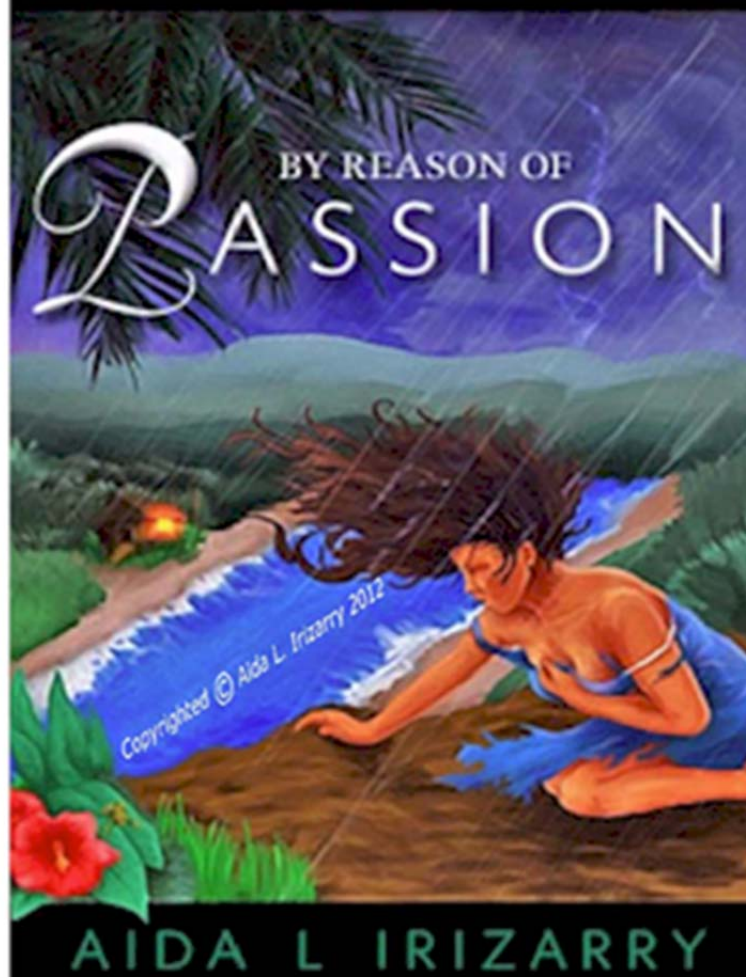


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CHAPTER 1

Aguas Mansas, Puerto Rico.

August 14, 2004

I SHOULD'VE LISTENED TO MY GRANDMOTHER'S WARNING THAT EVENING IN THE KITCHEN:

“No shortcuts on the way home from Mass—not in the dark, child.” *Abuela*—Grandmother in English—referred to the Mount, a junction to the right of Santa Ana Way, our main thoroughfare. “That walk home is too dangerous.”

“A sidewalk runs alongside the Mount, *Abuela*, did you forget?” I sat down by the table at the breakfast corner.

“All I know how pleasant it was walking up the Mount,” *Abuela* sighed.

A woman no much taller than me—5'4—*Abuela* always dressed in black. Those were mourning colors, she'd told me. And they helped her never to forget her loss, my mother.

My grandmother sauntered to the window that looked out to the patio. The curtains, polka-dotted, she pushed to one side. Her face to the sky, she added:

“Then the town sells the land. What happens? A paved road sprouts out of nowhere. Never mind, that cramped sidewalk along the Mount. And that entrance ... well, what could they possibly be hiding behind that gate?”

“Private,” I said.

“Do not enter.” Abuela swung about; the curtain slipped between her fingers.

I dropped my backpack on the table.

“Oh, how ominous!” I leaned forward, both hands spread on my knees.

“Laugh at me, but one day someone will get hurt up there.” A spoon in her hand, Abuela now stood by the stove. Her brow an accordion file, she held her brown eyes steadfast on mine.

“I hate those cars speeding up here in frenzy.”

“This isn’t a freeway, I know.” I relaxed against the chair now. “And the motorcyclists aren’t any better.”

“Well they aren’t, and—look at you, tapping your knuckles on the table. Why are you nervous?”

“Stop reading into things, Abuela.” I draped an arm on my backpack. My other hand landed on my lap. “Nothing bad is going to happen to me, I promise.”

“Don’t be too sure, child.”

Growing up, I heard elders in our community speak about the paranormal. Mrs. Almendros swore she’d dreamt her sister had died. A week later, the dream came true.

Mr. Santini held séances at his home on Friday nights. Neighbors flocked to him to contact the dead. Hogwash, I felt. The paranormal was nonsense made up by idle minds.

But I loved Abuela, and so I never questioned her belief, odd as it was. Sometimes, when those she loved were in danger, an angel would warn her. How? He’d whisper in her ear to let her know.

“The devil’s in the air tonight, following each of your steps,” Abuela was quick to point out. “Those were my angel’s exact words. Take his warning lightly, and —”

“Why don’t you tell your angel I’m almost 19? Wait—he should know that. Oh, yeah, let him know I can take care of myself, too.”

“You’re beautiful and stubborn like your mother, God rest her soul.” Abuela swung about to check the chicken and rice. Aromas: rosemary, garlic, and tomatoes played in the air, I recall. “Well, I’ve outdone myself, like always.”

“Great!” I stood up, the backpack I hung on my back. “Now, if you’d just stop calling me a child, I’d be in heaven.”

“Heaven will have to wait. I’ll stop calling you ‘child’ when you’re ninety.” Abuela covered the pot. She faced me.

“Lord, give me the wisdom to accept the things I can’t change.” The words a song on my lips, I made the sign of the cross. Then, eyes lowered, I clasped my hands in prayer.

Abuela often used the phrase in resignation. One day, having failed a math test, I imitated her actions, as I did above.

“Amen,” Abuela said.

We both laughed. But my spoof became a habit. One day she’d die. What a fitting way to keep her alive in my heart, her favorite phrase: “Lord, give me the wisdom to accept the things I can’t change.”

That eve, though, I didn’t hear my grandmother’s amen. I heard her nails scrape the floor when she picked up Sofia. The rag doll, twenty inches long, had tumbled out my backpack.

She smoothed my doll’s tiered skirt. Her finger lingered on the words on its hem: “With love, Mom.”

A gift, Mom had given me the toy on my fourth birthday. Her design, she’d sewn it herself. I named my new playmate *Muñequita*, Dolly in English.

One week later Mom died. Muñequita became ‘Sofia’ that day. That was my mother’s name.

My Sofia had changed since then.

“Her mouth’s about gone,” I said when Abuela gave me back my doll.

“I’ll embroider it back when you return from Mass, how about it?”

“No. Then it wouldn’t be Mom’s doll, would it?”

Abuela nodded.

“Well, child...” Tears welled in her eyes. She rushed to hide her pain—this sometimes happened when we spoke about Mom. “Don’t tarry any longer. Run along now.”

I tucked Sofia into my backpack. My good luck charm, I carried my doll in times of stress. Abuela didn’t ask what was on my mind. She knew I never went to church—not unless something bothered me.

“I’ll see you later.” Out of kitchen I dashed, down the stairs that led to the patio.

By the kitchen window, Abuela screamed:

“God go with you and be careful! Something might happen—”

“But nothing bad ever happens in Aguas Mansas, remember?”

Aguas Mansas is part of Cabo Rojo. We’re a resort town on Puerto Rico’s Western Coastal Valley. Nature gave us the Phosphorescent Bay, spectacular beaches, forests, salt mines, and neighbors that look out for each other.

The Recreation Plaza, where Saint Michael the Archangel Church stands, is the elders’ hub, though. They meet there to chat or play dominoes. Some prefer the shops around the plaza. The malls are expensive for those on a fixed income.

After Mass, I took a *público*—a taxi—and headed home. The driver let me off at the entrance to the barrio.

The sun had begun to set. Behind the houses along the way, palm trees and cacti surround a man-made lake. Not too far along into Santa Ana Way, the Mount surges upward to the barrio. Banana trees look down at the homes on stilts asleep by the waters. The dwellings' rooftops are peach, green, purple, and black specks against the valley. I need say a spacious alley separates each residence.

On my way home that evening, cool winds had begun to sweep the valley. Perhaps it would rain later. It would be a blessing. Aguas Mansas' temperature had held at 85 the last week. No wonder I welcomed the breeze on my face.

Both palms on my knees now, I took a deep breath.

Doña Leticia had already lit a candle on the windowsill of her blue house on stilts. That eased my nerves.

All was well. Aguas Mansas slept in peace. I had nothing to fear.

Ko-kee ... ko-kee sang our Puerto Rican miniature frog.

Ko-kee ... ko-kee.

Honk! A blare, like that of a duck with a head cold, broke the amphibians' song.

I swerved around. A van, like a black bull waiting to charge, stood at the entrance to Santa Ana Way.

Why worry? All was well. Aguas Mansas slept in peace.

I carried a rosary inside my black skirt. My hand in my pocket, I wound my fingers tight around the crucifix.

Again, I fixed my gaze ahead.

Vroom ... vrooms, the van's roar rose in anger.

The driver turned on the headlights. Off—on again... off once more, on again. The lights captured me in an embrace.

A frightened colt, I galloped toward the Mount. I tripped on a rock. I tumbled down onto the ground.

The vehicle rumbled closer to me now.

Once ... twice..., three times the conductor honked the horn.

Back on my feet, I saw the vehicle speed toward the Mount. I noticed, then, too, the van's windows were tinted dark.

I doubled back to Santa Ana Way. No sense taking a chance up the Mount, not that evening. Maybe Abuela had sensed danger. It didn't matter, it was best not to risk my safety.

"Good evening, Elena." Doña Leticia called from her porch. She lived across the entrance to the Mount. "Coming home from church?"

"Yes." I came to a stop by the dwelling's balcony. "How are you, señora?"

The woman picked up an orange tabby, the one with dark lines on its coat. About eight cats roamed about her at that moment. She petted the cat's head. Again, she looked up at me.

"Been ill, you know. Soon I'll be in heaven." She smiled. Her gums were rotten to their core. "Ask Rosalina to visit and clean my house, won't you?"

"I'm sorry. My cousin can't come over—not ever." My cousin Rosalina was married to Federico de Santos, doña Leticia's only son.

"If this is about money, I'll give her something."

"Oh, but money's has nothing to do with it, señora. Federico doesn't want her to help you. Last time she did, well ... He lashed her with his belt buckle."

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” Dona Leticia cleared her throat. “Federico has the right to discipline Rosalina. She must respect him.” The old woman dropped the cat at her feet. “My Federico’s a good boy, always looking after me. Oh, yes, thank the Lord. He’s a good boy.”

I gave scarce heed to her words. Doña Leticia was senile. Federico hated her. In fact, I couldn’t recall the last time he’d pay her a visit. Yes, I felt sorry for the old woman. I offered to clean her house the following morning.

“I guess you’ll do. But hurry home, hurry.” One hand fluttered in dismissal. “One more thing—may I?”

“Of course, señora, one more thing, and then I’ll be on my way.”

“Sometimes the Lord shows me the future. You,” she pointed a bony finger at me, “no walking up the Mount. Evil forces are all around you today. Listen and obey me, young one.” A hand on her back, doña Leticia headed back inside.

I’d prove Abuela and doña Leticia wrong. I’d walk up the Mount, and live to tell my tale.

9/16/12###

CHAPTER 2

“WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS,” I SANG AS I BEGAN MY JOURNEY UP THE MOUNT.

All was well. Aguas Mansas slept in peace.

Ring!

Earlier, I had spoken to my boyfriend. He lived in New Hampshire now that he went to Dartmouth College. Without checking the number, I answered:

“Hola, Gerardo.”

“Someone better than that pansy of yours,” the voice over the line said.

I hung up. The cell phone, now on vibrate, I dropped in my skirt’s pocket. Once, twice, the phone quickened against me. No need to answer; I knew the caller. I rushed my steps.

Ahead, someone called my name. *No one there—had I imagined it?* No, a woman pounced from behind a tree. She cut my trajectory. About six foot one, she wore a silk blouse knotted at the side. Her thigh-high slit skirt rested two inches above the ankles. Red-high heels and pink stockings added to her odd look.

Her straight light brown hair, parted left, touched her earlobes. They were naked. She’d brushed her mane behind one ear. A final accessory—a Spanish tortoise comb that held the woman’s tresses in place.

I leaned closer. The stranger winked at me, *his* lashes dry seaweed.

“Federico,” I said.

“*Hola, bella.*” Hello, beautiful, he’d said. He jerked me to him. I found myself trapped in his gray eyes.

I couldn’t help it. My mind drifted to last year. Rosalina had invited me over to cut a cake. It was my eighteenth birthday. She had asked me to get a crate in the shed. Next thing I knew, Federico had followed me inside.

Caught off guard, I found myself pinned against the door. He trapped my arms at my sides. Immediately, Federico plunged headlong to kiss me. I fought back: I turned my head away. He followed each move, grazing my lips, nipping them.

One thing I didn’t do: scream. Rosalina was five months pregnant. Why upset her. But that’s what I did. She called out from the kitchen window, which looked out to the shed:

“Cousin Elena, what’s taking you guys so long?”

So she knew Federico had gone after me.

“Federico’s helping me find the crate!”

“Thinking on your feet,” he whispered. “Good girl.”

“It’s underneath the table with the broken leg!” Rosalina screamed.

“Okay, looking now!” I lied.

Federico caught my mouth then. I gave in when he curled his tongue around mine. I didn’t have a choice. He had shoved a leg between my thighs. Each time I snubbed him, he’d buried his knee in my flesh.

On the attack once more, he’d snort like a pig. *Grunt*. He’d let go of my lips. *Grunt-let-go. Grunt-grunt-grunt*. I almost choked. Federico tasted of garlic and rum.

“Come on, guys! The kids wanna get at that cake already!”

“We’re coming!” I hollered.

“Not yet, we’re not.” Quick as a fox, Federico swept down on the side of my neck. He slurped my skin into his mouth. I whined in pain. He held on I don’t know how long, and then he drew back.

“Happy birthday.” He pointed to a cracked mirror on a shelf. “Go check out my gift, man. I want you to remember that soon you’ll be mine.”

“So,” Federico called me to the present, “I gave you a hickey. Was I first?”

I didn’t answer him. Doing would have encouraged Federico’s pursuit.

“You’re blushing. I was first then.” He twitched my nose like I was his child. “But maybe I can be your *other* first, let me.”

I wouldn’t let Federico get to me. I began to walk at leisure, he at my side.

“Were you on your way to visit doña Leticia?”

“I ain’t here visiting my holy mamá, God forbid, no, I ain’t doing that. Saw you leave Mass. Wanted to talk, but I couldn’t. See, I was headed to a meeting, man. I called you twice after. You ignored me, what’s up?”

“I don’t answer my cell when I’m walking, okay? But you’re here now, so talk.”

“You told Rosalina I should give up my acting dreams. No way. I’ve just auditioned with Bernarda Alvarado. Imagine me, a star in a *telenovela*.”

“You’re kidding—you tried out for a Mexican soap?”

“Hell, yeah.” Federico swatted away a mosquito on his nose. “The tabloids are right. Bernarda’s a nympho. Man, I rode that old mule hard and good far longer than I cared to, shit. Got myself a final audition, though—Tuesday, how about that?”

“And not a thought of Rosalina, how sad.” I came to a halt on my way to the Mount.

“What if you get AIDS and pass it on to her, then what?”

“I’m 34, not stupid.” Federico reached into his blouse’s pocket for a toothpick. He spoke as he dug his gums. “I use condoms, man.” The tip of his index finger landed on my lips. “No need to worry, know what I mean?”

Oh, I knew what he meant. But I wasn’t about to indulge his fantasy. When I shook him off me, Federico added:

“As for my Rosalina, she loves it bare and rough.” He flicked the toothpick to the ground. “She’s a slut. Anybody’s. I knew it the day I screwed her.”

“You’re a creep. My cousin has never slept with anyone but you and you know it!”

I don’t know what came over me. I slapped Federico. He stumbled; he regained his balance. Then he grinned, the gold caps on his center front teeth stark against his tanned face.

I let out a yelp, not that he had touched me. I realized what I had done. In my culture, a woman who strikes a man risks getting hurt.

Having defied fate and won, I began my journey uphill again.

Federico’s skirt rustled behind me. *Clip-clop-clop-clip-clop-clop*, his high heels pummeled the Mount’s narrow sidewalk. My instinct urged that I run, but I didn’t.

His sweat smelled like eggs left on a counter a day or two: rotten. Whenever the wind carried this scent, I’d lengthen my steps. I knew Federico was gaining in on me, then. Once, the air brought in its arms carnations’ sweet fragrance. I shortened my pace, secured he’d fallen behind.

Clip-clop-clop-clip-clop-clop ... The shoes had silenced now. Where was Federico?

I swung about to find he'd caught up. Federico was a twisted twig, his shadow etched on the field beneath us. He grinned, he pointed to his feet. They were bare.

He stopped at the palm tree by which I'd come to a halt. Leaning in on me, he said:

"Hey, let's make a deal, man."

"Let me go on my way or I'll tell Rosalina—"

"Tell her I want your ass. She'll knock herself out to please me in the sack. And you she'll ban out of her life, that's what my Rosalina will do. So go, spit it out, I dare you."

"You have no scruples, do you?"

"One more insult and you can say goodbye to your dreams." Federico rushed into his skirt's pocket. "New World University—"

"What?"

"No more waiting, man. Your roommate's name ... I have it right here." He slapped the envelope against an outer thigh. "Right here, man."

"Let me have it." I made a dash to get the envelope. Federico pulled back.

"Sure, lay me first."

"Give me my mail, Federico." Again, I tried to capture the missive.

"Snatch it from me." Federico skipped ahead. "I dare you!"

A gust carted my name to the heavens. A rabbit, I hopped here, there, followed Federico to no avail. Each time I closed in, he sprinted farther ahead. His guffaws were a slap to my face.

I lost him, came to a halt, and shouted:

"I want my letter, Federico! Stop!"

Federico's response? His laughter echoed, it seemed, throughout the valley. And then his mirth turned into silence.

Ko-kee ... ko-kee sang our Puerto Rican miniature frog.

Crickets chirped their song higher than usual. Quick, their tempo changed. The faster their chirp, the warmer the night, that's what I'd read. Perhaps this was true. Perspiration had begun to run down my cheeks.

"Federico!" I swiped my brow. I swerved around.

Up yonder, I saw a two-story home, its windows darkened. Mr. Graciano, my grandfather's lawyer, owned the house. Only last week Grandfather had shown me its picture. "Jewel Homes Magazine" had featured the stead on its cover.

I'd never been deep in the Mount. Mr. Graciano would lead me back should I knock on his door. But I couldn't do that. He was in Italy on vacation.

"Come get your letter! Hurry, man!"

Where was he? I jumped backward, almost lost my footing.

Federico appeared nowhere in sight. I knew different. He'd ventured farther inside the Mount.

"Where are you, damn you!" I screamed.

"Near! Follow the road up here!"

The trail, to my right, curved to a point ahead.

"Hail Mary ..." I strained to find my way in the darkness in a night in which the moon played peek-a-boo behind the clouds. "Where are you?"

"You're getting closer!"

The path, a ribbon thrown at random at my feet, unfurled to the left now. I followed the climb steeper at my every step.

“Holy Mary Mother of God ...” The lane uncoiled to the right again. “...Pray for us sinners.”

Exhausted, I stopped to rest. I placed both palms on my bended knee, my attention farther ahead. I saw it then: The cross in shadow beneath my feet.

I swung about. Christ lay crucified on a marble cross that seemed to reach the sky. The platform on which the monument stood measured about ten feet all around. Below the Crucified, I saw three wooden benches. The seats didn't have any back to support the weary. They invited one to pray.

I'd gone to Mass, called upon God along my way up the Mount. After that climb, I didn't feel the need to pray. I sat on the center bench, my back towards Jesus. To my surprise, the seat's depth proved comfortable. One other person could sit behind me. Our backs wouldn't touch since 18 inches would keep us apart.

I tossed my backpack across the stand. By now, I should've gotten to Casa Sosa, my home. I'd call Grandfather. He'd know where to pick me up. Not a good idea, I didn't want to admit my bad judgment.

In the end, I decided to contact Federico. A risk, given his intentions? Yes, but I had to trust he'd do the right thing, lead me halfway down Mount. I'd take it from there. Besides, I had to get New World University's message.

I dialed Federico's number. The charge on my cell phone had died.

“Federico, where are you hiding?” I slipped the phone back in my pocket. “I want my letter.”

“You know the price, bella.” I withheld a yelp. Federico, behind me, had grabbed me by my right forearm. “Don't fight me, eh? I have a switchblade.”

Click.

“And I’m not afraid to use it.”

Clack.

He pressed the blade’s point behind my right ear.

“Don’t hurt me—don’t.” Abuela, I should’ve listened to you.

“Then do as I tell you. Lean forward now.”

He worked fast to secure me, my wrists bound tight behind me.

I swung my head to look at him. Federico now wore khaki shorts, a beige tank top, and a red bandana around his head.

His eyes lowered, he dislodged the knife trapped between his lips. He swung the switchblade upward. Then he dropped it close to my face. I shrieked. My shoulders folded. I buried my chin against the crook of my neck. My tears began to roll.

“Elena, don’t fight him,” I heard Abuela say in night’s air “Calm down. You can free yourself. Have you forgotten your mother, child?”

Had Abuela spoken to me? I don’t know. But I found strength when she reminded me about my mother. I couldn’t recall the last time I’d thought about her.

On the day Mom died, she fought the tide that carried her and Father out to sea. This my Abuela had learned from eyewitnesses. My mother wasn’t a coward: I was her daughter.

I didn’t know how I’d escape, but I had no doubt I would.

Composed now, I didn’t struggle when Federico slipped behind me.

“Slide that luscious ass against me.” I inched backward. “Closer, that’s it. ... That’s it, against me.” Federico tangled his long legs around mine. His left hand cleared a path beneath my arm. “Tonight, you’ll ingest my fever.” One ... two ... three ... four buttons gave way.

He cupped my bare breast. To my dismay, I realized I hadn't worn a camisole or a bra that day.

"Full ..." He tossed the knife behind him. "Deliciously firm and they are mine, man." Federico leaned closer. He whispered breath uneven against my ear. "Feel my touch." His right hand now joined the left at play beneath my blouse. "Let go. I'm gonna make you feel so good ... that's it, feel my touch."

I shut my eyes. I clenched my mouth, and then I fled. In my imagination, I soared to the heavens. A breeze smacked my face. The current rushed, carried me along, its embrace ice. I heard someone—a man or a woman, I can't recall—say:

"Hurry, hurry, I want you to see."

Clouds, white, its face mottled in gray, whirled about against the black sky now. The moon, pallid and somber, guided my way. I glided down to a standstill by a cave's threshold. In the semi-darkness, I sensed an older man and a girl. She was twelve, I surmised. Her face and his I couldn't see. But I did hear him say, his voice a grizzly bear's:

"Tell me, little one, what do you think I had you drink?"

"Chamomile tea, señor."

"Chamomile?" The man's laugh was a witch's chortle, then a roar. "No, my little one, something stronger to make you lust for me like a woman."

"You will ingest my fever." Federico hissed in my ear.

"I won't feel ... I won't," I said. My attention I fixed on the *drip-drip-drip-drip* song in the cave.

"Water dripping ... dripping ... Mamá ... just dripping," the child said.

“At sunrise, I’ll make you my woman,” the man babbled. “But first I’ll teach you to like my touch.”

The dusk which had surrounded me disappeared. I stood in night’s pitch darkness. Thunder, a volley of claps, startled me now. Its snarl bore other sounds: lips smacking; gasps, shallow and fast; whimpering in fits and starts; and, then, silence.

Peace embraced me one second, to flee when the old man groaned:

“Oh, God, I promised her I’d wait until sunrise to take her. Forgive my carnal desires, Lord. I’m but a worm, I know.” He gasped, a man in death’s throes. “Come little one, lie still. That’s it, still. I must taste you once again.”

“Mamá!” the girl shrieked in my ear.

I bounced forward. A blowtorch, Federico’s finger had lashed my nipples into hardness. I boomeranged back into his hands. My breath failed me; I tilted my head back. I faced Christ on the cross, His cheeks marred by tears.

“Calm, calm down. I’m buttoning your blouse,” Federico said.

I heard one button snap into place ... another ... one more.

“Cool it, man. That’s it, nice and relaxed, bella.”

Relieved the fever inside me had begun to die, I shot up to a sitting position. The binding around my wrists caved in. I was free. But until I had a plan to flee, I’d play along. At least now, thank God, I had hope where only fear reigned earlier.

Federico’s words were a bee’s buzz in my ear:

“Why use a knife to subdue you, eh? All I need is my hands to make you give in to me.”

My hair coiled tight around his knuckles, he jerked my head upward to his. “Slut.”

“You bastard!” I jerked my elbows sideways, folded them. Downward I brought them. I struck Federico on the ribs.

“Bitch!” Federico wailed.

He jumped backwards, did a half turn. One backhand slap, he sent me reeling. I fought to get a footing. I had to get the gun on the bench! I failed: I landed on all fours on the ground.

A tiger in wait, Federico, knelt behind me. He locked my legs between his.

“That knife is close by. One move, I’ll slash your throat.” His palms on my buttocks, Federico plunged his head beneath my skirt. A wild cat, he bit my right buttock.

I howled. And I shook to dislodge Federico as a dog shakes off its fleas. He clamped tighter, his teeth visors against my flesh.

My knees thumped one against the other.

Courage.

I folded one knee, and then kicked.

“You asshole!” Federico bellowed.

My donkey kick had connected to Federico’s body. Where? Maybe his groin? I swung my foot upward again, faster this time. He collapsed on the platform floor. Pain etched on his face, he inclined on one elbow. He called out:

“Slut, now you’ve asked for it!”

Upward I bounced to my feet, my pain now forgotten.

The knife ... where was it? Federico claimed he’d dropped it close to him. He lied. One foot behind me, the switchblade slept on Sofia’s belly. My doll had fallen out of my backpack when I tossed the bag on the platform.

I didn't waste time. The switchblade now mine, I threw Sofia into my backpack. The book-bag, I chucked over my left shoulder.

Federico struggled to stand up. He rose halfway only and clutched his crotch.

I didn't take any chances: I trained the switchblade on him.

"Don't come near me. I'll kill you."

"Let me have it." Federico stood approximately six inches, back towards the cross, I, two feet away

"Thou shall not kill." I trembled, my body I had to steady.

"How about that, you know right from wrong."

"Oh, God, I can't do it." I looked down at the blade, then up at Federico. "I can't do it."

"Coward," he said.

I didn't answer.

"And you know why you *won't* hurt me, eh?" Federico rose to his full height now. He swabbed his tongue on his lips. "Because you want me to quench your lust slowly, ever so slowly inside you." He paused, and then *that* word rolled off his tongue, "Slut."

I screeched like a hyena. I leapt towards Federico. My backpack I hurled upward behind me. And he, I pinned against the cross. Samson's strength now mine, I dug the knife, like a pitchfork, into his left shoulder. To my right I yanked ... to my left.

"Die, you animal! Die!"

Federico de Santos shrieked a yell Aguas Mansas must've heard. A madman, he tore off his tank top. He jammed it against wound to fend off the bleeding.

God, what had I done? I gazed down at my white blouse, stained in Federico's blood. Upward, my eyes rose to meet my victim's. Little boy lost, that's what he was, a child bewildered by his punishment.

"Damn blood won't stop ... it won't stop."

"I'm sorry ... I'm..." I backed away, frightened lest Federico come after me. "No, I don't feel bad for you—no." The switchblade I held like a gun now, aimed straight at my attacker. "You tried to rape me, damn you."

"Now, how's that for sympathy?" Federico scanned his wound. He covered it up again. "I'm gonna have to get stitches, man."

What happened next still amazes me. Federico reached into his shorts. The letter for which I'd risked my life landed on my toes.

"You've earned that goddamned piece of paper. Take it before I change my mind."

I picked up the envelope, slipped it into my right shoe. The backpack in my possession, I pointed the knife at Federico's heart.

"I'm going home. Try to stop me, and I'll kill you. I mean it."

"Go already, and not a word to anyone about tonight. Do it and I'll bury you alive. beneath this monument." Federico sagged against the cross. "Now get the hell outta here!"

Having vanquished Federico, I tossed the blade inside my bag. Somehow, I'd get rid of the weapon. Lord forbid Abuela found it. She'd get hysterical and call the police. No, I didn't need more drama.

I rushed my steps off the platform, to stop at its base when Federico called out:

"Hey!"

I glanced over my right shoulder. Federico had sunk to the foot of the cross. His head he'd cocked to one side, the legs, too, he'd parted. I noticed the tank top slept on his rumpled jeans. Blood now ran freely down his shoulder.

My life's dream was to become a doctor. My first instinct was to help Federico. I changed my mind. Why tempt fate?

"Hey..." This time, the word caught in his throat. He jabbed an index finger to his chest, then he used it to gesture towards me. "One day ... one day, we'll finish what we started here ... one day. Count on it, bella."

I escaped, having learned one lesson. Bad things can happen in Aguas Mansas. I'd fought off a sex maniac one Sunday night in August.

9/25/12###