

Understanding the Alacran

By Jonathan LaPoma

Chapter 1

I was twenty-three when it happened. While that may seem late to some people, to a lot of those people it never comes—no matter how many lives they threaten to prove it has.

I'd been traveling by bus through Mexico for nearly two weeks with two German friends and my girlfriend, Luz, who left us at our last stop, Veracruz, to spend the rest of the Christmas season with her family. We woke up that morning in a hostel in the cool mountain town of San Cristobal de las Casas and set our sights on the Mayan ruins of Palenque.

I was the first to the road, pulling ahead of the sluggish Deutch Duo. A cab rounded the corner.

“Taxi . . . TAXI!” I waved frantically and though it was slowing, I almost ran in front of it.

The Germans lumbered behind.

“Hurry the fuck up!” I said.

The morning was peaceful, but I wasn't. We'd missed our buses in two other towns, and I'd be damned if we missed another. Our group leader, and my best friend, Luz, wasn't there to cool my nerves, and the fresh morning air could only do so much.

We hopped in the cab. “Bus station, please,” and the cabbie took us on a complimentary tour of the town for our fare. The bus was leaving in an hour, buying me

time to enjoy the scenery: Spanish colonial architecture with the Sierra Madre de Chiapas mountains just beyond. Beautiful.

Though Gretel had only come to Mexico for this particular trip, the other German, Mica, and I had already logged four months in the small traditional Pacific coast city of Lila. Lila was one of the oldest Mexican cities west of Mexico City and was known for its brutal tropical heat and humidity.

I rolled down my window and breathed in the fresh air. It had been so long since I'd had any relief from the heat. The weather now resembled that of a beautiful spring day in the US city I'd tried to escape, drawing my thoughts to inevitability. No one truly leaves Buffalo.

The cabbie dropped us in front of the bus station, and we walked inside. I was exhausted. I was always exhausted. Sleep was just a temporary delay in one endless and grueling day. My eyes were only opened wide enough to find the ticket counter, then my wallet, then a plastic seat in the waiting room where I relieved my legs of their duty.

I'd noticed another difference between San Cristobal and Lila, other than weather. San Cristobal was a tourist town; Lila wasn't. I looked up and saw a mix of pasty white gringos from—judging by accents—Australia, the US, Britain . . . All the clowns I'd tried to leave behind. For a moment, I was no longer in Mexico, until someone with a remote turned on the small TV mounted to the wall in a darkened corner, shattering my tranquility with the rhythmic blast of a banda music video. Banda was basically a Latino version of polka, and along with mariachi, teeming with cultural significance for the Mexican people. Anyone who's been to San Diego or LA or El Paso has likely heard it blasting from some Mexican's truck at some point or another.

I didn't even look up at the TV. Hearing banda in Mexico was nothing new. I'd been poking fun at it for the previous four months for its trite lyrics and almost ludicrous instrumentals and tried to tune it out when I heard it.

On that morning, however, I believe I felt the true message of the music for the first time. It wasn't the music itself that caused this change, but rather, the reaction of all the gringos in attendance once they'd been jolted awake by the forceful blast of trumpets and piercing grito of the mustached lead singer.

I kept my eyes on the floor until I heard a rumble of laughter that spread throughout the room. It didn't seem intentional, but it happened. I sat within myself for a moment as a tidal wave of thought broke in my mind. Soon, we hopped on the bus and everyone took their seats. Most shut their eyes, but I spent the next six hours fully awake and deep in thought as we twisted and turned through the mountains and countryside in one of Mexico's poorest, yet culturally richest, states, Chiapas.

I'd arrived in Mexico four months earlier. The trip was long and an experience within itself. I flew from Buffalo to Cleveland to Houston to Guadalajara, and in Guadalajara I took a wild cab ride to the central bus station where I boarded a bus to Lila. The bus ride was peaceful and helped to dilute several of the nagging voices of "reason" I hoped to dissolve in whatever solvent the Mexican people had to offer. The bus itself was comfortable and would have been empty if not for the two giggling girls sitting to my right.

My attention, however, was focused through the window to my left. It was late, but the dying amber sun held on just long enough to cast a bronze hue on the lush fields and rolling mountains beyond them—a cordial greeting for this strange white man. For hours, I stared at the small fruit stands, and taquerias, and auto garages that lined the highway. The

dying light of the now fallen sun drew the people from the protective cover of their homes. Shoeless jugadores played soccer matches on dirt fields lit by streetlights, while others worked on cars and smiled. Others stood talking, laughing over god knows how many beers, while elderly men and women sat in lawn chairs, quietly basking in the company of those around them. There were great open fields of tall grass with fires burning in the distance whose flames leapt off the world like brilliant localized solar flares. There were big gorgeous mountains on the horizon in every direction the bus's structure allowed me to see, and every so often a moonlit river would cut through a forest of towering palms as if for nothing other than to please the hungry eyes my inadequate soul had been so longing to satiate. The girls to my right would shoot me intermittent glances then whisper and giggle. But their hushed words weren't necessary. Even if I could understand them, I don't think I would have paid them any attention.

I arrived in Lila around 10 pm. The night was humid and heat oppressive. I wiped the sweat on my brow, grabbed my big blue bag and guitar, and headed into the bus station. Sal was there as he'd said he'd be, along with our other college buddy whom we lovingly referred to as Cletus. I'd known Sal for the better part of a decade, but we'd only been friends for the last few of those years. We grew up in the same town, went to the same high school—he was even friends with my older brother. But it wasn't until college that our lives had aligned. He told people he was in Lila studying the Vulcan Rojo, Mexico's most active volcano. This was a true. He was a grad student at the Universidad de Lila's School of Volcanology. But I already knew he was there for the same reason that I was—whatever that reason could be . . .

Cletus was an adventurous, well-intentioned chap but was prone to mood swings and self-loathing. Perhaps it was due to years of everyone calling the poor fucker Cletus? Cletus was only halfway through a two-week vacation but was ready to go home.

“Hey, William, how was the trip?” Cletus said.

“Long.”

“How’ve you been? I think it’s been over a year now, huh?”

Just hearing those words aged me some calculable degree. “Good.” What the hell else can you say to someone you haven’t seen in so long?

Sal made a call on his cell phone, and soon a blue hatchback came tearing around the corner. The driver, a beefy Mexican named Marco, stopped, got out, and popped the hatch. I laid down my guitar and big blue bag, closed the hatch, and piled in the backseat with Sal and Cletus. A husky German named Jorg sat shotgun. He turned, shook my hand, and gave a jovial “Hello,” then turned his attention back to the road. The other guys continued talking among themselves.

I preferred not to speak to anyone. I wanted to take in the sights. Lila was a gorgeous town. Its stucco houses and cobblestone streets were something I had hoped to see. Sal had described the city in his fervent recruitment efforts to get me to move down there, and now here I was, rearranging all the misplaced colors and shapes of my own fantasy.

We took the main road, Madrid del Rio, past the University’s sports complex called the Deportivo, and swung a left just before an elementary school. This road, unlike the paved main one, was cobblestone, and it led downhill, dumping us at the only house at its dead end. A white tile walkway led from the curb through the gated front door and spread out into every room in the stucco house, which looked as though it were a giant rock structure forced upward through the earth’s crust by, perhaps, some great lake of magma just

below the surface. In front of the house and to its right was a thick stone wall at least fifteen feet high that spanned the enormous perimeter of the city's cemetery, or panteon. With the exception of the neighbors sharing our western wall, that house stood apart from humanity.

Marco pulled the car under a series of almendros, or almond trees, out front, and we followed the walkway inside. Conversation could only take us so far, and soon we were back on the cobblestone streets in search of drinks. We set out on foot, following the panteon's wall to the nearest Arce, which was a Mexican liquor store chain. We each shelled out twelve pesos for a caguama, a liter of beer, and the guy behind the counter dunked his hand into a large plastic tub, navigated the waters of melting ice block, and grabbed out the glass bottles. We returned to the house and sat on uncomfortable handcrafted furniture and gulped our beers. Now true introductions could be made.

"I'm tellin' you, chicks here are prude." Sal spewed this crap as if he'd actually believed it. "They're all traditional catholic. It's gonna take you at least six months to get in anyone's pants, *if* you can get past their fathers."

Marco said, in English, "The girl I have been seeing, it takes me long time, maybe seis months?"

"Damn, you gotta step up your game, man," I said.

Marco inhaled deeply and gave me a look as if to say "that shit ain't gonna fly here," then let it go. He wasn't the kind of guy you wanted on your bad side. He stood about six feet with broad muscular shoulders and face-poundin' fists. But he seemed equal parts lover to fighter. He was a handsome dude who put a lot of thought into his style, which was built on tight designer clothes and lots of hair gel for his mullet. Despite the tough guy bullshit, Marco was personable and enjoyed drinking, fighting, shredding guitar, and getting laid. I liked him right away.

“I think I would have to disagree with both of you. It doesn’t take me long to,” Jorg smiled like some dumbass kid, “make it with the ladies.” It was a surprising statement. Jorg was a bespectacled twenty-nine year old grad student, and though he was a likeable guy, he wasn’t the best looking of characters. Jorg, like Sal, was in Mexico to study volcanology. He divided his time equally between the volcano, the Universidad, and parties. Though still husky, he’d lost considerable weight since his arrival in Lila nearly four months previous, most likely due to the high altitude fieldwork he’d been doing on the volcano.

Sal and I broke out our guitars during a lull in the conversation, but I stopped playing when I heard Marco repeat a word while speaking with Jorg.

“What’s alacran?” I said.

Sal smirked as Marco answered.

“Alacran means scorpion.”

Sal couldn’t wait to bust in. “You better be careful, boy. This house is infested with yellow scorpions, and those are the most dangerous kind. If you get stung, you got like twenty minutes to get to the hospital or you’ll start convulsing. You could even die.”

“Fuck!” I said.

“Yeah, I see three of them just last week,” Jorg said. “I shished them out the door with the broom. Just be sure to always wear sandals.”

“Yeah, and check your bed each night before you go to sleep,” Sal said.

“Man, I’m glad I’m leaving here soon,” Cletus said.

Christ! I laughed off their comments but knew I’d be dealing with their aftermath later on. I gulped my caguama.

“Just wait, Willy,” Sal said. “You’ll be seeing a lot of wildlife around here. Snakes, tarantulas, rats, mosquitoes carrying malaria. There are enormous bats that hang in the

almond trees out front. One flew right into my chest the other night as I was coming home from a run. It's crazy."

Soon, the conversation wore itself out and most decided on sleep. Despite the exhausting my journey, I wanted to explore the city. Cletus was the only to accept my invitation to grab a few beers, and we set off down the cobblestone streets in search of a place still open. We found a bar advertising two-for-one beers and sat at a wobbly plastic table outside. A waiter came over and tried explaining something but soon gave up when the cold blank stares on our faces never warmed. He tossed down a couple of menus and wandered away. Cletus had visited a number of bars in the past week and laughed when he saw the prices.

"What?" I said.

"They offer two-for-one beers here because they're double the price."

"Man, this fuckin' place, huh?"

The waiter came back, and Cletus and I pointed to what we wanted on the menu. The waiter left and returned with four Indios. Despite our inability to communicate with them, the bar staff was friendly. The guy who looked to be the owner came over to introduce himself. He was a gregarious chap who didn't stop flapping after introductions. He very well may have been telling us how great our mothers sucked cock, but he did so with such cordiality we couldn't help but think he was on our side. He tossed down a plastic bowl of spiced nuts before waddling away.

Cletus had an uneasy look about him.

"What's wrong, Cletoid?"

"Eh, not much." He took a sip. "It's just that I've been here for a week now and haven't done shit. Sal promised to take me to the beach, to Guadalajara, to the top of the

damn volcano. But we never do anything. He wakes up at two, jerks off for a few hours, then we sit around and get drunk until it's time to pass out again. I haven't seen a damn thing outside of these bars."

"Yeah, that does suck."

"And he's such an asshole on top of it. Just the other day we went out to eat with his girlfriend, Paz. Halfway through, dinner he chucked a hot tortilla in her face and stormed out."

"That's crazy. Why'd he do that?"

"You know him. Everything was fine until she offered me a spoonful of rice, and he went insane."

"What a lunatic!"

"Yeah. You really should just get away from him. Go explore Mexico on your own."

"Yeah, but he's not *that* bad."

I knew the words were a lie before I even said them—but I still did. Sal was a mercurial beast. No one knew when he was going to blow, but blow he did, and often. Cletus knew this better than anyone. The two were roommates in college. One night, Sal got upset with Cletus for something trivial like not washing a dish after using it, so he kicked down Cletus's door while Cletus was asleep, jumped on his bed, and slapped him hard across the face. And the abuse wasn't just physical. Cletus once made the mistake of bringing a cute new girlfriend over to the house. Sal asked her if Cletus had a small cock. She just giggled. Sal said he was sure his was bigger, so he called Cletus over and told him to whip it out so she could compare. Cletus obviously refused, but Sal persisted. Sal pulled his out, and she indeed confirmed it to be the bigger of the two. Then she started touching it. Cletus did nothing. He and his girl broke up soon after.

This abuse wasn't just directed at Cletus. I'd taken a good brunt of it as well, but not the physical stuff. I think Sal knew not to push me like that. But the mind games . . .

In the summer of 2005, we took a road trip together: six weeks across the country, from Buffalo to Denver to Seattle, then down to LA, Vegas, and the Grand Canyon and straight back to Buffalo in a thirty-hour marathon of driving—a feat I wouldn't recreate even if Salma Hayek was giving roadhead the whole trip. In those six weeks, we'd experienced some great highs together, but none could even out the lows. With Sal it was one sadistic game after the next. We spent most of the trip camping in state or national parks:

Yellowstone, Glacier, Mt. St. Helens, Crater Lake. He'd do things like pack up his tent in the twilight hours of morning while I was still asleep in my own, then start the car, stick his head out the window, and say something like, "If you're not packed up and out of here in five minutes, I'm leaving you." It might have been funny if it wasn't true. He did leave me once, and I had to walk several miles with all my gear to catch up. I could go on, but there'd be no room for any other story.

And now here I was, sitting in some small bar in some small Mexican town, drawn there by the exact same promises that were so ruthlessly unfulfilled for Cletus. Was I a fool? I knew the answer to that question and ignored it.

Sal had moved to Lila in the fall shortly after our road trip. For months, he'd been asking me to move down there with him. He'd call with stories of crazy parties, hikes up the volcano, bus trips to other cities. But I always refused.

I studied education in college and began student teaching that same fall. It was one of the most difficult periods of my life. Each day I went to school, I felt worse than the previous. I hated teaching, and schools, and ties, and pants with pleats, and people sitting around faculty rooms discussing prime-time TV and their boring-ass kids. But I hung in

there. It was something I had to do or society would have shamed me even deeper into myself. And each time Sal called with another story about gorgeous Mexican women and lively cultural festivals in the town square, a large part of me wanted to hang up. I knew if I said yes, maybe I'd never be able to say no to anything ever again. I was doing bad—worse than I think even I knew. I was getting fall-down drunk every moment I had away from school. A lot of heavy drugs were being passed my way, and each time I refused them I felt less resolve to ever do so again. One night in particular, I was hanging out with a friend addicted to heroin—didn't drink, didn't smoke reefer or cig's—just shot H. I watched him cook up, pierce his skin, milk blood, and empty the evil liquid into his arm. He pulled out the syringe, removed the needle, licked it, and threw it behind his couch, then he took off his shirt and gave some contrived speech about the superiority of the human body on heroin, followed by an intense flexing session. After, he grabbed a small scooper, dipped it in the bag of China white, and presented it.

“Who wants some of this?”

“Willy'll do it,” said a friend.

“Yeah, don't be a pussy,” said another.

I was stoned and drunk and already living at the limit of sanity. I thought long and hard then said “Sure” as casually as if he'd asked me if I'd wanted a bag of mixed nuts. But right at the final moment, as the scooper was a deep breath from my nostrils, I glanced at a husky friend lying on the floor—Junkyard Jake, we called him—who was barely conscious.

“Uh, Junkyard'll do it,” I said.

I didn't think he'd agree, but Jake shrugged his shoulders and snorted the powder meant for my nose. I don't know what would have happened to me if I'd taken it. Maybe I would've liked it? Maybe I would've made it part of the routine? Maybe my dick would've

grown six inches, and I'd be crowned the King of Siam? Who knows? But what I did know was that ol' Junkyard wouldn't always be around to save me from myself.

Sal called a few days later: "Hey, you gotta get down here. I'm drinking a beer and walking around the streets in nothing but my underwear, and nobody's saying shit. The cops just drove by and kept right on going."

Goddamn it! I wanted to believe. But I thought of our road trip. I thought of the time he slammed me face-first on a bar alley street after we got into an argument over Iggy Pop's real name. The times he threatened to poison my food with magic mushrooms before I had a test or a class presentation. The times we'd stolen bikes or cars, took 'em for joy rides, and brought them back in the middle of the night. The houses we'd broken into just to prove we could . . .

"I'm in."

"Excellent! You should wire me the cash so I can pay the landlady for your room. This way it'll be ready before you get here."

And so it went . . .

Chapter 2

We followed the panteon walls back to the house. Cletus claimed the couch, and I walked into Sal's room. He had a king-size bed made of two twins put together but had split them up before Cletus and I left for the bar, and I laid down on the far half. This wouldn't have been necessary had the landlady honored my rent payment. But she'd taken my loot then rented the room to some German two weeks before I got there. I could take care of all that tomorrow though. For now sleep, but only after checking the sheets for scorpions—my new bedtime routine no matter how desperate I was for slumber.

In the morning, I met the pale German occupying my room. He sat on the handmade loveseat in the living room, typing on a laptop and sucking the guts out of a cigarette. His name was Matthew, but we called him Mica after some miscommunication, and the name stuck. He didn't care either way. Mica donned similar style glasses to Jorg and even came from the same town in Germany, Essen. In his twenty-two years of life, Mica had already spent a year in Australia, where he became fluent in English, three weeks in Hong Kong, and several months rambling through Europe. Though he was German, he preferred speaking in English. This made my life easier. Since I was lowest in the house rankings, I asked Sal if he'd bring up my predicament to the reticent German. He complied.

“Hey, man,” Sal said, “it looks like Maria rented out the same room to both of you. William already paid for it before you got here so he'd be all set up when he arrived.”

“Oh, how unfortunate. Perhaps we should pay her a visit to amend the situation?”

Though I felt uncomfortable causing a stir, it was only right. The woman screwed us both. I hoped this didn't set a precedent for all future business deals in Mexico. Sal, Mica, and I set off for the landlady's house, and Cletus stayed home. We walked in the blistering

heat and followed the panteon walls around the block. When we arrived, Sal tapped a key on the iron gate.

Maria called to us from the house, but I had no clue what she was saying. Mica's Spanish was as green as mine. He'd taken a yearlong prep course at a university in Essen before joining the study abroad program, putting him at about the same skill level as me. I'd studied Spanish for seven years through grammar and high school but hadn't taken a single class since.

Maria fumbled through the door and shuffled to the gate. She wore a light cotton dress, which hung from her wilted frame and flowed like her long unkempt grey hair. Two short fat dogs with matted hair followed behind, barking incessantly. She waited until she arrived at the gate to start speaking, but didn't open it. She said something at us in Spanish, and only Sal responded.

Salvatore Juarez was a half-Mexican, half-Italian hybrid who grew up on the streets of Buffalo. The Mexican half of his family was from Guadalajara. Before beginning his studies with the Universidad, Sal knew about enough Spanish to converse with them—which was about the same that I knew. As he spoke to Maria, however, it was clear to me that he'd become near-fluent in the nine months he'd been in Lila. This gave me hope.

I tried my hardest to understand the conversation. Though I picked up on several words, I had no idea how to piece them together. The more defeated I felt, the more my eyes wandered—and they found a feast. Maria's house was like an alternate Noah's Ark for all those creatures too strange to be granted permission to board with ol' Noah. Two balding rail-thin cats lounged on a window ledge just above a shirtless man sitting in a fold-out chair and staring into space. The man looked emaciated and his torso revealed an abacus of ribs. His gaze was distant, likely taking him well beyond our frivolous matters with Maria and

transporting him to another place entirely. He looked to be in his mid-50s, but it's possible he was younger and had aged beyond his years. Judging by the sunken lines on his face, tremors of his hands, and intense distant gaze, I couldn't help but think this man was an addict or recovering addict of something.

The dogs kept barking long after we'd walked from the house.

"So what'd she say?" I said.

"She said we'd have to take care of this on our own."

"That's it?" Mica said. "Seemed like she had a lot more to say than just that."

"She did mention that she had a few other properties she was renting, and that we could check those out."

"I wouldn't mind moving if I had to," Mica said.

"Goddamn it!" I said. "She probably makes a killing screwing foreigners."

Sal got a phone call, spoke, and hung up. "That was my friend Jose. He wants to know if you guys wanna to go to El Campo today. There are some ruins there worth checking out."

"Well, my day is ruined anyways . . ." I said.

Sal laughed.

"I've got a lot of work to do, so you can count me out," Mica said.

We stopped by the house to get Cletus then hiked up the dead-end hill, crossed Madrid del Rio, and hopped on a bus just outside the Deportivo. The bus took us down Madrid del Rio through the commercial heart of town. We passed posh clothing stores, sushi bars, a megaplex movie theater, and a Super Walmart. We got out at the corner just before Walmart and waited for another bus. Soon, a rickety old blue jalopy came sputtering around the corner. We hopped on this new bus when it stopped, and it took us north. Though we

passed some more businesses, this was mostly a residential area. Most homes were modest stone structures like those I'd already seen. Others, however, were gargantuan mansions resembling small palaces and were usually located behind high, thick stone walls with armed guards at the front gates.

We passed a main highway and soon had left progress behind. We continued onto a dirt road and were enveloped with vegetation. The tree cover here was thick but thinned away revealing great pastures just beyond where cows grazed and bulls rested. The road was full of potholes, some the size of a bathtub, and the driver made frequent turns to weave around them as we sputtered and bounced along. Our speed reduced as the scenery improved. We passed a terraced farm with three levels, each with soccer nets at its ends, just beyond a small stone farmhouse. In the distance was an enormous tree that towered over everything but the mountains beyond. The tree stood alone, with strained limbs sagging towards the earth. Its massive branches grew from its trunk like trees of their own, and each spread out for a good fifty-feet before opening up into a brilliant display of lush, green leaves.

The gorgeous countryside soon met a small rural town, which seemed frozen in time, and continued through it as though it were a lazy green river. We passed a shrine to the Virgin Mother decorated with flowers and strands of Christmas lights wrapped around its concrete frame. Several men rode by on horses, exchanging casual greetings with their townsfolk. The dirt road ended on the edge of town, and we were soon on cobblestones again. These stones, however, were in much more need of replacement than those just beyond the forest in Lila. The town's name was El Campo, and it was unwittingly built over the buried ruins of an ancient civilization that weren't discovered until 1945. Though some

of the town had been dug up to expose these ruins, there was only so much they could dig without having to evict the town's current residents.

We hopped off the bus at its first stop and were greeted by a tall thin young Mexican man named Jose. Though reticent, Jose wasn't the least bit shy. There was a subtle confidence and warmth about him, making him easy to like right away. We exchanged handshakes and hellos. I overheard Sal whisper something to him, and Jose nodded.

"Hey, Will," Sal said, "say 'quiero' then 'ver' and 'gas' all together."

"What's that mean? I want dicks or something?" I had a lot of experience with practical jokes and was pretty keen to them as they were unfurling.

"No, no, it means, 'I want to see gas.'"

"Why the hell you want me to say that?"

"Just do it."

"What the fuck: Quiero ver gas."

They started laughing.

"What the hell does it mean?"

"Verga is slang for dick. You just said, 'I want dicks.'"

"You guys are pretty classy."

Jose led us through the gate and inside the ruins. There was an entrance fee but his aunt ran the town, so we got in free. As a kid, Jose would come down to the ruins and seek out white foreigners in hopes they could teach him some English. Jose spoke English fairly well compared to the rest of the Mexicans I was soon to meet. He had a natural hunger for knowledge, which invigorated me. He guided us through the ruins and interrupted our inane chatter with interesting and informative stories about the pyramids, altars, and ball courts.

The sun was almost directly overhead and cooked my skin, and even though I loved a challenge, the heat was too much. But it wasn't just the heat that got me. The humidity was brutal too. Cletus was feeling it as well, and soon we were on the rickety blue bus back to Lila.

The bus was hot and full of riders. Some teenage girls in catholic schoolgirl uniforms giggled and stared at us for the length of the trip. When we got off at a sandwich place, they followed behind, giggling and shouting words like "guapos" and "hermosos." I knew enough Spanish to smile at those words. They continued to shout words at us while they walked down the street. Day number two, and almost every girl I'd seen had been thus receptive to my pasty-white ass. I felt as sexy as a middle-aged Marlon Brando.

Regardless of any minor successes, I knew I'd need to figure out my living situation. Mica was typing on his computer when we got back.

"Maria stopped by while you guys were gone," Mica said. "She said she'd be by tomorrow to show us her other properties."

"Sal, we're going to the beach tomorrow, right?" Cletus said.

Sal didn't even look at him. "I wouldn't mind checking out houses tomorrow."

Cletus sighed.

That night, Sal, Cletus, Mica, and I went to Crystal, a trendy club teeming with teenybopper socialites looking to scale Lila's social hierarchy. We walked in after getting patted down at the door and headed for the bar where we were told we had to order from a waitress who'd bring us drinks. We flagged one down and made good use of the all-you-can-drink deal that came with the cover.

I scanned the room while sipping a Cuba Libre. Both stories were filled with ass-shaking Latinos. We were the only gringos in the crowd.

It didn't take long before we were dancing and didn't take long after that to find some girls. A tall one took a liking to me, and I ground sloppily on her leg.

"That's not how girls dance in this country."

"But it is how we dance in mine."

We kept downing Cuba Libre's and the room kept spinning—clouds of fog, cheap laser lights, mirrors covering the walls . . . I was drunk on the moment. We got tired of dancing, ditched the girls, and headed back to the house to slug some caguamas.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of Sal and Cletus arguing in the living room.

"Can't you guys check out the houses tomorrow? You said we'd go to the beach today?"

"If you wanna go to the beach, take the damn bus."

"But I'm leaving *tonight!*"

"Nobody's stopping you from going . . ."

I could already tell it was gonna be a long day.

Maria stopped by a little while later and drove Sal, Mica, and me to another house. Cletus stayed behind, citing a bad stomach. I didn't blame him.

We drove along the panteon walls, made a turn at a small street taco stand, parked in front of a large pink house, and walked inside. It was huge—double the size of our current place. It had three bedrooms, a sizeable backyard, garage, washer and dryer, and my favorite feature, a dining room that looked as if it were dug into a cave. Sal did the talking.

“How much she say?” I said.

“Fourteen hundred pesos a month.”

“That’s cheap!”

“It’s fourteen hundred per person.”

“Isn’t that standard?”

“It’ll be fourteen hundred per person, for six people.”

Ahh, there was the bullshit. She wanted to cram two sausages in each room.

“Or you could pay four thousand pesos and have your own room.”

I laughed. I’d be out of cash in two months paying that much. Sal’s reaction was similar. Mica, however, wasn’t so hasty to decline.

Maria drove us back later on. Cletus was on the uncomfortable sofa when we arrived. I sat next to him, and he handed me a note scribbled on a piece of graph paper.

“What’s this?” I scanned it.

“That girl you were dancing last night with stopped by while you were gone. She wanted to see you. She left her phone number and email address.”

“Christ, *I* don’t even know the name of our street. How’d she find me?”

“She said you told her you were at the bottom of the dead end near the university.”

“Crazy.”

Just then, a clumsy fellow in a shirt and tie wandered up to the house. He held a briefcase in one hand and a bible in the other. I was the only person to acknowledge his presence; I met him on the sidewalk.

“Hello,” he said.

“What’s happenin’, padre?”

“Do you believe in the lord jesus christ? If not, you must repent . . .”

I stared at him blankly. I could only make out a few words here and there. Normally I would have sent the prick away. But I encouraged the conversation.

“Sorry, man,” I said, in English, “I don’t go for that guy like you do. We had a pretty ugly breakup.”

“Here, take one of these. Read it every day . . .”

He opened his briefcase, pulled out an annotated bible, and handed it over. I thumbed through it while he continued to speak. The images were rough crayon sketches that seemed to have been drawn by a precocious third grader. I could hear the guys cracking open beers in the living room. I kept flipping pages and stopped on a picture of christ carrying the cross—blood everywhere.

“I’d seen enough of this shit, man . . .” I tried handing it back to him, but he refused to take it.

I wanted to walk away but remained still. There was something about the man’s demeanor that set me at ease. I knew I could fail a million times at conversation, but he wouldn’t leave me hanging. We spoke like that for a good forty-five before the guys pushed out the front door, and he left.

Sal handed me a beer. “Who the hell was that?”

“The hell, that’s who . . .”

We sucked down a few under the almond trees before dropping Cletus off at the bus station. The kid had the travellin’ gene. I knew it wouldn’t be long before he was in motion again. He ended up in Thailand a few months later after picking up a teaching gig there.

I wished him well before he left.

Chapter 3

When we got back from the bus station, Mica told us about a party going on that night at a fellow German's house. I was in, but Sal wasn't: "Paz's been ridin' me to take her to that new Julia Roberts flick . . ."

Mica and I drank a few caguamas under the almond trees before the party. The bats were out, and huge, and darting in and around us as we spoke—a few times almost making contact.

"Damn, fuckin' Bela Lugosi!" I ducked, almost spilling my beer, then bent over and scratched my legs.

"I've been thinking about that new place the inept one showed us today," Mica said. "I think I'm going to take it."

"Seems like a good place. I just don't trust that bitch." I kept scratching.

"Yeah, she does seem quite aloof . . . You know, you can use the washing machine whenever you'd like."

"Thanks, man, I appreciate that." I couldn't stop scratching. I examined my legs. "Goddamn, these bugs are eating me alive." I had at least fifty red bumps located mostly around the ankles of both legs.

"Yeah, the bugs are terrible. I've been here for two weeks now and it's starting to slow down. I think they just like fresh blood. I've had some time to process the Mexican food through my system, and they're not biting as much."

"I hope that works 'cause I can't take much more of this shit."

We slugged through our caguamas. Mica finished first.

"Damn, you must be thirsty."

“Well, you know what they say: ‘The German body runs on beer.’”

I laughed, caught up, and soon we were following the panteon walls to the party. Mica’s friend lived a few houses from Maria. His name was Hans, and he was twenty-five and in Mexico on a vacation that never ended. Hans was swinging in a hammock under an awning in his driveway and chatting with his girlfriend, Daniela, when we showed up. I was jealous of Hans for two reasons: the hammock and his girl. We must have been early because we were the only guests there. We slugged some caguamas as we spoke.

“When will the others arrive?” Mica spoke in English, because we all at least knew some of it. Hans was quick to correct this error.

“We are in Mexico, please speak in Spanish.” He said this in English, mind you. Hans spoke it well but practiced a “No English” policy as did so many other English speakers in Mexico who would piss me off in the future. I valued the exchange of thoughts and feelings above a need to conform to trends. He replied once more in English, “They’ll arrive soon. The party doesn’t start for another half hour.” He gulped his caguama, nearly tipping it back at a ninety-degree angle, then dragged on his cigarette. For some reason, he was shirtless. He exhaled as he asked us, now in Spanish, “Have you met my girlfriend, Daniela?”

Mica and I shook our heads. We said hello to Daniela, and in our minds we all agreed—Hans, I’m sure, included—that she was far too beautiful for him. Dark hair, cute face, great body . . . Hans lay there like a worm wrapped in a rainbow cocoon. He continued to suck at his cigarette. We banged our way through an awkward conversation before guests started to arrive. Hans kept mentioning something about the “extraneros.” I asked what the word meant, and he said, “foreigners” or “foreign exchange students.” Apparently, each semester brought with it a new wave of exchange students to the Universidad, and this

particular group loved to party. There were about forty in total. Most came from Central and South America, but there were a number of Germans, Brits, a Canadian, and a Nigerian. None, surprisingly, could claim the US as their home country. I liked that.

The extraneros showed up to the party in waves. The first I met were two lovely Columbian girls. They both had fair skin and round pretty faces, which I got to see up close when they each leaned in and kissed my cheek to say hello. This was a custom I could get used to. We sat together on wooden chairs outside and patiently struggled through a conversation, relying more on carnal instinct than a definitive verbal language. Neither of them spoke any English, so they were in no danger of breaking house rules.

My Spanish was, however, coming back to me now that I had a motive to remember it. The girls told me stories about Columbia. I understood every few words and through patience and hand gestures was able to pick up on the gist of what was said. Patience was key. Here I couldn't awkwardly machine-gun my through a conversation just to finish it the way I did back in the States. Anxiousness was to be expected, and patience was already built into the conversation. This set my mind at ease. I could focus more on the words I was saying than on how I was saying them. And I used those words I knew to tell the girls about myself. They asked what I was doing in Mexico. I smiled. That was a question I don't think I could have answered in English. Soon, I was throwing out words and phrases, and verb conjugations I hadn't used since fifth period Spanish with Sra. Rodriguez. The human mind was a fascinating entity, and I distinctly remember in that moment thinking how glad I was I hadn't yet completely destroyed my own.

Party people kept coming as the Columbians and I kept conversing. I met Peruvians, Argentines, a cluster of Germans, an Ecuadorian, more Columbians. They pushed into the house carrying bottles of liquor and beer, smoking cigarettes and conversing in celebratory

tones. When the music started, it didn't stop all night. My conversation with the Columbian girls ran dry at about the same time as did my caguama, so I followed the extraneros into the house to see what could be afforded. I did half a lap around a giant circular table separating the living room dance floor from the kitchen when a cute girl handed me a glass filled with some kind of punch.

“What is this?”

“Ponche. You drink it.”

I shrugged my shoulders and took it down the hatch. “ES FUERTE!” I shouted to match the party's energy.

“Jes, I know. You take more.”

She shoveled back in the punch bowl and poured me another glass.

The crowd was multiplying on the dance floor. I pushed through it and found one of my Columbian princesses. She didn't mind me grinding on her. I could feel her body warming. Thank god I'd made it through the question and answer round. This one took far less energy. Though I'd felt an intense freedom dancing with that gorgeous girl, I couldn't help but feel trapped in some new and specific way. There was no way to really know her, and there was no way for her to know me—at least, not in that moment. I chugged the rest of my ponche.

The Columbian and I got separated between bathroom breaks. In my drunken wandering, I met a Mexican girl named Juana. She spoke some English.

“Hola, gringo, how are you?” she said.

“Bien. What's that word, 'gringo' mean?”

“Someone from the United States.”

“Well, how'd you know I was from the United States?”

“Only a gringo wears his hat backwards.”

“I don’t think I like that word.”

“Is not bad. Just means ‘foreigner,’ really. Nada feo.”

“So, this must be a gringo party, then?”

“Jes, and they are the best! The gringos party harder than anyone else! I prefer for to be with them.”

Though she spent most her time with the extraneros, she wasn’t one herself. Juana was a full-blooded Mexican born and raised on the cobblestone streets of Lila. She wasn’t the only local I’d met who hung with such a transitory group. These Mexicans who were drawn to foreigners intrigued me. These who made friends with the fleeting, who invested time in the transitory, energy in the ephemeral. What did she stand to gain from a group who’d likely be gone in a college semester? Was she onto something here? I knew the answer to that question and did my best to ignore it.

Juana was a fun and personable girl even though she was prone to bitching. There was a spark to her—a desire for something more but nothing resembling greed. Something about her put me at ease but also provoked my inner devil. I liked Juana right away.

Mica and I were some of the last guests to leave the party. We walked together along the panteon walls and were soon home. I felt good about my minor success in communicating with the Columbians and in meeting some new people. There was still so much to learn. I wished I could fast-forward a few months to where I could at least speak Spanish at a conversational level. But I allowed those thoughts to rest, checked my half of Sal’s bed for scorpions, and went to sleep.

Mica moved out the next morning. He didn't have many possessions, just an old leather suitcase and his computer, and after a half hour of packing, not a trace of him was left in the house. Sal and I wanted to help him move, but we had other matters to attend to that afternoon. It was Paz's twenty-fourth birthday, and we had a lot to prepare. Jose's aunt owned a bar in El Campo, and she closed it to the public that night so that we could hold a proper fiesta. Sal's friend Javier, who was also friends with Paz, said he'd drive us around to pick up what was necessary for the party.

Javier showed up just past noon. He hopped out of his truck and staggered up the front walk. Javier was a small man with sharp facial features. He exuded energy and carried a perpetual smile, which seemed his default expression. It was as if he'd consciously blocked out sadness and had himself convinced he could achieve this impossible goal simply by smiling. Well, Javier was smiling, and smiling hard while staggering toward us. He looked drunk, and judging by the full forty-ounce bottle of Sol he was carrying, it looked as if he planned to stay that way the rest of the afternoon. He walked up to Sal and gave him a big hug.

"What's *up*, cabron!" Javier said.

"Chillin', Javie. How you been?" Sal pulled away from Javier's clutches.

"Eh, you know . . . So this must be Will!" Before I had time to object, Javier grabbed my arm, pulled me to him, and hugged me. "Cabron!" It was clear to me this was his catch phrase. He soon released me.

We squeezed inside the cab of the small truck, and Javier grabbed some plastic cups off the floor. He gave one to Sal and one to me, and filled them with his caguama.

"This is the way to start an afternoon!" I said before taking a gulp.

"Get used to it. It's not illegal for passengers to drink in a car in Mexico," Sal said.

We brought our drinks together for a festive “Salud!” then hit the road. I could get used to this.

We sped along the cobblestone streets, swerving every so often as Javier gulped his beer. We stopped first at a pasteleria to check out some cakes. Though Sal had his wallet set on the cheapest one in the display case, the pretty woman behind the counter guilt-tripped him into buying the most deluxe confection in the place. People often seemed perplexed by those who swung between the extremes, but they made perfect sense to me. Sal was one of those cats who’d just as soon max out his credit card to stay in a five-star hotel’s penthouse suite as he would sleep in a cardboard box in the alley out back. Maybe that’s why we were friends?

The lady wrapped up the overpriced hunk of sugar, and we set off again in our rolling bar. Our next stop was for the piñata. We drove to el Centro, or the town center, and stopped in front of a small stone house with a dirt floor. We walked inside and were enveloped in weirdness. There, hanging from the wooden rafters, were several dozen piñatas swaying in the breeze. It looked as if some medieval king had just put down a rebellion, and we’d stumbled upon the gallows after sentencing. But instead of people, this rebellion seemed to be led by frogs, and pigs dressed like princesses, and a giant apple. Sal approached the man while he was pasting up the guts of an elephant, and soon, we walked out of there with a chiva, or goat.

On the way to the truck, we passed a hardware store, and I asked Sal and Javier to follow me inside. I sent Sal to find the thickest plastic tubing in the place while I went for their biggest funnel. I paid for both items and explained to Javier what they’d be used for on the way back to his truck.

Javier dropped us off under the almond trees, and Sal and I went inside the house. I boiled some water to assemble the funnel, and Sal grabbed his guitar. When I finished with the funnel, Sal told me to grab my guitar too. He wanted to play a song for Paz that night and needed me for rhythm while he did a solo. We'd played in a band with a few other guys during our senior year in college—Sal on bass, me on rhythm guitar. We were just starting to hit our groove when graduation tossed us, and our instruments, out on the street. It was one of the most potent time periods of my life, and I still didn't believe it to be completely over.

Sal started with three simple chords, which didn't change through the song, E minor, C, and G. Then the words: "I see you at my door/I know just where you wanna go/But night falls down/And can't this wait another day . . ." The song had a great rhythm and melody.

When we finished, we put the guitars down.

"You write that?" I said.

Sal shook his head.

"Who did?"

Sal said nothing and walked away.

I put my guitar away and decided to settle into my new room. I unpacked my big, blue bag, put new sheets on the bed, and hung up my clothes in the closet. The room was small but had a high ceiling on the far end that sloped down to the wall near the door, making it feel larger than it was. There was a jalousie window in that wall, but all the glass panels were missing, leaving a big opening between my room and the hallway. There was a clear shot from that window to another across the hall leading to the outside. None of the windows in the house had glass; all but mine were simply large openings with security bars

around them. Anything small enough to fit between those bars could slither its way inside. I hadn't noticed this until that afternoon. I checked under the bed just to be sure . . .

I could hear Sal playing guitar in his room. Though the door was closed, and he wasn't playing loudly, I could hear all of his words: "Can't this wait another day . . ." He finished the song and started it again. Then came the music from his speakers: "Can't this wait another day. . ." I knew that voice. It was Ian Warsaw. Ian went to high school with us in Buffalo and was Sal's best friend. After high school, Ian tramped it out to California. He lived on the streets in Venice Beach and started to make a name for himself playing his songs at local bars. The kid had a golden voice for rock—raspy and soulful with just the right amount of desperation. He signed with a major record label that asked him to assemble a band. Ian asked Sal to join before asking anyone else. Sal played a mean bass and would have done the group justice.

But Sal said no. And he never gave a reason why—at least, he never gave me a reason. Ian's group got pretty big in 2002. Their first album sold over 400,000 copies, and they had a few songs move up the Mainstream Rock chart. But this never seemed to bother Sal—a kid who lived for music. He just stayed there in his bedroom that afternoon, playing along with that song over and over . . .

I fell asleep in my new bed and woke when a driver started honking out front. Sal poked his head through the open space in my wall.

"Yo, Marco's here to bring us to the party."

"Wha—Okay, gimme a few minutes to take a shower."

"No, man, the party's starting soon. We gotta get going."

"But you didn't tell me he was coming, and I look like hell." It was true. I was in nothing but a sweat-stained yellow t-shirt and a pair of cotton gym shorts.

“You look fine—let’s go. Grab your guitar.”

Marco laid on the horn.

“Fuck it.” I hopped out of bed, put on a hat, grabbed my guitar and the funnel, and we hit the road. We picked up Mica then drove down Madrid del Rio and made a right just before the Super Walmart. The sky drizzled as it had all day. Marco took us past the posh boutiques and row of mansions, and soon we were swallowed in the dark void leading to El Campo.

When we emerged from the darkness, we parked in front of a pair of heavy wooden doors attached to a high brick wall. We pushed through the doors and entered an open space alongside a covered bar area. Jose waved at us from behind the bar, and we walked over.

Paz and her guests were seated around a long series of tables that had been pushed together. There were maybe twenty-five guests in all, but more came in behind us. They were all dressed nicely. I looked down at my gym shorts and sighed. Sal looked at them and laughed.

Paz sat at the head of the table. She was a petite morena with sharp facial features and deep, dark eyes which were somehow pronounced even among the rest of her natural beauty. She was a business student at the Universidad and wanted to open her own clothing store in Lila when she graduated. For someone who studied business, she should have seen a bad deal as it approached, but she just sat there as Sal walked over and gave her a kiss.

Sal introduced us, and we kissed cheeks, then Paz introduced me to a group of her friends. Marta had kind eyes, but they seemed that could only remain so by her refusal to ever look at a single thing ugly. I kissed her cheek and said hello. Sofia was tall and pretty. I’d seen a picture of her on Sal’s wall before that night and couldn’t wait to meet her. She seemed kind too, but in a similar way to Marta. I kissed her cheek as well. Tito was lively and

loud but underneath the celebrative exterior had a quiet dogmatism that threatened to erupt into ruthless contention at the slightest hint of a challenge. There was something about that quality I admired. He seemed the type who'd never be taken alive without a fight. I leaned forward to kiss his cheek, out of rote and nervousness, but stopped myself before planting one. He smiled. Javier arrived later on with a notably thin, almost emaciated, man named Edgar. Javier introduced us, and we shook hands.

Sal sat beside Paz at the head of the table among the heaviest concentration of guests. Mica and I walked to the opposite side and found our rightful place separated from the rest of the party. Marta broke from the group and sat next to me.

Mica scanned the menu. "What's a michelada?"

"A michelada has beer, chili, ice, and salt," Marta said.

"Is it any good?"

"You should try one."

Mica and I each got a michelada, which was served in a large Styrofoam cup with a lid and a straw. I took one sip and nearly spit it on the floor.

"God, that's like spicy ocean water."

"It's not so bad." Mica took a big slurp.

"Do you want some?" I pointed my cup in Marta's direction.

"No thanks, I don't drink."

"Like hell you don't." I shot her a smile.

She shot back. "Okay, maybe I'll just have a beer."

"Yo, Jose, two beers!" My Spanish was coming around . . . I set my michelada in front of the thirsty German, and soon it disappeared.

Time passed, and the empties piled up on the table. I looked to its far end. Civilization. There was a gap between us as if two separate parties were going on: one in Spanish and the other in terrible Spanish. We kept ordering drinks. I'd forgotten about the funnel but pulled it out from under the table after Marta had accidentally kicked it and asked what in the hell it was. I explained how to use it and took a beer down as an example. Marta's eyes lit up. Soon, she was on her knees and sucking plastic. Then Mica went. Then me again. Some other guests saw us and wandered over curiously. I initiated several more people to the way of the funnel before a dance contest began on the dance floor. First, the girls danced. There was no standout among them, but one girl was sexy as hell, so when the crowd voted for the winner with their applause, the men gave her a standing ovation.

Then it was the guys' turn. Neither Mica nor I made any motion toward the floor. We knew our place at the party. When the music started, the guys took off. They all knew what they were doing—but Tito knew it best. Sometime during the previous week I'd heard Sal mention something about Tito's supreme dancing ability but had no idea the extent of it. Tito lit across the floor like a firecracker. He spun around, stuck his ass in our direction, and shook it at a speed that would make even Ricky Martin blush. The crowd quickly voted the others away, and the finals fell between Tito and the goddess he most likely cared nothing for standing beside him. When the music started this time, Tito worked himself into such a frenzy that his rival stopped dancing and just watched him in awe, as he twirled and ass-shook his way to certain victory. To celebrate his win, Tito did a split, but in doing so, kicked the legs of a table behind him where two of the more elegantly dressed guests were seated, sending their drinks and tapas into their laps. Tito smiled then quickly walked away. He was definitely my kind of people.

The music started and everyone danced, this time Mica and me included. I'd periodically stop dancing to get another beer for the funnel and present it to the crowd. Someone would always drop to their knees and take one down. I approached Marta with one, but she waved me away. I pulled a coin out of my pocket and said, "Heads you drink, tails, me."

She nodded, and I flipped the coin. I caught it and put it on the back of my hand, but before I could see its face, Marta took it from me and said "This is a twenty-peso piece. These are rare."

I decided to do the funnel myself. When I finished, I asked Marta for my coin. She just stared at me blankly. Jose walked over and mentioned something about me owing 300 pesos for all the beers I'd washed through the funnel, and I pretended not to understand and walked away.

The party continued to get rowdy until Jose stopped the music. He said something to the crowd, and they gathered around Paz and started singing as Jose brought out the fancy cake Sal bought that afternoon. He held it carefully, but when he stepped on the dance floor, he slipped and dropped the cake on the ceramic tile. Sal yelled out "Fuck!" while the rest of us laughed. One of the other bartenders, a big teddy bear of a guy, scooped the cake off the ground. He carried it to the back where I'd assumed he'd thrown it out. But minutes later, he came around the opposite side of the dance floor with it still in hand. He snuck up behind Jose and smashed the cake over his head. Everyone laughed again, this time Sal included. Jose picked up a piece of cake and chased after his coworker, inducing an all-out cake fight that spread among the guests. Everyone was clawing at the cake, ripping out huge chunks to throw or smash in someone's face. I grabbed a piece and approached Sal, but when I extended my arm to smash it in his hair, I slipped on some frosting and punched the cake in

his eye. He shouted “Son of a bitch!” then scooped up a piece with both hands and dumped it on my head. The floor was slippery, and people started falling in huge chunks of cake and spilled beer. Though everyone was covered in cake, no one seemed to care.

When people tired of the cake fight, they walked to the open area where the chiva was tied to a tree. Jose put a blindfold on Paz, spun her around, and handed her an aluminum broom handle. She took a big cut and hit the piñata, but not enough force to spill its guts. Next up was Tito, but he missed each time he swung. He handed the broom to one of the girls. No success. They passed the broom around like that, and soon it came to me. I took a big cut and connected, coming down on it as if I were chopping wood, but while I didn’t break the piñata, I did split the broom handle in half. I picked up the other half from the ground and took another swing. Again nothing. I felt a sharp pain in my hand, which started gushing blood. I looked at the broom handle in the bloody hand and noticed a sharp edge where it had been split in half, and right where I was holding it. I walked to a table, grabbed a napkin, and held it in my hand.

“Let me see it,” Jose said.

“No, it’s fine. It was a clean cut,” I said.

“I insist.”

I removed the napkin and showed him. He called to the teddy bear to grab the first aid kit. The crowd started to back away from me while looking on with dreadful eyes. I could hear them whispering, see them pointing. They acted as though my hand had been chopped off, and I was holding it in my other. Someone whispered to Sal, and he roared with laughter as he approached me.

“What the hell’s going on, Sal?”

“Yo, you’re not going to believe this,” Sal said. “Apparently, Cletus told everyone that you have SIDAS, or AIDS. They don’t know what to do.”

“Tell them it’s a lie!”

Sal addressed the group, assuring them I was free of SIDAS, and soon the party resumed. I was angry at Cletus then remembered the time in college when Sal and I picked the lock of Cletoid’s bathroom door and took turns upper-decking his toilet. I smiled.

Someone broke the piñata with the untainted half of broom, and the masses dove at its bounty. After, we returned to the bar area to watch Paz open her gifts. Sal and I broke out our guitars, and Sal sang to her. The moment passed quickly, and I put my guitar back in its sarcophagus.

The drizzle had been coming down all day, but suddenly turned into a downpour. Sofia was the first in the rain. She dashed out to the open area and let the water wash away the cake. Marta, Tito, and Paz joined in. A part of me wanted to join them, but another remained still. I stood there and observed as the party moved from the bar to the muddy grass area. The well-dressed partiers had traded cake for mud as an adornment to their clothes. They wrestled and danced and slid through the grass on bare feet as if they truly were children of the earth. Paz held her hands up to the sky as the clouds dumped everything they had. She’d tried multiple times to get a visa to visit the US. She had family in Denver she hadn’t seen in years. She also wanted to meet Sal’s family in Buffalo. But each time she was denied. The same with Marco, and Marta, and Sofia. All denied. They filled out the paperwork, went through the proper channels, paid the hefty fees . . . And here I was drinking their beer and eating their food. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t join them in that storm.

Eventually, the muddy people made their way back to the bar. I filled another funnel and presented it to Marta. She looked dizzy.

“Here, this’ll help clear your head.”

She pushed it away. “My mother will be so upset that I’m drunk.”

“Your mother’s probably sucking tube right now too.” Big mistake. I said that just as the song ended. Several people heard me and gave me the worst looks.

“Oh, sorry . . .” I said.

Marta just stared vacantly. I got another round of evil-eyes from the partiers, but soon the smiles returned. I think Sal could see that everyone was letting it go, and he stepped in.

“Did he really say ‘Your mother is sucking tube?’” He walked to the center of the action and addressed the crowd like some fucked up politician, never even looking at Marta. “What’s wrong with this guy? Your mother’s a nice person, and she doesn’t have to put up with that.”

“Hey, man, why don’t you cool it with that shit. I said I was sorry.”

Marta’s dry eyes began to moisten, and she ran into the woman’s room. Paz followed behind.

“Yo, man, that ain’t cool,” I said. “You made her cry.”

“No, *you* made her cry. You need to learn two rules to survive in Mexico: one, don’t talk about someone’s girlfriend, and two, *never* talk about someone’s mother.”

Marta and Paz emerged from the bathroom about twenty minutes later. The party was dead. Jose again approached me about my tab.

“You drank thirty beers. That’s four-hundred and eighty pesos.”

“Hey, I didn’t drink ‘em all.” I pointed at Marta as Marco carried her out on his shoulder. “You want your money, you can get it from her. I know she’s good for at least twenty pesos.”

I forked over 200, and we called it even. Marco took Sal and the girls home, leaving me, Javier, Edgar, and the German behind.

“Hey, cabrones, you want to continue the party?”

“Do Mexican chicks love denim?” I said.

Mica laughed.

Javie stared at me. “What does that mean?”

“It means, yes, cabron,” I said.

“Where we going?” Mica said.

“You’ll see . . .” Javie said.

I went to the bathroom to wash the cake off my face then we took off into the night. Javier’s truck was too small for four passengers, so I volunteered to sit in the bed. The stars were full and brilliant in the sky, casting a dull glow on the mountains and fields below. The grass towered over the truck bed’s walls, dripping rainwater inside. I fought the urge to leap out and run screaming into the wilderness. What the hell was I doing? Where the hell were we going? I lay in the bed to rest my mind.

Soon, I could see neon lights. Javier parked behind a building, and we got out. I was still covered in frosting, but so was Mica. We walked to the door and got patted down by security then walked inside. The place was nice: AC, flat screen TVs above the bar, twenty-foot stripper poll—not what I would have expected based on the shit I’d seen in movies and television.

We sat at a table and ordered a cubeta, or bucket of beer. Javier called a well-endowed woman in a bikini over, and they had a brief conversation, periodically pointing at me. I could only guess their words:

“So, it’s this guy’s birthday, huh?”

“Yeah, you should give him a free dance.”

“Why’s he covered in cake?”

“He likes to party.”

“Looks like it . . .”

Or maybe he was asking about a dance for himself in the back room? I wondered if Sal and the others were wrong about him. But I didn’t have much time to think about that. The woman approached me and said something too quickly for me to understand. I looked at Javier for assistance, but he just kept nodding his head and smiling. She said something again, and my head nodded as my eyes followed her bouncing breasts. She hopped on the table, took off her top, and started dancing. Fuck! This was going to be expensive. Might as well enjoy it. She bent down and slapped my face with her tits.

When the song ended, she hopped down from the table, said something to me, and held out her hand. Again, I looked at Javier.

“She wants you to pay her,” Javie said.

“How much?” I said.

“One hundred pesos, cabron.”

“Hey, man, you called her over. We should split this.”

“You pay.”

“Bah . . .”

I forked over the loot, and she walked her hourglass ass away. In a couple of hours, I was out 300 pesos. There was no way I could keep this up. I needed to make 300 last a week.

Javier drove us home a short time later. I was angry at myself for not taking better care of my finances. I unlocked the front gate and door and walked inside.

Something about the house felt different. I walked to my new room and undressed. Though exhausted, I searched my sheets for scorpions. None. Then under the bed. Nothing. I turned out the light and hopped into bed. Then, it began: Are you sure you checked under the bed? Those things are small, man, you might have missed one. What about inside the pillowcase? Or the closet? Lots of hiding places there . . .

Fuck. This wasn't good. The evil thoughts were back and rushing me all at once—perhaps to punish me for trying to get away?

Scorpions can climb, Willy. Keep your damned hands away from the walls. And, fuck, the bedframe! You're not safe here, man. No matter how thorough your inspection, a scorpion can climb up that frame at any time and snuggle with you all night.

The room was pitch-black. I held my hand an inch from my face, but I couldn't see it. Everything started spinning. The bed gave out and fell into the void that had grown around me. I wasn't whole. I wasn't human. I was a nervous fucking cloud of dark energy, expanding and collapsing on itself.

Don't touch the cool parts of the sheets, man. A scorpion might have crawled there since you'd moved your leg . . .

I heard a noise that sounded like someone tapping their keys on the front gate.

Did I lock the damned door?

But, fuck, Jorg said not to. If there's another earthquake, we're gonna need to get out in a hurry. And, what if the volcano blows? How much time would we need to get away?

I drifted inward—always inward. My whole life stuck inside. Then it hit me: you've got nowhere left to run. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think. How could anyone live like this?