's back. "We have it on good authority you are smuggling drugs, *senor*...," flipping open Christopher's passport, "Marcos."

Christopher hears the terrible sound of leather ripping, followed by, "Found it Jesse. The fool *gringo* stored it in the passenger door."

Adrenalin pours through his veins, powering his muscles. As confusion tumbles into clarity Christopher jumps to his feet. "These drugs have been planted! You're working with that skunk, the upholstery man!"

Both men burst into laughter. White teeth flash at Christopher with vicious pleasure, "Stupid, *gringo*, we'll take you our hotel, the Tijuana jail. Jesse will confiscate your car for evidence... drugs are a serious crime in Mexico."

They shove Christopher into the back seat of the Buick, handcuffs attached to a metal bar. The seat is piled high with stacks of paper and empty beer cans. The car reeks of sweat and beer. While opening the driver's door of Christopher's Chevy the lean cop whistles his appreciation of the smooth leather. "Maria will love going to the movies in this car. I'll tell her 'no panties.' We need to break in the upholstery."

The oversized cop's belly jerks and bounces fueled by laughter. The sound infuriates Christopher. He grits his teeth in frustration before roaring, "I'm a United States citizen. I'll call the American Consulate and be out of jail before you can eat a *tortilla*." He prays this to be true. "And you better take care of my car!"

Ignoring him the two men continue strategizing. "With this Chevy, Tuck and roll has paid its dues. Weed and a car... We'll have to get rid of the *gringo*."

"Lose him on *Islas Tres Marias*. *El Jefe* will take him with no paperwork."

Rubbing his belly the cop nods. "Okay. He's young and strong. *El Jefe* will use his muscle. He'll owe us a favor and he can get rid of him."

Christopher hears a lighter, smells the cigarette, the Chevy's car door slams. The Glasspack Cherry Bomb mufflers rumble. Christopher feels the power vibrate in his gut. His Chevy pulls out. Christopher bends over in pain. The cop looks at him through the rear view mirror, "*Gringo*," he smiles.

The Buick pulls into traffic. The cop knows hijacking Christopher's car hurts more than the whack of his partner's baton. His laughter fills the air with black bubbles. Christopher strains to spot his car. Vanished.

Tijuana Jail stinks of hopelessness. Christopher is pushed and shoved down a narrow hallway. Hands reach through bars pulling on his clothes leaving grimy smudges. A cell door slides open. He's shoved inside. The force of the thrust so violent he crashes into the opposite wall. Rubbing his neck he yells, "I'm adding this to my list of complaints for the American Consulate."

His answer is the sound of the cell door sliding shut with a metal clank. Cell mates shuffle to the end furthest from Christopher. He drops to the floor heedless of the grime. Envisioning flashes of the party, he can see friends arriving and laughter building. The back yard brimming with hanging lights, the barbeque stoked and smoking. His Dad smiling, a beer in one hand while turning the sizzling meat. His Mom starting to look at the clock wonders when he will arrive. The scene crushes him. He hopes, he prays, they enjoy a good meal before worry of his whereabouts sets in.

Looking back he can see telling no one of his errand was a mistake. He'd been proud taking a trip over the border. Wanting to prove himself, he made a rookie error. Now his parents will pay the price for his choice.

Trying not to think what might be on the floor and walls he leans back against the bumpy surface. Grime layered with despair coats his skin and clothes. The stench clinging to his head blooms into a pounding headache.

He longs to run free pounding down the street. In the twilight he would sprint the endless blocks until he reached the beach. Tearing off clothes, rubbing himself with crusty sand, he'd rub and rub until every pore was purified. Only then would he enter the cool water, the ocean with its own wilderness, dangers and freedoms.

But he cannot flee. He's stuck in this smelly dungeon imagining his mother and father looking at

each other, scared out of their minds. Wondering, has their only son has disappeared on his eighteenth birthday? He closes his eyes, seared with the images.

Night in the Tijuana Jail is noisy with whispered confessions, mumbled prayers, shouts and threats, cries of pain. As the cell door slides open Christopher feels the reverberation in his gut. He knows they have come for him. He was never arrested. There is no record of charges against him or documentation taking him into custody. Too late he finds freedoms and due process in the United States do not exist in Mexico. There is no phone call allotted him. In the periphery of his sight, awash in florescent blue the little dragonfly darts around him. Fear has made his mouth dry as dust. His skin pulses with each beat of his heart. Four guards escort him, front back and sides.

Outside, hidden in shadows created by floodlights, a waiting van is parked. Not dawn yet. He guesses the time just before three in the morning. In a surge of vivid clarity, lodged between one heartbeat and the next, Christopher realizes trapped in the van he'll have no authority over his future. This is his moment to escape. He will never see his car again but he'll be alive, home.

Leveraging his body between captors on each side, he swings his feet off the ground pushing. He lands a solid kick to the back of the jailor leading the way. The man stumbles crashing into the exterior wall. The guards on each side of him tighten their grip. He breaks one with an upper cut followed by an elbow to the chin. Stomping on the foot of the second guard with his now free hands he pulls the guard toward him. Christopher crashes his knee into the man's groin.

The guard trailing behind races forward. Christopher steps aside and pushes. The man face plants landing on his belly skidding to a stop. A quick assessment before sprinting finds the first guard regaining his balance. Face a mask of contorted rage he slams a nightstick into Christopher's gut. A second strike crashes down on Christopher's head. The angle breaks open his eyebrow, cutting flesh to the bone. Blood pouring down his face obscures his vision.

Christopher falls to the ground. Curled tight against the kicks, inches from the ground, he sees the blue dragonfly spiraling down a faded version of its florescent self.

CHAPTER TWO

JUANITA

Rebellious, Juanita pushes back long strands of hair. Her father chugs into the Mazatlan harbor while she scrubs the boat's galley. Throwing the water overboard, exhaustion clouds her view. Auras of the *putas* preparing to disembark waver in front of her.

Not soon enough she will be back in the little room off the kitchen at the home of *La Currndera*. Since her mother's death she lives and apprentices to the local healer. Her childhood home is now darkened by her father's drunken binges.

Juanita ties the bow and stern lines to the dock. Jose carefully counts out the money due to each *puta*. Too young to be called woman they trudge toward the bus stop with weary steps, already tired of the world and its demands.

Jose loves his daughter, yet he lives the life of a reckless bachelor, late nights, crazy parties, morning hangovers. After his wife's passing Jose numbed his grief with alcohol and woman. Countless days and nights of drinking has become all he knows. A world twisted by grief, and soothed with distilled agave.

He cannot bear to reach out to his daughter. It could shatter him.

Last week Juanita came to him. Pale, twisting her fingers, she said, "Papa may I have Mama's gold cross? I feel so lonely. If I could wear Mama's cross it would help me feel closer to her and to you."

At the time he was annoyed. Glaring at her, his head hammering with the beat of his heart, the effect of his morning tequila had already faded. The pounding headache, cottonmouth and nausea fuel his words. He'd spoken more sharply than intended. He cringes remembering.

"No. It would not be proper for you to wear your mother's cross. The cross belongs to me. How can you be lonely when you live with *La Currndera*?"

His coldness takes Juanita's breath away.

She can remember years when her father's eyes sparkled like the sun over the ocean. Now his eyes are tinged with yellow. His voice burned dry by tequila, is a parched crackle. The years vibrant with happiness are a forgotten memory.

Juanita tries once more to reach across her loneliness. "Papa," she says "When I'm with you it feels like you are not here. Your spirit has gone wandering since Mama died. I do not see happiness in your eyes. I miss you. Come back to me Papa. I need you."

For Jose, buried in the ghosts of the past stained golden by tequila, his thoughts are murky and wet. He can only shake his head and ask, "How are your studies with *La Currndera*? When will you be able to charge for your services?"

Before she can answer he shakes his head doubtfully, "Will any man want you?" Still wagging his head he asks "Will they want you, after you are called *La Currndera*? Who will want to marry the

apprentice to the healer?”

For the first time in their conversation Jose lifts his eyes to Juanita’s face. He says, “A strange world you’ve chosen.”

Juanita wants to shout, “You talk about my strange world? Your world revolves around prostitution. You poison yourself with tequila. What would Mama say if she could see you now?”

Instead she turns away. Her father’s question lingers, “Will any man want you?”

• • •

At *La Currandera’s* Juanita learns her belly is filled with miles of sensors. They are her antennae to truth. Her teacher explains, “The belly is the home of wisdom. In the gut lives your truth. To live an authentic life you must unite your mind and heart with your belly.”

She smiles at Juanita’s confusion. Shifting the conversation she says, “What are your dreams? What acts will pull your dreams from the invisible into visible reality?” She smiles and runs a warm hand across Juanita’s shoulders. She says, “My teacher had a saying. ‘If your dreams will not grow corn in everyday life then find a new dream.’ A quaint way of saying; when you marry dreams and acts, if they are not productive in the world, if they do not benefit you and others, you must re-evaluate your priorities and goals.”

Juanita is completely confused. They started talking about the belly, wisdom, connecting the belly with mind and heart. In the blink of an eye they are talking about dreams. She shakes her head. “How can you tell if your dreams are worthwhile?”

La Currandera shrugs. “What does it matter?”

Juanita’s eyes widen in distress. “Didn’t you just say dreams must grow corn?”

Stirring the pot on the stove *La Currandera* quietly chants a prayer. Finished she claps her hands. Looking at Juanita she inquires, “Have you finished chores?”

Juanita giggles. “Since I have come to live with you people ask me what you teach. They think my time filled with visions and magic. I tell them ‘no’ I clean the floor and find ways to make life run smoothly.”

“Yes,” *La Currandera* continues to stir the pot of herbs and water that will become a tonic for vitality. She says, “True power is your ability to create goodness, beauty in your life and for others. Go forward with faith in a greater goodness, Juanita. Dreams, acts, faith in goodness these are the words of power that will sculpt your life. In this way all dreams are variations of the one dream of wellness and beauty.”

Walking in the gardens Juanita repeats to herself, “Words of power: with words of power I shape my dreams.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “I dream of a life shared with a loving husband and children. I dream of becoming a healer. My acts, that match my dreams, will form my future.”

Beyond the flower garden where *La Currandera* sits with visitors Juanita stands among the vegetables and herbs. *Food as medicine filled with healing power.* Pulling weeds from soil wet with

the afternoon rain, she plants in her mind and heart, the one dream with infinite variations of beauty.

A small pile of weeds grows by her side. Juanita shifts her weight. Facing a new direction she continues pulling and shaking. The dirt flies free from the roots. She tosses the weed to the pile.

La Currandera does not approve of her father's demand Juanita crew his boat weekends. She cannot come between Juanita and her father's authority. Instead she teaches Juanita to cloak herself in prayers and power. Each time Juanita prepares to leave *La Currandera* she takes her on the journey to gather her power animal for added protection.

Tugging on a weed Juanita says "I rest in a greater good. My acts are the seeds of my dream. The seeds sprout. The Great Spirit decides the color of each flower. What does *La Currandera* call it? A greater good, united with the Great Spirit, known as Beneficence."

Later Juanita finishes the chores of the day. She sighs, "Beneficence. I love the word, Beneficence." Humming while mopping *La Currendera's* kitchen floor, the words play over and over; *dreams, acts, faith in Beneficence.*

As she works her words of power become a magical elixir. They flow down her throat, coating the miles of intestinal sensors. They soothe and strengthen her. She will no longer be defined by her father's rejection or her mother's death. She chants, *dreams, acts, Faith in Beneficence.*

CHAPTER THREE

ISLAS TRES MARIAS

Awakening in the van Christopher's head throbs. With each rattling breath he feels jagged edges of broken ribs grinding. *Where am I? Where is my car?* The questions circle over and over in a never ending loop. He has no idea how long he floats in this world of confusion and pain unable to hold onto reality. When the van bounces, jarring his injuries, pain drags his awareness into the rusty compartment separated from the drivers section by a metal wall. He breathes shallowly to minimize the pain. *How did I get here? Where is my car?*

The van bounces to a stop at a gas station. The driver helps Christopher to a toilet. Blood mixes in his urine. Slowly opening the bathroom door, through swollen eyes he watches the driver purchase two sodas. If he could breathe he'd make a dash for it. He swallows his frustration. Instead of handing the bottle that could be broken into a weapon the man maneuvers the glass to the side of Christopher's swollen mouth. He tips the liquid down Christopher's throat. The orange pop fizzes. Christopher greedily drinks. Back in the van, as his eyes adjust he makes out the shadow of a man huddled in the corner. They sit in silence, evaluating each other in the darkness. Christopher says, "*Habla English?*"

"Yes *amigo*," the voice heavy with weariness, "My name is Daniel." He coughs. "You are better now. You do not keep asking for your car."

"Where are we going Daniel?"

"They say only the worst go to *La Luna*," Daniel whispers. "But I know better. What did you do?"

"What do you mean? We're going to, *La Luna*, the moon?"

"*La Luna* is the name inmates have given to the federal prison *Islas Tres Marias*. But we might as well be going to the moon. I escaped for a few days. No one has ever really escaped to find freedom from *Islas Tres Marias*." Jangling his cuffs Daniel continues, "What did you do *mi amigo*? An American sent to *La Luna*, has never happened before. You'll be the only *gringo* on the island."

Christopher releases a shaky breath, "Did you say island?"

"Yes, *Islas Tres Marias* is fifty or sixty miles southwest of Mazatlan." Once again Daniel coughs. Christopher wants to do something, anything to quiet this racking cough. When he can, Daniel explains, "My cough comes from childhood. Worse with the beating... You have not answered my question. What did you do? What brings you to a Mexican Federal Prison?"

The question echoes thru him. Christopher feels wave after wave of burning indignation. Rage floods his body sweeping him into fury. Outrage scalds a swollen and bruised throat. "My car was stolen, by the police!"

"I'm falsely accused of drugs! Set up by the Tuck and Roll... skunk... I've been badly beaten... Someone needs to go to prison but it's not me."

In a voice rough with compassion Daniel says “I understand *amigo*.”

When Daniel’s cough quiets he confesses he shot a federal officer. “A man using his badge to molest my sister... he was beyond the law.” Daniel’s cuffs jangle when he waves his hands in the air. “Our confrontation ended in a struggle. His gun discharged twice.” Daniel is carried away in coughing. Bent over he tries to swallow. He cannot stop. He can’t breathe, and then mercifully the struggle passes.

Sitting upright Daniel continues, “The first bullet flew through pillows my sister had stacked on a leather bench. It traveled through the bathroom wall, exploding the ceramic bowl. That *hombre* carried a powerful gun, a Governor.

“The second bullet ripped through the cop. Guts spilled across the carpeted floor. My self-defense pleas were thrown out.”

In a quiet voice he explains, “Murder of a federal officer carries a mandatory life sentence.”

Daniel continues. Reaching for Christopher’s hand he says, “Remember no place or status can keep you safe on *La Luna*.” Daniel’s arm falls away. Christopher’s head leans against the truck panel. Eyes closed he falls into a restless sleep. Lost, irate, terrified, confused in his mind’s eye he sees Master Jojo. Sitting at attention, “You have everything you need to master each day Christopher.”

He curls tightly, arms casting his broken ribs, rolling to his side he pulls himself into the fetal position. He reviews events beginning with his drive across the border. He keeps each breath shallow to master the pain. He feels his parent’s terror. “You have everything you need to master each day, each challenge.”

When the van grinds to a stop at a dock in La Paz Christopher guesses the time around midnight. A flood light hangs on a tall light post encircled by hundreds of bugs and swiftly darting bats. From the boat a rough voice commands, “Do your business off the dock. We are many hours to Mazatlan and our stop for supplies. My guard will shoot you if you try to run or swim away.”

Hours later, huddled in a corner of the boat, Christopher agonizes over the fear his parents are suffering. The burden too much to bear he shuffles over to Daniel, “Please, tell me more about the island.”

Daniel moves to accommodate his bruises. He nods. “Okay *amigo*. Sixty miles southwest off the coast of Mexico, in the center of Hurricane Alley, are four small islands known as The Three Marias. First they were a hideout for pirates because the islands have artesian springs.”

“How did the islands become a prison?” asks Christopher.

“A deposit of salt discovered. Also discovered; an abundance of the agave plant used in producing *Tequila*. The government wanted cheap labor to harvest both salt and agave. The prison was set up in the 1930’s.”

Daniel coughs. Christopher can see the bruises of finger prints around his throat. They fall silent. He has fallen asleep when Daniel speaks again. Jerking awake, every bit of information is vital. “There are gangs who harvest the agave, others the salt, another gang does repair and maintenance. A

leader will come and meet you.

“I’ll be whipped or worse...”

Daniel’s voice falls away, his mind absorbed in the punishments awaiting him. Black circles under his eyes speak to Christopher of a raccoon. *A raccoon chews off his own foot for freedom.*

Just past dawn they chug into the Mazatlan harbor. The skipper parks next to a yacht King’s Run, San Diego, California. A woman lounges on the deck. Christopher guesses her age in her fifties. Trim and toned wearing a one piece bathing suit and matching sarong tied at her waist. Christopher inhales sharply. Is this an opportunity for help? The Captain and boat hands climb the dock to organize several pallets of supplies.

Christopher seizes the moment. Half yell, half whisper he calls, “Hey lady! I’m a United States citizen. I’m kidnapped, held hostage.” She doesn’t move. He cannot discern if she heard him. He calls out more loudly, “My name; Christopher Marcos.” Still no expression crosses her features. Christopher’s anxiety soars. His heart pounds, he’s running out of time. Boat hands have started loading supplies. “Call Rabbi Foxx the Wilshire Temple in Beverly Hills,” enunciating each word carefully he continues, “tell him to look for Christopher Marcos on *Islas Tres Marias!*”

Christopher is panting with the effort to yell without being overheard or exacerbating his injuries. Without glancing in his direction the woman pulls up her towel and leaves the deck for the stateroom. He looks at Daniel. “I think she heard me. I told her to call my mother’s rabbi.”

Daniel remains unseeing during their Mazatlan stop for supplies. He stares to the far horizon. Christopher worries. After a bout of coughing Daniel motions Christopher closer. He says, “Prisoners walk freely around the island. Don’t be fooled. The ocean provides the bars of this prison. A little town where administration lives encircled by high security fencing and guard towers. The towers are armed with machine guns and assault rifles. Surveillance cameras record entrances and exits. Guards in jeeps and on foot carry pistols and rifles. Few inmates are allowed past the gates.”

Daniel’s eyes close. His head drops. Christopher hopes he rests. In a burst of panic, he stares to make sure Daniel’s chest rises and falls. Christopher’s body slumps, chin to chest. His mouth twists. How will his family begin to search for him? Will they discover his car made a border crossing? And police will say he took a trip: Nothing to investigate. The *Tijuana* cops made no arrest. No paper trail of his transfer to *Islas Tres Marias* exists.

How many stories has he recently heard of young American men trapped in the Mexican penal system? The State Department makes only weak attempts to inquire. One man, a decorated veteran, was brought home when Fox News pulled strings behind the scenes and encouraged viewers to cancel their travel plans in Mexico. A potential crisis of their tourist economy at stake the veteran was released immediately.

Christopher happened to see an interview after the man returned home. One look at his face told the story of a broken man. He shivers at the memory, a decorated American veteran broken by Mexico’s prison.

What's the difference in Christopher's circumstance? That man kept chained to his bunk, beaten by other prisoners, did have a paper trail of his arrest. Family or friends could locate him. Lost in these endless thoughts Christopher floats, a downward spiral into hopelessness. Within the never ending horizon of the sea, time falls away. In this eternity Christopher is shattered.

The sun is high in the sky when dolphins break the surface, executing pirouettes. Even the crew shouts. Weaving in and out of the water, double flips in the air, the show continues for several minutes. Christopher listens to squeaks and grunts amidst their play. Their vibrancy, athleticism and gleaming health jolts Christopher free of despair. He's completely absorbed in the unexpected wonder. In that moment he makes a decision to search out and look for life's wonders. Watching the dolphins has provided him with a map. His first step for freedom he must to regain his health and athleticism. Within vibrancy and health he will pursue escape.

Leaning over the railing Christopher finds himself gazing into the eye of a Humpback whale. Grasping the railing he tunnels, falling, deeply into the mystery held within the whale's eye. Crazy, he's certain the whale understands his predicament. The giant surfaces spouting a spray of water and leaping forward. Taking a cleansing breath, Christopher feels liberated. *It's some kind of inexplicable spiritual magic.* In this instant he knows, *wherever beauty lives, so can I.* These wild creatures are a sign. They are a reminder of many freedoms.

Resolving to keep faith with the indecipherable bond that connects him with these animals he can hear Master Jojo's voice echo the corridors of his mind, "If you live in faith, through the bad times, you'll come out of the difficulties better than before. Practice, Christopher, is the key, in good times and bad."

"I'll live in faith."

Hard to imagine he can come out of this circumstance better than before but he pledges to stay true and keep faith with the goodness he saw reflected in the play of the dolphins. He'll trust in goodness to guide him. He has only one goal: reclaiming his freedom.

A second whale joins the first. Christopher intuitively knows they are mates. With a final flip of their enormous flukes they wave, *Hasta Luego*, diving deep.

Christopher's vow shudders through him. He will remember: *Just as whales can be hidden from sight in the depths of the sea; purpose, goodness, love can be concealed beneath the turmoil on life's surface.*

In this way he suddenly finds himself prepared for the obstacles to seizing his freedom. After eight hours of blistering sun, *Islas Tres Marias* looms in the mist.

CHAPTER FOUR

LA LUNA

Hurricane Alley comes too soon for Daniel. Carved bluffs, white beaches, at first sight *Islas Tres Marias* reflects jagged cliffs, sparkling sand, a white church and a cluster of stucco buildings. In the background, beyond the church, a massive security perimeter protects the entrance to the town.

Cutting the engine, the boat drifts to the dock. A crew member climbs the ladder and catches bows and stern line securing the craft to the landing. Daniel stands, frozen. Tears run down his face. A handful of guards wait forming a straight line on the wooden pier.

In the center of the group a murky haze encircles a short man, standing legs wide and arms akimbo. Mirrored sunglasses reflect the light. His assault rifle casually loops over his shoulder. Christopher's eyes widen and fix on a coiled circle... *a bullwhip? What? Daniel meant he'd be punished with this bullwhip? It will rip him apart, leave scars, permanent scars.*

The charged moment fills Christopher's vision with chaotic shards of light. He sees sweat break out across Daniel's brow. Daniel trembles. The whip unfolds. Unanimated it lays heavy across the smooth boards of the wooden dock. Collectively the guards take an uneasy step backwards.

Watching the central man Christopher sees superimposed the thick bones, large feet, muscular neck and heavily muscled shoulders of the Spanish Fighting Bull. The gloom deepens around him. Muddled dusky streaks of aggression fly at Daniel. *The flying bolts a precursor to the whip?*

Christopher wonders, *are these men accountable? A prison isolated, in the middle of, what's it called? Hurricane Alley?*

The air transforms dense and coarse with domination. Thick strands of muddy red encircle the man. He licks his lips, savoring the impending violence. The bull leans forward, *Bien venido a casa, Daniel,* he bellows. *"Aqui ahora."*

Daniel pales beneath skin streaked red with sunburn. Circles blacken his eyes. Muscles bunched with dread, slowly he climbs the ladder. Christopher sees agile raccoon paws merging, hand over hand. "Please, *El Jefe!*" begs Daniel.

El Jefe's posture thickens. Like the bull, his bony head lowers. The whip arches. Meeting Daniel's chest, leather has become a blade. Cutting deep through muscle and skin Daniel's shirt falls away. Another crack and boom and the whip encircles Daniel's naked waist. Micro-bits of flesh and blood fly thru the air. Daniel buckles, falling to his knees. Christopher hears his muffled prayer, *"Dios mio! Dios mio..."*

Now laughing guards surround Daniel. The Spanish Bull grabs Daniel by the arm dragging him to a waiting jeep. "I have a special place in town for you serving the guards." The whip winds around Daniel's waist cutting, tearing muscle and skin while he stumbles forward.

Frozen with horror Christopher waits.

In the void of Daniel's exit one man stands on the dock. He motions for Christopher to climb the ladder. Hand over hand, as Daniel climbed before him, Christopher trembles.

The dock, a whitewashed church, and hard dirt streets are juxtaposed against a brilliant sky. The church, freshly painted white stands outside the gates to the town. Tunneling his examination deeper Christopher sees a glimpse of shops and buildings inside the walled community. Now he understands what Daniel meant when he said the island had a town. Shifting for another angle he sees homes. He moves closer for a better view. *Shops and homes. So much to see.* His view blocked by the high security perimeter fencing.

"Marcos! Follow me. I'm Checo, maintenance and repair. You work for me." Checo shakes his head grimacing. "Welcome to *La Luna*. You've arrived at the home of the dangerous and those of us who wish we were dangerous." He barks a bitter laugh.

Christopher grabs Checo's arm. "Will Daniel be alright? What will happen to him?"

Ignoring the question Checo continues walking and Christopher follows. Wild parrots soar thru the tree canopy. Christopher stumbles as they trudge up a dirt path. His ribs protest the movement. Sharp pains force him to take shallow breaths.

A well-muscled man Checo's stride is full of confidence and swag. Tall for his Latin ancestry, even his features are European. Beside Checo standing in his shadow Christopher makes out a black Jaguar. Sleek with black-spots he prowls restlessly next to Checo.

"You'll work for me in maintenance. My men know nothing of mechanics." He grins, "after all they are thieves, drug dealers. Are you skilled with machines?"

Years of working side by side with his Dad on household repairs flashes through Christopher in condensed thumbnail sized images. Memories layered throughout the years hit him individually and simultaneously. Christopher staggers. Edged in black the visions of their heads together under the hood of his Chevy make him want to weep. Visitations from his Mom supplying them with cookies and drinks, the memories overpower him. His body starts to shake, violent tremors.

Checo notices Christopher's wobbling and pulls him beneath the shade of a banana tree. Steadying Christopher's elbow he lowers him to sitting. He picks a banana handing it to Christopher. "Eat. Banana trees were planted by pirates. We can thank them for the banana, mango and papaya on the island."

Checo drops to sitting, Indian style, next to Christopher.

Feeling like an invalid Christopher slowly unpeels the banana. He asks "How did you come to *Islas Tres Marias*?"

Out of the corner of Christopher's eye is a flash. Green and blue, a blur in a steep dive hurls at them screeching a high pitched warning.

Without thinking Christopher throws himself onto Checo.

"Watch out. "Arghhh," he screams as his ribs make their own screeching protest. The banana flies out of his hand.

When they are not hit by the incoming projectile Christopher lifts his head. A parrot watches him. Hovering in the air by Checo's bicep, she clutches Christopher's banana in her talons.

Slowly, agonizingly Christopher pushes himself off Checo's lap. Ribs grating, Christopher grinds his teeth to keep from groaning.

The parrot drops the banana, landing on Checo's shoulder. Catching the banana mid-air Checo watches Christopher. Taking back the banana Christopher asks, "Did I over-react?"

The parrot rolls her beak under Checo's chin. He grips her curved beak pinching and tugging his greeting. Her yellow head, cocked sideways, gazes at Christopher. He returns her stare with wonderment. Offering her a piece of banana, he asks, "Have you named her?"

Checo rubs the bird below her formidable beak, scratching the soft downy feathers of her neck. "I call her *Ave Bonita*, Sweet Bird."

Christopher finishes the banana feeling steadier. He hesitates, then asks again, "How did you end up here? I mean on the island, in prison?"

Checo's growls, "Do not ask inmates how we ended up on *Islas Tres Marias! Comprende?*"

Christopher drops his head embarrassed.

The silence stretches.

Checo sighs. "I was a professional *Futbol* player." Another pause while he scratches *Ave Bonita's* chest. She coos softly. Checo's voice is rough with emotion when he continues. "I was injured... drunk... jewelry store..... motorcycle cop... accident... *Islas Tres Marias.*" Checo blows out air; frustrated, embarrassed and tired.

Christopher doesn't know what to say. He mumbles, "Thanks Checo."

With a grunt Checo stands. In a flash of green *Ave Bonita* flies to a tree branch. Offering him a hand, Checo pulls Christopher to standing. Christopher grinds his teeth and steadies himself.

Leaning in Checo gives Christopher a penetrating glare. "Listen *gringo*. My name is ChecKO, not Cheeco. Got it? ChecKO."

Christopher nods, "Got it."

Muttering Checo marches off. Christopher hurries to catch up. The trail coils deeper into the forest. Sunlight slants through trees and green leaves. The forest is filtered in golden light and lush greenery. The air is alive with golden beams and each leaf etched in a diffuse glow is another wonder. A day filled with wonders and horrors.

Shaking his head Christopher continues down the dirt path ending in... shacks. The canvas tents surrounded by jungle are nothing like the thick adobe walls of the church or the town surrounded by security fencing. He follows Checo inside. The screen door slams behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CHICKEN AND THE EGGS

A half hour before dawn, a damp darkness clinging to his dreams, Christopher wakes in a panic. A voice thunders, “Marcos! Get your ass up and out here now!”

Christopher tumbles to the floor. He gasps at the pain while leaping to his feet. Pushing open the screen door the first thing he sees, Checo’s stormy face. Christopher winces. A double duty grimace encompassing the pain of his ribs and the trouble he’s caused. *Ave Bonita* adds her own “ACAWK” stalking the tree branch punctuating Checo’s upset.

Hands on his hips Checo bellows. “Do you think you can wander on to the job site when you please? We walk out together and work until 3PM. *El Jefe* will punish us all because you couldn’t get out of bed on time!”

Christopher nods, making eye contact, “It won’t happen again.”

Checo takes a calming breath. “No one in my crew has been cut by *El Jefe*’s whip.”

“I understand.”

Checo says, “I don’t ever want to talk about this again.”

His lips sealed Christopher nods.

Ave Bonita puffs her chest filling her feathers with air. She squawks making sure Christopher knows she holds him accountable for Checo’s upset. Walking into the still dark jungle, Christopher can just make out in the shadows Checo’s Jaguar pacing at his side. Dawn approaches with a pale light. *Ave Bonita* sails ahead in the shadowy growth. The trail moves up a gentle slope.

At the equipment shed Christopher finds duct tape and wraps his torso, immobilizing his ribs. The attendant hands each man a tool. Risking putting a hand on Checo’s arm, he warns, “You’re late. Fat Luis looks for you.”

Checo nods, giving Christopher a hard stare. To the group he announces Checo announces, “Today we swap out the salt pumps.”

Each man carrying supplies follows Checo the trail becomes whiter with salt. The granules crunch under Christopher’s feet as they approach the plateau. The pits are long and narrow. *Solid white!* Christopher stares in surprise. *White as fresh snow.*

Several inches of spring water feeds into the designated pits. Pumps pour in water softening the encrusted salt. Christopher immediately understands the problem. Salt dust combined with island humidity and spring water has frozen salt to bolts on the pumps.

He watches the crew struggle to free the bolts. By the time the grip of petrified salt is broken the men are fatigued. Christopher shuffles thru the pile of equipment. Finding a length of pipe he slips it over his wrench handle. The added length gives him more torque and he easily frees the bolt. Soon every man on the crew has extended the length of their wrench.

Checo slaps Christopher on the back. "Explain this to me."

"Argghhh. Ouch. My ribs! Don't touch me again and I'll explain it to you." Christopher leans into the pipe, "Extending the length of the wrench provides torque."

Checo laughs. "I was a professional athlete, *amigo*. I don't know this mechanical word. Explain 'torque'?"

Raising his eyebrows Christopher replies "Torque. Umm. Torque creates twisting power."

Amused, Checo slaps him on the back again. Christopher moans. Checo's several steps into his stride. Christopher shakes his head and calls out. "Wait. Why didn't anyone add length and torque before?"

Checo grins. "I told you *amigo*. These guys are criminals. They know how to play cards, steal, distill agave making tequila, grow marijuana and beat the crap out of you."

Christopher shrugs. "You mean instead of acquiring skills that translate into work these guys planned their slash and grab robberies."

Checo smiles revealing a tooth framed in gold, "Yes. Now you understand my problems."

Mid-morning Fat Luis comes by to inspect the work. Checo pulls a reluctant Luis out of the jeep for a demonstration of torque. He twists a frozen bolt with the extended wrench. "Observe my invention! Lengthening the wrench gives me power. 'Torque.'"

Hearing Checo's explanation Christopher smiles, amused.

Fat Luis grumbles, "*El Jefe* will be pleased." Lumbering back to the jeep the effort creates a line of sweat down the back of Luis's uniform.

As the heat of the day builds Christopher's body is lost in the work. In the muggy glare, sweat pouring he understands why these men are emaciated. His mind wanders. *Martial arts tells me I have the resources to master each day, each problem. Just like adding length to the wrench handle... If I can perform daily tasks in new ways... maybe an escape plan will evolve.*

Master Jojo's voice echo down the corridors of time, "Christopher, strength is an element of mastery. The totality of mastery is morphological field formed by truth, acts of power, the alignment of your words and actions. Your congruency ignites positive possibilities and magnetizes beneficial circumstances." He stomps the practice staff on the floor adding, "The mastery of martial arts."

Leaning his weight into the extended wrench handle Christopher thinks *I need to heal, gain strength and figure out what Master Jojo meant. Prison schedule ends at 3PM. We are free to walk the island. Yesterday I saw banana and coconut trees. There may be more food to find.* Looking around he sees hunger on all their faces. *Even Checo, a leader, looks hungry.*

...

He has found wild chickens! He spends Sunday, always a free day on the island, fashioning his hen house. Arranging rooster's visits evolves into a thriving egg farm. He's started a garden. Additionally several times a week he harvests bananas, papayas and mangos. Sundays he prepares fruit salad and

scrambled eggs. He shares the brunch with Checo.

Selling eggs, saving the *pesos*, will fund his escape. But each morning he finds himself chasing off inmates hungry for food. Working manual labor sucks up calories. Prison food consists of rice and beans and more rice and beans. Inmates are half starved.

They might pick fruit off a tree if it's handy. Most spend free time drinking, smoking, playing cards, or distilling the pina of the agave to produce tequila. Growing and distributing marijuana, the group culture dictates these behaviors. As the *gringo* Christopher is exempt.

Before the sun comes up Christopher is standing by his chicken coop. It doesn't take much to fight off men scrawny with hangovers. A sweeping kick, a thrust of his palm connecting with a nose, stomping on a foot; eventually inmates take the easier route and buy the eggs.

Christopher says, "I'll set up a rotating system. Everyone will have opportunities to purchase eggs on a schedule." Sunday as he and Checo shovel in eggs and fruit he's inspired. "Hey *amigo*, if I pay you twenty-five percent of my profits for your protection will you put the word out? I could use another deterrent keeping the inmates from stealing my eggs and vegetables."

Checo grins. His gold tooth flashes. He whistles for *Ave Bonita* to join him. A blur of green and blue she lands on his shoulder. He hands her a chunk of banana. Cocking his head eye to he whispers, "What do you think Sweet Bird shall we help the *gringo*?"

Fluffing her chest feathers *Ave Bonita* sings, "Sweet Bird, Sweet Bird."

Checo looks at Christopher. "*Si amigo*, we'll help you." He waves his finger, "On one condition."

Christopher stiffens, his momentary joy leached from him in the blink of an eye. "The condition?"

Checo slaps his shoulder. "Eggs, *hombre*, I want two or three eggs a day."

Christopher smiles and extends his hand. "Deal."

As a final discouragement to thefts Checo announces, "Anyone stealing eggs will never again be eligible to purchase eggs, barbeque chicken or garden items."

Watching the routine, putting the pieces of prison life together, it's not a leap of imagination to conclude there is a short expiration date etched on his life. Watching Daniel's beating he promised himself to fly under the radar. He will not draw attention to himself with fights or drinking. And Checo takes the kudos for any invention or creative solution he designs. It brings a smile to his face watching Checo hog the glory.

The only *gringo* on the island, this status alone makes him stand out. Beaten and kidnapped, by the police! His car hijacked. Brought to the island on charges never filed and without a foundation in reality, he is a messy problem for the prison bureaucracy. Eventually they will kill him. Problem solved.

Betrayals, deceit, beatings: The circumstances leading to his incarceration replay over and over. He cannot find the pause or stop button. First a burning sensation in his gut and he grits his teeth, tightly shut. Nothing stops momentum of fire pouring through him. Outrage singes muscles. It burns through veins and arteries. Countless times a day he is singed by his outrage. He does not know how

in the world to contain or release his violence.

After work he takes to the trails running. He channels anger that will not be denied. Other inmates babysit bootleg stills transforming the agave plant into a rough version of tequila or harvest marijuana farms deep in the island foliage. Christopher runs the trails. He hunts food to fuel his strength. Running teaches him the topography of *La Luna*. The gift of running; anger spills from him in sprays of sweat that disappear instantly in the semi-arid atmosphere.

While he has found an abundance of food he has not been able to find Daniel. The prison population located and stationed across the island. Inmates harvest agave on the northern side of the island. They are located near the dense growing areas. Prisoners harvesting the salt, west of the town and dock, are stationed near the salt pits. At every location supplied with dormitories, mess tents, and supplies Christopher inquires after Daniel. Paths connecting the groups are interspersed throughout the island. Daniel has vanished.

Recalling Daniel's soft voice his warning haunts him. "No status or role can keep you safe on *Islas Tres Marias*."

Evenings, just before twilight, Christopher practices martial arts. His anger spent, muscles heated, in the soft sand, in slow motion, he defines each stance. Warming up, one posture flies into the next, creating a sequence. The chain of movement brings him to the razors edge of his ability, the place where his power meets with a deeper inexplicable power. Draped in the colors of the twilight he sets each movement ablaze with intricate precision and bold strength. Enveloped in the posture of the looming crane, power sheds itself, morphing into a giant crab, leaping into the mythical stag. In the setting sun he loses all self-consciousness. Leaping, turning, spinning, kicking and punching he spars with his partner, Mother Nature.

Sometimes he feels eyes watching from the darkening jungle. *When I'm stronger I'll offer lessons, for a small fee... Another way to save for my escape.*

CHAPTER SIX

THE PUTAS

Mid-morning Checo's crew trudges toward the administrative garages. Christopher's first look inside the gates of the walled community he is amazed to see shops and even restaurants. They walk by a hospital. *It's a small town in here.* There are warehouses for food, a commissary, cafeteria, on-base dormitories and separate homes for married administrators. The most elaborate building is *El Jefe's hacienda* wrapped in Spanish Colonial curves. Christopher stretches for a glimpse of a Saltillo tiled courtyard. Well-armed guards in jeeps and on foot enter and exit the compound for island patrol. Women and men walk dirt streets on errands. A guard in a rusty jeep stops Checo. Christopher wonders will there be a confrontation? Trouble? After a whispered conversation Checo reaches deep in his pockets taking out two packs of cigarettes. After handing them to the guard the jeep speeds off in a cloud of dust. "What just happened?" Christopher asks one of the older inmates. Head down, his eyes on the street, the man replies, "The guard told Checo; *putas*, the prostitutes, will be at the dock tomorrow. Guards, group leaders, the administration have the privilege to buy time with the girls."

Christopher's eyes widen, "Prostitutes?" The old man nods. He is already shuffling off. He doesn't want to be seen talking to the *gringo*. Thoughtfully scratching his head Christopher wonders *will the puta boat be a way to sneak off the island?*

...

Dawn crests the horizon and Christopher has a spot on the bluff where he can watch the comings and goings of the dock. He settles beneath a group of banana trees for an unencumbered view of the show below. The boat, a fifty-footer, has already moored. As the sun illuminates the horizon even at this distance Christopher can see it needs care. Orange rust has begun to leak down the white hull. A dozen girls stand scattered behind the Captain. Clothing varies from peasant girl to slutty street walker. Wrapping his arms around his knees he contemplates *who put the Captain in charge of the putas?*

Men are lined up in order of importance. Testosterone fueled feet stamp and men jostle each other impatiently. The Captain sets up shop on the dock under an umbrella. Later, a young woman climbs off the boat to bring the Captain a beer and the restless men grow silent. Christopher leans forward to get a better view.

Luxurious dark hair falls past her shoulders in waves. Long limbs are toned and smooth. He guesses her age somewhere between eighteen and twenty years old. Her eyes are wide and clear. Her features and body stunning in their symmetry; they are a study of balance, complexity and openness. Infinitesimally small explosions, bursts of light, open then recede. Like dainty bubbles of Champagne they pop, fizzling bright and agile. *The air sparkles around her!*

Losing his balance he tumbles forward. She looks up the hill. He lays in her sight line now. Christopher wheezes in surprise when a white swan appears at the woman's side. Five feet tall her plumage brilliant white, her wings fan out, stretch and then settle. Almost as tall as the woman so many feelings roll off the swan Christopher cannot keep up. Fiercely protective she will fight on land, water or air. She is delicate yet strong, kind yet willing to be tough. The swan lengthens her neck, circling the woman, peeking around at Christopher. He stops breathing. Yet his heart pounds loudly. He's entranced with both the swan and woman. He blinks and the woman stands alone, looking at him. Christopher scrambles back beneath the shade of the banana trees. He hears the Captain say, "*Nina, mija, mas cervesa por favor.*"

The breath whooshes out of Christopher like he has been hit in the stomach. *This beautiful young woman is the Captain's daughter? Why would he involve her in his world of prostitution? A daughter should be protected from loveless acts.* Irate with the Captain, caught in the woman's beauty, Christopher watches her scrub the decking hair falling down in strands while she cleans. *She's a hard worker. Beautiful... Did she see me? Did she smile? I think she smiled at me!* Not to be outdone he blows her a kiss.

...

After this strange introduction Christopher opts to rest. Free days are for repair, to fully recover from his injuries. He journey's inward, a meditation designed to retrieve pieces of his spirit that were broken off, traumatized in his beatings, imprisonment, the theft of his car. Closing his eyes he counts each inhale and exhale. His mind and heart settle. His attention drifts. In the partial wakefulness of the dream he searches for lost parts of himself. He adds a prayerful wish. *Guide me.* He floats. In the distance sail images related to him. Like a magnet he draws them closer. His spirit recognizes each reflection even while it appears to be debris. One picture of his Chevy battered and broken reflects the many hours he spent restoring it only to have the connection brutally severed. In his inner vision he cleans and restores the car. It melts into the growing sphere of health surrounding him. Taking the view of his beaten body he images his ribs healed. Bruises fade. The likeness of him stands straighter, filled out with muscle and strength and something akin to the vitality of the dolphins. When the impression of him bursts with health he draws it inward, melting into the field that composes 'Christopher.' And so it goes he floats in inner space and collects the broken and frayed pieces of himself. With his intent and inward vision he heals parts of the soul broken off in the trauma of beatings and imprisonment. The screen door bangs. Checo enters talking with *Ave Bonita* in soft coos. She cackles softly in his ear. Drowsy, Christopher thinks, *Checo's pet; friend, guardian, defender and an alarm system warning of dangers. Her claws would make a formidable ally.* In a spurt of adrenalin he realizes Checo's return marks the end of the day. The boat must be leaving. He jolts upright. Jumping from the bed he sprints out the door. He arrives out of breath at the bluff above the dock just in time to see her toss bow and stern lines onto the boat. "*Date prisa Juanita, hurry,*" the

Captain shouts over a crude loud speaker. Juanita jogs to the bow. She turns and looks directly at Christopher. She smiles. Hands to lips, she blows him a kiss. Laughing Christopher blows a return kiss. *Sassy girl.*

Walking the dirt trail to the food tents lost in thought he wonders, *am I having a happy moment? Possibly involved in a school boy crush? I have a crush on the daughter of a man who runs a prostitution ring? Have I lost my mind?*

Yet a light step accompanies him as he heads to dinner. Checo standing on the porch entrance blows him a kiss. *He must have seen me.* Christopher's apprehension soars. He keeps his head down walking past Checo. Ignoring the man's gesture, as an afterthought he calls out, "Hey Don Juan! When is the boat returning?" "Not soon enough *gringo*," Checo laments. "Not soon enough. They only come once a month, occasionally twice a month. Why can you afford a girl?"

"No," replies Christopher in his sternest voice.

Ave Bonita squawks at him.

The sound startles Christopher and he jumps.

Maneuvering around *Ave Bonita*, he slaps Checo on the back, "You're an ugly man Checo... And I mean that in a brotherly way," he adds. Laughter erupts in the tent.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A FIRST DATE

Christopher hears via the prison grapevine the *putas* are returning. Saturday morning finds men stamping their feet in impatience. Disorderly they whistle and catcall as the boat arrives. Boots pound the dock thundering out the rhythm of desire. *Putas* raise their skirts, sashaying across the bow of the boat. Flinging hair they gaze over their shoulders at the impatiently waiting men.

The Captain's daughter stands apart. She observes the show with a trace of humor reflected in her features. Her body is slim with long legs and narrow hips. *She appears at ease, a woman of quality, graceful and athletic.* Christopher's heart hammers at the sight of her. He feels giddy. *Where is her swan? What's the best place for a first date?*

He squeezes his face, wrinkling his nose. *A first date on an island dungeon! If she agrees to take a walk with me she's having a date with an Islas Tres Marias inmate and I am having a date with the puta prince's daughter. Not a traditional entertainment in sight, only the glaring eyes of prisoners and guards. This will be tricky.*

Edging his way past the dozing Captain, Christopher descends the ladder to the boat's deck. Juanita's eyes follow him. Wide and clear, chocolate brown eyes fringed with long lashes, gaze at Christopher's face. His mouth goes dry, at a loss for words. Leaning against the cabin, he strives to look relaxed. Really his knees are shaking. The cabin he leans on is his support. He stuffs his hands in his pockets. With a smile he introduces himself. *"Buenos dias Senorita. Mi llama es Christopher."*

A kind of wonder shines from her face. It's as if she rarely hears a man speak kindly. Friendliness brings a shine of tears to her eyes. Christopher's warmhearted nature glows around him like an aura of good health. Juanita looks down, shy and embarrassed. He can see her thoughts. *Do I have the courage to speak with the gringo?*

Christopher huffs surprise watching as light gathers in her belly circulating golden warmth in a clockwise direction. When she smiles her happiness shines. She says, *"Buenos dias Christopher. Mi llama es Juanita."*

Exhilarated, leaning his weight forward into his toes, Christopher asks, *"Habla English?"*

"Yes I do." She answers. "Are you American?"

"I am." He gives her another friendly smile. "Would you walk with me? We could walk up the cliff. Your father can see us from the dock."

Smiling as bright as sunlight, Juanita pushes her hair off her face. She says, "Yes, I would like to walk with you."

Christopher hears her sharp inhale. Looking down at her feet Juanita says "Before we go. I want to warn you. My father's cousin is the man you know as *El Jefe*."

Tilting her head she appraises Christopher's reaction. He smiles at her. He can see she's wonders

does he understand? Christopher nods, "I've heard your uncle is *El Jefe*, a scary *hombre*."

He has no negative reaction to the news that she is the niece of *El Jefe*? Juanita smiles, "Shall we walk?"

Christopher holds the ladder steady as Juanita climbs to the dock. They are deep in conversation before the end of the dock. Walking the sandy trail he has forgotten the dangers. They arrive cresting the bluff, hearts pumping, just slightly out of breath. Juanita's cheeks are pink. Her eyes shine. *Ahhh. The air dances with sparkles of light.*

Laughing they swing their feet over the ledge, animated by the climb, intoxicated with their adventure. They talk of the past, not ready to dream of a future. She says, "My mother was a stay at home mom. My father was on the boat fishing just off these islands." She stretches a finger out to the ocean. The water with many hues of blue extends as far as the eye can see. "Papa did not always run a *puta ...*"

Juanita runs out of words and Christopher can see she feels ashamed of her father's profession, his choice to exploit young women, their survival based on trading their bodies for money.

She explains, "I was sixteen when Mama became ill. Pounds flew off her body. Nothing eased her pain. Not food, medicine or rest. I watched, helpless, as life drained out of her." Juanita inhales a shaky breath covering her mouth with her hand to hold back tears.

Christopher sits quietly. A woman's tears usually create a knot of anxiety in his belly. Today his concerns are for Juanita. He wants to hold strength protecting her as she walks through the fragilities of her story.

Juanita resumes with a wobbly smile. "Doctors could not help. I prayed day and night for her. Nothing stopped the disease. She was exhausted. She was dying."

Gaining strength from Christopher's steadfast presence Juanita continues, "Then one day my prayers were answered.

"I was at the open air market buying food for dinners I cooked but mama could not eat. I stumbled from the bright day into a canvas covered stall. It was dark and gloomy. I couldn't get my bearings. I fell. It was like falling down a tunnel." She looks at Christopher and asks, "Am I getting too weird for you?"

Christopher shakes his head and says, "Your story is right up my alley. You have no idea the strange things happening to me."

"Well," Juanita hesitates.

Sparkles shine around Juanita. Christopher would like to take her hand. Instead he says, "Juanita, did you tell me that *El Jefe* is your cousin? The Big Boss, a warden on *Islas Tres Marias*?"

Juanita's eyes widen. She can only nod.

"If this information didn't scare me off, you can tell me anything." He pauses, "more to the point, I have my own freaky experiences. I'll look forward to telling you." With his fist he thumps his heart, and says, "You're safe with me."

Juanita laughs at the comical face Christopher makes. “Well, okay. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She laughs again and then... “I went into the stall at the market place... I stumbled... I was unable to stop my fall..... I could feel the wind rushing past me. Afterwards I was not sure, did I faint? Did I fall asleep? Did I have a very weird dream?” Laughing again she says, “I really don’t know what happened that day.”

With a shaky sigh she continues, “I was transported or tumbled into a twilight world.” Waving her arms in the air as if they can convey the color she says, “purple and greens, and... and starlight!”

They share a penetrating look and Juanita flushes. “Oh, I can’t believe I’m telling this story!”

Christopher smiles, “You’re just getting to the good part. What happened next?”

“Well, you won’t believe it... all these animals started appearing.”

“Trust me. I see many animals.” Christopher says, “I believe it!”

“You see animals?” Pulling her hair into a new ponytail she smiles. Christopher smiles back, mesmerized. The swan peaks over Juanita’s shoulder.

She continues. “I was so surprised when a fox stuck its head out of a den that I screamed. The fox sat like a cat staring at me. I know it sounds crazy.”

Christopher reaches out to touch her arm. “Yesterday in the maintenance garage, I saw a Jaguar standing next to my boss Checo, and it’s not the first time. I mean this animal is formidable.”

Juanita cannot help the bubble of laughter. “The fox talked to me! She said, ‘you’re a pretty girl. I’ve seen your future. Do you have questions?’”

Juanita looks into Christopher’s eyes, “I could barely speak. I finally asked ‘why am I here?’

“The fox stared at me. After some time passed she said, ‘I don’t know. Why are you here? You’re the one who landed at my front door.’”

Juanita shakes her head, “That fox turned around and disappeared into her den. She was grumpy and put out with me!”

Juanita’s eyes are dreamy. “The fox popped out again and said, ‘have you decided?’ She was so strange. I wondered if I’d hit my head? Could this be a dream?

“‘Of course this is a dream’ snapped the fox.” Juanita looks at Christopher. “I hadn’t said a word. How could she read my mind? The fox was furious. She stamped her paw and screamed at me. Did I want her to reveal my future? It would only cost me a few strands of my hair.

“Now the story gets even crazier. I became distracted from the fox’s offer by a white swan.”

“Wait,” Christopher interrupts, “did you say swan? I saw the swan. The swan was with you on your father’s boat and here again today.”

Juanita smiles, “Really?”

“Yep. The swan was looking over your shoulder just a minute ago.”

Juanita bows her head. “The swan approached me and walked a circle stopping in each cardinal direction. At each point, south, west, north and east, the swan stretched out her wings.”

She reaches slender arms stretched to their fullest demonstrating for Christopher the swan’s wings.

When Christopher smiles Juanita's heart thuds, she smiles back at him before continuing. "The swan whispered, 'can I talk with you?'"

"I said, 'yes,' because I felt relaxed and protected. I leaned forward and the swan said, 'do not give the fox your hair. If you do then she can call on you to assist her increasing her power.'" "

Lost in her story Juanita continues. "The fox rushed out of her den. Yelling at me she shouted, 'Well, I never!' She stomped around. Then she disappeared into her den."

Juanita laughs remembering. "'Ignore her,' advised the swan."

Grabbing Christopher's arm she said, "The swan sat next to me. She told me, 'I've waited to meet you for-ever-so-long.'" Juanita swept up in her story is sitting up straight. Her eyes shine with laughter. "The swan leaned up against me and said, 'our time is short today. I've called the medicine woman to come and guide you out of this underworld. It's not safe for you to have arrived in this place, your first time, unguided.'

"Then she surrounded me in her wings. I fell asleep."

Smiling she continues. "When I opened my eyes I was looking into the face of *La Currandera*."

Christopher asks, "*La Currandera* is your teacher?"

Nodding Juanita explains, "I woke-up and found all my groceries spilled out of the net carrier, the dream of the swan and fox was as real to me as the groceries. I felt the warmth of the sun, the bright day and I asked *La Currandera* 'what happened?'"

"She told me, 'we'll have time for discussions later. Now I need to see your mother.'

"I took her home. Poor mama was so ill. *La Currandera* lit candles and smudged the air with sage and copal. She sang dusting my mother with her herbs and feathers. My mother's face grew peaceful. For the first time in many months she rested." Juanita looks up at Christopher and smiles sadly. "*La Currandera* came every day until my mother passed away."

Christopher's eyes never left Juanita's face. *This is a sacred story, sharing her mother's illness and her death. She told me about her first meeting with La Currandera...*

Christopher swallows hard not sure how to say what's in his heart. "When you describe meeting your animal, the swan and your teacher I am excited for you." Putting his hand on her arm Christopher says "And I'm sad for the loss of your mother."

His unqualified acceptance brings tears slipping over her cheeks to shimmer in the air around them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REDEMPTION'S WARRIOR

Sirens shatter morning routine and prisoners sneak glances at the guards. They don't want to be caught pausing in their work. Even such a small infraction can lead to a whipping. No one returns from a beating whole and too many have suffered the tearing flesh and cut muscle. Even the mind will be injured by the whip. It obliterates safety scaring body and soul.

On *Islas Tres Marias* the island itself is the prison cell, the ocean the prison walls. Inmates traverse the island after work hours supervised by brutal guards who have all the fire power they need to kill everyone many times over. Get too close to a jeep or guard uninvited and they'll shoot.

Today Checo's crew is working maintenance within the small town housing guards and administrators. The town is a donut hole within the island prison surrounded by high security fencing and all the support staff and their shopping needs to live a typical mainland life. *But they're not living a mainland life*, thinks Christopher. *In their own way they too are imprisoned on Islas Tres Marias.*

Siren still howling, Christopher wonders *what's the emergency?* Fat Luis stands in his jeep listening to the radio. He shouts, "A sailboat infiltrated the perimeter."

Christopher's heart races with the possibility of escape. He prays *let this be an American ship*. He knows it's not a fishing boat. The Mexican fishing community, with the threat of incarceration, respects the one mile boundary. It's an invisible border following the curvature of island topography.

There has never been a moment Christopher accepted imprisonment. Leaving the work site with the excuse he needs a bathroom break he makes his way down a dirt street slipping past an exit. Security doors are designed to provide only a departure. They are not guarded with men. They are reinforced steel, automatically locking and monitored by surveillance cameras.

Christopher is in a race to beat *El Jefe* to the intruders. Once he's passed the gate and hidden within in the trees he begins to run. He's been waiting for an opportunity, a moment of confluence; the right time and circumstance dovetailing that will allow him to escape. He knows there is an expiration date on his life. He can't wait around to find out the exact day. The siren is still wailing as Christopher runs. He is running for his life and freedom. He is running to his family. Their worry and grief are his burden interlaced within his mind and heart.

Already his throat is dry, eyes squinting in the tropical glare. On a sigh he races through a shaded part of the trail. Within the mottled light of trees and brush he sprints for the largest beach on the island. At each cross road of divergent trails he takes the southern track of packed dirt. Trees overhang. Brush and thorns reach out to scratch his arms and legs. Skirting salt pits, agave farms, sleeping quarters and kitchens Christopher does not want to be caught running the paths during work hours. Prisoners harvest agave on the northern parts of *Islas Tres Marias*. They have the largest

sleeping quarters and eating stations. Paths connecting the groups are interspersed with hidden marijuana farms and outdoor kitchens brewing the agave pina for tequila.

Arriving at the coast he runs parallel to the south beach. He stays where brush interspersed with trees meet the tall grass and sand. Sunlight vibrant and strong in a cloudless sky beats down on him. The intensity of the tropical sun, in conjunction with intense exercise and no water is dangerous.

Already he's feeling the effects of dehydration. *I'll have to risk it. The stakes are freedom and my life. I'm in a race to find my way off this dungeon and keep those trespassers from getting killed.*

Once aboard the launch *El Jefe* will be required by *Islas Tres Marias* topography to follow a long peninsula. Christopher navigates a more direct route running and crisscrossing jungle paths. Dirt foot paths no wider than two people across intersect with each other like deer trails leading from the administration city to inmates sleeping quarters, cafeterias, work sites and beaches. Feet pounding and breath rattling in his chest and ears Christopher stops. Hunching over, hands on knees, head drooping, he sucks in as much air as he can. He thinks *it's a long shot I'll make it to the beach before the launch.*

If he hugs the tree line parallel to the south beach he should continue to be out of sight. Christopher dodges boulders, digging deep for more speed. His breath is ragged. Blood roars in his ears. Pounding feet clang all the way to the top of his head. *Focus, freedom, focus...*

Filtered through intense tropical glare, across sparkling white sand and diamond studded water, Christopher can see a twin mast sailboat. Sails stowed, a quarter mile up the beach. Intense glare off water gives him an instant headache. His foot catches on an exposed root. His power wrenches him forward, the root holding him back. The result slams his body, flat out, into the dirt. The air leaves his lungs with a "whoosh." Spitting out dirt he lifts his head to see polished decks, gleaming metal. The boat gently rocking flying the stars and stripes, *Yes, American!* Christopher is a quarter mile to freedom.

He pushes himself to his feet. Squinting into the sun his eyes hurt. Moving thru the tall grasses edging the deep curvature of the beach he's closer to the intruders but remains hidden. In the glare of sun on water he sees the guard's launch round the cove. A sob threatens to rip free. *I'm too late.*

He's too late to warn the intruders. Too late to swim out to their boat and hide unseen. Too late to find a way back to his family and friends worried sick about him. Moving closer still by crawling through the grass he hears voices. Two women rub suntan oil on their shoulders and backs. *Bikini's!* Laughter carries toward him on the wind.

Four men wrestle with the skeleton of their pavilion. Already a canvas floor is held in place with four coolers, one at each corner. In the middle are cameras. Movie-sized cameras ready to be set at their proper angles. *What's going on here?* Christopher shakes his head in confusion. The launch makes its way down the peninsula and the guards will be boots on the sand in just minutes.

Anxiety skitters across his skin and deep in his belly. *There must be a way to get these strangers off the island.* Most of all he wants to find a way onto their boat and home to Los Angeles and his

family. Brilliant blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds makes his head spin. Dehydrated from the run, “What are my options? What options?” His thoughts are jumbled and repetitious, ideas slip past him. “How can I get them out of here?” Shaking his head increasingly confused the sun, too bright, slants into his eyes. Aching, his eyelids drop closed. *I’ll rest my eyes just one moment, to help me think. Think.*

The launch scraps against the sand in shallow waters. *El Jefe* jumps off. Christopher elbows his way deeper into the thorn brush. From this vantage point bodies appear to stretch like a carnival mirror. They grow to gigantic proportions. Christopher rolls his head in anguish.

Matched stride for stride, the first guard shadows one step behind *El Jefe*. A second guard mans the radio. Despite risking *El Jefe’s* wrath the air horn blasts his displeasure. The waves of sound ripple over Christopher. Filtered by the branches of the thorn bush Christopher watches the women under the canopy shrink, covering their exposed skin with crossed arms. Four men stand arms limp at their sides. Gone are the happy smiles and laughter. Two clacks are the sounds of *El Jefe’s* shotgun primed. Despite being a short man, he towers over the group. Priming his own shotgun *El Jefe’s* guard hollers, “Hands up!”

Leering at the women *El Jefe* barks his order. Tumbling over each other to comply they sort themselves out to march single file toward their rowboat. Abandoned on the beach the canopy, coolers, beach chairs... *tripods*. With the area cleared of bodies it looks like a stage. *Did they come to film a movie?*

El Jefe stops and turns. Christopher cringes. He reads their mutual comprehension traversing *El Jefe’s* features. Firing one shot gun round, head down for the charge, *El Jefe* bellows, “Alto!”

The trespassers freeze. With the barrel of his shotgun *El Jefe* jabs the women. His gun is a scalpel slicing the women away from the group. He orders the men “Face down in your rowboat! Wait!”

Christopher’s hope for the stranger’s peaceful transition onto their sailboat fractures. Shards of sunlight break over the group spearing Christopher’s eyes. Nauseous he puts his head in the sand and vomits.

El Jefe drags the women back to the canopy. Adjusting the cameras lowering his head like a bull ready to charge, he smiles. Christopher frowns. *The intruders have transformed into prisoners for El Jefe to abuse.*

Unhooking the bull whip at his waist, *El Jefe* unsnaps his pants. The whip explodes and Christopher’s hands clench. Blood blooms, slashed across one woman’s belly and down the other’s back and buttocks. Specks, bursts of skin, fly as the whip cuts deeper. Both women are screaming high pitched sounds breaking into sobs as the whip carves their bodies. The guard silences his woman with a slap. Her body goes still.

In the desiccating heat Christopher vomits again. The sun stripping-scourging, sparks shoot off angles. He deteriorates into the astral flares. Lost in the dream, he sees his body retrieve his hidden fishing knife. He seizes *El Jefe’s* head, exposing his throat to the serrated edge. In his sun soaked

dream *El Jefe's* life drains away, the earth bright with blood.

Broken branches pierce his skin. Stones imprint bruises. Christopher shakes his sun drenched head and the dream flees. He's trapped and can only witness. Hovering over *El Jefe* he sees the Spanish Fighting Bull, the thick muscular neck and shoulders heave with sexual aggression. The rapes are quick, under thirty seconds.

Trained in the dojo's Christopher's inability to intercede, to save these women, is shattering. Bruised, slashed and bleeding the women are thrown into the rowboat with their companions who are shaking with shock and terror. As the rowboat retreats *El Jefe* and his *compadre* open the abandoned coolers. Christopher's last hopes of escape deflate like a balloon losing its air. He crosses his arms over his belly to bear the pain, crouched in the sand, surrounded by thorn brush and grass. Christopher crushes his forehead into the sandy dirt.

Waving beers in the direction of their mate manning the launch *El Jefe* knocks the beer cap off on the edge of the cooler and drains the bottle with one long swallow. Once again the air horn blasts the waiting guard's displeasure. He's missed out on the fun. He'll get a cold beer as a consolation prize. The duo fire shotgun rounds at the retreating sailboat. Laughing, they're drunk on their dirty deeds.

Christopher tumbles into more sun stroked dreams, layered and interwoven, fracturing, prisms of light. Grass and thorns cushion him. He deteriorates into a million pieces. A brilliant flash precedes a woman floating in solar flames. *Hallucination?*

Oscillating, infinite variations, her voice echoes across the shattered landscape, "Who has desecrated my beach?"

Looking down the beach it vibrates grim and bleak at the site of the rapes. Pointing at Christopher, she says, "You will be mine, Redemption's Warrior."

Christopher's head drops to the hot sand. He seems to be watching outside his body while simultaneously feeling each and every grain of sand rubbing against his forehead. "Redemption's Warrior?" he mumbles.

Searing light soaks his every molecule and cell, imprinting his DNA. "The first lesson of redemption: You are alone. The last lesson of redemption: You are interconnected with the totality of life. Live the first and win the last."

A flicker of understanding, the infinitesimal flame, an outline of light within light, she raises her arms. "I am the Divine Transmuting Flame. I hold the Cosmic Balance."

He blinks. She's gone.

Shaking Christopher draws in a small breath. A breath practiced in years of martial arts. Designed to break through jammed up trauma, a cleansing breath, lower respiration and blood pressure, restoring equilibrium, one, two, three breathes. He rests his throbbing head, forehead still pressed to the ground, his mouth unbearably dry. His muscles pulse with a fiery ache.

Right now, a little clearer, he needs to pay attention. *El Jefe* is nearby. His life is at stake. Found here they will shoot him on sight or *El Jefe* might hide him in an isolated cave, torturing him.

Stretching out onto his belly, sand burning his skin, Christopher raises his head. The guards grapple with the cooler's handles. They carry their bounty across the sand, a modern day treasure chest. Of the four coolers confiscated only three fit. The launch has limited space for their pirated bounty.

From his vantage point Christopher watches them push and shove. The guard left to man the launch is unhappy. Elbowing and landing punches where ever possible they push the launch into the water and jump aboard. *El Jefe* waits sitting in the Captain's chair. Christopher shakes his head. *They look like a bunch of clowns. Clowns with deadly toys.*

• • •

As the launch speeds out of the cove Christopher runs to the abandoned cooler. He has just a few minutes. Lifting the lid reveals a dozen beers and two magnums of Champagne. Seeing the bottles packed in ice Christopher shoves his hands into the melting cubes. Splashing his face, drinking his fill, he takes an icy chunk and shoves it in his mouth like a Popsicle. Ice was a taken for granted commodity in his former life with his family. Shoving down these feelings he grabs a bottle of Champagne and three long necked beers.

Moving into the shade of brush and trees, he jogs, putting time and space away from the beach stained with violence and the other strange occurrences. He moves down the trails until he only hears bird song. Crouching back to back with a Jacaranda tree he drinks the ice cold beer. The bitter brew cannot begin to wash away his rage and futility. He rolls up the Champagne and two remaining beers in his shirt. He'll take them to the cave, high on the cliff where he hides his *pesos*.

CHAPTER NINE

THE FIRST AND LAST LESSON OF REDEMPTION

Back at quarters Checo interrogates him. “What have you seen? Do you know who broke the perimeter? How did the *El Jefe* dispose of the intruders?”

Christopher reports the gruesome events, omitting only his strange waking dream and his confiscation of beer and Champagne. He’d hoped telling Checo would lighten his burden. This has been one of the worst days of his life. Unable to intervene while women are assaulted right before his eyes. Anguish. He’d thought, he’d hoped, Checo would understand his misery.

Instead while Christopher is dispirited, Checo is excited. He asks endless questions. A growing paranoia stalks Christopher. Suddenly he doubts Checo can be discrete. *Can I trust him? Will he broadcast this day’s events, embellishing with his storytelling skills?*

If *El Jefe* discovers Christopher’s presence on the beach today it will be his death sentence. *Damn! I should have kept it to myself.*

At dinner his worst fears are realized. Checo tells the tale as if he were the witness. Inmates laugh and sigh. Checo plays out the scenes. “Checo,” Christopher shouts. “Are you out of your mind?”

Publically mocking El Jefe!

El Jefe will kill the man who gossips about him.

Undeterred by Christopher’s steely eyed disapproval, Checo continues to pantomime the sloppy assaults. Hearing the violence cheered by Checo’s audience infuriates Christopher. He will never forget the helplessness not daring to intervene. While his table mates are spellbound by Checo’s reenactment Christopher is reliving the horror. Dinner tastes like burnt corn and ashes in his mouth. *What a mistake. Checo is acting like a wild elephant on a rampage, unaware of the hunter with the assault rifle.*

What did Master Jojo say?

“Buddha tells us the mind is a wild elephant. You are the tiny rider sitting on the elephant’s back. When the rider and elephant want to go in the same direction all is well.” Christopher recalls Master Jojo sitting straight backed on the cushioned dojo floor. He gestures with his heart hand. “However, when the elephant wants to go in a different direction to disagree is futile. You cannot argue with an elephant, especially an elephant on a rampage.”

Christopher thinks *tonight Checo is the elephant on a rampage.*

The rowdy laughter falls away as Christopher is caught in the memories of Master Jojo’s teachings; his serene intelligence, his comic faces. “The elephant is our mind’s power and strength, but undisciplined it will trample through our lives and the lives of loved ones and friends...”

“The tiny rider on the elephant represents the rational mind... The rider or rational mind, thinks he’s in charge... in truth, Buddha teaches, he serves the wild elephant.”

Christopher recalls right at that moment Master Jojo threw a baton at him. As it rocketed toward him, Christopher batted the missile away. Master Jojo laughed and said, “What part of your mind protected you from the stick? The elephant! The rider does not rule our instincts.” He adds, “A myth.”

Christopher smiles remembering, Master Jojo’s teaching style best described as unexpected. Reaching across the mat, patting Christopher’s knee he said, “When you are fighting for your life the elephant drives your combat maneuvers. Rapport between the rider and the elephant will be your secret to beating the odds when overwhelmed with attackers.”

Master Jojo closes his eyes concluding the lesson. His final sentence the most important, “Learn to mediate. Quiet the wild elephant and forge a bond.”

Getting up from the table, while listeners are caught in Checo’s stories, Christopher heads for a quiet place near the beach. He sits with his back to the coconut tree and his eyes drift closed. He searches for inner quiet. For the last four years Christopher has sat in meditation. He has befriended the wild elephant dwelling within us all. Meditation frees him of some anxieties others suffer. But on *Islas Tres Marias* it’s impossible to extinguish the fear real and imagined that eats away at the mind. Utilizing meditation and martial arts Christopher calms his fears. As the rider he watches and assesses the dangers of the moment. Simultaneously he trusts the instinctive nature of the wild elephant that dwells within him and acts for his greater good without the need for thought.

This sets him apart from every other man on the island.

• • •

Christopher lives for Juanita’s visits. Their conversations are the elixir of his life. On one trip up the bluff, he tells her the details of his eighteenth birthday. “At dawn I left without waking my parents. My dad might have felt the rumble of the car.” He laughs, “It has power, sleek, streamlined, sweet power!”

He shudders remembering his errand at the tuck and roll shop, “a double-dealing skunk! His workers hid a kilo of marijuana in the passenger door!”

Recalling, Christopher’s gut wrenches, as if his car disappearing from sight, vanishing, is happening all over again. He can’t count how many times each day he relives the nightmare. Outrage and helplessness pour through him. He shakes his head, “The police! The Tijuana Police!”

Juanita horrified, feels his loss. His beating strikes in her body. A new ache in her soul, to hear he was abducted, kidnapped and beaten. She understands his tortuous path to *Islas Tres Marias*. They sit in silence, surf pounding in the distance. Christopher feels each wave, a tug, a singular inhale and exhale. In a quiet voice he adds, “The worst part? My parent’s worry. Knowing they are terrified.”

Grabbing his arm, squeezing, Juanita begs, “Christopher let me call them.”

Brushing her hand he says, “No Juanita.” He swallows hard against her offer, “too dangerous.”

After witnessing *El Jefes* savage treatment of the women on the beach Christopher is determined to

keep Juanita safe. “I have to escape soon.”

“What? You spoke softly.” Shaking her head, peering into him, “What did you say?”

Changing the subject, he asks, “Do you learn ceremonies and healing prayers with *La Currandera*?”

He is protecting me. Hiding her sadness, Juanita nods vigorously, “Yes, and much more. I practice dreaming.” She laughs, just as he hoped she would, at his wiggling eyebrows. “There are many kinds of dreaming. Right now I train to walk between the waking and sleeping world.”

“I know that place!” Christopher shouts. “Sometimes I find myself both waking and sleeping. I try to hold onto both. It’s hard. Tell me more!” Juanita laughs. Rarely does she find people interested in her work with *La Currandera*.

“She teaches me the healing properties of herbs and stones. You’d be surprised at the slippery nature of this knowledge.” Juanita’s voice drops into a whisper. “I’ve learned words of power to pull my dreams from the invisible world into the physical world. And she reminds me to confer with my power animals.”

He nods, “You are the only person I’ve met who knows the animal close to them.” Frowning he asks, “I don’t know how to explain what I see. The animal is part of them?”

“Yes!” Juanita shouts. “Exactly! We all have an animal reflecting our instinctual nature.” She pauses, “Thank you Christopher for respecting my ways.”

Christopher has a surprise for Juanita. He smiles and says, “The first time I saw you, a swan peeked at me from around your waist. And I’ve seen lights sparkle around you.” They share a smile. Remembering his strange waking vision he asks, “Have you heard of a saying ‘the first and last lessons of redemption?’”

Juanita’s face brightens immediately. “Of course. Some call it ‘the first and last lesson of power.’”

Juanita brushes back a strand of hair lifted in the ocean breeze. “It means: You are alone. You are responsible for every aspect of your life. Lastly, you are interconnected with all of life.” Laughing she says, “*La Currandera* made a little jingle. She says, ‘live the first and win the last.’”

They are sitting at the top of the bluff. Looking across long vistas of endless sparkling water is infinitely beguiling and daunting. Humming aloud he says, “Hmmm... live the first lesson of redemption and you’ll win the last lesson of redemption.” *Familiar.*

Juanita watches him. Still trying to pull her hair out of her face, a question lingers in her eyes.

He shakes his head. “Tell me again. What does ‘the first and last lesson of redemption’ mean to *La Currandera*? What does it mean to you?”

Squeezing his hand with understanding she says, “*La Currandera* teaches the first lesson is you, everyone, is alone. We are each accountable, responsible, to every circumstance and situation we find ourselves.” She winces. “I know that must sound harsh. You did not plant drugs in your car...” Her voice drifts away.

Christopher sits up straighter. “You’re speaking truth Juanita. In my eagerness to prove myself,

pride motivated me to drive into Mexico alone. It was foolish. I was unprepared for problems. I thought I could fight my way out of trouble. I've learned there are many faces of trouble martial arts cannot solve.” He gives her a quirky smile. “Okay the first lesson of redemption; I am responsible for my life.”

Juanita takes a deep breath. She too is captured in the endless horizon. “I've spent the last several years in the bedroom off *La Currandera's* kitchen living the first lesson of redemption. Christopher, only I can translate *La Currandera's* teachings into a personal wisdom. My engagement in the process is the difference between borrowed knowledge and wisdom that is vital, alive. This is the first lesson of redemption as I understand it.”

Juanita nods thoughtfully eyes still focused on the horizon in middle space. “The last lesson of redemption, hmmm. How can I explain? We are each part of, connected within, the landscape of life. In our ignorance we think in flat, two dimensions of reality. I'm referring to an inconceivable whole. The last lesson of redemption refers to us each as part of and responsible for the well-being of others.”

Chewing on the end of her ponytail, Juanita pauses. Christopher can sense her effort as she gathers her thoughts to describe something larger than words. “You've heard the saying ‘damage we do to the strand in the web damages the entire web?’“

Christopher nods. Juanita pulls out her ponytail. For a brief moment her hair flies free. Sparkles shimmer, her swan peaks over her shoulder. Christopher feels... tight. He longs to run his hands through her shiny hair. The sound of her words pulls him back from his reverie. As Juanita reties her hair into its ponytail his heart speeds up and his mouth goes dry.

“Let me start again. When you live accountability, when you dedicate yourself, thoughts and behaviors to a positive dream,” in Juanita's pause Christopher counts her inhales; one inhale—two. “Life will gift you, provide aid. *La Currandera* calls them ‘serendipitous moments.’ We've talked around this before.”

“You're talking about Beneficence?”

Juanita nods. “If we live in beneficence, beneficence will live in us. Does that make sense? Could this also be the last lesson of redemption? A global accountability to wellness and each other, acts of power and beauty?”

“You think beneficence and redemption are related?”

“Confusing,” Juanita sighs, “Yes. Beginning my apprenticeship with *La Currandera* she asked me, ‘Do you believe in Beneficence?’ Of course I said ‘yes.’ But she shrugged off my easy answer. She took hold of my shoulders and gave me a shake.” Juanita shrugs her shoulders her body remembering the shake from her teacher. ““Can you fathom a goodness requiring you to create acts of power and truth that resonate out into the world? Goodness so powerful, living in your acts, creating waves of intention where the impossible becomes possible?”“ Juanita sighs remembering, “Honestly Christopher I had no idea what to say to *La Currandera*. She seemed to be asking me for a life-long

commitment. I barely understood what she was talking about.”

Looking at Christopher she asks, “Do you follow?”

He nods, looking at her as if his life depended on her. Shouldering the burden Juanita said, “*La Currandera* made tea and sat me down at the kitchen table. She said, ‘Can you understand Beneficence as a morphological field created by truths, acts of power and beauty, the alignment of positive goals and behaviors?’ I drank tea and when I nodded she continued. ‘These acts of power and beauty magnetize beneficial circumstances.’”

Christopher sits up straighter. “Master Jojo said the same thing about the mastery of martial arts. He said mastery creates a morphological field.”

Juanita burst into laughter at the look on Christopher’s face. “A long answer to your questions about redemption.”

“*La Currandera* and Master Jojo sound like a scientists.”

Juanita nods her head solemnly. “Yes. Most healers I’ve encountered, excluding fakes, do speak with clarity. Theirs is not borrowed knowledge. They live healing traditions passionately, with curiosity, with love and purpose. They test a tradition to see if it’s true. In the process knowledge translates to wisdom.”

Sharing a look, sharing silent communication, they laugh. They are happy in each other’s company. Amidst the desolation of *Islas Tres Marias* they have found joy in each other. Christopher longs to hold her hand.

As months flow by they begin planning a future. They share words of encouragement. Christopher knows Juanita does not have the heart for crewing her father’s boat. Her father’s slow to replace her. If the Captain unintentionally hires crew with loose lips at a bar while shooting tequila... It could expose and ruin his entire operation.

Christopher reassures her. “You’ll soon finish crewing for your father. You’ll be a healer! As soon as I’m free of *La Luna* I will join you.”

Seeing her frown he rubs a hand down her arm. “Have faith Juanita. You’re my beautiful golden girl. I can’t wait to build a life with you.”

“Christopher, tell me about your family.” Juanita begs.

“Okay, okay,” he laughs. “The best word to describe my family, noisy. Dad comes from a big, Catholic, construction, family. He owns a cement truck. Developers use his truck a lot because he’s disciplined with time management. Construction schedules run around the concrete pour.

“My Mom’s not Catholic.” He gives her a lopsided smile. “This causes loud arguments. My Mom is Jewish.”

Juanita cocks her head looking at him through her left eye. She can see the aura surrounding Christopher. The edges black with grief, the center his family life, Juanita takes a sharp breath. “Oh! They taught you to chip away at obstacles until your dreams are within reach.”

Christopher nods. “Yes. My mom taught me. Do you know the term *mitzvah*?”

Juanita shakes her head. Eye to eye with Christopher she pulls on her hair. He has learned pulling on her hair means code for upset. He takes her hand. “What?”

Her mouth pulled down in an upside down smile she asks, “Do you think they’ll like me?”

Christopher’s face lights up like Christmas morning. “Juanita! You and my mom live life by the same code. You just use different names. A *mitzvah* is a good deed given freely and makes life beautiful for others. Mom devotes her life to *mitzvahs*; for family, friends, neighbors, or strangers. Like you, she devotes herself to kindness and creating beauty.

“She also taught me *Shabbat*, Friday evening, is a meal and a time of celebration. We set aside worries. Focus on our gratitude’s.”

Juanita sighs blissfully. Her eyes are soft and dreamy. “Oh, how wonderful. Your mother taught you to balance work and gratitude, love, and family.”

Although she lives with *La Currandera* and loves her teacher it has been years since Juanita has felt tended heart and spirit. She longs to belong to a family again. Drawn to Christopher she sees in him a person of strength and integrity. She hopes, she believes, together they will build a wonderful, intergenerational family, to share with his established family. Throughout the day she drops into reverie picturing their future. She falls asleep, replaying their conversations. She is filled with the deep powerful presence of Christopher’s love.

CHAPTER TEN

DANIEL'S SHAME

Leon Vargas and his son Miguel head west at sunset in their thirty foot fishing boat, the *Caballito de Mar*. For five generations their ancestors have lived in the fishing village; *Barras de Playta* just north of *Mazatlan*. A simple life, when they're not at sea they tend to their boat and fishing equipment. Devoted to a god and family, Sundays are a day of church and family gatherings.

Every few days they motor to their hereditary fishing spot one mile off *Islas Tres Marias*. They drink hot coffee and eat *pan dulce*. At sunrise they set their poles and fly jigs and begin to troll. On board is enough diesel fuel for a full day assault. Dry ice and canvas will protect the catch. Deep in the locker, frozen with ice, their cargo will be safe for the all night trip back to *Mazatlan* and then home. A good catch will be ten tuna that weigh anywhere from fifty to one-hundred-fifty pounds. A successful haul will also include several dozen Dorado. Father and son each prime shotguns to ward off tiburon. Leon nods to Miguel cleaning his gun, "A Vargas does not share his catch with sharks."

Shotguns also provide protection. Fishermen fear an escapee prisoner from *Islas Tres Marias* pirating their vessel. Losing control of their fishing vessel jeopardizes their lives and livelihoods. Never once have the Vargas men seen a prisoner from *Islas Tres Marias*. All fishermen have been warned and given an escapee will result in their own imprisonment. Most fishermen will shoot to avoid losing control of their boat.

...

Every day of his captivity a fire consumes Christopher. Each memory activated of his former life, the duplicity framing him with drugs and stealing his treasured car, beatings and illegal imprisonment; his outrage, singes nerves and muscle. Fury pours through him, triggering a cascade of bio-chemical reactions. In the rush of neurological and muscular response the combustion transforms, metabolizing his nature with its ferocity. Leaving him breathless, it's more than his mind can assimilate. Oppressive and disjointed, anger ferments an indigestible bitterness. He struggles to remind himself, *how will I escape trapped in my own negativity?*

While his spirit struggles, his body does maintenance and repair work throughout the island prison. At each location he asks after Daniel. The prison grapevine has no news of Daniel's whereabouts. After work hours he cares for his egg farm. At twilight practicing martial arts, sometimes in the sandy beach and other nights on the dirt trails, his focus is building strength. And always he strives to fly under the guard's radar.

...

Late one Saturday morning standing at the supply shed going over inventory with Checo they turn to

see ominous clouds rush in concealing the sun. Trees rustle. The boom of thunder rumbles beneath Christopher's feet. A splatter of raindrops makes small puffs of dust. Closer now the BAH... BOOM of thunder dovetails with the flash of lightening.

Christopher runs toward his chicken coop and garden shouting, "Hang on girls. I'm on my way!" *I cannot lose my money makers.*

Clouds dark as night rumble, rain pours a torrential flood. Dirt paths instantly erode transforming into streams. It is a symphony of rain and howling wind. Lightning illuminates the rusty silver of his barbeque and chicken coop. The chickens are safe. Christopher hunches under banana trees while the storm spills across *Islas Tres Marias*. Trees bend in the wind. A crack followed by an explosion signals the nearby coconut tree split in two. Tree remnants fly by carried off in wind and rain. Lit by lightening the jungle flashes florescent hues of green and gold, colliding in the boom of thunder.

Every island dweller waits for a hurricane to rip across the land. As a force of nature the hurricane is a great equalizer. All the island's inhabitants share the anxiety of waiting. Should a hurricane blow the island to pieces they will all be hunting for a safe place to wait the storm out. In this way waiting lives in the back of each man's mind; guard and inmate alike. Christopher wants nothing more than to escape *Islas Tres Marias* before a hurricane strikes.

As quickly as this storm hits it dissipates. Clean air lays cool against his skin. Clouds part, the sun shines. A rainbow bends over the island. Christopher sighs with relief. Not the monster storm hovering in the back of each man's mind. Today the storm's drops of water glitter like diamonds.

...

Saturday afternoon turned mild by morning's downpour, Checo and Christopher are summoned to town. A bad feeling surges through Christopher's gut as they walk through the town past the guard's dormitories to their garage. At the bay entrance *El Jefe* waits holding his whip. Christopher schools his face into a neutral mask. The air around *El Jefe* is inky like jagged obsidian blades.

Memories of Daniel's ruined torso and the women's bodies streaming blood; these images are burned, seared into his memory along with his strange waking vision. Christopher suppresses a shudder. *That whip has broken countless threads of human skin and muscle.*

In the corner covered in cobwebs stands the generator supplying electricity to the guard's quarters. The equipment's silence announces the problem. Taking his time cleaning off the generator one layer of dirt at a time Christopher finds the fuel filter clogged. He looks at Checo, "Do we have a replacement part?"

Pacing a small square of pavement, shaking his head, Checo adds, "We are in trouble. It'll take a week to get the replacement." In the deeper shadow of the garage the Jaguar paces, its spots illuminated and shiny. In the gloom Checo looks dangerous and wild. Christopher blinks and the cat disappears. "What?" Checo demands.

"Nothing," Christopher drops his head. Clanging through his tool box he looks up with a grin. "I

think I can clean the filter. For the future.....”

Before he can finish a cough sounds from the corner. *An uncontrollable cough, dark eyes circled like a mask.*

In the murky light disembodied eyes stare at him. *Like a raccoon.* Leaning forward Christopher peers into the dimness. *Is this a man?* Shocked he questions, *could the rumors of inmates used as personal slaves be true?*

The shadow resolves itself into a man who stands and shuffles, stirring up clouds of dust and again the persistent cough. Grabbing a broom he vigorously sweeps. This further stirs the air with debris.

“*Hola,*” Christopher manages between coughing and choking on the dust.

Soiled and threadbare clothes hang from the man’s bony shoulders. Greasy hair partially obscures eyes widened in fear. Christopher replaces his tools. Pausing, reaching into his memory, *something familiar about this man.*

He turns to Checo. The Jaguar is pacing again.

“Does this *hombre* live in the garage?” Squinting Christopher takes in the hunched posture and sunken eyes. *Daniel!* It’s difficult to correlate this dirty bone-thin man with the muscular man Christopher remembers. *And there goes the cough again. Daniel’s cough.*

Checo ignores the question and the man standing in the shadows.

Christopher reaches a hand out to Daniel, “*Como esta, amigo?*” The silent man shuffles outside stilted and jerky. Dismayed Christopher sees a tear trickling down Daniel’s haggard face.

“Let’s finish and get out of here,” growls Checo.

Dismayed Christopher asks, “What about Daniel?”

Together Checo and the Jaguar pace, synchronized velvet, ready to leap and pounce. Checo grits his teeth and growls, “This is not our business. Nothing we can do.”

El Jefe steps out of the shadows into the bright afternoon. Daniel freezes.

Picking up the bucket of soapy water Christopher used to wipe down the generator *El Jefe* throws the mixture over the crown of Daniel’s scalp. Daniel howls in pain as the industrial suds burn his eyes. *El Jefe* gestures with his whip handle, “*huele como basura.* You smell like garbage. Go to the beach and wash yourself, *pronto.*”

Staggering Daniel makes his blind way down to the nearest exit and the beach next to the dock.

Christopher feels infuriated. Daniel’s injustices mix in a toxic brew with his own. Grinding his teeth, he turns away. He will not give *El Jefe* the satisfaction of witnessing his anger. Pretending he’s in a sensible environment, dealing with rational people, Christopher explains to the Big Boss new generator supplies are needed. He has left a list on the wall detailing the items to be ordered from the mainland.

El Jefe arcs his whip over their heads as they leave the garage. When the tip catches Christopher’s shoulder *El Jefe’s* laughter follows their exit. Christopher purposefully does not touch his shoulder. He will not acknowledge the destructive power of the whip in *El Jefe’s* hand.

They take a detour to the nursing station. A divot carved out the skin where his shoulder and back meet. It burns. The nurse quickly sews his muscle and skin back together. After five interior stitches and twelve exterior stitches Christopher shakes his head no to her offer of pain medications. A greasy salve cools the burn. She covers the entire area with a bandage.

Once they are safely on the dirt path Christopher looks at Checo who is walking stride for stride with his shiny black spotted Jaguar. Hatred shimmers off him in dark waves. Taking in Checo's dark affect he says, "That went well, didn't it?"

• • •

One mile beyond the island's curvature the Vargas duo find this day's fishing poor. Both men are tired and irritable. It takes a specific kind of man to live atop the ocean kelp forests, a wilderness inconceivable for most people. Weather is dangerous and mutable, a living entity capricious. After the morning's storm a relentless sun bears down from a cloudless sky. Heat and light reflect off the still waters. Gentle swells slap the sides of the *Caballito de Mar*. They add to the monotony. Five small tuna is the extent of their haul.

Following the timeless fishing adage if you're not catching fish move, Leon and Miguel relocate their vessel south hoping to snag Dorado a just a mile off the prison compound. Floating flotsam dislodged by the morning storm will hide gathering Dorado in its shade. Flashing florescent blue and green the Dorado hide, under the floating tree. Both men heave a sigh of relief. They're happy for a new beginning.

As the Dorado hit the jigs out of the corner of his eye Leon catches the movement of an approaching swimmer. He does a double take. A man using an inner tube serving as a life jacket kicks madly towards them. "Reel in the jigs," Leon calls to Miguel.

Father and son shout waving their arms high above their heads. Miguel begins to crank the hand winch pulling in the twenty-five pound anchor. Leon fires a warning shot in the air. "There's not enough time," he calls to his son. "The engine is off."

The swimmer closes the gap. Miguel fires second shot and still the prisoner fights his way through the water seeking sanctuary on their boat. Father and son exchange a look of dread. They cannot allow their ship to be boarded. Miguel yells, "Holy Mother! Do you see this? Is he *loco*?"

They are screaming expletives in an effort to scare the swimmer into changing his course. Never in their imaginings of just such an occasion, did they realize to protect their boat they will have to overcome the sacred conscripts engraved across their mutual biology, a shared life force compelling them to honor this inmate's body as holy.

The escapee holds the stainless steel railing with his hands and feet and will not relinquish his grip. Desperation has fueled his muscles with super human strength. Together the father and son do not have in their combined strength, the power to jettison the unwanted intruder from their boat. Leon and Miguel exchange a look filled with horror, the situation desperate. "He's too strong," shouts Leon.

In a burst of energy the man rolls onto the boat deck sweeping Miguel off his feet. Miguel goes down hard hitting his head on the railing. His eyes are blank and Leon fears him dead. The prisoner is diving for the cabin and control of the boat.

Caught with a prisoner aboard ship will be the end of fishing rights at *Islas Tres Marias*. Worse they could become inmates themselves. Who then will be the breadwinner for their families? They've heard the stories of innocent men as well as convicts forced to live the impoverished life on *La Luna*. In this moment Leon realizes their lives, livelihood and boat are in mortal danger.

"*Por favor, por favor,*" begs the man as he clings desperately to the side railing making his way to the helm. The wild eyes, stringy hair and emaciated limbs leave no doubt he is a prisoner off *Islas Tres Marias*. "*Por favor, por favor!* He pleads.

Leon cries out. Strangled anguish, "Arrrgggggghh."

Miguel lies dazed and bleeding on the deck. Leon blinks against a terrible searing pain. Adrenalin surging, the trigger as light as a feather, the gun discharges. The bullets velocity carries the intruder's body backwards. The man drops in the water. Leon runs to Miguel and lifts him to standing. They hear garbled screams as sharks converge. Looking beyond the boat they see a disappearing mix of man and fish. The water is streaked with ribbons of bright red blood and pink foam. "Damn tiburion!" shouts Leon pumping his shotgun into the boiling bloody water. Miguel shaky, fighting to stand, picks up his rifle to help.

Checo and Christopher are walking from the garage when a guard in a jeep speeds by yelling, "Daniel is swimming to the fisherman." Gunning the jeep he races to the dock.

Christopher sprints toward the dock. *It's a screwed up world where a rapist goes free and the family protector is put in jail.*

A group of inmates stand frozen on the cliff looking over the dock. The siren blares a warning. The town will be locked down. Lookouts armed with assault rifles will shoot any prisoners approaching the town wall. To Christopher the sea has become filled with miniature diamonds of light floating on the water. Within each diamond he sees a violet flame.

A violet flame, yes. What did she call herself? The 'divine flame of transmutation,' yes, that was it. 'I am the violet flame of transmutation. I carry the cosmic balance. You are Redemption's Warrior.' Why do I think of that now?"

A faint pop-pop, like firecrackers discharging carries across the distance.

Finally they see a launch speeding toward them. "What took them so long?" Miguel yells.

A silence weighs heavily on the group. They wait overlooking the dock. Christopher feels like he's been punched in the gut. Only *Ave Bonita* remains unaffected. She nibbles on Checo's ear. The launch returns. For a brief moment the guard's head droops. Catching inmates watching him his features harden. His voice flat and fierce he says, "Come and retrieve your comrade. Clean the launch."

Wrapped in canvas they take Daniel to the land surrounding the church. Inmates have already been set to the task of digging the grave. At the fresh site they all stand quietly. Checo elbows Christopher.

“Say something,” he hisses.

Mucus, thick with unshed tears, clogs Christopher’s throat.

Coughing, he reaches out toward the grave. “Daniel was a good man. He defended his sister from a lawman who used his badge as a shield to repeatedly violate her. They fought over a gun. The man was shot.” Christopher’s voice breaks. The men are staring at him in confusion. Apparently none of them knew the story of Daniel’s imprisonment. Mumbling grows to a collective growl. Taking a deep breath Christopher continues, “The law refused to consider Daniel’s plea of self-defense. He was sentenced to life imprisoned on *La Luna*.” Looking up Christopher soaks in the shocked and outraged faces. Choking out the words he adds, “Daniel stood for his sister and paid a terrible price. Today he chose death over slavery. He claimed his freedom.”

Christopher’s voice drops deep. “Daniel, today I saw redemption’s flame. *Vaya con Dios*, friend, redemption awaits.”

He turns away lost in grief. Although for a friend he barely knew. A man in the midst of his own turmoil Daniel took the time to explain to Christopher the dangers of *La Luna*. Checo stares at Christopher in bewilderment as he bolts from the graveyard.

Raw with emotion Christopher cannot tolerate being watched. Starting with a trot he hears his words, “redemption is coming.” Increasing his speed, his feet pound the rhythm to his chant. “Redemption is coming. Redemption is coming.” Running the dirt trails to the furthest beach on the island he throws rocks, boulders, stones into the wind whipping the peaks of waves. “Redemption is coming.” Finally he curls up within nearby drift wood and cries hiding his face in the crook of his arm until he is empty and sleeps.

Word spreads quickly, “Daniel tried to escape. He was shot by fishermen and eaten by sharks.”

Checo shares the story over the dinner table. As with every tale he elaborates, “His arteries pumped like garden hoses emptying into the sea.”

A dark sobriety fills the inmates. Already guards laughingly address prisoners as ‘shark bait.’

• • •

At home in their local café Leon reads the headline: On *Islas tres Marias* Prisoner Attempts Escape. In a rare expose the newspaper reveals the origin of the charges against Daniel. Horrified Leon discovers Daniel’s imprisonment the result of protecting his sister from the sexual assaults of a corrupt and predatory police officer.

To both Leon and Miguel this corruption is inconceivable. In the fishing village each male family member takes responsibility for the safety of the women. When Leon looks at his son he finds his own tears reflected in Miguel’s face. He puts his arm around his son’s shoulder and says, “*Mijo*, what have I done?”

Leon is Catholic. “I killed an innocent man.” He tells his wife, “My soul forever damaged.”

The shot replays itself over and over in his mind. When he closes his eyes he sees Daniel clinging

to the railing, pleading, “*por favor, por favor.*” Saying the blessing over a family meal he hears Daniel scream. “*Mio Dios.*” In his dreams Daniel falls, bleeding, into the water churning with sharks.

When Leon looks at his wife or Miguel’s young daughter’s he sees Daniel’s sister. Even sun sparkling on the ocean triggers the bloody memories. Inconsolable he cannot eat or sleep. This inmate was not the terrible monster the fishermen have been led to believe live on *Islas Tres Marias*. This prisoner was a man who protected his sister and paid the ultimate price with his death.

The local priest tries to comfort him. In Leon’s shock and numbness the words just slide off. They slide off into an abyss created by the horror and trauma of watching an innocent man he’d shot eaten by sharks. Leon sleep walks through chores seeing only Daniel’s wild eyes and emaciated body. He asks Miguel, “What really goes on at the island?”

They have both heard rumors. Heart-broken Leon and Miguel can only tie themselves to their routine under the watchful eye of their family and community.

• • •

On *Islas Tres Marias* Christopher realizes without a relationship with fisherman escape will be impossible. Countless times he considers hot wiring the guard’s launch. He’d need extra cans of gas. Only accessible beyond the town gates with special authority gasoline is kept under lock and key. The launch filled with gas has a range of twenty five miles. Half-way to Mazatlan, he’d be stranded in the Pacific. *Suicide.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DOUBLE DREAMING

Juanita arrives breathless from her climb up the hill, alive with love and excitement. Absorbing her beauty Christopher's heart rate accelerates. He feels her strength as she takes his hands and he breathes deeply. For the first time since Daniel's death he feels something not leaden and gray. He watches her lips move but the words are lost in the impact of her presence. She carries the spaciousness of the wind on sea. In her eyes a hint of starlight and mystery.

Juanita sobers hearing the news of Daniel's death. She says, "My father approaches *El Jefe* with caution. As a child he was *loco*." Reaching for his hands, squeezing his fingers, she says, "Please Christopher. Let me help you escape."

They've had this conversation many times. Recently on the far side of the island Christopher and Checo stumbled on a bone yard. A mass grave, layers of bones hidden in the jungle. He shudders remembering, shaking his head. "No Juanita. These men are murderers. Even your father cannot keep you safe if they think you helped me escape."

He searches for the words to explain. He counts on her safety and well-being. He draws comfort from the knowledge she is protected. But the words are elusive and he groans his frustration.

Juanita nods. "Living with *La Currandera* has kept me distant from my father's world." Laughing, she leans into him, whispering, "And no one wants to make a powerful healer angry."

Squeezing his bicep, and giving his arm a tug she says, "For a moment let's set aside worries. *La Currandera* suggested we teach each other something." Amused, she adds "To quote *La Currandera* exactly she said 'it will strengthen our unity.'"

Standing up Juanita brushes the dirt off her pants. She gives Christopher a fiercely competitive grin. "Today you will teach me martial arts. I will teach you double dreaming."

Sweeping him a welcoming gesture she adds, "You first, let's begin."

Christopher begins their impromptu class with a forward fold. Gently swinging, gravity pulls on their hamstrings, the muscles along the back of the leg. He broadens the swing understanding it releases stress petrified in the muscles. Christopher rocks back and forth in comfort but for Juanita the deep pull on her hamstrings takes her breath away. She giggles, "Nothing like being shown up by a boy."

Pulling his chin to his shin Christopher smiles at her.

Dragging his forearms over the top of his head Christopher begins conscious breathing. He explains, "Inhale over the course of six counts. Exhale over the course of six counts."

Juanita presses her palms together and drags them over her head in their prolonged forward fold. She has stopped breathing. "Ow! This hurts," she complains.

"Try breathing," he encourages. "Inhale six counts, exhale six counts. I'll count for you."

After four cycles of six count breathing he asks, “How do you feel now?”

“Better,” Juanita pants

He cannot help the laughter bubbling at the back of his throat. He says, “Master Jojo reminds us ‘dead men don’t breath.’ Try slow inhales and exhales. It will keep you calm and refresh the muscles. Otherwise your mind can run away with you when the practice gets more difficult.”

Juanita gasps, “More difficult?”

This simple but powerful stretch has taken her by surprise.

Next Christopher demonstrates a side stretch followed by pulling his calf to the back of his thigh. Juanita grimaces as her quad muscle grips the bone in protest. Christopher watches stoically.

Underlying the movement sequences lives a difficult, time consuming lesson. To put words to the body’s story Christopher explains, “It takes time and your patience for a body to open and clear out.”

“Clear out what?”

“Honestly?”

Meeting his gaze, her brown eyes open and clear, “honestly”

Christopher shrugs, “Okay. What makes your body stiff while mine stretches?”

“HmMMM, practice?” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Nope, concretized ‘junk’ closes a body down. It lives in our muscles, joints and tendons.”

Gritting her teeth Juanita repeats, “Debris? *Basura*? I seriously never thought such a thing would be possible. Wait until I tell *La Currandera*.” She makes a joyful squeak. “Thank you Christopher.”

Christopher continues with several rounds of front then back kicks. He finishes the mini lesson with side-kicks. He returns to a seated position on the ground. The soles of his feet are pressed together. He opened and finishes the mini lesson with stretches. When Juanita imitates him her knees fly up and she hunches over. Sweat rolls down her neck and flushed face. Christopher applies gentle pressure just above her knees. He explains, “It takes patience to understand the synergistic dynamic of strength emboldened with flexibility.”

He grins at her. “You have to surrender into the sweat. It’s a different mind-set. Most girls try to avoid sweating.”

Juanita giggles, “When do I get to hit you?”

Christopher laughs with her.

“Okay, it’s my turn,” Juanita says excitement lighting her eyes.

“What will we do exactly?” he asks.

Juanita frowns, “it’s kind of hard to explain. I’m going to take us through to the opposite side of time; day is night and night is day.”

Christopher shakes his head, “What?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Is it dangerous?”

Juanita shrugs, “maybe a little.”

“I trust you with my life.”

“Well then,” Juanita smiles. “Let’s sit here. Do not move from this spot.” She squeezes his hands, “If you move around I may not be able to bring you back.”

Juanita unconsciously bites her fingernail.

Christopher nods.

She takes a deep breath, exhaling and shaking out her hands.

“Should I copy everything you do?” asks Christopher.

Juanita gives him a playful punch. “Breathe in and breathe out, just like we did in your martial arts lesson. Juanita reaches down to her side where she carries a bulky woven bag made from thick fibers of alpaca wool. The natural colors vary from cream to stone to brown. A hint of sage and rosemary drifts toward him when she opens the bag.

Pulling out four rocks she places a stone in each direction. In the south she places a red rock. She explains this is a sacred circle. “Some healers open their circle in the east. *La Currandera* opens a ceremonial circle in the south, a place of trust and innocence. Following clockwise we arrive in the west.”

She places a black rock, shiny and lined with striations, in the west. Smiling at Christopher she says, “West the place of setting sun. Some say death and transformation, even perfection or ecstasy live in the west.” A white stone follows in the north and then a yellow stone in the east. When she has all the stones in place Juanita begins a prayer; part song, part chant. She places different objects from her bag around the circle. Christopher can feel power building around them. The air is sticky yet weightless.

Juanita’s voice has become a singsong prayer and he falls into the rhythm and tone. Incandescent beams of violet, gold and green flash then disappear. The air feels feathery against his skin. Juanita’s glows a nimbus of light surrounding her. Christopher floats. *I hear a song alive in her words*. His muscles unwind. He falls into her instructions, wrapped like a package in the depth of her intonations and cadence. Now her voice travels across a distance. “In your mind’s eye, see us standing on this cliff. The sun shines. Feel the warmth on your skin, the gusting wind. It fills us with pinpoints of light. Standing together, holding hands, we are dissolving into pinpoints of light.”

Her directions reverberate in his body. Releasing his past, he moves beyond the shell of circumstances known as the story of his life. In Juanita’s lilt, inflection and rhythm, everything has transformed into dancing bits of light.

Eventually she says, “Can you see the horizon, the place where the earth and sky meet? It’s particles of light. We are particles of light. Now, with me, slip into the opening, the horizon where earth and sky are one.

On a sigh, Christopher slips through the opening. He floats through pinpoints of light. Ahead he perceives Juanita’s light body. He follows her moving beyond the edges where the earth and sky meet. He opens his eyes. They are sitting on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean surrounded by dark night

and millions of sparkling stars.

The air leaves his diaphragm in a “whoosh” of combined terror and disbelief. “This place?” he asks, “a shared dream? Does it really exist?” He’s starting to hyperventilate. “I don’t know if I’m more scared this place might be real or a hallucination.”

Juanita takes Christopher’s face in her hands. “Hey, hey, we are here together in a sacred dimension. Remember to breathe. I’ll count, six count inhales and six count exhale.” She holds onto Christopher’s hands while they breathe.

Once centered Juanita laughs saying, “Look at the efforts I make to spend a night with you.”

Enchanted and dazzled Christopher asks, “Am I breathing in starlight?” Beside him Juanita starts to hum, adding, “Yes, very good Christopher. Breathe deeply the starlight. Ask for a visitation. Tonight we seek Star Woman, an ancient power, carrying the void before time as we know it.”

As she speaks an explosion of light bursts from her chest. *So bright, so vast*, it blinds him.

She cries out, anguished, collapsing at his side.

He yells, “Oh my God! Juanita! What happened?”

Juanita’s lifeless body drapes across his lap. “No!” he shouts. Cradling her, rocking, shielding her from the cold, “No! You cannot have her!”

He wants to get up and run for help yet he’s glued to this spot. Panic crushes him. *Where do I get help in this place?* He has no idea how to save her.

• • •

Solar winds buffet him. Stars stream by. He loses himself in the eternity. The weight of Juanita’s body pulls him back. *How long have I sat here? How much time do I have?*

Incomprehensible to live a life without Juanita, inside him a primordial scream gathers. He reaches out to the line where earth and sky meet. He pulls together, into his belly, the power of breaking dawn and twilight. With supernatural strength he calls on the powers of the four directions. He wraps himself in the planetary winds and bellows, “Juanita! Come back to me!”

The roar echoes through him. Waves, pinpoints of light, stream over and around him. They coalesce, past starlight, at the edge of existence. He bends over Juanita pulling her to his heart.

Looking up he’s alarmed to find a gigantic face filled with stars staring at him. An eye blinks. The face transforms into a woman, a woman standing within a universe of stars. Pointing her finger at Juanita, she asks Christopher, “Why did this woman bring you here?”

Heart pounding, he can barely speak. “I don’t know.”

Rocking Juanita in his arms, looking into the woman’s eyes filled with star shine, he swallows hard. “For generations before and eons after, in the stillness of a new day, in the night’s starry skies, I will love her.”

Star Woman’s image imprints deep within his cerebral cortex. “Please help me,” he begs. Personifying lunar darkness, turning it inside out, Star Woman speaks. Through her celestial winds

birthing the Milky Way, in the pulse of solar systems, in the beginning and end of time, she is infinite and eternal. Her eye falls on Christopher filling him with despair. *How will Sovereign Life find importance in the infinitesimally small... me? We are irrelevant...*

Her voice is the explosion of stars splashing across the galactic sky. Shaking uncontrollably Christopher slips into her primordial pulse, oscillating. Negativity, unresolved bits and pieces of his consciousness flee within her vibratory disposition. He is one, with the totality, the sublime beauty of existence. In the cosmic melody of Star Woman he feels peace.

She calls on him. "Welcome, Redemption's Warrior."

He breathes starlight. "Star woman. Please help me."

Stars outline her face layer upon layer of starlight creased and folded giving her form. "Very good. You are willing to ask for help. Most humans ... forget... to ask for help."

She gathers a cosmic breath and blows it over Christopher who still holds Juanita in his arms. His insides turn to water as Juanita awakens. Her chest, rising and falling, stars spinning, the universe expanding. He can feel Juanita's heart, beating at one synchronized with his heart. Star Woman's face fills the edges of the universe. She exhales transcendence. A heavenly voice embodies the union of opposites. "When two hearts, in their innermost heart beat as one, then all of time stands still and bows before them. This is the power of love. Never forget it."

She evaporates. Christopher's head drops forward, bowed over Juanita, he weeps.

• • •

When Christopher next opens his eyes they are sitting on the cliff looking over the ocean. The sun beats warming their skin. He sees the ocean with new eyes. In the union of sun and water, the refractory power creates miniature diamonds. Shining stars in the depths of the ocean, born of sun and water. He thinks *I can almost see Star Woman's face.*

"What happened?" he asks.

Juanita shakes her head and her voice trembles. "Honestly Christopher I don't know. I was trying to introduce you to Star Woman, but I had one experience and you had another. Both were tests I didn't anticipate." On a soft moan, "What will *La Currandera* say?"

She reaches for Christopher's canteen of *Islas Tres Maria's* spring water. Taking a long drink she hands the container to him. "*La Currandera* would tell me 'all is well that ends well.'" She shakes her head. "I've been taught to do better. I've been taught the importance of holding ceremonial space."

Christopher drinks. Cool water soothes his throat. Every part of him is parched, dusty with the solar winds of creation. *I feel charred by starlight. Who would believe me if I told them this story?* The answer instantaneously is *Juanita.*

Now they are back safely on the cliff they move to sit under the shade of the banana trees. He asks, "What do you mean hold ceremonial space?"

Juanita sighs, "When we journey with cosmic elements we can fall apart. Oh I don't know how to

say it. Let me see... it was my job to hold the intention so clearly that we would only stay right in that spot. Instead I was pulled to a different place.”

Already Christopher’s memories are starting to disintegrate. What did Star Woman say at the end?

When two hearts beat as one time stands still... This the power of love. Never forget.

Peeling a banana that has fallen, amazingly at her feet, Juanita breaks off half and hands it to him. “Tell me everything you remember,” she says around a mouth full of banana.

Wiping his mouth after another long drink of water Christopher says, “It’s hard to remember exactly. One part I’ll never forget. You died. I called for you. A woman made of starlight told me, ‘When two hearts beat as one, the power of love... All life stands still. Never forget.’”

Juanita nodded. “I could hear her. I heard her say, ‘Never forget the power of love, the power of two hearts joined in love.’”

Drawing a shaky breath he laughs, “She told me never forget but already I can’t remember exactly what happened.”

Putting a reassuring hand on his arm, Juanita nods. “That’s how it works, Christopher. *La Currandera* says when you are in a ‘ceremonial altered state,’ you might call it a meditative state. Like when you told me of your journey to collect the pieces of yourself broken off in trauma.” She grimaces, “after you were dumped here on *Islas Tres Marias*. Wait. Let me start over.”

Christopher nods and Juanita continues. “When you are in ordinary waking state you remember the facts, the rules, of the physical world.” Frustrated Juanita tugs on her hair curling at her shoulders. She says, “It’s so hard to explain!”

She puts her hands in front of her, each one cupped and says, “In one hand lives the ordinary world and its rules; in the other hand lives dreaming or ceremony or prayer. When you are in either world it’s difficult to remember the other world.”

Christopher nods in understanding. “Yes, that’s a great explanation. I understand what you’re saying. But,” he swallows hard. “What happened to you? Juanita I thought you were dead.”

He reaches for her hand. It’s Juanita’s turn to laugh shakily. “I think I did die in a way, Christopher. I had no idea this could happen. While my ‘dream body’ was with you my ‘light body’ went somewhere else.”

“You’re talking in riddles, ‘dream body, light body!’ Just tell me what happened!”

Paling slightly Juanita says, “Suddenly I was with an aboriginal man. His face and body were painted white with dots and spirals. He had a stick, like a wizard’s wand, and he carved me open like a surgeon with a scalpel.”

“He said,” Juanita’s eyebrows pinch, frowning. She reaches into her memory for the exact words. “He said I had to die and be reborn in love.

“While you struggled, he planted inside me crystals glowing with starlight. He called them, ‘earth stars.’ I could see you and I watched him. I was in both places at once. *La Currandera* calls this double dreaming.”

Her tears start to flow and Christopher is helpless. He pulls her to him, “Shhh,” he whispers. “We are okay now. You’re okay.”

Juanita shakes. “He told me that if you could not find the power to call me back, transform your heart and open to love, then I would die. I would exist only in my ‘light body.’ He used his stick to fuse me back together.”

Juanita pulls up her top and looks at her stomach. Down the center of her midline a radiant white light, shines like a scar. Her eyes widen when she looks up at Christopher. Simultaneously they say, “Wow!”

Juanita continues, “I heard you call me.” She grabs his hand and squeezes. “Wait I almost forgot. He gave me a message for you.”

Juanita reaches for the water bottle. She takes a long drink and then continues. “He said, ‘Redemption’s Warrior, your journey of redemption, beyond this island, is to re-make your world.’ He gave me this to give you.”

Juanita holds up her hand. Peeking over her shoulder, watching with interest, Christopher can see Juanita’s white swan. Slowly Juanita uncurls her free hand. A flash of brilliant blue, as deep as the ocean surrounds them and Christopher sees the pulsing florescent blue of his dragonfly. It flies into his heart. Christopher is pulsing with blue light, filling him with wonder, an internal earthquake shakes. Toxicity, all of the anger he’s felt each day of his imprisonment, falls away, freeing him.

Smiling Juanita says, “He told me to tell you ‘follow your dragonfly home.’”

CHAPTER TWELVE

FROM FAMINE TO FEAST

When *El Jefe* calls Fat Luis into his private study Fat Luis cannot help but gawk. Dark woods, hand loomed silk rugs, and crystal decanters filled with liqueurs on a massive antique sideboard just the beginning. Although second in command Fat Luis has never been invited to one of the many parties held in the hacienda.

Saltillo tiles, chandeliers, velvet sofas and oversized chairs stuffed with down feathers create an inviting atmosphere. Luis can imagine the harvest dining table groaning with food. Just thinking about it makes his mouth water.

The *hacienda* is the only air conditioned building on the island. Even the hospital utilizes ceiling fans. The library is cool and fresh. Fat Luis is sweaty and self-conscious. *El Jefe* stares at him.

Did I sigh out loud? Clearing his throat he says, “You called for me *El Jefe*?”

Chewing on his hand rolled cigar *El Jefe* appraises Fat Luis. He ignores the man’s efforts to gather his wits, probably a necessary evil after rushing over to the compound. Placing his cigar on a crystal ashtray he takes note of the jam stain on the front Fat Luis’s shirt. He says, “I’ve heard the *gringo* prisoner cooks a good barbeque.”

“Yes, *El Jefe*. He barbeques chickens he has raised.” Luis mouth is watering just thinking of Christopher’s barbeque sauce. “He uses chilies, tomatoes, and onions grown in his small garden.” He drops into reverie imagining one of Christopher’s chickens all for himself.

El Jefe’s voice pulls him out of his food trance.

“I need you to supervise the purchase of fresh fish from one of the fisherman outside the mile perimeter.” Picking up his cigar rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, he continues, “In the past your fish selection has been... lacking. I’ve heard the *gringo* is a good cook.” His fingers tap out his impatience on the walnut stained desk. “Before the fishermen turn back at sunset I want you to take the launch, with this *gringo* and have him select from their catch. Instruct him to barbeque the fish and bring it to the *hacienda* before eight o’clock. Tonight Carmen and I will have a dinner party.”

Chewing the cigar, he asks, “How long have you known about the *gringo’s* chicken farm?”

Fat Luis sweats in silence. To say he’s known all along will sound like he gave permission. To say he only discovered recently will reveal his ignorance. *El Jefe* waves him away. “Never mind, it’s harmless. Go get *dinero* from the controller. An envelope waits for you.”

As another afterthought he adds “Do not negotiate with the fisherman.” He taps his forefinger on the desk. “Give him one offer. If he does not accept he will never fish off our islands again.”

As Fat Luis exits the *hacienda*, Jacinto lights his cigar blowing smoke toward the ceiling. His eyes are flat. Every encounter he perceives a potential challenge to his authority. Even the smallest battles must be conquered.

Luis lumbers into the jeep. After picking up *dinero* he orders his driver to search of the *gringo*. His driver navigates the jeep down to the dock. He says, “When the *putas* visit the *gringo* can be found on the cliff with the Captain’s daughter.”

Fat Luis snaps his fingers for the binoculars. He observes Christopher and Juanita sitting side by side. He asks, “Is that all they do? They just sit and talk?”

“Yes.”

“*El Jefe* has a soft spot for his niece. Why else would he let her talk with the *gringo*?” Still looking, Fat Luis sees Juanita vanish. He mumbles, “What happened?”

He lowers the glasses and carefully cleans the lens. He hands the binoculars to the driver. “Are they still there?”

Confused the man looks at him but takes the binoculars. Looking at Juanita and Christopher, *Fat Luis plays a trick on me?*

Handing back the glasses he says, “Yes, they are sitting on the cliff.” Looking again Fat Luis sees they have moved to sit beneath the banana trees. Christopher seems to be comforting Juanita and even hugs her. A blast of brilliant blue surrounds the couple. Once again he lowers the binoculars and cleans the lens.

His driver says, “They are coming down.”

When Christopher passes the jeep Fat Luis calls out, “Hey *gringo*! *El Jefe* sent me. He wants you to select fish and prepare it for his party tonight. Meet me at the launch an hour before sunset.”

Christopher is stunned. *Contact with fisherman? A dream comes true.* Bowing to Juanita, he says, “I enjoyed our conversation.” Grinning he gives her a wink. Her smile lifts his heart.

Turning back to Fat Luis he says, “I will meet you at the launch one hour before sunset.”

He jogs to his garden. He’ll pick the ingredients and prepare a marinade now. One part of his attention absorbed in preparing ingredients. The other striving to remember all he knows about *El Jefe*, a slang title meaning the Big Boss.

His given name is Jacinto. In the United States his title would be Warden Jacinto. He and his wife, Carmen, are rarely seen beyond the town perimeter. Unloading supplies inmates see the very best in tequila, current movies, fresh foods, perfumes, soaps, fine linens and clothes made of the finest materials. All earmarked for *El Jefe* and his wife.

The Big Boss lives in the white washed *hacienda* behind courtyard walls. Prisoners, roam the island after work hours, but are never allowed to loiter around the perimeter of the town. They have no access to the administration buildings or *El Jefe’s hacienda*. Guards, posting watch from towers and patrolling the ground by jeep and on foot rotate duty twenty-four hours a day. *El Jefe’s* occasional trips to swim in the surf with Carmen are heavily guarded. A mid-sized man with a swollen belly *El Jefe* adorns himself in gold chains over a hairy chest.

Carmen’s dyed yellow hair, long and curling, her too small bikinis, incongruous with the vacant stare of a woman who has learned to hide behind the needs and wants of her man. Carmen married *El*

Jefe in the hopes she'd escape a childhood of poverty and abuse. But amid the sumptuous riches of her married life she finds herself living in another kind of prison.

Christopher thinks *they are an odd pair*. He's seen them chasing in the waves, predator and prey. Watching the man hunting his petite wife in the shark infested waters surrounding *Islas Tres Marias* Christopher knows her screams are of real pain. She screams the terror of being caught.

Christopher spends the rest of the afternoon collecting wood for the barbeque. He ropes Checo in to help with the promise of "as much as you want," fish dinner. Together they gather Mesquite wood, Ironwood and Jacaranda branches. Christopher debates, "what impact will these wood flavors have on the barbeque?" His skills as a cook hold the power of life and death, for him, the fish and even Checo.

Thinking out loud he tells Checo, "I'll go heavy on the Mesquite wood for the main course at *El Jefe's* dinner party. We can smoke the left over fish. The foundation wood for the smoker will be Ironwood. The density of Ironwood will be good for long smoldering."

Checo looks up from digging a second barbeque pit. He stares at Christopher in amazement. "Where did you learn this stuff?"

Christopher's answer is quick, like a snap of his fingers. He says, "My parents. I started cooking with my mom when I had to stand on a chair next to her."

Checo hears the raw pain in Christopher's voice and knows not to pursue the topic.

Together they strategically place the branches and start the fire. In the initial smoke *Ave Bonita* squawks her disapproval, a streak of blue and green, she flies to a distant Jacaranda tree. Checo's jaguar lies behind him lounging.

Christopher says, "Let's build one more pit. I'll use only Jacaranda wood. It will burn quickly giving the fish a delicate, quick seared, flavor. We'll add only fresh squeezed lemon and lime. It will be the first course."

Checo says, "Sounds good. Save some for me."

Christopher punches Checo in his meaty bicep. "What do you mean, 'save some for you'? You are my sous chef. You'll be standing right next to me getting hot and sweaty."

As he finishes digging the additional pit for barbeque and smoker, Checo asks, "How are you going to cook the fish without grills?"

Christopher grins. "I confiscated aluminum foil. We'll wrap the fish in marinade and banana leaves. Then fold them in the foil and place the whole thing directly on the coals." He looks up from chopping ingredients for the marinade and yells, "It's an experiment!"

"You better hope your 'experiment' turns out well," says Checo while stoking the beginning of a fire. "This dinner is for *El Jefe*. You don't want to end up on the bone pile."

Studying the placement of the last Jacaranda branches, they will not be lit until he returns with the fish. Pausing he looks at Checo, "Juanita taught me faith in a 'greater beneficence.' So let's have a little faith brother. This style of barbeque works for the chickens."

An hour before sunset Christopher arrives at the launch. He stands on the dock as Fat Luis boards the launch. With each step Luis takes the launch sways wildly in the mooring. Christopher pretends not to notice the effect Luis has on the boat's center of gravity. Instead he occupies himself freeing the bow and stern lines. The task complete he jumps aboard.

“Don't mess with me *gringo*,” wheezes Fat Luis.

Holding his palms up Christopher says, “No problems from me big man. Let's go get the fish for *El Jefe*.”

Luis engages the throttle and the launch pulls out to sea. Christopher is eager. To be free of *La Luna*, if only for a boat ride an exceptional moment for a prisoner of *Islas Tres Marias*.

The launch is motorized by a seventy-five horse power Nissan outboard. It moves quickly across the choppy water. Despite knowing their progress is monitored by guards in the watch towers, for a fleeting moment Christopher envisions pushing Fat Luis off the boat and speeding away. Even knowing the launch's limited fuel capacity part of Christopher urges, demanding, “Go for it.” To distract himself he watches Fat Luis's belly as it jerks and tumbles with each thump of the boat. *It's not a pretty sight*.

Luis spots his target fishing boat a quarter mile ahead. Flashing the twin yellow beacons he does a “Whoop- whoop” with the siren. He startles Christopher with a conspiratorial, mischievous grin and cuts the engine. The launch drifts toward the surprised fisherman. *Luis has probably scared away every fish in a mile radius*.

Infringing on the fisherman's boat space is the height of bad manners. The fishing duo forced to reel in their fishing lines. Luis has ignored basic fishing etiquette. Christopher gives the fishermen an apologetic shrug. He sets the rubber dock bumpers between the boats.

Leon Vargas and his son Miguel share a private look. They shake their heads and grimace at their poor luck. First an emaciated prisoner attempts to board their vessel. Leon shot him. Father and son watched in horror. Sharks ate the intruder. Later they find out he was an innocent man sent to *Islas Tres Marias* by a corrupt judicial system. Now today they are challenged by island authorities. It's a dreadfulness that goes on and on. The look Leon throws Miguel says *where will it end?*

At the very least it's an inconvenience to their fishing. They are almost done for the day. Soon they will turn the *Cabalitta de Mar* toward home. They will travel in the deep of night to their fishing village *Barras de Playta*. Nodding to Miguel they continue reeling in their jigs.

“Que paso?” Leon shouts to Fat Luis.

Fat Luis smiles revealing teeth littered with the remains of his last meal. “We are here to buy your fish, *mi amigo*.”

Luis's false cheerfulness irritates Christopher. The Vargas, father and son, breathe a sigh of relief. They will not be evicted from their fishing spot. Leon Vargas shouts, “Buying our fish is easy *amigo* if you have *pesos*.”

Vargas wipes his sweaty brow replacing a palm frond hat. “My fish bring good money in

Mazatlan.” With outstretched arm he gestures behind him, “cooling in my locker I have tuna and dorado.”

Christopher is half listening to the negotiations. *Are these the fisherman who shot Daniel?*

“Our tuna are sixty *pesos* per pound,” says Miguel joining the bargaining. “Dorado priced seventy *pesos* per pound.” He has instinctively inflated the price of the fish.

Fat Luis thinks for a moment. *My opportunity to impress El Jefe! If I buy the fish at a good price I could be invited to the party at his compound.*

He can already envision the massive table full of food. Salivating, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with a boat towel he makes his bid. “I offer you fifty *pesos* per pound for two tuna and all of your Dorado.”

“Go to hell Big Man!” Vargas’s face darkens with outrage. “You are trying to steal my fish.” Reaching for his shot gun he pauses when Miguel places a calming hand on his shoulder, but it’s too late.

Fat Luis has seen the gesture and launches into a stream of profanity that has spittle blowing back into his face. Armed with *El Jefe’s* promise of banishment he vows they’ll never fish the islands again. Wiping his mouth Fat Luis knows he has trapped Leon and Miguel. He pops the top on another soda tipping the can and drinking deeply of the sweet orange fizz. Reaching into his shirt pocket he pulls out a king-sized candy bar.

Frozen to his spot on the boat Christopher is disgusted. His thoughts are in turmoil, almost as outraged as Vargas senior. *I’m so close to the next step toward freedom and Fat Luis bullies this fisherman into submission.*

Christopher searches for something to say, anything, to redeem the moment. Carried by the ocean breeze his thoughts have scattered to the four directions. Breaking the tension Vargas junior calls out, “Okay, okay. Come on board and select your damn fish.”

Luis nods at Christopher. He leans back in the Captain’s chair and pulls out a second candy bar.

Miguel reaches out his hand.

Leaping forward, Christopher pulls himself on board the fishing boat. With a grin Christopher shakes Miguel’s hand. Turning toward Leon, offering an apologetic smile, he extends his hand. Leon grumbles but in the face of Christopher’s friendliness he gruffly pumps a handshake. Opening the hatch the three men pull back the canvas, revealing dry ice, exposing the catch. “These tuna are huge! They’re as big as a man.”

Miguel smiles at Christopher’s enthusiasm. Grim, Leon pretends disinterest. Christopher asks, “Can I use your gaff to pull them aboard the launch?”

“No *problemo*,” Miguel replies with an easy smile.

Hooking the silver tuna behind the gills Christopher wrestles the slippery fish onto the launch. He loads the Dorado one at a time. The fish flash silver, turquoise and florescent yellow in the late afternoon sun.

With a smile at Miguel he says, "I know these will taste as good as they look."

Fat Luis pays the elder Vargas announcing, "If *El Jefe* likes your fish I'll be back next week for another purchase."

As the launch pulls away Vargas waves his hand in disgust. Christopher thinks he hears, "Get lost."

It will take some time for Vargas to forgive Fat Luis for strong arming him out of his catch. Christopher is sure Miguel jacked up his original quote. *They probably settled near the Mazatlan price.*

Tossing their jigs toward the floating debris in the water, Vargas junior and senior can see the Dorado's rainbow flash. "We have a new customer, *muchacho*," Leon says. Both men lift their voices in laughter.

Checo is at the dock to greet them. Thinking ahead he has brought a wheelbarrow. Preparing the fish immediately is essential. Christopher asks for a sharp knife and aluminum foil from the guard's kitchen.

Fat Luis puffs up and it's then that Christopher sees the octopus. Two small eyes are dwarfed by the head size. With no internal or external skeleton its squishy appearance matches Luis immense size that also appears to have no skeleton. Eight arms sway. When the octopus notices Christopher staring an inky discharge surrounds Luis. Fat Luis hesitates to answer Christopher's request. They both know he will agree. But first Luis absorbs the power and flavors of his supremacy before answering the simple question. "Okay."

Christopher's rage flashes. *These are the acts of dominance that suck the life out of inmates.*

Checo sent to retrieve the knives, they move to the barbeque pits and the nearby banana tree. Filleting the fish into one and two pound segments Christopher utilizes the leaves off the tree to wrap them with his marinade, chilies and fruit. *Please God, this will create a bold yet delicate seasoning.*

Placing the Dorado surrounded in lime juice and banana leaves in the still burning branches of Jacaranda they will be seared as the first course. He continues adding tuna, a denser fish, in the coals of the mesquite. It will cook while Christopher and Checo deliver the Dorado.

By the time they have delivered the tuna both men are hot and sweaty. They postpone an ocean swim in favor of preparing the leftover fish for their dinner and the smoker. They return to find inmates crowded around the barbeque fires. *Ave Bonita* dives swooping over heads. The inmates take a nervous step back. Christopher explains the remaining fish left over from the haul will be smoked overnight. He says, "Tomorrow I will have generous portions of fish for sale. Just a few *pesos* will buy more fish than you eat."

Excited chatter surrounds Christopher and Checo as they wrap the fish with marinade using banana leaves. Batches are wrapped in foil and dropped in the ironwood coals. Tired of their audience Checo rises. Standing his full six feet he says, "*Vamanos!* Anyone caught near the barbeque will never buy Christopher's fish or chicken again."

Inmates scatter.

To celebrate their good fortune Christopher cooks fish for Checo and himself. When he produces two long-necked beers he laughs at Checo's astonishment. He prepares the fish on the barbeque just as he has earlier for *El Jefe's* dinner party. He has gathered banana, papaya, coconut and lime, tossed together as a fruit salad. Rice and beans have come from the inmate kitchen. He serves them fish over a mixture of rice and beans.

He startles Checo by asking him to say a dinner blessing. Checo has not bowed his head in prayer since before his injury ended his *futbol* career. In a strangled voice he says, "We pray for God's blessing and are grateful for this good fortune. Amen"

Ave Bonita echoes, "Amen. Amen." She swings on a nearby branch, hanging upside down. Christopher laughs, "*Ave Bonita* has her own way of celebrating."

Pleased with their laughter she swings with only one foot hoping to impress them even more. When Checo and Christopher clap their hands together in applause *Ave Bonita* sings. Her trills sail out and through the trees. Before lounging by the small fire they bury the smoking fish. Checo feeds his parrot bits of banana. After offering Christopher a cigar Checo drifts off to sleep his belly full and cigar hanging. *Ave Bonita* sleeps nearby with her head tucked under a wing.

Christopher's smoky thoughts turn to Juanita.

He sighs deeply.

His longing is deep and complex. Their chemistry runs thru his heart, flooding him with desire. When they touch their spirits shiver with delight. He imagines holding her tight, sharing intimate touch. In his imagination Christopher knows every part of Juanita. He knows how to make her laugh or tremble in excitement. One day Christopher will know in his body what he already knows in his soul.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A GIFT FROM *EL JEFE*

Word leaks out the *putas* are arriving for their bi-monthly visit. Dawn greets the men as they line the dock. Golden beams are just cresting the eastern horizon as the boat arrives. The Captain cuts the engine drifting to the dock.

Christopher's heart has begun to hammer in anticipation. His eyes search the deck for Juanita's slim figure. Women are shouting. They swing their skirts, pirouetting around the deck. Tossing hair, their lingering looks cause men to shout, whistle and stamp their feet. It's a crescendo of noise and bravado.

A skinny boy jumps to the dock to secure the lines.

What! Wait! Shouldn't Juanita secure the lines? Christopher's breathe catches. His throat swells. *No!*

Shoving bodies aside he arrives at the front of the line. He shouts down to the skinny kid, "*Donde esta Juanita?*"

The boy pretends to cough and sneeze, pantomiming the flu.

Crushed Christopher pushes his way to the dirt trail leading up the cliff. Today there will be no new memories for Christopher and Juanita to share. In his misery he doesn't notice the Captain. Juanita's father studies him with a fierce scowl. He grips the boat railing until his knuckles turn white.

Cresting the cliff Christopher sits down hard. Holding his head in his hands despair threatens. *How can Juanita love a prisoner? Where is the future? One tortured thought leads to another. Have her feelings changed? Has she met someone else?* Exhausted he lays down watching the colors of the sea change.

• • •

Awakening to the rumble of diesel engines he's surprised. The Captain's boat sets out to sea. Twilight falling, the time of day the trees collectively sigh and breathe. *Juanita explained this mystery. She said, "Trees breathe once a day. Together they exhale and inhale at twilight. Pay attention and you'll be able to feel it." Juanita think of me.*

Walking on down to the beach, a full moon wondrously round, casts a luminous glow. Behind him in the quiet he hears "plop, plop." A momma sea turtle lays her eggs. *She is as big as a manhole cover.* A grunt of satisfaction tells him she is finished with her chore. He watches her head to the water's edge.

Instinctively compelled Christopher stops her. Looking into her soft eyes and gathering his intent into his belly he exhales his prayer. "Great Mama turtle please carry my prayer. I send my love and blessings for Juanita's full recovery from the miseries of flu. Let her rest in a circle of love. As she

reclaims her health, let beneficence guide and protect her. Amen.”

The turtle eases into the moon lit sea. She glances back as if to say, “okay” disappearing into the greatest mama of all. The welcoming sea washes over her. In better spirits Christopher heads to his bunk.

• • •

Lying on his cot Checo smokes a black market cigar. *Ave Bonita* hangs upside down rocking on her dowel perch. Her trills fill the air. Christopher sits down to listen, her song mesmerizing. Checo breaks *Ave Bonita's* spell asking, “Where is your *muchacha* today? Is she laying down with a new man in Mazatlan?”

His laugh rumbles deep in his chest.

It takes all of Christopher's self-restraint not to jump on Checo and beat the crap out of him. Checo blows out a tourbillion of smoke. *Ave Bonita* fluffs out her feathers in irritation. Choking on the swirling haze, squawking a complaint, she coughs. Her ruffled quills unleash a single green feather. Christopher watches it float to the floor.

Ave Bonita hops her way to Christopher's bed. “Sweet Bird, you can hang out with me. Come over anytime.” Looking over at Checo he adds, “Even *Ave Bonita* doesn't like you right now.” The screen door slams behind him as he goes to the kitchen tent to search out leftovers.

• • •

The next day obsessively playing out escape scenarios leaves him with a pounding headache, sick at heart for everyday of his parent's grief. *Too many visions of failed escapes are toxic.*

Consciously choosing to shift his thoughts he remembers Juanita the first day he saw her. Air sparkles, the white swan peaks over her shoulder. *I love her smile. She radiates sweetness, strong and feminine, delicate.* As a bonus Christopher finds her smart, engaging and straight forward. *There are no words to describe Juanita's powers as a healer. She has eases my burdens in countless ways. She has uplifted me with prayer and ceremony.*

He grows still. The blue dragonfly dances around him. *I want to spend the rest of my life with her. At the moment of death I'll look into Juanita's eyes.*

Then his anxiety skyrockets. Will Juanita crew her father's boat next month? There is no way he can be certain she'll agree to be his wife. *Marriage is in the future, a future free of Islas Tres Marias.*

These plans require faith. The dragonfly flutters near his heart. Pops of blue light engage and disappear. He has no idea what they mean. Yet their presence is a comfort to him. *Do I have faith? Do I have the necessary faith in the unfailing goodness of life? Juanita calls it faith in beneficence. Will I break free of La Luna's curse before I am dragged into the jungle and the bone yard?*

Christopher stands straighter. He chooses. *I will live with faith in Beneficence. I will live with*

faith in the unimpeachable truth of my integrity.

The air shines around him. Faith delivers him to the possibility Juanita can, does and will love him. Juanita the hope of their future is the glue that holds Christopher together.

Sunday afternoon he sets out to gather limes for *El Jefe's* fish. Walking under the shade of a large tree with extensive exposed roots he looks up to the canopy of graceful branches dense with foliage. Leaves chatter in the tropical breeze, the seduction of a willing woman swaying and chattering while looking over her shoulder beguiling.

Sitting in his jeep a watchful guard nods. He says, "No loitering on the grounds. Only the chapel is available to inmates." He pats and rubs the assault rifle lying across his lap. Curled in the passenger seat, tilted upright, sits a bullwhip. *More and more guards are carrying the whip.*

"Thanks for the warning. I just want to pick limes for the fish I prepare for *El Jefe.*"

The guard nods "No *problemo.* Go ahead." He waves his hand in agreement.

Christopher moves quickly toward the chapel and surrounding graveyard. Here, among the markers, the lime trees grow. Christopher rubs his thumb over the bumpy skin. The dark green fruit plump. Gently pulling the lime away from the stem it drops into his hand. The back of his mouth puckers. He puts the fruit into his pants pocket.

By the time he's carefully selected the limes a misty rain has begun to fall. To avoid a soaking Christopher jogs to the back door of the church. Rusty hinges squeak as he enters the vestibule. The sanctuary surprisingly well maintained. He notices *Candle smoke has dulled the stained glass windows.*

Two elderly inmates, bent with years of work in the salt pits, are mercifully assigned church duty. The chapel smells of polish and candle wax. Christopher thinks, *not many men reach old age on La Luna.*

Curiosity draws Christopher into an alcove. A desk and matching swivel chair fills the space. Shelves hold church artifacts, a silver chalice, and bowls for communion wafers. He sits in the oak chair testing the swivel. He uses the desktop as leverage, holding it in the classic u-grip, and pulls himself into the desk niche.

Opening the drawers Christopher finds them empty. The last drawer doesn't rest smoothly in its tracks. He pulls and the swivel chair topples backwards. A flash of silver falls at his feet. On the stone floor lies an amethyst and pearl rosary. He flashes on the times Juanita explained *La Currandera's* belief. Beneficence, a morphological field crafted with truth, acts of power and beauty, the alignment of goals and behavior. Congruency ignites positive possibilities, magnetizing beneficial circumstances. What had *La Currandera* asked Juanita? 'Can you fathom a goodness requiring you to create acts of power and truth that resonate out into the world creating waves of intention where the impossible interfaces the possible?'

The rosary's beauty astonishes him. He runs his finger over the cross. Then he lifts the figure to his lips as he has seen his father kiss the Jesus with reverence. The beads whisper and slide through his

hand. He decides to take it to the chapel conservator. If he gives it to Christopher he will gift it to Juanita. *A perfect gift for Juanita.*

The rain has passed leaving the air fresh and plants sparkling.

Red throated frigate birds ride the thermals searching for food and mates.

Clouds catch the trade winds and dance the spontaneous choreography of moisture and air, a sacred geometry funneling across the sky. Even the ocean sways in harmony with the moon's gravitational pull.

In the sparkling of fresh air mingling with plants, the dance of wind and clouds, in the calmness of his eye falling on far distance, suddenly Christopher can feel his God here. He can feel the large and small beauties of God right here reaching beyond the horizon where earth and sky meet. His God is alive amidst the cruelties of *Islas Tres Marias*.

Back at quarters Checo tells him, "Fat Luis looks for you. *El Jefe* wants a fish run. Get down to the dock."

Jogging to the boat dock Christopher arrives breathless. Fat Luis is bitching. His octopus is staring at Christopher. Its arms wave in agitation. Two tiny eyes lost in the oversized head and roundness. The octopus lack of skeleton is reflected in Fat Luis's size.

Fat Luis continues his tirade as the launch dips and sways with every step he takes to the Captain's chair. He says, "*El Jefe* buys too much fish." He glares at Christopher. Christopher could swear the Octopus glares as well. He suggests, "Why don't I cook you a fish dinner?"

Silence sits heavy, Fat Luis silent.

His octopus arms wave in the air with gentle undulations.

For Luis food the answer to every problem, food even solves the problem of overeating. He says "Don't expect favors from me *gringo*."

"No favors big man. Just extra food I hope you enjoy."

As their launch approaches the Vargas fishing boat Christopher sees Leon's fleeting distaste for Luis. His overflowing belly, stained armpits, greasy hair; his girth dominates his appendages. *Luis's obsession with food has led to a stunted personality. Life skills, good communication are not relevant. Luis loses himself, loses consciousness in a spiritual union, oneness, with food he's ingesting.*

It gives Christopher pause. *What would it take to excavate the feelings that lead Luis to drown himself in food?*

He wants to feel compassion, but it's not there this day. In fact his conclusion *I need to find a way to distinguish myself from the fat man.*

The fish purchase goes quickly aided by Christopher's friendly banter and handshake. He makes sure Vargas junior and senior know him on a first name basis. When Vargas reaches for his payment Christopher turns to Fat Luis taking the money from his hand in one smooth motion.

Placing the *dinero* in Leon's hand he says, "*Vaya con Dios mi amigo*."

Leon nods, “*Gracias* Christopher, *e usted.*” From the middle of the boat Miguel raises his hand with a smile and nod to Christopher.

Such a small exchange and Christopher’s elated. He has made a personal connection. *They see past my prison clothes. They see me as a human being, not a prisoner, at least for this moment.* He’d like to do a small dance of joy. Today the good wishes and *adios* has given him hope.

• • •

Checo drops by while Christopher filets the fish at the original pits they dug. Looking up from slicing along the backbone, Christopher grins, “Hey *amigo, que paso?*”

Stomping toward the fire pits Checo says, “You kiss the smelly behind of the fat man and leave me with extra work.”

Sucking yet another black market cigar Checo blows the smoke at him.

Covered in fish guts Christopher snaps, “Checo for the first time we have enough to eat. I give you twenty-five percent of the profit from the fish I sell. I’m making money for both of us. Don’t complain.”

He hands Checo a fresh piece of fish knowing he’ll share a morsel with *Ave Bonita*.

Still angry but satisfied with the exchange, Checo moves down the hard packed trail. *Ave Bonita* follows painting the air with her native trills.

• • •

The *putas* have come and once again Juanita’s absence plows through Christopher’s gut. Determined to talk with her father he waits until the women are matched up with the first group of men. He approaches cautiously standing respectfully. He thinks *this will be a delicate conversation.*

Ignoring him, Juanita’s father counts his money. He’s sitting in his usual spot under the umbrella next to his boat. Taking a deep draw on his cigarette he looks up. “What’s your story? What does my daughter see in you?”

“Your daughter is a special woman.”

The Captain frowns. He leans his elbows on the table. “Young man,” he says “Juanita is not a woman. She is a girl. I do not appreciate you treating my daughter as a woman. It is disrespectful to her place in life. It is disrespectful to me her Papa. *Comprende?*”

Christopher thinks *Juanita not a woman, yet you use her to crew your floating house of prostitution!*

He grits his teeth. He does not want to fight with Juanita’s father. He only wants to know if Juanita is safe. Why doesn’t she come to *Islas Tres Marias?*

Holding back his thoughts he says, “Yes sir. I understand.”

The Captain looks at him gruffly. “What’s your story?”

Christopher takes deep breath, to relive his parents anguish, his stupidity and the duplicity of the tuck and roll owner. The beatings and the suffering inherent living in captivity everyday on *La Luna* is

its own torment. Every time he describes the treachery it exacts a toll. It crumbles his spirit. It makes daily life separated from his family and Juanita that much harder.

But Juanita's father has asked. Christopher begins with his errand to the Tijuana Tuck and Roll.

Interest fades quickly in the older man's eyes. The more Christopher reveals the more disinterested the man becomes. Frustrated Christopher stops speaking. *I will not cast pearls before swine, not even for Juanita's father.*

Silence sits heavy between them.

Donde esta Juanita? He asks breaking the silence. Suddenly he is self-conscious. The beige t-shirt and beige drawstring pants, his prison clothing, marking him as an inmate of *Islas Tres Marias*.

The Captain does not look up from re-counting his money while replying. "She is in San Diego with her *Tia*." Slowly, reluctantly the Captain continues. "She wanted to come to the island. I insisted she perform a family duty. Her *Tia* will take her to the San Diego Zoo and shopping." Pride shines in the Captain's eyes.

When he looks again at Christopher those same eyes are hard as stone. He says "Christopher, while you appear to be a gentleman, here on *Islas Tres Marias* you are a prisoner. If Juanita comes to *Islas Tres Marias* again you will remain a gentleman or *gringo*, I will have *El Jefe* cut off your *huevos*." Shaking a finger with sternness he adds, "I may have him cut them off anyway."

Christopher knows this is not an idle threat. He's trapped in the fundamental differences between a free man and a prisoner. He swallows hard against rising anger. He will never be able to explain the depth, the authenticity of his feelings for Juanita to her father. They press against the fabric of his soul. Speaking past the lump in his throat he asks, "When are you scheduled to come to the Islands again?"

The Captain arcs the butt of his cigarette into the water. "That's up to *El Jefe*. Hurricane season approaches."

Christopher bows his head. "Please tell Juanita I look forward to our next visit."

"If I have my wish," the Captain says, "she will find a young man with a future. What can you offer her *gringo*?"

Standing tall, Christopher answers "I'm a citizen of the United States. I have a future to offer. I will not always be a prisoner on *Islas Tres Marias*."

The Captain snorts. Turning his head is a dismissal. Christopher bows. He has been trained after a fight to show respect. Teeth clenched, pride slugging it out with anger, he turns walking away. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the blue dragonfly.

• • •

The following day *El Jefe* demands a fish run. Strangely Luis is not reluctant. He buzzes with a peculiar excitement that Christopher cannot understand. His octopus is alert. The arms waving with, not agitation, but the most activity Christopher has ever seen.

The two men stop at the supply shack next to the dock. Luis offers Christopher a cigarette. "No

gracias. I don't smoke." Puzzled Christopher shoots him a questioning glance. He wonders, *why would Luis offer me a cigarette? Typically he's yelling complaints. What does this gesture mean?* Luis smiles, the octopus undulates. "Take the cigarette *gringo*. A gift from *El Jefe* he insists you smoke it.

How do I refuse without offending El Jefe? The octopus watches him. All eight arms ripple. Fat Luis makes a show of lighting the cigarette. Christopher takes a dutiful first puff. Surrounded in a haze of smoke unprepared when Fat Luis punches him. Three hundred pounds focused right below his navel.

Christopher crashes to his knees. Luis takes the opportunity to right hook him in the ear. His world tilts and spins. Deep in his intestines nausea grips him. Christopher projectile vomits on Fat Luis's shoe.

Infuriated Luis grabs him by the collar, yanks him to his feet and bolo punches him in the groin, the pain an electric bolt from his toes to his ears. Christopher faints. Curled in a fetal position, a fire is blazing in his belly, parts of him are swollen like a cucumber and other parts have vanished.

He comes to when Luis throws a bucket of water on him. A bucket of water Christopher supplied at Luis request before he offered him the cigarette.

Sound travels down a long corridor. From a distance he can hear Luis laughing. He says, "What are you looking for *gringo*? Did you lose something today?"

Hands on hips, Luis looms over Christopher. He yells, "Gringo, that's a gift from me and *El Jefe*. You're too cocky. You forget you are a prisoner! *Basura!* Get to your feet. Let's go buy some fish for the man."

Slowly Christopher rolls to his hands and knees. Face to face with the wooden dock he notices the wood is silver with age and splinters. When he stands a ripping sensation has him bending in two. *That can't be good.*

There is no time to assess his injuries. He slowly moves to release the bow lines. He steps gingerly, finding his footing, aboard the launch. As they speed out toward the fisherman Christopher vomits over the side.

When his stomach settles he fills a small bucket with water. He pours the cool water down the front of his pants. Filling it a second time he pours it over his head. His ear throbs.

Fat Luis laughs and his belly bounces. Christopher gazes at his feet thinking *I could kill this idiot with one blow*. He feels the power of a mighty kick growing within him.

Seen from the lookout tower the escapee alert would be out before he could get very far. And he's in no condition to run.

When he can form a cohesive thought he realizes *my time on La Luna is at an end. If I can't escape they'll take me out to the jungle after Juanita's next visit. They'll wait for her to see me one more time to avoid her suspicions. Her father will hire a new crew member...*

Luis pulls alongside the Vargas fishing boat. Taking in Christopher's appearance Miguel yells,

“Hey! What happened to you? Your ear bleeds, and your face is swollen!”

Fat Luis laughs from the Captain’s chair. “Not the only thing swollen from my beating,” he brags. “The *gringo* even threw up on my shoe and again on our way out here.”

Miguel takes in Christopher’s bent posture and understands what happened. He looks to his father. Leon’s face is a storm cloud. Over and over, waking and sleeping, he still sees Daniel’s face and hears him beg, “*Por favor, por favor*. A memory he will never shake.

Together father and son help Christopher load the fish. They give him a first aid packet of ice for his ear. The exchange goes smoothly. But Christopher sees something new in Leon’s face, determination growing.

Christopher can only hope the duo will agree to give him transportation to Mazatlan. Somehow he must arrange to make his way to their boat, unseen by the towers, in the dark. After Juanita’s next visit he will ask them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

OLIVIA

At seven in the morning it's already hot and sticky. Men stamp impatiently waiting for the *putas* to arrive. Christopher has not seen Juanita for two months. Today he will hold her in his arms. He'll ask the question never far from his mind and heart since his revelation. If all goes well they'll make a plan for a life together.

On *La Luna* Christopher has become a liability. He's shunned by all but Checo and *Ave Bonita*. Also an exception is *El Jefe* who is still hungry for Christopher's fish. Christopher's beating at the hands of Fat Luis is a warning everyone else has heeded. If he doesn't escape soon his time on *Islas Tres Marias* will end with his body rotting in the bone yard. He'll fight for a future with Juanita. He needs to know. *Does she have the strength, the will, to overcome these obstacles? Can we claim a future together? Does she love me? Does she know I love her?*

Sitting on the bluff he spies a pair of parrots swooping through the tree top canopy. Their colorful plumage is iridescent. Ferocity radiates around them like a protective shield. Checo has told him, "Parrots mate for life."

He jogs on the dirt trail leading to the dock. As Christopher approaches the area he feels something out of place. A west wind running; hungry, warm air brushes over him. *Winds normally blow out of the south or east. And it's kicking up whitecaps. It must have been a bumpy ride for Juanita to the island.*

Thoughts fall away when he spots her. *The air shimmers. There! Her swan!* Juanita smiles, she is radiant. Christopher's heart pounds with excitement. "Yes!" he shouts.

Juanita shoots him another happy smile while securing the shorelines. For an instant, just the blink of an eye, time disappears. Juanita immersed in Christopher's love. Christopher feels Juanita's love for him. Catcalls, boisterous shouting and pushing, slam him back into the moment. From the boat Juanita waves, "*Hola Christopher. I'll be up the trail uno momento.*"

The woman crowd on deck and wave their dresses like flags. Lips pucker invitations. Men shout and feet thump the dock. It's a circus. Christopher moves up the hill to wait for Juanita.

From this vantage point he notices the tide pulling out long over the rocks below. *That's peculiar. Even more strange, there are no birds.* Typically birds are screeching a greeting at the arriving boat. No Frigate birds drift in the thermals.

Ominous gray clouds are building in the west. The air settles over his shoulders with the heaviness of a blanket. Absorbed in his upcoming conversation with Juanita, Christopher shrugs off his questions about the weather. Dark skies in the morning can turn into dazzling, hot afternoons. *Weather in Hurricane Alley can be turbulent.*

Climbing the cliff, finding Christopher waiting, Juanita smiles. Eyes wide and clear, skin toned and

golden, standing tall and straight, Juanita's heart reflected in her eyes. Christopher says, "I suffered in our time apart." He rubs his chest, a remnant pain of their separation, and gives her a lopsided smile. Carefully he pulls out the amethyst rosary. Beads murmur softly as they pool in his cupped hand. "I found this in the chapel. The cleric gave it to me. It spoke to me of you."

The swan looks over Juanita's shoulder. Christopher knows anyone who hurts Juanita will answer to her. Since his beating he's been on high alert. He wants to know Juanita is safe. Out of the corner of his left eye he sees the blue dragonfly, vivid with life. "Juanita, exiled on this crazy island, I found you. If I had to go to prison to find you, then I'll happily do it again to..." He clears his throat, "To build a life together."

Her eyes never leave his face. Juanita opens her palm receiving the rosary. The beads slip from Christopher's hand into Juanita's. They pool into a lake of amethyst and pearl. In her eyes he sees love mirrored back to him, *Juanita's love*. Her face alight with joy, Juanita kisses Christopher. She slips the rosary looped over her wrist. She gazes at him in silence.

Taking her arm he guides her further away from the cliff seeking privacy. Troubled by her silence Christopher's says, "What the heck Juanita! I'm trying to propose to you! Will you marry me?"

He cannot help himself. Leaning over he places gentle kisses on her cheek, her neck, trailing down her throat onto her chest, nipping at her collarbone. Their hands and lips begin to roam. Excitement shimmers around them. "I'll marry you Christopher," whispers Juanita.

In an alcove high above the sea, away from prying eyes, with soft sighs and fierce strength, they touch, sharing, in the most intimate ways. Later they whisper of their love, a miracle budding in captivity. A love nurtured in the harsh and deadly environment of *Islas Tres Marias*.

Christopher explains his timeline. They agree Juanita will immediately go to his parents. Even staying with her *Tia* in San Diego would put her under the control of her father. When they pause each one notices the dark sky pressing down. Thinking out loud Christopher says, "The siren will sound a warning for danger."

With so much to share, touch and feel the outside world falls away. Christopher has prepared a letter for his parents, their address and phone number, all sealed in a plastic bag.

Juanita asks, "How will you cross the border without your passport or other identification?"

He soothes her. "I'll have to be flexible. I have money saved."

Rubbing his hand down the length of her arm, he asks "What does *La Currandera* say? 'Goals and their corresponding acts create positive possibilities.' I'll have to trust in your Beneficence."

Eyes bright with tears Juanita nods. "I'll wait for you at your parents."

Christopher takes both her hands in his, "I need to know your safe." He pauses. "We could marry between the apple trees."

Juanita laughs, "You've given this thought."

Nodding Christopher says, "You'll love my family, Juanita. And they will love you."

He reaches a hand pulling her to standing. They are dismayed to see the skies have continued

blackening. The island muffled in quiet but in the distance thunder rumbles.

Concerned, Juanita says, “I have to get back to the boat. My father will want to leave ahead of this storm.”

Christopher’s heart accelerates. Looking into Juanita’s eyes they are thinking the same thing. Juanita talked about it only once. Her older brother was lost at sea in a storm. He’d refused to wear a bow line tethering him to the boat or a life jacket. Juanita’s father, dispirited in the wake of his wife’s death, did not have the energy to argue.

Turning Juanita to face him Christopher says, “Let’s talk to your father. Why not ride out the storm here?” His heart pounds with fear for Juanita and her father’s reckless choices.

Juanita shakes her head. Her father has weekend plans that include the agave fermented, golden liquid, Tequila. She gives Christopher a kiss, then pushes the plastic covered papers deep into her pocket.

Christopher catches her, crushing her, pulling her to his heart. Love full and enduring wraps around them. The white swan spreads her wings surrounding, shielding Juanita in his arms. She whispers, “Our plan in place. *La Currandera* tells me ‘behaviors with dreams build our foundation.’ Then we’re reunited!”

Christopher knows nothing he can do or say will stop Juanita’s father from leaving the island. A sick feeling accompanies their goodbye. Instead of feeling hopeful, this parting is jagged and painful. Juanita’s final words are, “Trust Christopher, trust Beneficence.”

He sits on their cliff watching the sea. The long tide is pulling out further and exposing more rocks below. He studies the rocks thinking aloud. “I’ve never seen the tide driven out so far and still no siren warning.”

Sitting in the muffled quiet, observing the boat preparing to leave, understanding explodes within him. *The hurricane is coming out of the west. The west! A hurricane is coming and no one is prepared.* His thoughts are barely complete when the wind kicks up sand and the palm trees bend toward the sea.

Christopher runs. A black sky presses down. The low ceiling makes each crevice of rock stand out boldly. *Can I convince the Captain to ride out the storm in El Jefe’s hacienda? El Jefe might not want their kinship common knowledge. But surely a hurricane is an exception!*

He organizes his arguments while urgency propels him to leap from rock to rock. The Captain is thinking he can beat out this westerly storm. A trailing wind will speed up the trip home. Halfway down Juanita’s father blasts his air horn. Three quick bursts signal he’ll depart ASAP. Christopher is racing. Lightning blinds him. The crash of thunder so loud he tumbles down the last few feet.

At the dock waiting men oblivious to the weather yell insults. The Captain has already maneuvered the boat from the dock. He makes a rude gesture before turning his attention to the sea.

Christopher is too late. The boat has cleared the bay and is entering full speed into the stormy ocean. His ankle, bruised from his fall, needs attention. His chest is heaving. To catch the boat before

it left was a futile effort. Head hanging he whispers, “Will I ever see the sparkles dancing around Juanita again? Will I hear her say, ‘I love you Christopher.’”“?

The siren. With both hands on the ground to support him he yells, “Hurricane!”

Standing, turning from shore he begins searching a safe place to ride out the storm. But first he makes a quick stop at the shed near the dock. Grabbing a roll of duct tape and beginning at the arch of his foot, creating a base, he wraps the tape around his foot and ankle. Standing, his foot can bear his weight now.

Whipping wind pushes him to Fat Luis sitting in a jeep talking on the radio. Grabbing the driver’s door with both hands he screams to be heard over the now howling wind. Luis answers but his words fly by. All he can make out is, “hurricane... muy malo.” Luis puts the jeep in gear and heads for the town. Christopher can see the gates are closing. *Inmates are every man for themselves.*

The earlier quiet has been replaced with buffeting winds tearing the jungle apart. Christopher is bursting with futile rage. All he can think *he’s carrying Juanita into a monster. The island will not sink, but his boat can flounder.*

It is too painful to consider his task to stay alive and find shelter. *I am no good to Juanita dead.* He hears the chant she taught him, “Dreams, acts, faith in Beneficence.”

Most storms come from the south but this storm comes from the west. Could this be the devastating hurricane everyone fears?

It’s shattering to realize he was so wrapped up in his feelings for Juanita he did not translated, decipher, the danger to him, to her and their future. *If I’d paid better attention I could have warned them. But who would listen to my gringo warning?* Juanita has a six to seven hour trip ahead in the roughest seas of her life. He tries reassuring himself. *The odds are this storm will head north.*

But he can feel nothing but a terrible dread. The oppressive darkness has begun to leak fat raindrops. By the time he arrives at his chicken coop it’s raining sideways. The top half of a palm tree breaks loose from above crashing into the coop. Chickens flapping short wings rush into surrounding brush. “Don’t go far,” he yells to the departing chickens. “I’ll find you after the storm.”

Christopher sprints to his quarters. Adrenalin fuels his muscles masking the pain in his ankle. Checo and *Ave Bonita* stand at the entrance. Christopher yells, “Wait for me. I have an idea.”

Gathering clothes, shoes and bedding he wraps them in a tarp he’d stashed under his mattress. The green feather he’d saved inside a shoe. A tree falls. Ripping through the roof and filling the room with water and wind. He sprints for the door. Checo stuffs *Ave Bonita* under his shirt. Christopher yells, “Follow me.”

As they run Christopher prays for Juanita. He prays in his father’s catholic voice and his mother’s Hebrew voice. The prayers run together. A terrible ripping in his gut warns him, *Juanita in danger.*

• • •

“Juanita, *aqui pronto, pronto,*” the Captain calls. Juanita staggers to join her father in the tight

cabin. From the locker below the console he pulls out a life jacket. “Put this on!” he insists.

Never taking her eyes from his face she slips into the vest. In the surging, foaming sea their boat is a mere speck. Pushed from behind in mounting winds the boat pitches and heaves, cresting waves over fifteen feet high.

Terribly sea sick the *putas* cling together on the deck. They are crying with terror and misery. Juanita instructed them to tie onto the boat railing. Cursing her they ignored the instructions. Instead they cling helplessly to each other.

Juanita pulls the inflatable life boat from the deck locker, it whips away torn out of her hands. She groans and stumbles back to the cabin, her father’s face stark with desolation. “This is a devil storm *meja*. It comes from the wrong direction.”

Taking her father’s rough and calloused hands in her own Juanita says, “Go back Papa. Go back.”

Shaking his head the Captain replies, “The boat will swamp if I turn it around. We must pray the storm tracks north... as they always do.” He whispers.

Instead, storm swells rise higher. The boat surfs the downward side of a twenty foot wave, Juanita thrown around the cabin. Hitting the trough, water pours in over the stern. The boat pumps cannot keep up. The women scream. Juanita cannot hear them but shadowed in rain their faces, mouths wide and distorted, are gruesome snapshots.

Yelling to be heard over the storm she tells her father, “I tried to get them to tie down on the boat railing.”

Her father grinds his teeth in frustration. His only daughter, his livelihood and his boat are in mortal danger.

• • •

Like a punch in the gut, bending him in half, Christopher knows Juanita is in dire trouble. His thoughts unwelcome visitors crash through his defenses. *She will not escape this monster. This storm will eat everything in its path. It moves east toward the mainland not north and out to sea.*

Pausing to yell in Checo’s ear, “We’ll go to the church. The walls are thick.”

The small chapel located just outside the closed gates of town. Checo grabs his upper arm pulling him. “Let’s go!” he shouts.

With every thundering step Christopher prays, *help her lord. Help her.* It’s both a demand and a petition.

Hurricane Olivia is building in intensity. The gusts toss Christopher and Checo like rag dolls. Driving rain obscures their vision. A full grown tree including the roots flies by them like a missile. At last they stumble into the chapel.

• • •

A thirty foot wall of water dead ahead and Juanita’s hand tightens around her rosary. She shakes with fear. Slate grey mountains of water surround the boat. *How will this boat climb such a wall of*

water?

Her rosary and its smooth round beads filled with Christopher's love steady her. She slips past her panic until the diesel engine stalls. The fishing boat slides back. It's unable to climb the towering wall of water.

Sliding into certain doom, a gust lifts the boat. A stay of execution, the Captain grinds his teeth. Stepping around Juanita he slides her in between his arms and the wheel. Like a tiny toy, the storm gods deposit the boat on the wave's crest.

The boat freezes at the apex, poised at the pinnacle, balancing as if on a teeter-totter. Inevitably the bow plunges. The vessel buries into the valley of grey foam below. The entire ship is immersed under water.

Clinging to each other for dear life, the *putas* are washed away when the vessel pops to the surface. Horrified, Juanita slaps her hand over her mouth.

Miraculously the engine putters to life. Juanita and her father make the sign of the cross over their hearts. They hug tightly and continue to fight the wheel. A calm in the howling wind has them looking at each other in confusion. One, two, three breaths of quiet pass. As realization dawns, terror replaces their bewilderment. A single ray of sunlight breaks over the boat exploding in prisms and rainbows of color. Open flat seas sparkle for a quarter mile ahead. Juanita shudders, *did God spare us? Are we in the eye of the storm?*

• • •

In the church Christopher huddles against the thick adobe wall. The chapel nestled in a small gorge. Surrounded by protective rocks it offers literal sanctuary. Adobe walls two feet thick buffer and muffle the storm. They keep the worst of the dangers at bay. Christopher is shaking with shock. He leans against the wall to subdue the tremors.

Outside the thunder of poorly constructed island structures thrown together in mindless abandon is the grotesque dance of Hurricane Olivia. An explosion of glass flies into the church. A palm tree, transformed by the storm into a torpedo, shatters the church's most prized possession. The stained glass window depicting the last supper lies in fragments littered across the stone floor. The window and its beauty had survived countless other storms. It was a beacon of spiritual hope in the desolate surroundings of prison life.

A hush fills the church. Through the broken window shines a patch of sunlight. Gone is the howling wind and clatter of building torn apart flying in multiple directions. *Is the eye of the hurricane passing over us?*

Wrapped in his blanket and tarp, he slides down the wall and prays for Juanita's safety. Shaking and rattling with fatigue Christopher stares out the open window. Fighting fatigue, against his will he falls into a half-waking consciousness. Through the open window he can see Juanita standing at the helm of the boat. He sighs, *in the arms of her father.*

At first the sea is quiet in his vision. He bows his head in relief. Juanita is safe. She is beyond the dangers of the storm. On the island, once beyond the eye the hurricane will still use trees as torpedoes. A supernatural streak of sunlight breaks across the bow of her father's boat. Cascading into prisms, sunlight surrounds the vessel. Waterfalls of brilliant color are so bright they make his eyes tear. The flat sea glistens with sunshine. He whispers, "Yes! She is safe." Christopher exhales. *All is well.*

Juanita lifts her eyes.

Somehow she can see him. She is looking directly at him. How they can see each other he cannot explain. Yet they are connected. In Juanita's eyes he sees the reflection of her white swan. Behind her, within her, the swan reaches out its fullest wing span.

A grey wall of water fifty feet high roars toward the boat. Hanging his head Christopher knows *there will be no escape for Juanita or her father.*

He watches, as he bi-locates; his body in the church, his spirit with Juanita. He hears a whisper, *when two hearts, in inner most heart, are joined as one.* "Juanita!"

Condensed into a spark of eternity, Juanita's arms are the outstretched wings of her swan. The giant bird lifts. Her powerful wings lifting higher and higher until she is immersed in sunlight and prisms of color refracted and broken.

The fishing boat disappears into the maw of the wave. Boards splinter, flying in different directions. Christopher falls. He falls long corridors filled with light. He falls past awareness, lands crashing into unconsciousness, safe from the storm and its tragedies.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RECONSTRUCTION

Hurricane Olivia has departed *Islas Tres Marias* leaving behind a grey and churning sea filled with debris. Christopher thinks *half the island is in the ocean*. Countless trees, palms and brush are stripped bare and broken. Housing and roofing material scattered throughout the island. The dock half its original size; a miniature version, its pieces litter the shore. The guard's launch still tethered, partially submerged in the sea, lying on its side. The storage shed has vanished.

Another punch to the gut; *Juanita, she is beyond mortal problems*. Christopher's dream was more vivid than life. It revealed her transformation. *Did she change from woman to swan? A swan larger than life, filled with supernatural power. Had the swan's strength lifted Juanita toward the sky? Are the swan and Juanita one?* He cannot understand the strange merging of Juanita into the swan and the swan's power. *Is the swan an angel?*

He sits down on a piece of drift wood, his head in his hands. He's unaware of tears sliding down his face. *What happened to Juanita?* He shakes his head, *Juanita, dead. I'm alone on La Luna*.

Feeling like a zombie Christopher inches his way through the rubble with all his worldly belongings under one arm. Heading to the cliff, along the shore, where his money is hidden. The bluff where he and Juanita spent their time has dramatically eroded and large parts of the face have fallen away. Gaping holes redefine the silhouette and surface.

The climb slippery, shifting terrain slows his progress. Christopher doesn't care about the dangers of mud slides, *Juanita is gone*. Pulling himself up the hill, he looks for his marker. The small opening marked by a stick is full of mud. His heart sinks. He no longer recognizes the topography. Heedless of dangers Christopher drives his fist into a tight space. Clinging to the side of the cliff, essentially a mud wall, he uses every fiber of his strength to stay vertical. He presses his hand inside the wet mud up to his armpit and miraculously he feels the jars.

"Yes!" The interior cavity holds three pickle jars of money. *Safe*. For the moment enough to know he still has his *dinero*. They are in-tact along with the bottle of champagne. He checks again. *One, then two and yes, three jars*; his life savings survived the hurricane. *Thank you*.

Reorganizing the jars to the new surface of the tiny cavern takes all his muscle. Once he's finished he returns to join Checo. Together they face the damages in the wake of Hurricane Olivia. The gates of the town remain securely lock. No one has ventured out to help or supervise the inmates.

Reconstruction of the island is daunting. Securing a food supply and water is the first priority. "Has the storm damaged access to the island springs?" This is the first question Christopher asks Checo.

Checo answers, "The town remains closed off. Their resources are available only to administration and town residents. We do or die and fend for ourselves." Christopher watches Checo's jaguar pace. *Ave Bonita* standing on the bare branch of a fallen tree squawking and ruffled.

Checo says “Fights already break out. Without food, water and the organization we can expect violence.”

At an island meeting Checo emerges as the alpha leader. He convinces the prison factions to work together under his organization. Leaving the meeting after each group is assigned a duty Christopher says “You are a charismatic leader.”

Checo shrugs off Christopher’s comment. “Hey *gringo*, in case you haven’t noticed these men are a bunch of criminals. Without organization they’ll kill each other and maybe you and me.”

“They could escape. Build a raft and drift out to sea.”

Checo laughs, “You’ve forgotten *amigo* the currents pull deep in the Pacific. They would be lost at sea.”

Christopher shrugs. Checo slaps him on the shoulder, “Remind me of the organization plan you designed for our crew.”

Months ago Christopher had suggested to Checo he organize their crew like a *futbol* team. Some would specialize in repair. Others cleaned and serviced machinery. Christopher even trained a few men in electrical protocol. As a boy wanting to earn money Christopher apprenticed to one of his father’s brothers, an electrician. He ran for equipment, handed tools called for, held ladders steady. At first he wasn’t allowed to do much. But he’d watched and learned and saved his uncle time and hundreds of extra steps. Eventually his uncle allowed him to wire lights, install circuit breakers, and repair wiring. He taught a handful of me the protocols beginning with “turn off the power!”

The reorganization in their crew significantly reduced mindless errors and poor performance. Christopher’s goal was also achieved. The observant eyes of *El Jefe*, no longer fall on Checo’s maintenance crew.

Aided by Christopher’s suggestions Checo applies the same strategy to ordering crews responsible for tasks post Hurricane Olivia. Over the next days every group Checo sends out has a purpose and mission. Fresh water retrieved from indigenous springs, food, undamaged by rain or sea water collected and stored. Checo sends one squad fishing. Another squad collects undamaged fruit. Hunting parties look for wild pig, chickens. They achieve a surprising albeit modest success.

Cooking squads butcher and prepare meat and fish. Fire pits dot the debris covered shoreline. They place canned food along the edges of fire pits to heat. Construction teams sort out buildable wood and begin rebuilding sleeping quarters. Until the repairs are complete inmates sleep unconfined under the stars. In the wake of Hurricane Olivia stars appear vivid, alive with primordial power. Christopher thinks he sees flashes of Star Woman. He sits most nights dug into the sand on the remainder of the beach. A nearby fire dries out the wet sand. He is sleepless with longing for Juanita. Watching the shifting movement of the night sky he sees Star Woman’s gigantic face filled with eons of stars. Her words seem meaningless now. “When two hearts, in their innermost heart, beat as one, all of time stands still to bow before them.. This is the power of love... Never forget.”

Grabbing his head, pulling handfuls of hair, these memories torture him. “What good are these

memories?" He will always remember the words but the loss of Juanita robs Christopher of any serenity. He is erratic. One moment calm, the next moment shattered with his loss. Over and over he relives the waking dream. Without Checo's guidance he would wander purposeless in the debris. Instead he searches for fruit undamaged by the storm. It helps when Checo asks him questions or for his opinion.

When the Mexican Navy, the *Armada*, arrives with food, building supplies and armed guards they are surprised to find inmates well behaved and productive. The island outside the town is well organized and running smoothly.

El Jefe has hijacked guards and staff to stay within the administrative compound. It's a lock down of sorts, ostensibly for their protection. In reality they are a labor force to repair his hacienda and the administrative buildings. A twenty-four hour patrol of armed guards insures safety. The administrative compound look out posts supplied with machine guns and other artillery are engineered to survive disasters. They actually remain standing along with the perimeter fencing.

Embarrassed when the Armada officers report the prisoners are well organized *El Jefe* flies into a rage. Pounding his fist on an ornately carved library table he screams, "Find me the leader. Find me the man supervising prisoners on MY Island!"

...

Ave Bonita flies at Checo's attackers face and hands. She squawks her formidable outrage. Checo is brutally apprehended. In the distance *Ave Bonita* follows the jeep where Checo has been unceremoniously dumped. Now she perches on the open window ledge of *El Jefe's hacienda*. When Checo looks for her through his swollen eyes he shouts a training word for her to leave. A private language he has constructed for *Ave Bonita's* safety.

El Jefe, and Fat Luis look at each other in confusion. *El Jefe* wonders *this some sort of voodoo?*

Standing in front of *El Jefe*, his eyes blackening, his body bent in pain, Checo remains unrepentant. In fact he cannot believe his ears. He shouts, "Have I actually been beaten for providing leadership that is well organized and running smoothly?"

Checo presses forward glaring into *El Jefe's* eyes. Standing on either side of him Fat Luis and his driver shift their feet. Checo shouts, "**Someone had to keep the men from killing each other!**"

A hush falls throughout the room.

His face contorted with rage, the table quaking beneath him, *El Jefe* shouts, "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" Spittle, tinged with flecks of his cigar tobacco flies at Checo's face. Hopping and sliding across the wooden slab *El Jefe* is nose to nose with Checo.

A fist to the gut has Checo bent double. Observing the vulnerable area exposed, *El Jefe* slams his elbow into the soft spot at the base of Checo's neck. Checo hits the tabletop and crumples to the ground. *Ave Bonita* darts from the window ledge and leaps at *El Jefe's* face. Gouging her talons into his scalp she screams lifting beyond the grasping hands. Large clumps of *El Jefe's* hair and skin come

away with her. Her parting gift, white poop sprays across furniture and head tops. A final circle of her vibrant wings makes the room feel small before she flies into the garden.

El Jefe has one final and permanent reminder who is in charge. Lifting Checo's head he blows on the tip of his cigar. Bits of ash fly away until bright orange pulses in its place. All the preparation *El Jefe* needs. Grinding his brightly tipped cigar into Checo's right cheek the smell of burning flesh chokes the room. Twisting the cigar deeper, widening the circumference, deep ridges form before the cigar burns all the way through Checo's cheek. He groans in his stupor.

"Get him out of here," *El Jefe* orders.

Luis and his driver lift Checo by the armpits.

El Jefe longs to hide Checo in one of the caves on the island. Somewhere he can torture Checo for days. Checo's embellished version of the rapes has been retold to him during the town's hurricane quarantine. Hunching his broad shoulders he grimaces remembering, "the rape that lasted thirty seconds."

Checo witnessed the rapes, embellishing the tale to humiliate him. It took a while for the story to find *El Jefe*. Now that it has he feels an urgency to have his revenge. The simple comment, a poor reflection of his man hood, burned into his memory. Despite *El Jefe's* brutal beating he will not rest until Checo is further punished by his hands. He will have his vengeance soon.

...

Armada guards supervise island restoration. *El Jefe*, and Fat Luis leave for the mainland. *El Jefe's* wife Carmen teeters behind the group in high heeled shoes, spilling out of a low cut, too short, dress. Having survived the hurricane *El Jefe* will be generously compensated, the Mexican government providing rest and relaxation.

El Jefe, Fat Luis gone; Christopher does not worry about being dragged into the jungle. Losing Juanita he has lost hope. Tumbling into depression and hopelessness, disorienting. It's difficult to put one foot in front of the other. No longer receiving a share of Christopher's chicken farm profits and after his brutal beating Checo treats him with the formality of an inmate under his supervision. Embittered, a friendly banter or exchange of ideas impossible, Checo screens every interaction through the humiliation of his beating and the filter of his resentment. Christopher thinks *poisoning him inside and out*.

Joking, laughter and embellished stories have dissolved from Checo's world. Rebellion and stoicism vie for dominance in their place. The burn on his cheek weeps, oozing its refusal to heal. There is no one on *Islas Tres Marias* with the expertise to bind his wound or heal his bitterness.

The medical question, should they sew the gap together? Or do they allow the burn to heal and regrow its own skin? Before they can successfully address these questions the burn cyclically becomes inflamed and infected. Checo's never healing burn an ugly reminder. Leadership, justice, valor do not have a place on *La Luna*.

Ave Bonita returned to her rightful place on his shoulder is also somber. Her songs carry the lower notes of sadness. She does not leave Checo's side. His beating, the glaring wound, purple oozing infection, has diminished his self-esteem. Leadership after the hurricane gave him personal pride and respect.

El Jefe threw his success in his face; literally with the cigar burn. His injury has become a stigma. He has been marked unworthy. Once admired now he's shunned and avoided by all but Christopher. It re-enacts his loss of prestige after his *futbol* injury sidelined his career. His jaguar no longer visible to Christopher's searching eyes.

Christopher lost in his own pain cannot help Checo with his disgrace. He watches *Ave Bonita* snuggle under Checo's chin. She sings softly and coos. Her music soothes Checo's heart. It's his one comfort. The parrot understands Checo's wound to the soul. She does her best to console him.

Each time he sees *Ava Bonita*, Christopher's heart lurches in longing for Juanita. *Ave Bonita's* generous spirit extended to Checo a catalyst for his own grief. He can barely breathe under the weight of his loss.

Days are grueling. Servicing jeeps, generators and pumps without the extra protein from eggs, chicken and fish Christopher, along with everyone else, is emaciated. Bone tired prisoners fall asleep dressed. One night Checo loses his temper over the stench. He marches the men out at midnight and hoses them off. "Toss your stinking rag clothes over the fence. Sleep naked for tonight," he orders.

To a man, including bosses, guards and shop owners in the town, dysentery proliferates. Mexican Pepto-Bismal does little to quell the painful, bloody evacuations. Bent over in his own anguish Christopher begins a search of the jungle and kitchen for relief.

He begins his recipe with bananas which are soothing, binding and filled with restorative trace minerals. Dysentery leads to dehydration. Without water housed in the body the kidneys are compromised, even breaking down. He notices when inmates eat beans the dysentery worsens. He tells the cooks, "Beans are bloating and cause pain in the digestive tract. Worse they absorb water, taking hydration from already dehydrated bodies." The cooks look at him in confusion. Backtracking Christopher says, "The body already dehydrated... more dehydration challenges the kidneys. The organs start to shut down. Dehydration will kill."

A walk through the kitchen gardens reveals well established ginger plants. Talking to the cook and his helpers Christopher says, "Ginger root is an ancient tonic for the stomach. Rice calms and soothes. It puffs up with water while it's cooking. In this way it returns water to the body."

Throughout his childhood vitamins and nutrition were a topic of conversation at the dining table. Christopher's father too, had studied with Master Jojo as a teen. His interest healing injuries with food began during his martial arts apprenticeship. Now Christopher applies his second generation knowledge utilizing foods like medicine. He experiments in the inmate's kitchen. Cooked rice, bananas, grated ginger, applesauce for additional fiber, pectin (historically known as a remedy for digestive disorders) and tapioca all blend together for a porridge that will grip the lining of the

intestines. He continues his explanation to the cooks who look at him in bewilderment. He says, “Carbohydrates adhere to the lining of the intestines, slowing and calming digestion.” Hitting the wooden spoon on the edge of a large kitchen pot he adds, “Simple cures put an end to dysentery.”

Christopher’s potion has become a magical elixir. Soon all the kitchens on the island prepare the soothing cocktail. It is a turning point for Christopher. Searching out life sustaining ingredients begins to heal not only his intestines but also his spirit. For the community at large, Christopher’s role in providing relief from dysentery makes him a hero even with the guards.

His health restored so is his will to live. Once again escape becomes a priority. Back on his feet Christopher makes a visit to his money cave. Counting out the funds he finds he has ten thousand pesos, just over two thousand dollars. Confident he has enough money Christopher strategizes its possible distribution. He’ll give the Vargas duo one third of his money; provided they agree to take him to the mainland. The remainder will take him further north, maybe by ferry and bus. Before Christopher attempts an escape *El Jefe*, along with his love of fresh fish, must return to *Islas Tres Marias*. He has no idea how long *El Jefe* will be furloughed to the mainland. The prison grapevine has no information either.

Prisoners begin to transition back to their pre-hurricane behaviors. Christopher and Checo are the exception. Both men have been devastated by the storm. Christopher lost Juanita. Checo lost the reflection of his esteem through other men’s eyes.

Christopher once again spends late afternoons practicing martial arts. Evenings he sits on the cliff looking out to sea. He wonders *when will I see the Vargas fishing boat?*

He no longer enjoys the beauty in the changing colors of the water. Without Juanita his life has lost its color and vibrancy. Hurricane Olivia stole his precious Juanita, stealing along with her the colors that made his life rich. Her flight, in his strange dream left little doubt in his mind that she and her father were consumed by the hurricane.

One evening he sees what he has been looking for; the *Cabalitto de Mar* sits glowing in the sunset. But another week passes and still *El Jefe’s hacienda* remains empty.

Anna the nurse has returned to the island with her husband the head accountant of the town. Christopher advises Checo, “Anna will help you heal the burn on your cheek.”

• • •

Christopher met Anna several weeks into his captivity. Exploring he’d slipped on the rocks and cut open his knee. He needed stiches and antibiotics. It was early in his incarceration and Anna gave him encouragement. Looking at Checo now, Christopher remembers his first encounter with Anna. While Anna sewed up his knee, she’d said, “You have not lost God’s Favor. Stay true to Beneficence. You will come through this time better, stronger than before.”

Christopher had said, “Anna your words sound familiar to me. The Captain’s daughter, Juanita speaks about Beneficence. She taught me a chant; Goals, acts, faith in Beneficence.”

Anna had smiled and shrugged. “Juanita studies with my sister Bella. A beautiful and sweet young woman.”

“Yes,” agreed Christopher. But Anna surprises Christopher again when she says, “Someday, together, your two hearts may beat as one.”

At the time turning bright red Christopher looked over his shoulder to see if anyone had overheard Anna’s amazing remark.

She’d put a calming hand on Christopher’s knee. “Within the powers of Beneficence we pray for a swift healing to Christopher’s knee and spirit. Amen.”

Christopher had bowed his head. Looking up, his eyes shine. “Thank you Anna. Your words give me hope.”

Surprising Christopher yet again she’d pulled him to her for a quick hug. She said, “Christopher I did not tell you God’s Favor is in your future to give you hopes. The words that come through me are a gift of prophecy. I cannot change this about me anymore than you can change the gifts special to you. Our only choice is to ignore them or enhance them.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Christopher said with respect as he’d reached, barely limping, for the door.

“And Christopher,” Anna smiled, “Never forget the power of love.”

The next day Christopher had taken Anna and her husband a basket of eggs. Now he thinks *Anna is the only one on the island able to heal Checo’s burn and bitterness.*

To counteract Checo’s disapproval Christopher gathers the colors of the golden sun from his belly before he speaks. “Checo, if you’d meet with Anna once you’d change your mind about her. Please think about seeing Anna.” The words sit untouched between them. Checo’s face does not flinch. Making no eye contact he says, “I’m not interested Christopher. Drop it.”

• • •

One bright morning Christopher sees familiar faces step off the weekly supply ship. *El Jefe* assists his sultry wife Carmen disembarking from the boat. Fat Luis follows close behind.

Christopher’s heart begins a war drum thump. Here is Fat Luis, his link to the Vargas fishing boat and possibly escape. In this single instant his life transforms, the endless waiting over. Now danger and positive possibilities juggle in a never ending pirouette.

Preoccupied with his plan Christopher almost doesn’t notice the look on Checo’s face. A black rage shimmers around Checo. For the first time in many weeks Christopher sees the Jaguar. It’s mouth open in a silent scream, the cat leaps toward *El Jefe*.

Gently Checo puts his hand to his cheek. The injury is part scar, part open wound. *Ave Bonita* dives streaking across the sky. *This will require watching,* thinks Christopher.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ADIOS AMIGO

Freedom. Christopher's flight for freedom has arrived. Freedom runs through him like an electrical current. Each morning his eyes snap open and his heart thunders in his chest. Nothing can contain the adrenalin pouring through his veins, firing his muscles. *La Luna's* suffocating grip has changed him. In a fever of anticipation he lives on borrowed time with *El Jefe's* return. Each night he wonders if he'll be dragged into the jungle for a slow death before he can organize events in his favor.

On the surface he pretends to be relaxed. He offers help where needed at work. He practices martial arts because they have all come to expect this behavior. In reality he's living a double life. The strain cracks his composure.

Occasionally he catches Checo's eyes on him, watching, gazing speculatively. *Does he know? Does he suspect I'm planning escape?* He misses his beautiful Juanita. Their future never had a chance once her father decided to outrun Olivia. Time will have to work its healing. First he must escape. Return to his family. The memory of Juanita's brightness will carry him home.

• • •

Christopher discovers *El Jefe* and Checo nose to nose just outside the inmate kitchen. Christopher has only seen Checo's jaguar once since his beating, *El Jefe's* shoulders swollen with the fighting stance of a bull, both are surrounded with a grainy red streaked aura of combat. Black bolts attached to the dispute arc the distance between the two men. *Why would El Jefe be by the prisoner's kitchen?*

Grabbing his whip *El Jefe* transforms the yelling match into a fight. He is forestalled by Checo's long reach. Wrenching the braided handle away Checo crashes his arm upward breaking *El Jefe's* grip. The length of leather lashes out. *Ave Bonita* screams violently swooping over Checo's shoulder. Her beak, claws and wingspan add to the confusion.

The whip in his control Checo strikes out. His fury focused in this one moment. The ribbon of leather crashes over *El Jefe's* face and shoulder. Checo yanks the leather toward him transforming it into a cutting blade ripping *El Jefe's* clothes tearing his face, carving his shoulder and biting into muscle. Christopher is horrified to see the whip has cut all the way to the bone. The white of *El Jefe's* collar bone is clearly visible. He roars head down for a charge, infuriated.

Christopher shoves his way between the two men. Turning to face Checo, he pries his fingers off the grip of the whip handle. Speaking in a calm but urgent voice Christopher talks Checo down from his fury. If Checo cannot contain himself, if he cannot pull in his anger and function within the realm of the prison authority, under the jurisdiction of the guards, he will die. Before sunset.

Dislodging the whip Christopher turns, sandwiched between the two men. He hand hands the leather stick back to *El Jefe*. Now he can see the corner of *El Jefe's* mouth has been carved away.

Christopher stoically watches deep red liquid pool in the crevice of *El Jefe's* mouth and leak down his chin. A scar will cover the wound, his mouth forever altered. He'll need stitches for his lip and collarbone.

The men march away in opposite directions. Christopher worries *if the guards come for Checo in the middle of the night they may decide to take me as well. Just for the efficiency of killing two in the time it takes to kill one. Islas Tres Marias has become too small for those two. Death is stalking Checo and he doesn't seem to care.*

Christopher doesn't know what to do. Checo is closed off. *I'll have to make my move soon. Before we are both dragged into the jungle and left to disintegrate on the bone pile.*

Checo's head throbs. In the foggy distance he can hear the distressed chatter of *Ave Bonita*. He tries to open his eyes. They are stuck shut with clotting blood. He raises his hand to brush free his eyelids. While he can feel his brain transmit the message to his muscles, his hand does not arrive at his face.

His brain sent the correct message. Something wrong, he does a mental scan. *My body stands upright. What's going on here? Am I encased in concrete?* He cannot remember what happened, having difficulty thinking clearly. How did he get in this predicament? Fueled by his panic one blood encrusted eye pops open. He hears laughter behind him but he can't turn his head. The realization slowly dawns on him. He is buried up to his neck in sand. He yells. "Stop the joke!"

He screams, "HELPPPP, HELLLPPPP."

A terrible dread turns his insides liquid. Checo's clouded brain clears enough to identify the man's laughter. Yes, he knows this laughter. His fears confirmed when the crack and boom of a whip lashes his head and the man speaks the final words Checo will hear, "*Adios amigo.*"

The tide inches forward with each surge. Checo screams and screams. No one hears over the incoming surf.

When Checo doesn't show up for dinner inmates feel uneasy. A vibrant figure in prison life, his physical strength radiates confidence and inspires admiration. Even the guards admire Checo. Some secretly cheered when Checo gained control of *El Jefe's* whip.

As night falls, rumors spread fast. Checo does not arrive for lights out. By morning he is still missing. Prisoners grow silent. In the quiet a menace swells. The guards announce Checo went swimming. He is assumed drowned, accidental drowning.

Inmates know *El Jefe* stalks Checo. Who else would have masterminded his disappearance? The prison grapevine confirms the rumor. *Ave Bonita* has been observed following *El Jefe* in his jeep. She swoops and squawks, aiming for the eyes, over and over. A sight repeated throughout the island racing along the prison rumor mill.

Christopher searches for Checo on the back side of the island. He goes to the salt pits and then the boneyard they discovered together. He finds no sign of Checo or foul play.

He walks the agave fields but finds nothing. He explores the lower, easily accessible cliffs and some of the higher west facing cliffs.

Unsettled he goes to the cliff above the dock where he and Juanita sat. He sits waiting for a sign. Anxiety unrelenting, skittering across his synaptic nerve endings and the chasm of what he knows and doesn't know about Checo's disappearance.

As the tide pulls out he notices a group of seagulls huddled around what looks like a beach ball. Christopher hurries down to investigate.

As he approaches the smell keeps him away. Checo's head swollen with salt water, seagulls have eaten the most delicate tissues, the eyes. Christopher turns and vomits. He wretches and gags until his insides litter the sand around him. Every drop of bile excavated he stands with resolution. Saying a brief prayer for Checo's spirit he turns away and walks purposefully to his cave.

He has already calculated the Vargas boat returns tonight for a fishing run tomorrow. Christopher has counted the cycle of their fishing pattern for the last months even before the devastation of Hurricane Olivia.

He finds Fat Luis lounging in his jeep just outside the administration gates in front of the church. Blood singing through his veins, heart rate accelerating Christopher approaches Luis with the bottle of Champagne.

"Hey Luis, look what I found. I came across it looking for my chickens. It's yours. I don't drink Champagne."

Taking the gift the obese man ogles the bottle. His fingers leave a greasy trail across the glass.

Watching him Christopher wonders *did you watch Checo die?*

Luis looks speculatively at him. "What do you want Christopher?"

"Nothing," he shrugs, "nothing but maybe some fresh barbequed fish. Check with *El Jefe* and see if we should buy more fish?"

Fat Luis drools and carefully wipes away the spittle pooled at the corners of his mouth. "Good idea. I miss fresh fish myself."

Disgusted Christopher thinks *you can't make this stuff up*. The line cast. The hook set when later in the afternoon Fat Luis tells Christopher to be ready the next morning for a fish run. Christopher spends the rest of the afternoon digging barbeque pits. He strategically places them parallel to the beach.

Mid-morning the next day Fat Luis and Christopher speed across a flat sea towards the Vargas fishing boat. Vargas looks up at the approaching launch. "*Mijo*, our easy money is back. Prepare to tie up."

Leon adjusts his hat, removes his sunglasses stowing them in his shirt pocket. The launch, drifting, collides gently against the rubber dock bumpers. Christopher jumps forward to assist in tying the lines. He vaults aboard the fishing boat. After a quick greeting, his back to Fat Luis, he presses a thick wad of *dineros* into Vargas's hand. Quietly he says, "There is more to come. Let's go below and look at your catch. I will explain."

Fat Luis pops open a soda. He leans back in the Captain's chair and puts up his swollen feet. He leaves the conversations and selection of fish up to Christopher.

Vargas senior mops his head with a large bandana grateful for a moment in the cool shade below the deck. He's tense, uncertain, yet knowing the contents of the conversation to come. He has never fully recovered from the devastating news that the man he shot, his only crime was that of a brother protecting a sister.

In a very personal way he will never fully trust the judicial system again. When it comes to his boat and justice he will come to his own decisions, a new and uncomfortable responsibility. He fears his decisions will be challenged today by Christopher.

Tossing open the hatch, exposing the catch, he looks at Christopher. He slaps him on the back. "What is this dinero?"

"Two thousand *pesos*," says Christopher, "the first half of your payment. Smuggle me to Mazatlan. Tonight I will swim to you here." He hopes it will be enough.

The silence stretches.

Vargas shakes his head. "I am a fool."

Grabbing Christopher's bicep, squeezing, he says, "I'll help you. Providing I don't see anyone chasing you," he qualifies.

"You're a good man Christopher. I've watched you over these months. I don't know what mischief brought you, to *Islas Tres Marias*. But I'll help you get free of her grip."

They briefly sketch out a plan.

Vargas turns and speaks loudly, "Okay, three tuna and ten Dorado today."

They need Fat Luis to think it is business as usual. Together they climb to the deck. After loading the last fish Christopher swings himself over the railing landing lightly on the launch. Reaching his hand toward Fat Luis, Vargas takes his money. Luis steers the launch back toward the dock.

The reality of his escape buzzes through Christopher like a high frequency whine. He tightens his hands into fists biting down on his lip. Backing away from Fat Luis he crouches by the fish hoping to be invisible. Swiveling his head Luis shields his eyes. "What's the matter with you *gringo*? You look like a girl guarding her dolls." Fat Luis takes a long pull on his soda. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen. I'm nineteen."

"What did you do? Steal? Drugs?"

Gathering his strength, centering his attention, Christopher pulls himself into the moment glaring on the tuna. He worries he'll hyper-ventilate. He prays not to do something unthinking and stupid that will reveal his plan. He grips the railing. Leaning in toward Luis he yells. "I didn't steal. When I turned eighteen I brought my Chevy that I'd spent years... Years!" His outrage has brought him to hyper-ventilate. Just the moment he was seeking to avoid. Seething, he screams, "My Dad and I spent four years restoring the Chevy! That tuck and roll upholstery, that skunk, stole my car!"

Fat Luis laughs and his belly heaves and jiggles. Orange soda spills down his pants and still he laughs. "What are you talking about *gringo*? A skunk stole your car and you were sent to *Islas Tres Marias*?"

Fuming. Still squeezing the railing his knuckles white with the strain Christopher screams, "YES!" Out of the corner of his eye the blue dragonfly skirts the edges of his vision. Surrounded by a flash of high frequency blue Christopher staggers. Leaning over, placing his hands on his knees he takes a deep inhale. "Have you ever seen my arrest paperwork? Have you ever seen a list of charges, trial or sentencing? No. You have not because they do not exist."

Luis still laughing says, "*Gringo*, you'd do better to stick with cooking fish instead making crazy accusations." Slowing the boat as they approach the dock Luis slaps his knee. Choking on his laughter he says, "As far as I know tuck and roll upholstery shops do not employ skunks. Certainly not skunks that drive." He is wheezing with glee. His own joke provokes his merriment.

"Hilarious," says Christopher on an exhale. Shaking with outrage he climbs up the ladder with the bow line. Luis tosses him the stern line. After tying up Christopher stoops to pick up fish with the launch gaffs. *I cannot afford to have another outburst. I'll take Luis fish when I deliver El Jefe's. Eating will distract him.*

Cleaning and gutting the fish, haunted by the specter of Checo's grisly head. Checo's spirit enters the clearing. He comes to complain, the jaguar at his side, *Ave Bonita* trailing behind. He says the usual words. "You kiss the smelly behind of the fat man and make more work for me."

With Checo's ghost looming he must find a way to behave as he would any other day of a fish run. He slices up trays of tuna for a late lunch at the *hacienda* and another tray for Fat Luis. Delivering these appetizers he returns to prepare barbeque.

Sparkling and followed by her swan Juanita's spirit arrives. She smiles, "goals, acts, Beneficence." Together the words become a chant. It begins to circle through him, a song, and a prayer. "Goals, acts, Beneficence" their cadence is more than a rhythm. "Goals, acts, Beneficence;" they are way of life.

Fileting the fish, slicing carefully along the midline, he cuts away the debris. "Goals, acts, Beneficence," three words condensed mean so much more. Today he prepares fish, an *act* of disguise in preparation to realize his *goal*, escape from *Islas Tres Marias*. Beneficence is his choice. Beneficence will guide, direct and protect him in the actions required to realize his goal, escape. *Goals, acts, Beneficence*, chanting the words make him feel closer to Juanita, closer to success. Tonight he will be swimming into deep waters. He will be swimming for his life and freedom.

First he must get through this day giving no hints of his plan. Filleted fish soak in a plastic tub filled with coconut milk, chilies and banana. He adds coconut meat. Flies swarm. *The flies were not blown away in the hurricane*, he thinks. *It's infuriating the flies are still here and Juanita gone.*

"I am the Divine Transmuting Flame. I carry the Cosmic Balance. You are mine, Redemption's Warrior." *Goals, acts, Beneficence*. His hands prepare the fish. His heart sings; *goals, acts, Beneficence*.

At twilight Christopher knocks on Fat Luis's door with a tray of barbeque fish. He has already delivered the fish for *El Jefe's* party. Fat Luis looks at him. His lip curls with scorn. "What are you

doing Marcos? Are you kissing ass to be made lead man?" He leers at Christopher, "Do you want Checo's old job?"

Christopher drops his head and swallows hard against a surge of anger. Looking up, forcing a smile he says, "I guess we'll see in the morning. Have a good night."

Immersed in wave after wave of power Christopher walks away. Clean, clear, *like star shine*, beneficence rushes over him, thru him. His energetic body is huge, a gigantic buffer extending past the town and into the surrounding semi-tropical jungle. *Is this Beneficence helping, preparing me for escape?*

While waterproofing his money jars he's visited by Daniel whose only crime protecting his sister from a sexual predator. After images linger of Daniel huddled in the corner of the garage wearing rags. This is the Daniel who was driven to claim his final dignity, attempting escape from *La Luna* in broad daylight.

Checo's face swollen with empty eye sockets, Checo's offense was leadership in a time of need. He did such a good job restoring order after the hurricane that his success embarrassed *El Jefe*. A charismatic personality, Checo was known to exaggerate. Embellishments served him. They provided entertainment, enhanced his reputation or made a story more fascinating. Checo's face bloated with sea water, Christopher will never forget. Crushed by sadness, a lump so large he cannot swallow, lodged in his throat. While power pulses, synchronized with his heart-beat, redemption's power the glue holding him together. Redemption's white hot anger remembers. Today Daniel and Checo, the women raped on the beach and countless others whose stories he doesn't know the details, they are not forgotten. Bowing his head he prays his escape will free others. He doesn't know how this might work. He only feels a driving need.

Twilight streaks horizontally through the trees. Green leaves surrounded in gold. He buries the jars temporarily next to the fire pit. Stinking of fish and sweat he dives into the surf. Tonight guards will expect him to babysit the fish smoker down by the beach. Hungry for the delicacy they will not seek him out until morning. All he has left to do, wait for night to fall.

• • •

Christopher moves through the brush gathering his hidden supplies. Earlier he had waterproofed his money jars. Digging them out of the sand he loads them in an inner tube along with a bag of fresh clothes. Sitting at the water's edge he ties the inner tube to his waist. Soundlessly, sinking up to his neck, Christopher begins to swim. The moon casts her light on gentle swells marking a sparkling path to the Vargas boat.

Salt water buoys the inner tube behind him. Christopher loses himself in the moment. He does not notice he's embodying his personal authority or that stroke to stroke, breath to breath, he is swimming for justice and freedom. He does not seek a paper bound bureaucratic justice. He swims for a burning white-hot justice. As he swims he does not make the journey alone, or only for himself. He swims for

Daniel. *Daniel was chewed up and spit out by the terrors of prison life.* As he swims, Christopher honors Daniel's spirit and his desperate attempt to escape. He also swims for the memory of Checo. A good man punished for leadership. *Checo, with his never healing cigar burn, the price he paid for being a strong man in a time of need.* Christopher swims for Juanita. He swims for their life if not for Hurricane Olivia. He honors her memory by succeeding. The first day he saw her and the sparkles brightening the air around her: *I've heard people talk instant love before.* For the first time Christopher understands a love born in an instant. *I loved her the first time I saw her and her swan.* Juanita's beauty fills him as he glides through the moonlit water. For the love they share, for the goals outlined in their last day together, Christopher swims toward his freedom.

As he swims his determination grows. He shifts to the breaststroke moving steadily forward, strong and focused. Pumped with adrenalin he's not at all tired. Images of his childhood as a mixed race boy navigating the streets of LA, studying martial arts, even his time on *La Luna* have all prepared him to succeed. *Escape. Escaping Islas Tres Marias is redemption.*

He swims for liberty, for himself, for love, for Checo and Daniel. He prays as he succeeds their spirits will fly free. His freedom will be their redemption. *Freedom is all the redemption we need.* With this realization Christopher feels a shift. Words describing this event are superfluous. Within his limited understanding, a flame, the Divine Transmuting Flame, drops into his belly, a steady warmth, and communion. At one with Beneficence; powerful and congruent, creating positive possibilities. The Vargas boat lies ahead. He has not drifted off course. He travels as Redemption's Warrior accompanied by ghosts of his past. They have led him to safety.

One hundred feet from the boat, a streak of white moves in the water. *A shark?* The moonlight catches flash after flash of movement and creatures. Dozens are swimming in proximity to the Vargas boat. Desperately he reaches out of the water... wanting to be lifted to safety by human hands. A giant triangle creature swims under him lifting and supporting. As he climbs the ladder boarding the boat, father and son are laughing so hard they are holding their sides. Through their laughter streaked with tears they explain the creatures are harmless and friendly. They watch his confusion with amusement. Eventually he laughs sheepishly, happy to befriend the Manta Ray, not a shark. Vargas grips his arm. "You made it with no one following. *Bueno.* You have my *dinero?*"

Breathless with freedom, Christopher leans for a moment hands on knees, his head hanging. "I have it for you. Let me go below and put on my clothes. I'll bring you the money."

Leon sends Miguel below with him.

He wants to avoid any surprises.

Christopher does not mind their caution. Elated to be free of *Islas Tres Maria*, dressing quickly, he hands Miguel one of the three jars. "*Por su Padre,*" he says.

Leon calls down to Christopher, "Stay below. I'll call when we are all clear."

Starting the engine, he pulls the boat forward slowly, building power. Fifteen minutes later he taps on the hatch. "Come up."

Miguel works deftly stowing gear below. Christopher sits behind Leon. They do not speak. They each have a soft drink sitting in a comfortable silence. Christopher thinks, *stay in the silence. Do nothing to disrupt the moment.* In several hours they will enter Mazatlan's harbor.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RECOMPENSA

Pre-dawn sky delineates obstacles as Vargas pulls into Mazatlan harbor. He will continue on to *Barras de Playta* after dropping his passenger off. Christopher shakes each man's hand and adds a heartfelt, "*Muchas gracias mi amigos.*"

Adrenalized he vaults up the dock with his belongings. He gives a final wave for Leon and Miguel before they steer *Cabillito de Mer* for home. Finding a bench beyond the harbor he stuffs the *dineros* in his pants pocket. A street vendor sets up in the plaza across the street. The menu; coffee, hot chocolate and *pan dulce*. Christopher purchases one coffee, one hot chocolate and asks for an extra-large cup. Two *pan dulce* finish the order.

Sitting on a park bench he sips the combination chocolate and coffee. In this moment his nerves are fortified with caffeine and sugar and his fears diminish. Enjoying the warmth of the brew rich with chocolate he tastes freedom free of the suffocating grip of *La Luna*.

...

On *Islas Tres Marias* Christopher is not missed until breakfast. Inmates immediately rehash Checo's murder. They question, "Has Christopher been murdered too?" The grapevine hums with questions and conjecture. *El Jefe* hearing the news Christopher is missing says, "That *basura* has not escaped. He's either shark food or in hiding." Pulling on his boots he strides toward the garage. "I'll find him and when I do, he'll be my slave."

El Jefe moves swiftly across the compound jumping into his jeep. *Ave Bonita* follows concealed in the trees. Gunning the engine he speeds down the hill toward the dock. Closing in fast on the dock *Ave Bonita* dives, a blur of green and blue, screeching, feathers, claws and beak gouge and blind him. Finally able to throw her aside, his face, neck and arms bleeding where she has bitten and gouged. If *Ave Bonita* had not flown into his face, obscuring his vision, *El Jefe* might have driven up the hilly access road. He did not veer up the hill because *Ave Bonita* clawed and blinded him in this critical moment. As the jeep flies over the sea wall, Checo's parrot vanishes into the tree line. Inmates watch in stupefied horror as *El Jefe* and his jeep sail into the ocean. Unbeknownst to Christopher his escape ignited the chain of events steering *El Jefe* to recklessly chase him down. Together with *Ave Bonita's* he's Redemption's tool after all.

...

Revived with caffeine and sugar Christopher asks the vendor where the tourist shops are located. His plan to purchase a four pocket *Cuba Vera* shirt, chino pants, sun-glasses and a hat. Until then he mustn't draw attention to himself. Returning to the bench he takes up his vigil. Stretching his legs out

long in front of him, eyes closed, ankles crossed, appearing at ease he waits for the stores to open; a long, long wait, the sun well into its journey across morning sky before the first of the many shops opens. His first opportunity on the mainland to savor his freedom, unfortunately his earlier steady nerves, they are now raw. He feels the wild elephant who wants to trample every obstacle in sight. The rampaging elephant will run headlong for the border, trumpeting his victory. He wants to continue his mad dash for freedom until he stands in front of his parent's house wrapped in their hugs.

Sobering. He remembers Daniel's five days of freedom before he was caught and returned to *La Luna*. Between the worry of being caught, his adrenalin fueled desire to run as fast as he can to the border, it takes all his discipline to sit quietly until the shops pull up their shades and unlock their doors.

On *Islas Tres Marias*, as required by law, Fat Luis notifies federal and state police on the mainland. The prison has an escapee. Christopher's description and Tijuana jail photo are sent out over the web. A felon on the run, Mexico's bureaucratic and law enforcement agencies have begun their search.

At the clothing store Christopher spots a four pocket shirt and a pair of chino pants. He walks to a store selling souvenirs and purchases sunglasses and a baseball hat. The elements of his disguise complete, he changes clothes in the nearby alley, rolling his prison garb in a bundle.

He has a new worry. If anyone finds and identifies these discarded prison clothes they will reveal to *El Jefe* his location along with his path of escape. *How can I make these clothes disappear forever?* He smells smoke from the incinerator of a restaurant. Happily it is unsupervised. He throws the clothes into the flames, one step closer to feeling free.

In more good fortune, he spots a barber shop. The first chair, an old fashion stool of leather cushions and handles surrounded by chrome, the barber pumps him high. He requests hair clipped short and beard and mustache shaved off. A clean face will be his best disguise. Looking in the mirror takes his breath away, not in a good way. His skin dark and leathery, he'd arrived in Mexico with youthful and full cheeks. A well nourish American filled with strength and vitality. Now his cheeks are hollow, lined with cracks. Along with his checks his composure cracks. Viewing his reflection, he doesn't recognize this shriveled version of Christopher. Exposure to unrelenting island sun and wind has left him as brown as any native. Laughing, he thinks, *today I can pass for a migrant farm worker*.

In the directory of a nearby phone booth he locates the American consulate. Goal defined he takes off walking. The consulate housed in a neighborhood called the Golden Zone with wide streets lined with tall trees it feels like years since Christopher has seen such a beautiful neighborhood. Heavy graceful limbs shade the streets providing glimpses of the stately homes where the consuls reside. At the American consulate his hopes are dashed. All the air leaves his body with a whoosh. A *Sinola* State Police patrol car blocks the gated entrance. *El Jefe has put out the word. They're expecting me*. He feels like a hunted animal. Pulling down his hat joining a group of tourists, he thinks, *On to plan B. I'll take the ferry to La Paz then a bus to Tijuana...*

Fat Luis studies the map table in the hastily prepared war room. A muddy red flush suffuses him. “Could the *gringo* have made it to Mazatlan?”

Fat Luis doesn't want others to think he left Christopher alone with the fishermen. Luis did not take the time to learn their names. Risking an opinion he argues, “He may still be on the island. Take the jeep around one more time.”

In his heart, Luis knows Christopher has outsmarted them all. Last night he chided Christopher for seeking the power of Checo's lead position. Christopher had something more powerful in mind. It makes Luis flush with shame to be outwitted by a prisoner. He'll never speak of it out loud. Now first in command, looking at the map he nods, “One more time,” he says. “If any of you find him bring him back alive.”

• • •

While the *Baja* ferry loads cars and small trucks a dozen passengers wait behind a white fence, tickets in hand. Approaching the ticket office Christopher chokes when he spots his picture from the Tijuana Jail taped on the wall adjacent to the ticket booth. He strains to read the Spanish words. **Recompensa. Reward for Federal escapee:** Momentarily confused Christopher thinks, *Wait*. He pauses, almost hyperventilating. Choking, he ducks into a public lavatory and then into a stall. He coughs. Coughing momentarily takes his mind off the shock of seeing his picture on a wanted poster. *I should have anticipated this search.*

Gathering himself he notices the blue dragonfly out of the corner of his eye. It reminds him, “a calming breath.”

Thankfully the picture does not look like me. Grainy resolution, wrong camera setting makes for a poor reproduction. *At the barbershop I could not recognize myself. It may save my life.*

Washing his hands in a drizzle of cold water he continues breathing and evaluating. Calmer he exits the lavatory and purchases his ferry passage. Standing in line waiting to board the ferry he feels *squeezed in, claustrophobic!* The growing press of people leaves him breathless. The heat and smell of unwashed bodies, at once distinct and cumulative are suffocating him. His heart hammers. Panic fuels his muscles. Sweat pops out along his forehead, a few short breaths from a panic attack. *Will I be recognized? Caught, tortured and enslaved?*

He'll have to subdue this panic, the contradiction, free from prison but hunted. Volitionally, consciously he practices breathing. Twisting muscles slowly lengthen. Bystanders only see a man standing, lost in thought. In reality Christopher practices the breath of martial arts. He calms the rampaging elephant.

Now breathing he unclenches the large muscles along his thighs and buttocks. On a silent exhale he gently pries the muscles loose. Unclenching his jaw helps. He wiggles his toes. In spite of these improvements Christopher still stands in the strange landscape of paranoia. This world glitters with menace. On the one hand he feels inconsequential and invisible. On the other hand he feels brilliant

with runaway fear. *Am I a flashing neon sign?* With a sigh Christopher realizes if he cannot calm his fears it will be a long trip to La Paz. Head down, one foot in front of the other, he boards the ferry, the first in line at the cafeteria.

He purchases two chicken tamales, a side of rice and beans, and a large soft drink. He craves the sugary drink. He feels as if he has survived a great battle. All his energy has been spent in the effort to make it this far. The ice cold drink replenishes him. He eats slowly. He doesn't want to stand out as someone ravenous for food. It settles his stomach, expanding and calming. The blue dragonfly flies at eyelevel. He calls up Juanita's words "Follow your dragonfly home!"

The ferry engines start up. The deep rumble vibrates through the bottoms of his feet. Finishing the soda something wound tight within him lets go. Inexplicably his fear transforms into excitement. The ferry pulls away from the dock. A breeze flows over his skin. His stomach full of food he purchased with money he made. The next stage of his journey home is underway.

He can envision his mother's face glowing with the joy of his homecoming. He can see her clearly, every feature distinct. He even notices her wearing the Star of David given to her by her mother. Throughout his childhood she has worn this Star of David together with the risen cross given to her by his father as a wedding gift. He feels at one with his family, at one with his strengths. He feels *dinero* secure deep in his pockets. Curled up on a bench in the observation deck, the vibration of motors powering their way through the Pacific Ocean and then Sea of Cortez he falls into a much needed sleep.

Christopher bolts upright. Heart thundering in his chest he takes in his surroundings. It's dark, well past midnight. Around him men, women and children curled up on benches are sound asleep. Stumbling he makes his way to the upper deck. Warm sea air combined with the ferry's trajectory raises the hair along his arms.

The lights of La Paz flicker in the distance. The real light show is the stars. Every pinprick of light in the pebbly Milky Way stands out clear, defined. He recalls his dream quest to meet Star Woman with Juanita. Even when they were together their paths were distinct. Her dream journey took place not with him but in the part of herself she called 'a light body.' His quest was to call her back to their shared dream. To accomplish his mission he reached out to the four corners of existence. Her name filled him. A primordial scream, "Juanita!" pulled from the very center of life rolled out of him. How he wishes he could call her back to him again. In their dreaming Star Woman heard his plea. Appearing as a face filled with eons of stars she said, "When two hearts, in their innermost hearts, beat as one ..."

"What does that mean for me now?" He whispers. He wants so badly to have Juanita back again. The last time he'd journeyed on these waters he'd been beaten. More importantly his life had been stolen. Tonight he is taking back his future. He's slipping away from the slavery of his false imprisonment. He looks to the pebbly sky, "I am stealing back my freedom."

Two blasts on the air horn signal their arrival in La Paz. The ferry eases into the slip dropping the

loading ramp on the dock. The pedestrian ramp lowers. Passengers quickly depart hurrying toward their errands. Hovering next to a man wearing drab wool coat is his blue dragonfly. Circling and twirling around the man's head the dragonfly dances. Christopher approaches and asks directions to the bus stop. With a friendly smile the man replies, "Follow me *amigo*. I too am headed for the bus stop."

His new guide has dark Indian skin. Festive clothes under the grey wool wrap reveal another persona than the wool coat. White Mexican cowboy boots and matching hat, a back pack, give Christopher the impression the man wears most of his wardrobe. He asks, "Are you heading north?"

"*Si amigo*. I go to work the almond groves... In California," he adds in a whisper.

The many eyes of a peacock tail are dragging behind the man. They follow, layer upon layer of feathers, like the train of a fancy dress. Christopher has a feeling all of life is a celebration for this man. Curious he asks, "Do you have a working visa?"

"No." Shaking his head, eyes downcast, shoulders hunched, drawing his coat more closely to his chest, the festivity gone. Reading the story his body tells Christopher hypothesizes *a man who does not like to deceive. He feels caught in the moment like he's cheating.*

Christopher gives him a firm pat on the back. He says, "I don't have a visa either. My name is Christopher."

The brown face brightens, feathers lift, hundreds of feathers iridescent blue and green sway together over his shoulders. He smiles and extends a hand, "I am Pepe." Shaking Christopher's hand vigorously he adds, "I use the same Coyote every year."

Christopher is amused. *This man makes a party out of a single statement.*

As they leave the terminal Christopher sees another reward poster. "Again!!" His heart seems to stop then gallops away leaving him lightheaded and short of breath. He leans on a nearby trash can.

Confused his guide asks, "What? What did you say?"

Christopher forces himself to stand up straight and smile. "It's nothing. I'm just glad to be off the boat."

Thoughts race, heart pounding, blood rushing his world glitters in paranoia. The hammer of his pulse narrows his vision into a tunnel. He walks in a twilight world, a world where even the most benign landscape can turn deadly in the blink of an eye. From his experience on the streets of Tijuana he understands all too well the instantaneous potential of life as you know it snatched away.

Imprinted in his memory, driving down the road, hands pounding the steering wheel in time to music, alternating black and white leather, his new tuck and roll upholstery. He's thinking about his birthday party. Blinking lights, a badge pressed to the window, herald a previously inconceivable future.

Thoughts of his Chevy still flood Christopher with indignation and rage. The barbershop mirror told the story of his life in prison. His body wears the injustices perpetrated on him like an ill-fitting suit. Hit hard in these first moments of freedom with his last moments of freedom.

Will I forever wear the body La Luna created? Will my body ever tell another story? A happier story?

Lost in thought the two men walk quietly through La Paz. Lining the road facing the ocean are restaurants and bars. Half of the businesses are boarded up. Building exteriors are crumbling, a reflection of deferred maintenance in various stages of decay.

Christopher's thinks *my world no longer rotates around a small patch of real estate. My future is not in the hands of cruel sadistic men. I choose my future.*

They leave the paved road for a hard dirt street meandering into the hills above the bay. He's relieved to see the bus station. But at the ticket window he sees *another damn **Recompensa** poster!*

His lips press into a hard line. He itches to tear it off the wall. A sour faced clerk gives Christopher a long look. His heart skips a beat. He puts his right hand to his chest and rubs a circular motion. Then he puts his left hand on his new friend's shoulder. Looking the woman in the eyes he says, "I pay for my brother's ticket and my ticket."

The clerk takes the *dinero* and gives them their tickets. Her indifferent attention is on the next customer. His friend smiles with pleasure. "*Gracias amigo. I only have money to pay the Coyote and get across the border. Now I will eat while I wait for the Coyote!*"

"*De nada, mi amigo. It's my pleasure. Thank you for bringing me to the bus station.*" Sitting in the shade, across the road from the bus station, Christopher and Pepe watch a large converted yellow school bus being fueled with diesel. A crudely stenciled, "*Baja Norte*" is painted over the faded demarcation, Phoenix Unified Schools.

A mechanic washes windows with a red rag. The driver arrives dressed in jeans, a faded long sleeve button down shirt and a green bus driver's hat. He stows a large thermos and lunch bucket behind the driver's chair. Passengers are crowded near the bus doors waiting to board.

Doors open and travelers collide making their way to seats. Christopher and Pepe walk to the bus and sit, one to a bench, with Pepe behind Christopher. The bus roars to life. Jerking between gears and belching smoke it agonizingly slow it pulls out of the bus terminal.

Looking around Christopher guesses by reading his fellow traveler's demeanor and clothing most are seeking work in the picking season in California. The air is interspersed with ribbons of worry and rays of hope.

Bouncing north along the paved highway, at sixty miles per hour, passengers feel every pot hole. Christopher thinks *this suspension was shot long before the bus's incarnation as the Baja Norte.*

He absorbs the sparse scenery and mercifully some of his worries fall away. Multiple limbed Saguaro cactus stand amidst sand and rock formations. Christopher has heard others say they are sentinels of the desert. He thinks *Saguaros are the shaman's, the spiritual medicine of the desert.*

This cactus forest surrounded in boulders captivates him. Immersed in the scenery he lets his mind wander. One Saguaro appears larger, distinctive and powerful, shining with health. Sharing vitality, Christopher opens to receive the wonder, a blessing of Beneficence.

The faint scent of Creosote drifts through the open window delicate and barely perceptible. In Christopher's reverie he imagines *Saguaro the spiritual leaders, Shamans, and creosote binds desert life, the glue, cosmic glue*. On *Islas Tres Marias* the smell of fear and domination saturated clothes, clinging to hair; bitter and sticky. Bedding and towels carried the faint scent of loose bowels and undigested terror. The air charged with violence. To be free of the toxicity, to receive the elusive whiff of Creosote wandering through his reverie, these are gifts Christopher did not anticipate.

The sound of sirens and flashing lights pull Christopher out of his daydream. *Not again!* His full attention slams in his body. *The flashing lights of police*. The driver hits the noisy air brakes. A green canvas covered troop carrier parks across the highway blocking traffic. The driver operates the door level. Doors swing open. Federal soldiers swarm the bus. "Everyone step outside. *Pronto!*"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BANDITOS

A soldier with newly posted Sargent's chevrons barks out orders. In a jumble, passengers disembark. Kids clutch their mothers. Younger children, weepy or wide eyed, are held in their mother's arms. Facing the uneven line of travelers the Sargent demands the destinations of each male. Another soldier follows holding Christopher's wanted poster. *Unbelievable!*

Sweat begins a thin trickle down the mid-line of his back. The blue dragonfly flies at his eye level. Velocity faster than Christopher's anxiety ridden mind can comprehend the dragonfly circles Pepe. The young man in festive clothes covered by a drab *serape* relaxed watches the proceedings with interest. The dragonfly returns back to Christopher's eye level. A florescent blur repeats the pattern three times. Christopher pauses, *what is the dragonfly telling me?*

Soldiers are working down the line toward him and he squeezes his eyes shut. Taking his cue from the dragonfly, Christopher whispers to Pepe, "I have never traveled for the picking season. I don't know what to do or say."

Pepe says, "*Permitame hable*, let me talk."

Christopher nods gratefully.

The Sargent glares. Up come the peacock feathers, a dazzling display. Full of confidence and excitement, throwing his arm over Christopher's shoulder his new friend says, "*Mi hermano* and I go to pick almonds."

Nodding agreement Christopher smiles broadly. Tension radiates off him. The dragonfly dances. The peacock feathers are undulating. Christopher's grinding his teeth. Eternity in the space of three heart beats. The Sargent is satisfied. Adjusting his nightstick he turns to the bus driver. He says, "*Vaya ahora.*"

The interlude has passenger's adrenalin pumping. Returning to the bus conversation is loud. The driver is speeding. The bus sways groaning on an old frame. Christopher links eyes with Pepe and says, "*Gracias amigo. Gracias.* This is my first time to cross the border. I did not know how to find the bus, talk to strangers or find a *Coyote.*" He crosses his arms against a chill. "I thought I would find an abandoned road leading across the border."

Pushing his hair out of his eyes Pepe says, "I have gone for the picking seasons since I was young." He is wrapped again in his wool coat, content. Christopher thinks *I need to buy a coat*. Reading his mind Pepe says, "You can buy a blanket or *serape* when we stop in Mulege."

Nodding Christopher says, "Pepe, you have been a good friend, sharing your knowledge. You showed me how to deal with scary men who wear new Sargent stripes."

They both laugh. They talk easily. Pepe shares his adventures in previous picking seasons until the bus stops in the seaside town of *Mulege*. A crowded truck stop offers gas for the bus. Bathrooms are

available for the travelers. Food and drinks are a welcome break in their journey. Christopher uses loose change to buy a lukewarm egg burrito and an ice-cold soda. Leaving the store he stops at the window. *Another freakin poster!*

Pepe materializes at his side. Glancing at the picture of Christopher from the Tijuana jail, he says, “This *hombre* is a *gringo*.” He shakes his head. “*Gringo*” is self-explanatory.

Below the poster is a stack of cotton blankets. Christopher reaches for a blanket and turns toward the cashier. He shrugs disinterest.

Back on the bus wrapped up in the blanket Christopher feels good. He enjoys the simple freedom of paying for a meal and purchasing a blanket. Chilly night air, stings. The warmth of a blanket, a blanket free of the odors of *Islas Tres Marias*, is a luxury.

A new driver replaces the first. *Eight hours or so to go*, he thinks.

Passengers settle in. Mother’s hum lullabies. Whispers replace loud conversations. Drowsy and full of food Christopher walks the twilight land. In the boundary between sleeping and waking Christopher wanders in conversation with Juanita. “*La Currandera* taught me walking the line between sleep and waking builds personal power.” She explained, “Learning to ‘dream the dream awake’ is a lifelong quest.” Seeing Juanita even if only in the dream Christopher wants to soak in everything. The way her face catches the light, the effervescent sparkles, “Juanita!” he calls.

Air brakes screech. The bus jerks to a stop. “*Banditos!*” shouts the driver. Christopher rolls off the bench seat crashing into Pepe’s seat. He ricochets and tumbles to the floor. *Juanita! Where am I? Prisoner’s sleeping quarters? Falling off my cot? Did someone say Banditos?*

A full moon outlines a jeep blocking the highway. He jerks upright. *This bus is full of migrant workers who saved all year to pay a Coyote to get them across the border for the picking season.*

Again his adrenalin kicks into high gear. Women scream. Children are crying. Men tight lipped with fear and anger. The *Bandito* climbs steep bus steps wearing crisscrossed ammunition belts covering a big belly. *A cartoonish Bandito*. His sight shifts. An infinitesimal shift transported he remembers the first time he felt this sensation. Waves of light, flexible and forged pour through him. Millions of diamonds reflect in the path of the moon’s light. Starlight’s flames surround and protect him. A force of nature, appearing as a miniature goddess saying, “I am the Divine Transmuting Flame. I hold the Cosmic Balance. You are mine, Redemption’s Warrior.”

Suddenly clear to him, filled with determination, he will not hand over money he made selling eggs, barbequed chicken and fish. It was too much work. He needs the money for a *Coyote*.

Waving his rifle, *Bandito* shouts “Everyone off the bus. *Pronto.*”

Children have advanced to sobbing. Mothers weep and beg for mercy. The night of high desert has dropped into the low sixties. The group shakes with cold and fear. Sobbing, weeping, praying, begging; a cacophony of noise. Jewel toned colors in ribbons of light are whipping and turning, swirling and leaping.

In the midst of the chaos Christopher is beginning to shine. A light of palpable force the shining

calms and soothes everyone in its perimeter. As light continues growing more passengers become silent. A golden silence, filled with love, and for the first time since Christopher's car was stolen, a peace. Bigger than his mind, a peace his soul recognizes. He opens to receive and within this growing radiance Christopher stands quietly.

The *Bandito* moves toward him. Aggressively the man shoves his gun and face inches from where Christopher is standing calmly. Christopher has been waiting for this moment. The *Bandito* leers. Christopher stomps on his foot. The *Bandito* howls in surprise and pain. Stepping forward Christopher's palm shoves into the *Bandito's* nose. The strike has him arching back in surprise. Blood is streaming down his face.

Christopher steps even closer. He grabs the *Bandito's* shoulders. Holding him steady he gathers his force and slams his knee into the man's groin. Around him passengers are cheering. The *Bandito* drops to the ground. He rolls on his side, knees tightly held into his chest, the fetal position.

The bus driver arrives with rope. Christopher kicks the gun away. Pepe picks it up for safe keeping. Christopher walks over to the jeep. Popping the hood he pulls the distributor cap. Pulling it out, he hands it to Pepe, "A souvenir for you."

Pepe laughs, white teeth flashing. "*Gracias mi hermano!*"

Men slap Christopher on the back. Women with tear stained faces, radiant with relief, thank him. The mood is festive. On the bus again, food and drink are brought out to celebrate. Christopher eats so many tamales *I haven't been this stuffed with food for years.*

Children run the aisle and climb the seats. Men shake his hand. Pepe stands nearby protectively. Occasionally his hand drops onto Christopher's shoulder. An endless celebration; until night's darkest hour, where silence lays like a blanket, its weight calming and soothing. In velvety darkness sleep claims the group transformed by their struggles into a village. Christopher's soul knows the blissful peace of redemption. He watches the night's darkness replaced by a lightening sky. Gradients of darkness fall to the gradients of light. The sun begins to rise in the east. To the left the Sierra Madre Mountains are purple in pre-dawn light. Christopher sighs. The weight of night falls replaced by the golden light of dawn.

Christopher is leaving Mexico a man. He came to Mexico on an ordinary errand, a boy questing for his manhood. Within prison life he transformed and balanced the depth of his character. His strengths utilized for the betterment of each day led him out of exile and into his journey home.

I found love. He will forever hold Star Woman's message close. "Two people at one in their innermost hearts... Never forget the power of love."

A honking behind the bus has each passenger turning to get a look. Christopher's eyes widen in disbelief. A yellow Chevy speeds by the driver still honking. Christopher hears Cherry Bomb Glasspack mufflers roar a familiar howl. The black and white Tijuana tuck and roll upholstery shabby.

All four passengers are gesturing angrily at the bus. Christopher is glued to the window. He is

greedy to read the telltale signs of his shiny car's past, everything since their separation. He watches, hungry for each fleeting view, until the car disappears over the horizon. Ownership of his Chevy is in the past. His priority is a safe return home. Turning to face his guide he says, "Okay Pepe, what's next for us?"

Pepe yawns, "As soon as we reach Tijuana we'll walk east for about an hour. A home serves as a halfway house. We wait for *El Coyote*."

In the bus terminal they purchase orange sodas from the vending machines. Walking Christopher is lost in thought. He remembers his promise as the boat docked on *Islas Tres Marias*. His vow to stay connected to beauty, where beauty lived so could he. Now he comprehends Beneficence working in the large and small moments of daily life. *Juanita taught me to love. I will never settle for anything less.*

Christopher's body hums with excitement. Geographically, as the crow flies, they are a half hour from the United States. He considers calling his parents, going to the border and asking for sanctuary. But these routes are mined with pitfalls. Should he fall into the hands of the Mexican authorities... He has no United States passport. *Corrupt cops sold it.* The Mexican government searches for him as an escaped felon. *How did my life get so crazy?*

When he's home he'll look at the night sky and remember the nights of star watching on *La Luna*. The injustices he suffered will be *in the past*. These will be his four words of freedom, *it's in the past.*

Unpaved Tijuana roads are still carved deep with potholes. *I drove my Chevy around these potholes.* Nearby two boys are beating a tree trunk with sticks. Women hang out wash. Old men sleep on the porch with one eye open. Christopher feels none of the hostility he'd experienced driving his car. *They look at me now and see a native.*

One foot in front of the other the two men walk. The houses are spaced further apart. In the distance is a white stucco home with an orange tile roof. Across the street is a minimart.

Pepe announces "We are here *mi amigo*."

He knocks on the door three times. Rap. Rap. Rap. The door creaks open. A young girl with a baby in her arms ushers them in. Her large eyes assess their appearance. Men, women with children, populate the floors. Mariachi plays from a battered radio on the kitchen counter. Shifting the baby to her opposite hip the girl says, "In the backyard we have *basuras*. If you want paper buy it at the market."

Pepe nudges Christopher with his elbow, "Okay *Amigo*. Pay *El Coyote* when he shows. You're own your own."

Shaking Pepe's hand Christopher says, "*Gracias, mi amigo. Gracias.*"

Christopher finds a place to sit leaning against the wall. Closing red and gritty eyes is heaven. In this moment there is nothing to do but wait for *El Coyote*. Inhale and exhale, it feels good. Wrapped in the blanket he bought in Mulege, he curls up against the wall, sound asleep.

Shrill cries of a baby jolt Christopher awake. Morning sun filtered by sheer curtains, around him many still sleep. Carefully moving around the bodies he walks through the kitchen and out the back door. *How could I fall asleep in the midst of strangers? Have I learned nothing about stranger danger?*

Rubbing his eyes he staggers toward the outhouse. He stands watching the sky change. The backyard is dirt. Three outhouses line a wooden fence. On a concrete apron chairs are scattered in various stages of disrepair. Old coffee cans are filled with cigarette butts.

Startled by the bang of the kitchen door Christopher turns. The girl minus the baby scrutinizes him. She stands hands on hips, waiting. Panic rushes through, by now, well-established circuits within his body and biology. *Does she recognize me from the wanted posters? Are the police on their way? Should I run?*

He gives her half a smile. It's all he can muster. *What was I thinking falling asleep in a room full of strangers?*

The girl's eyes widen. Without speaking they question him. Christopher realizes he's holding his breath. She says, "I'm cooking breakfast. For some *pesos* I can cook for you too. You look hungry."

Her kindness disarms him. He swallows embarrassment. "*Si señorita*. That will be nice."

She turns away. The screen door slams. Christopher sits down hard on the concrete steps. Will he ever be free of these fears? His shoulders ache. He rolls his head to release pain. He sighs. Then remembering his new motto, he says, "It's in the past."

Gathering grit and determination, he enters the kitchen.

Dirty dishes cover the counters. A fan runs set inside the window frame. Sitting at the table he rests his hands on the red placemat. He feels ancient. The girl brings him a stack of fluffy pancakes. He smells buttermilk lingering in the kitchen underlying the fragrance of cooked pancakes. Buttering layers his mouth waters. *How long has it been since I've eaten pancakes?*

He pours syrup over the top. The girl offers him a steaming mug of coffee. Christopher nods, "*Si*" when she gestures to the milk. Each bite of pancake melts in his mouth, syrup and soft, buttery crust.

Out of the corner of his eye he watches as the girl move through her kitchen chores. She covers a sink full of dishes in hot water and soap. Using a rag she wipes off counters and stacks dishes to be washed. Puttering after her Christopher sees a flat tail of the silky creature following her. Taking another bite and wiping up some extra syrup, he thinks *this is delicious*. *On La Luna, food tasted hostile, filled with dissatisfaction. Burnt edges no matter what was prepared.*

But that was in the past. Not wanting the girl to think he is *loco* he mumbles, "It's in the past." With a grateful smile he puts *dinero* far exceeding the price under his plate. He bows his head again when she smiles and decides to go explore the store across the street. He buys chocolate bars and a large bag of peanuts. Adding to his purchases toilet paper and the San Diego Tribune, a six pack of water, soda's, a fresh pair of socks and lastly a wool *serape* he returns to the house remembering to knock Rap. Rap. Rap.

His back against the wall, eyes closed Christopher's thoughts turn to Juanita. *In Juanita's presence I felt complete. Yes, even stranded on Islas Tres Marias.* Star Woman's voice replays in his mind. "When two hearts, in their innermost hearts are one..."

Juanita what happened? Did I watch you morph into an angel?

And Star Woman answers, "Never forget."

Women and children are in the backyard. Through the racket he identifies a ball has appeared leading to a spontaneous game of *Futbol*. Christopher's eyes burn for his friend Checo. Inside conversations are spoken softly. The radio plays Mariachi. He feels the floor meet the base of his spine. The wall supports his back. He drifts. He is riding the waves of music falling deeper into reverie.

The room disappears. He floats. At the beach, sun turns the grains of sand golden beneath a blue cloudless sky. Flashes of Juanita's face laughing. Sparkles, pinpoints of light surround her. The ocean filled with diamonds winking. She is reaching for him. The white swan stands behind her. Wings outstretched. They enfold Juanita, dressing her in white feathers. He blinks against the glare of the sun.

When he opens his eyes, Juanita, wearing white walks toward him. She is radiant. Her eyes shine, filled with love and hope. The ocean sparkles. He sees around him faces, the sheen of tears. Flowers, he can smell flowers. Fragrance floats sweetly, bees buzzing. The love of many condensed. Star Woman carries the void. He can see her in the clarity surrounding, empowering. The air filled with Star Shine. A shimmer wavers, infinitesimally small, across the landscape. Chips of starlight fall around them. He and Juanita are stand hand in hand. "When two hearts beat as one in their inner most hearts..... all of life bows before them."

Mariachi is playing.

"Never forget."

The dream inhabits him a place in his soul; large and small. In this way he'll keep the dream close forever. The wait for *El Coyote* stretches into long days broken only by trips to the market. After splurging once on the candy Christopher purchases burritos, rice and beans. They are the core of his meals along with apples and oranges.

He tries sitting in meditation. His mind fills with static. *YIKES! YIKES.* He wants to have another dream. The dream more real than waiting, Juanita and her swan, the star shine, over and over again he tries to recapture the moment. He closes his eyes riding the waves of Mariachi music. He envisions Juanita's white swan, her enormous wing span. He pieces together Juanita's face. Her golden skin, her smile, eyes filled with laughter and love. As he tries to recapture his dream the images remain one dimensional. Even flat memory is better than no Juanita at all. He'd felt so close to her.

He searches to recapture the dream.

On the third evening *El Coyote* appears. In the backyard he parks a shiny BMW. Despite age the car is beautifully restored. The interior, Christopher notices with a grimace, is rusty brown tuck and

roll. The exterior is silver. It blends into the twilight. A small man *El Coyote* also blends into the group. Christopher shrugs. Being able to blend in is a good thing for a *Coyote*.

The fee for guiding each adult through a hidden tunnel under the border is two thousand *pesos*. *El Coyote* explains the tunnel exits in the desert, five miles outside of National City. *El Coyote* knows most of the men and women from previous border trips. Christopher silently puts the payment in the man's outstretched hand. He's startled when the *Coyote* questions, "*gringo?*"

Christopher nods. Having collected his payments *El Coyote* raises his hand in farewell. He says, "I'll see you when the time is right. *Adios.*" His enigmatic exit leaves them to wonder.

In the empty days Christopher's fear played out endless scenarios. All ending with him in handcuffs and bruises transported to *Islas Tres Marias*. He waits for *El Coyote*, so close to home and freedom and yet dangerously far away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CROSSING

Forty-eight hours after payment *El Coyote* arrives at the safe house. Driving a canvas covered stake bed truck his arrival triggers large spikes of anxiety in the waiting group. They've been waiting feverishly for this night, yet anxious that the night with all its dangers has begun. Christopher watches the anxiety pour off the waiting group in red spiky waves. He shakes his head. *Do I always have to see what's invisible to most people?*

He remembers meeting Juanita for the first time. The sparkles light the air around her. The white swan stood peaking over Juanita's shoulder at him. *These are precious memories.* No, on second thought he wouldn't change those sightings or his abilities.

A shaggy grey haired coyote is sitting next to the man whose job title is *El Coyote*. The animal's golden eyes flash when he notices Christopher watching him. Just that quick, in the blink of an eye, it disappears from sight.

Christopher sighs.

Then in a rush spilling thru his autonomic nervous system he realizes freedom is close at hand. He feels the song in the beat of his heart, in the blood flowing through his veins. It spreads across his skin, tingling. Like everyone else awaiting *El Coyote* they are hit hard with the dangers of clandestine crossings of the international border in the deep night.

The blue dragonfly hovers over his shoulder beginning to glow. Christopher can feel the light pouring through and expanding around him. *Breathe. I still have miles to go and sneak across the international border.*

El Coyote herds the group into his truck. Christopher holds onto his wool *serape*. He'll need it before the night is over. He donated his blanket to other travelers coming through the house. The young woman smiled her thanks when Christopher offered the blanket to her. Her animal stood next to her, shiny, and sleek.

Shoulder to shoulder, a tight fit in the back of the truck, no one speaks, a silence tense and full of worry. Inexplicably Christopher finds an inner space, quiet and still. He doesn't let his attention stray. He has no desire to merge with the collective anxiety filling the truck bed. Quietly inhaling followed by long, slow, deliberate exhales he pushes aside visions of worry. His family flashes before him. *Have they given up looking for me?*

Lost in memories he visualizes his father preparing his favorite food, a Filipino dish, *Lumpia*. His mother's prays before Shabbat meal. He desperately wants to hug them, feel their solid bodies, heart to heart. He cannot imagine the turmoil they have been through with the disappearance of their only child.

Juanita! Juanita's image wavers in front of him. Joy wild and fierce pours thru him. Laughing he

thinks, *I really have to do something about these hallucinations.*

Dust from the trucks tires quickly coats the travelers making breathing difficult. Deep ruts jostle the group like rocks in a can. After an hour, bruised and discombobulated, they clunk to a stop. *El Coyote* unhooks the canvas. In their eagerness to disembark they tumble over one another to the ground. Waving for silence with a finger to his lips, the group moves into single file, following *El Coyote* into the flat desert.

Stars only provide guiding light. Desert fragrance Creosote flowers are barely distinguishable. They float on residual warmth in the air. The occasional Saguaro tree looms above them. It is the time of year Saguaros wear a crown of flowers proclaiming sovereignty over the desert. The gestalt that makes up a desert evening calms his skin.

In the starlight Christopher can make out a distant rock outcropping. Thirty minutes walking brings them to the base of the hill. Following a path visible only to *El Coyote* they climb the hill. Children stumble and fall, Mothers soothe and shush. Elbows bang into neighbors. Rocks and pebbles slide. The narrow path leads to a saddle between two hilltops. More Saguaro cactus juts into the night sky. A final turn leads to the mouth of a cave. *A cave!*

Navigating around the circumference of a boulder *El Coyote* pulls away layers of brush that cover the opening. The absence of light as he stares into the man sized opening makes Christopher shiver. Handing the nearest man a flashlight *El Coyote* says, "*Vaya con Dios.*"

What?! *El Coyote* does not guide the group thru the tunnel? The interior rock of this cave is smooth to his touch. *Limestone, this is not a man-made cave. This is nature's tunnel carved out of soft limestone over hundreds of years.*

Slowly the group makes their way forward. Only the sound of individual breathing and the occasional crumble of rocks mark their progress. Losing track of time, the knowledge that many in this group have traveled this way before, keeps him calm. Darkness so thick he can barely make out the person in front of him.

Finally the group enters a cavern. Christopher sighs with relief. The light of the distant, late rising, moon and below is the open desert. They have arrived. Voices echo off the walls. A discussion is taking place. They are shifting and organizing. The group splinters off in different directions.

Christopher makes a spontaneous decision to sit at the mouth of the cave. He will spend the night here and wait until morning light can guide him home. He doesn't have a flashlight. He will not risk a fall by walking the desert in the deep night. Pepe shakes his hand. "Gracias, amigo."

It's hard to say goodbye, difficult to imagine they will see each other again. The diverse groups begin trudging down the slope toward the city lights. Standing at the mouth of the cave Christopher wraps himself up in his thickly woven *serape* before sitting Indian style.

He tracks their varied progress down the hill and out into the flat of the desert. Compared to the warm night air of *Islas Tres Marias* the night has become cold. Tightness bands his chest. He feels alone and lonely on this first night back in his country. His head aches with sinus pressure. These are

not the feelings he anticipated arriving home.

The darkness wraps around him. Pillowing his head into his knees, fatigue and grief intertwining, Christopher weeps. He cries for the time lost with his family. He cries for the grief they've suffered. He cries for the boy he'd been when he came to Tijuana. He cries for his past, and the unknown future. How will he fit in? He will never be that young man again. He will never be the son his parents once knew. He cannot change a pickle back into a cucumber. *Who am I now?*

He cries for Juanita. Tears soak into his *serape*. Snot flows from his nose, rivers of mucus and tears, he mops up with his shirt. Taking a shaking breath, he's empty, hollowed out with crying. He leans his head against the limestone wall and closes his eyes. Asleep Christopher jerks upright when search lights blaze across the desert and an amplified voice calls out "Alto!"

High pitched screams pierce the night. Children shriek for their mothers. Single men split off from the group and run. Border patrol compresses the several groups into one and herds them into their jeeps and trailers.

Christopher watches his *compadres* rounded up. Eventually the search lights turn off. Car doors slam. Synchronized head lights of the vehicles drive off together. He thinks *if I'm captured by the Border Patrol without identification I could be returned to Mexico and Islas Tres Marias.*

It's a bitter realization. He is across the border on United States soil but without identification he could still be returned to *La Luna*. He backs further into the cavern. The night has become cold and the ground hard. In the distance he hears the soft yelp of coyotes. Why didn't he think to bring bottled water? He remembers the last time he became dehydrated. Initiated; Redemption's Warrior, the Divine Transmuting Flame. Huddled behind some boulders he drops into an uneasy, wakeful sleep.

Dawn falls across the open desert and Christopher sits at the opening waiting for enough light to walk down the desert outcropping. Diffuse gold and pale desert greens mingle. Christopher rubs his face. Looking again across the desert he shouts, "I'm Home!" The stiffness of sleeping on rock falls away. Excitement energizes his muscles.

But he's had no food or water in twenty hours. *Why didn't I prepare?*

He sets out slipping down the hill. At the bottom of the incline he heads north. North to home and family in Los Angeles, *I'm home.*

In the saddle between two hills, a tamped down section of dirt is littered with cigarette butts, candy wrappers and aluminum foil along with tamale corn husks. He is on the trail of previous illegal immigrants. Litter marks the trail. He thinks *it's not the rock carrions of the boy scouts marking the trail. Casual littering: A dark side of illegal immigration.*

The outskirts of San Diego glitter in the fading dawn. Excitement bunches his muscles and he breaks into a jog. Freedom the elixir quickens his pace. Arriving at a freshly bulldozed firebreak he follows the path. Surrounding vegetation has been recently burned in a wild fire. The sound of a helicopter overhead reverberates in the ground beneath his feet. Literally out of the blue sky a "Whomp, whomp" announces the helicopter descending upon him.

Should I hide? Should I wave my arms? He dives for the ground. The brush is low burned stubble. It provides no cover. Lying flat on the ground, tufts of grass barely one foot high; dust flies, the ground quakes. In the midst of billowing earth the helicopter lands. Choking Christopher decides to stand up. He's been spotted.

Voices carry as the flying machine is disengaged.

Momentarily confused, he realizes *they're speaking English*. For a moment he hears the words but cannot decode their meaning. His eyes are burning. Air born dirt, debris stirred by the helicopter is sticking to him. Dismayed he realizes he's coated in dust. To the border patrolman exiting the helicopter he looks like a brown man covered in dirt.

Two uniformed men run towards him, pistols drawn. *Guns! Do they think I'm a criminal? Wait! They think I'm an illegal alien*. Christopher's heart pounds so loudly it rings in his ears. He struggles to find English words. *When have I forgotten how to speak English?*

Why didn't I think to practice English? He forms a stumbling sentence. With a placating gesture of hands he says, "I'm sorry for running." Horrified to hear he speaks with an accent.

The officers stare him down. Legs in a wide stance, guns still pointed at him. They are ready for trouble. Clipped masculine voices, *speaking in clear English*, order him, "lay flat with your hands behind your head."

They cuff him.

The last time he felt hand cuffs bite into his wrists his car was hijacked and he was abducted. Repeating the experience on United States soil is more than disturbing. Spitting out dirt he yells "I'm an American!"

Their silence is the only response as they drag him to his feet. In a panic he continues. "My name is Christopher Marcos. My home and family are in Los Angeles."

Desperation fuels his words. He stumbles. "Please look me up in your records. My parents must have reported me missing." Stress has thickened his accent. "On my birthday, I went missing on my birthday."

The officer holding him by the plastic flexible cuffs says, "Sure brown man. My name is Mickey Mouse. My country is the Magic Kingdom."

Both men snicker.

What a nightmare. Traveling across Mexico I was terrified to be identified "gringo." Now I worry about being identified as an illegal alien.

"Please," he pleads, "I went missing on my eighteenth birthday."

To the men watching him he looks and sounds like a Mexican. And he was walking a path carved out by illegals before him.

Christopher groans. *Why didn't I think to practice English? I've thought day and night of my American citizenship. What an emergency. I could be sent back to La Luna.*

Hostility radiates from the uniformed officers. One of them growls, "Hey buddy." He gives a yank

on Christopher's cuffs. "We don't take kindly to people impersonating our missing children."

Hauling Christopher toward the helicopter, looking over to his partner he says, "These idiots are really getting good with their stories. Next he'll be telling us he is a La Jolla surgeon."

Enjoying their banter, his friend adds, "Maybe he fell off his yacht in *Cabo* and had to sneak across the border because his passport was stolen."

The King's Run. Christopher chimes in, "Yes! My passport stolen! Stolen by the Tijuana police!"

"Sure buddy. We've heard those Mexican cops are corrupt."

This brings a chuckle. The men begin a conversation about the drug cartel. More and more children are sent across the border, clogging the system. Border patrol busy with the children, allows opportunistic and dangerous illegals to sneak past the international line.

Christopher can only endure their frustrated witticisms as he's dragged into the helicopter with each Border Patrol officer maintaining an iron grip on his elbows.

The pilot turns, looking over his shoulder, "Why are we wasting fuel on one illegal?"

The officer clicks into his safety harness saying, "This Mexican could be mixed up with drugs. A wise guy with a vocabulary the accent is one hundred percent Mexican."

The second officer says, "We'll check him out at headquarters. Maybe he's wanted in Mexico."

Christopher hangs his head in despair. He swallows, desperately thirsty.

On the ground officers escort Christopher into the deportation building. From there he's led into a small examination room. A table and two chairs fill the tiny space.

A black woman in uniform tells him to sit and wait. She removes his hand cuffs.

Dehydrated he can barely form the words. He asks, "May I have a glass of water?"

"I see you speak English," she retorts.

Beside himself with frustration and fatigue Christopher yells, "Yes, I speak English. I'm a United States citizen!"

"Ah, a smart-mouth," looking over her shoulder as she exits, she says, "Do you still want water?"

Christopher can only nod. His outburst has used the last vestiges of his energy.

She huffs out of the room. "They don't pay me enough to take attitude off an illegal."

The room swims. He burns with a dry heat. His eyes burn so painfully the only relief is to close them. He is swollen with frustration locked tightly into joints and muscles. To be back in his country yet on the cusp of being ejected is more than he can bear.

More pressing is his need for food and water. The last days of waiting for *El Coyote* he barely ate. Now he could drink a gallon of water. He's hungry too. The emptiness presses on him. He feels hollow and alone. He even feels faint, discombobulated. *How can I make them see me, Christopher, a citizen of the United States?*

After all he's been through he's at a loss.

The officer brings him a glass of water. Making eye contact with her he says, "thank you."

He is shaking. It takes two hands holding the plastic glass to bring it up to his lips. The room is

spinning. The walls and floor, across the furniture, are small infinitesimal cracks. A roll of thunder and the cracks widen. Light is pouring through the fissures leaving Christopher disoriented and confused. *How many days has it been since I've eaten?* When Officer Goldberg enters the cubicle Christopher slumps defeated in his chair. Goldberg's voice cracking like a whip, commands, "Sit up!" He peers into Christopher's eyes. "Are you on drugs? Are you a mule? Show me your arms and feet."

Goldberg straddles the chair backwards. He is a large well-muscled man in his thirties. He has a wife and daughter at home whom he loves. And he loves his country enough to protect its borders and maintain its sovereignty.

Silently Christopher offers Goldberg his inner arms. Peeling away his new but now dirty socks reveals his feet. Goldberg nods. He studies the report in front of him. Christopher has lapsed into silence. After struggling to live through and escape *La Luna*, to be back in his country, unable to reach his family, it has broken something within him.

Traumatized to find his words accented. His hopes are dim that he'll have a better conversation with this supervisor. For the first time since his arrest in Tijuana he has given up. This quest has taken every bit of ingenuity and fight he can muster. He has no more to give, *it's true. We all have a breaking point.*

Goldberg looks at Christopher. "My people tell me you are a wise guy. You're even impersonating a missing person." Squeezing the top of the chair, scowling at Christopher, he says. "How did you come by this information?"

Christopher is silent. He wants to speak over the knot lodged in his throat. He wants to tell this man his whole terrible story. He needs the voice of Christopher the American, not the voice of Christopher the *gringo* prisoner on *La Luna* He thinks *I'm not sure my parents would recognize my voice.* Hungry and dehydrated, he wonders, *can I form a coherent thought or sentence?*

Goldberg continues. "What brings you to our borders?" He growls, "Are you setting up a connection?"

Taking a deep breath for one last try Christopher says, "Sir, my name is Christopher Marcos, if you'd hear my story."

Goldberg leans his elbows onto the table. "We don't listen to stories here *amigo*. Where we found you tells us you made a border crossing last night. If you're a citizen why do you need to sneak into our country?"

"If you'd listen," Christopher begs.

Goldberg stands. "I don't have time to play your games. Davis in here now, help Bernice cuff this guy for deportation."

Dios! After all this I'm going back to Islas Tres Marias? The room darkens. Every ounce of strength is leaving his body. He is at one with a great void, an empty vessel. The room is fragmenting into a million pieces.

A great terror seizes him, shattering. The puzzle broken Christopher doubts he'll be able to put the pieces of himself back together. He stumbles and Goldberg grabs his elbow. He is eye level with the officer's chest. The blue dragonfly bounces. Vivid, florescent blue holograph highlights Goldberg's name tag.

A flash of inspiration and Christopher comprehends the dragonfly's message. He says, "Goldberg. Wait. Officer Goldberg, do me a *mitzvah*. Call my mother's Rabbi at the Temple. He can identify me. Call Rabbi Foxx. The Rabbi. Wilshire Boulevard Temple."

"*Mitzvah?*" Goldberg grabs Christopher's elbow for the second time. With a penetrating stare he asks, "Are you Jewish?"

Christopher smiles for the first time since he kissed Juanita goodbye. "My mother is Jewish!"

Officer Goldberg rubs his chin. "Okay. Davis, hold that order for a minute."

Christopher's legs are wobbling. They feel like rubber. He sways drunkenly.

"Bernice," shouts Goldberg, "bring this man some juice."

Smiling at Christopher he says, "I've got a good feeling about this call." He pulls out his phone from his back pocket.

To avoid falling Christopher sits. He lands hard on the plastic chair. The woman officer hands him a large plastic glass filled with pineapple juice. Watching Goldberg talk to directory assistance he sips slowly.

He listens as Goldberg asks for Rabbi Foxx. The connection is so clear from across the room Christopher hears the Rabbi. "Yes, I am Rabbi Foxx. Christopher? Christopher Marcos? Why yes, I know him. I officiated at his mother's Bat Mitzvah." Rabbi Foxx's voice raises, filled with excitement. "Christopher disappeared on his eighteenth birthday. Do you know where he is?"

Goldberg smiles at Christopher. "Yes Sir. I'm looking right at him."

Rabbi Foxx cries out, "Praise God. We thought he was dead!"

Officer Goldberg looks over at Christopher. "Welcome home Mr. Marcos. The Rabbi knows you."

EPILOGUE

Reviews from Billy Blue and crew of the Wave make Christopher's cheeks heat red with pleasure and embarrassment. Providing security to local businesses began as a neighborhood job when Christopher and his buddy Joe were teens. Over the years it has grown to include providing security for visiting performing artists at the Los Angeles Forum.

Shaking Billy's hand Christopher says, "Bill I know you love American barbeque. You have some downtime. Why don't you bus your crew out to my house for a barbeque on Sunday?"

"Ya know mate, I'd love to," Billy lays a friendly arm along Christopher's shoulders. "I insist on bringing the brews."

"You got it my man. I'll set it up with your manager. Ginger right?"

A hand raised, saluting Billy yells over the noise, "I'll see you Sunday."

Sunday dawns with blue skies. Christopher slept in after a busy evening preparing for today's barbeque. He awakens to the smell of buttermilk pancakes. He pads across the plank wood living room floor in bare feet. A terry cloth robe, a recent Father's Day gift, is loosely belted. Steaming coffee with milk is waiting for him.

He takes a sip and smiles. Cutting into hot pancakes with melted butter and syrup never fails to make him happy. Pouring more syrup he envisions the day's tasks. They are preparing for an afternoon of fun with family, friends, Billy Blue and the crew of Wave, as well as security industry associates.

By late afternoon it's not easy moving his Dad away from preparing *Lumpia*. Christopher has assigned him supervision of the barbeque pit. He has a knack for cooking tender ribs. Ribs have soaked all night in Christopher's marinade. Pineapple salsa, a pot of barbeque beans and King's Hawaiian bread will round out the meal.

The crowning achievement will be Christopher's *Lumpia* taught to him by his father. Christopher is explaining the ingredients to his daughter. Eight year old Cisne, standing on a chair peeks into a steaming pot. The party ebbs and flows, currents are balanced between Christopher in the kitchen and his father at the barbeque. Christopher says "Cisne honey, go into the back yard. Find out who is ready for desert *Lumpia*."

Christopher's family, friends, employees and their families celebrate raucously with the Canadian Wave band and crew members. Sitting on the patio are his mother and Rabbi Foxx. Heads bent together they are in a deep discussion. Christopher thinks *they're probably discussing the infinite expressions of Mitzvahs*.

The light of candles in glass jars brightens the air. Chewing a butt of an unlit cigar Rabbi Foxx is gesturing passionately. Christopher catches his mother's eye and smiles. She will keep track of him throughout the evening. She can never get enough assurance her son is alive and well. A left over from the time he was missing. He nods at her with understanding.

Across the yard Billy is wearing a sauce soaked apron. Christopher laughs. His friend is learning American barbeque from Christopher's Filipino father. It's music to his ears, his father's laughter drifting across the backyard.

In front of Christopher are several trays of desert *Lumpia*. He has prepared the dish as a surprise for Juanita. Cisne has rematerialized at her chair by Christopher's side. She says, "Daddy they are ready for desert *Lumpia* now!"

Cisne's name translates from Spanish into 'swan.' Tonight she's wearing a blue dress with a white collar. Juanita, at her daughter's request, appliqued a white swan on the lower right half of the dress. It is surprisingly stylish and fresh, as is his daughter with her dark hair and brown eyes. She has Juanita's sparkle.

For a moment in Cisne's face he can see many women; his mother, grandmother, his wife, Juanita. In that split second all the important women in Christopher's world looks back at him through the eyes of his daughter. Juanita's swan peers over his daughter's shoulder.

Rapping on Christopher's arm with a wooden spoon Cisne says, "Dad, come back. The world needs you here tonight, making desert *Lumpia* for mom and everyone else."

Christopher laughs. "You are a 'sassy girl.'" Cisne is quick to laugh or scold depending on the needs of the moment.

Christopher remembers the phone call he made from the immigration room. When Juanita answered his parent's phone the world stopped spinning. "Juanita! Is it really you?"

Laughing and crying Juanita says, "Christopher! Come home! We are waiting for you."

A thrill runs through him remembering. As he looks for Juanita in the midst of their party they share a sweet and knowing glance. *The air sparkles around her!*

Christopher will never take for granted her unique beauty. It is a reflection of her soul, her work as a healer, the depths they have traveled together. Lifting a tray of desert *Lumpia* he swings Cisne off the chair and says, "Lead the way. Who is ready for desert *Lumpia*?"

Billy Blue turns away from the grill. He faces Christopher with a beer held high. "To my friend Christopher Marcos, the best security man in the business and to his beautiful family. Thank you for a fantastic evening. You live a charmed life my man."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jennifer Morse, trained as a marriage and family therapist, has spent her life studying mysticism, striving for balance between conventional life and the mystical.

William Mortimer, a successful businessman and nationally ranked bodybuilder, researches alternative medicine and nutrition in his quest for well-being and longevity.

They reside with Aidan the Goldendoodle in the White Mountains of Arizona.

Redemption's Warrior

Copyright © 2014 By Jennifer Morse and William Mortimer

All rights reserved.