KEOTA

Chapter 1

Acapulco 1993

For days, heat and humidity trapped in the bay by mountains had the city on its knees. Not even trade winds blowing most of the day could dislodge it. Chris Boyd, used to cool, dry summer evenings on the west slope of the Rockies, felt faint. She turned onto the Costera towards Club KayO's where she was to meet an American named Tommy who might know the whereabouts of her mother, Keota. Chris's best friend Rainy had promised to join her.

Chris pulled up to the curb in front of the club, left her car with the valet and got in line behind dozens of tourists eager to party. The last time she'd seen a line this long was in college, outside a lecture hall where Ram Dass had just spoken. She'd gone there to set up an interview for a journalism class, armed with research she'd done on him and the LSD he'd once championed. When it was her turn, before she could say a word, the former Harvard professor touched her arm. "That which you long for, longs for you," he'd said as a limo pulled up to the curb.

"What?" she'd asked. "You mean Keota?" But the crowd had closed around him and he was gone. It wasn't until hours later that she'd come to, remembered the interview she was supposed to have scheduled, and knew that Ram Dass had not meant her mother.

This time, Chris wanted to hear with an impartial reporter's ear, not a frantic daughter's. She'd brought everything she had of Keota's for the meeting, the photos, the well worn postcards mailed from dozens of locations, and the eleven pitiful notes scrawled across the kind of brochures you find in motel lobbies.

Once through the line, she found a table beneath a fan. The place smelled of garlic, sweat and coconut oil. She caught a waiter's eye and ordered mineral water with ice. Why would someone giving or selling information want to meet here? she wondered. Besides the lack of air conditioning, it was impossible to hear over the heavy metal band and too dark to examine photos. The glossy walls looked wet in the flash of strobes, and the dancers did too.

Young, sunburned tourists soon filled the place, all looking as if uniforms had been assigned: skimpy dresses for the girls, blousy shirts for the guys. Tequila poppers and blended drinks made the rounds, administered like first aid by waiters as serious as medics.

Her stomach had begun to cramp, just as it often had after Keota left. Usually, at the AA meetings her dad would drag her to. The stories of drunken stupors and crazy times the AA-goers recalled fondly, and seemed to miss, always got to her. She was eleven or twelve before her dad quit making her go—immediately after the night a regular recounted an outing with his buddy and the hookers they had taken to their adjoining hotel rooms. Unable to get it up with his girl, the storyteller had gone out into the hall and knocked on his buddy's door. "Hey," he admitted asking his friend, "Can we trade?"

All the reforming drinkers broke up laughing, including her dad. Then the next up, a newcomer who stroked his beard as he talked, reported getting sick enough of his chest

hair that he'd tried to remove it. Evidently, that is, because he could only recall waking from a blackout, razor in hand, bleeding and missing a nipple. The room was dead still for a moment after that one. That was the worst, the silence that followed a not-so-funny story. That and her gnawing dread of the tales her father might tell of her mother but, thank God, never did.

Yet, here she was, a decade or so later, in a place that might better be called Club Chaos, still afraid of what she might hear about Keota. She estimated that eighty percent of the people here were now drunk enough to try to trade partners or shave their chests.

After another thirty minutes, Chris grabbed her only evidence of ever having had a mother and went to the pay phone by the restrooms to call Rainy. The desk clerk at their hotel hadn't seen her. Chris hung up and returned to the bar. A group of couples had taken over her table. Certain that neither the man called Tommy nor Rainy would show, she decided to leave.

On her way out, she thought she saw Alejandro across the room, the guy she and Rainy had argued about earlier that day. She hurried through the crowd after him but lost him. Once outside, she gave her parking ticket to the valet and paced at the curb, searching for Rainy in the line of people waiting to get in. When the valet brought her car, she threw her packet of Keota stuff onto the passenger seat and headed down the Costera. She was in a dark residential area with no streetlights when Rainy popped up from the back.

"Hello."

Chris jerked around. "Rainy! What the hell?"

"I have to tell you, I think the upholstery back here is moldy."

"Where have you been?"

"Hiding. You were right, there's something weird about Alejandro."

"Why, what happened?"

"First of all, he—hey, watch that car!"

The headlights made an abrupt veer into their lane and Chris swerved right. Her car jumped the curb and sailed above the narrow boulevard toward the squatty trunk of a palm. She tried to brake, but they were airborne.

About to crash beneath palm fronds flaming in the headlamps, she thought about—of all things—her mother's fortune telling. The thing she most associated with her departure the summer of the year Nixon was impeached and she, Chris, started school.

Keota had told fortunes just that one time, at a picnic Chris's father had hosted to celebrate his three years as publisher of *The Charlo Weekly News*. This only party he would ever throw was huge and went on most of a Saturday.

All day guests had gone to and from the beach and the porch—location of several kegs of beer and coolers of pop. Platters and roaster pans of fried chicken, baked beans and salads sat out in the heat on a large picnic table someone had hauled in. Hot dogs and hamburgers smoldered on adjacent barbecues. Her father kept the bonfire going all day and no one went near it until a breeze came up late afternoon and the sun dipped into a bank of clouds.

Most of the guests packed up and drove off right after sunset. The fire, by then, was a pool of simmering coals. Keota brought out marshmallows to the few kids still waiting

for parents up on the porch, drinking beer and in no hurry. But instead of rejoining the adults, Keota took a newspaper from a stack beside the pit, rolled it and ignited one end in the embers. She eyed this torch from all angles, turned directly to a neighbor boy and told him his fortune, as though seeing it in the flames.

The other kids clamored to hear their fortunes too, and Keota seized an armful of papers and doled them out. One by one, she went around the circle, setting fire to each child's issue of *The Charlo Weekly*, extracting all of the fate therein, quickly, before losing it to smoke and ash.

In the light of those popping cinders, Keota looked more beautiful than she'd ever looked in Chris's memory. Keota was not unhappy that night and her dark curls and large, black eyes were shiny. All the kids watched spellbound as this exotic mother moved gracefully about the fire with each bright torch, her voice soft and haunting. Bursts of flame, as tossed twigs or candy wrappers ignited unexpectedly, added to the eerie mood of the night.

When it was the neighbor Lorraine Comstock's turn, Keota said, "You, my dear, will sing like a bird." And to Chris: "Christian, you will travel far from home looking for someone or something until you've lost home altogether. But," she added, twisting the already extinguished roll a last time before tossing it into the fire," at the right moment you'll find home again."

When it came to Lorraine's best friend Judy Throckmorton, Keota frowned, puzzled. "My goodness," she said, catching her breath.

"What?" Judy Throckmorton asked.

Keota smiled at her and threw the blazing paper into the pit. But Chris knew by her hesitation and the way she fingered her hair that she was struggling for something to say.

"You will be known throughout the valley."

"For what?" Judy wanted to know.

"That's all, kids, let's go up to the house."

Keota started up the hill and Chris ran after her. "Mom, what did you see?"

Her mother turned but didn't stop. "Nothing."

"But what about Judy Throckmorton?"

Keota let her catch up and even put an arm around her. "Which one was she?" she asked, flipping long strands of hair from her eyes with the back of a hand full of barbecue utensils.

"The last one."

Keota bit her lip. "I don't really *see* anything. I was just fooling around," she said, and hurried on up the hill.

"You saw something bad!" Chris insisted.

Her mother kept on going and Chris flopped down on the side of the bank. Waves lapped at the beach, her father Judd Boyd burst into laughter on the porch, and Cat Stevens sang from the stereo: "I know I have to go away. I know I have to go."

After her father's beach party, almost everyone on the point held a smaller version of it, beginning with the neighbor several houses down the shore. Kids were not invited to this party and Chris was left with a sitter named Patty.

From the back porch, Chris watched people arrive at the east end of South Shore Drive with things they lugged to the backyard. Then it grew dark and the moonless night

so black that the bonfire lit but a small area of beach. A dim porch light illumined no more than indistinct movement on the deck, but the music was loud enough to keep Chris awake long after Patty made her go to bed.

When she heard voices and laughter near the house, Chris got up and went outside. Patty and a guy? But all she could make out was a two-headed shadow, as a near-full moon scaled the mountains and dropped a line of light across the lake.

She put on her flip-flops and headed down the hill. Almost immediately, she stubbed her toe on something and lost her balance. She started sliding and then tumbling, hitting one or two large rocks on the way down. Her right leg hurt and she yelled at Patty, but there was no answer.

Chris tried crawling back up the hill but the pain in her knee was unbearable. She pulled her nightgown out of the way and, with her arms and good leg, pushed herself up the hill on her butt. Once on the bank she rested before tackling the porch. Then, holding onto the railing, she hopped up the steps to the door and, inside, felt along the wall for the kitchen light. Her knees were bloody, her nightgown grass-stained and ripped. Her bum leg, besides being swollen and numb, was full of cuts from dragging it. She hopped to the living room, found the phone number her mother had left for Patty and called it.

"You what?" her mother asked over the party music that was even louder over the phone.

"I hurt my leg!" Chris yelled. "Really bad! Please, come home."

"Take some aspirin," her mother said and hung up. Chris hopped to the television, turned it to a movie, and hopped back to the couch. She was chilled and pulled up the afghan slung over the back of it. She didn't get the movie and tried calling her parents several more times. "Okay, okay! We're coming," her mother yelled over the noise. "Did you take the aspirin?"

"No, it's upstairs! I told you, I hurt my leg."

"Well, for god's sake, tell Patty to get it for you!" The line went dead.

In the morning Chris woke to sun beating through the window on her swollen limb. She could hear her parents arguing in the kitchen. "Mom!" she cried. But it was her father who wandered in to see what she wanted. His eyes were bloodshot and his bathrobe had a cigarette burn in the sleeve. He looked unhappy and in need of a shave. "Why did you sleep out here? Move over," he added, approaching her injury.

"No, Daddy!"

He picked up the afghan. "What the sam hill?"

"Where's Mom?" she cried. With just this bit of concern, Chris began to break.

"Don't cry, baby, we'll run you to the hospital. Let me get some clothes on." He ran out and her mother appeared, in the same general shape as her father.

"Oh, honey," she said, "Why didn't you tell me it was so bad?"

Soon her father returned and carried her out to the car. By now Chris felt faint. The next thing she was aware of was an unfamiliar male voice. It was hot and her leg hurt worse than it had all night.

"It's broken," the voice said. "In two places."

Wondering who was talking, she opened her eyes. But all she could see were her parents, hung over and alarmed.

The next few weeks, Chris slept in the den. It had its advantages—close to the kitchen, the best TV in the house, and she could see what was going on down at the lake.

One night late, Chris heard her parents come in the back door. In the foyer, her father paid and dismissed the babysitter—not Patty—then tiptoed into the den. Her mother followed and soon the two were at the desk near her. One of them had something the other one wanted and Chris watched as these two specters struggled silently over whatever it was. They might have been nothing more than drapes moving in the open window breeze except that they twice banged into the desk and then the chair next to it. When the struggle turned in Chris's direction, her mother fell over the back of the couch and landed on top of her. Chris screamed and she and Keota rolled to the floor, the heavy cast first. Cigarettes from out of nowhere spilled across the carpet with them.

"I hate you," Chris shouted. That caught them off guard, causing them to stare in her direction in the longest of brief moments. The air was laden with the scent of alcohol and her mother began to cry.

"Don't ever talk to your mother like that again," Judd said, helping Chris back onto the couch. Her mother got up and fled, squashing cigarettes as she went. Judd ran after her, first bumping into a chair, then the half-open door.

"I was talking to both of you," Chris called after him. Ashamed of herself, Chris lay awake the rest of the night. When dawn broke, she watched a gray light spread across flattened and broken Marlboro Lights. Soon after—in her mind it was always the next day, though her dad said not—Keota went out to get some things. That's what she'd said, she had to go get, or maybe do, some things. When her dad got home from the paper a few hours later, he wanted to know where Keota was.

"And where's dinner?" he demanded, looking around the kitchen. "She knows I have a meeting tonight."

Chris shrugged. But all of a sudden she knew by the way her stomach had gone queasy that her mother had left them. She hopped up the stairs on her good leg, holding onto the banister, going as fast as she could. Her father, obviously sensing the same, ran up and around her. By the time she got to her parents' bedroom, he had all the bureau drawers open and was throwing her mother's remaining things from the closet onto the floor. Chris was stunned and stood there helplessly. Her mother's cosmetics and toiletries were missing from the dressing table. He noticed that too and attacked all that was left. He grabbed Keota's framed picture and threw it across the room, then flung a vase of drooping flowers from Keota's garden.

"Daddy, no!" she screamed.

He looked over at her with a look that scared her. She hobbled down the stairs, grabbed her crutches, and went out the door and down the block to Lorraine Comstock's, the neighbor girl who'd been at the picnic with the fortune telling. It was still light when she rang the bell. One of the Comstock boys answered and told her to come in. "Rainy!" he shouted up the staircase. Chris waited uneasily, feeling privy to somewhere she ought not be, in the biggest house on the block where Lorraine Comstock was called Rainy by one of her notorious brothers whose horseplay, loud music, swearing, reckless bike riding—you name it—gave pause to most of South Shore. That and the reason she was there had her stomach churning.

When the brother did not get an answer, he sent Chris up to a bedroom—more hopping. The door was open and Rainy was on the bed watching television. Chris did not explain her sudden entrance and the girl did not act surprised to have someone she hardly knew, in a cast, visit unexpectedly. She simply made room on the bed for her, then went

downstairs to get the dinner her own mother had left on the counter in the kitchen before leaving for her bridge club. She returned with that and two forks. Chris and Rainy ate in silence, their attention supposedly on a documentary about elephants.

After it was over, Rainy shut off the television and turned over to sleep. But Chris lay in the dark listening to music coming from somewhere in the house: "If you want to leave, take good care . . . a lot of nice things turn bad out there. Oh, baby baby, it's a wild world. I'll always remember you like a child, girl."

Chris buried her head in the pillow, determined not to cry, lest she be put out into the dark on her crutches to face alone what was left of her ruined life.