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Read **BY REASON OF PASSION** ... Prepared to be surprised!

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Chapter 1

AGUAS MANSAS, PUERTO RICO

AUGUST 14, 2004

Grandfather says *Aguas Mansas*' beauty led his ancestors to settle here. I think the barrio reminded his forebears of a town in Spain. I don't know. I've never been to Europe. But at least the family moved to a place where nothing bad ever happened.

In good weather, I always followed the Mount up to Casa Sosa, my home. True, the main road took longer to walk, but I loved the exercise.

Abuela, Grandmother in English, preferred I take the fork on the right of the road. She warned, "The road up the Mount is too dangerous, cars speeding and—"

"I'm not a little girl any more."

"Something may happen to you, child."

"And if it does, I can take care of myself, *Abuela*." Smells: rosemary, garlic and tomatoes played in the air in the kitchen. "I'm a grown woman. Five feet four, see?"

"And right now, a foolish 18-year-old not to listen to your elders." *Abuela* swung about to check the chicken and rice. "I've outdone myself, like always."

"Great, and be nice. Stop calling me a child, okay?"

“I will—when you’re ninety.” My grandmother covered the pot. She faced me.

“God 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. Eyes lowered, I clasped my hands in prayer.

Abuela often used the phrase in resignation. One day, having failed a math test, I repeated it in jest. I made the sign of the cross. And then, I added a personal touch. Hands folded in prayer I cast down my eyes.

My grandmother had answered, “Amen.”

We both laughed at my improvisation. The spoof became a habit, though. One day Abuela would die. What a fitting way to keep her alive in my heart, her favorite phrase.

That afternoon, I didn’t hear Abuela’s amen, just her nails scrape the floor when she picked up Sofia. The rag doll, twenty inches long, had tumbled out my backpack unto the ground.

Sofia safe in her arms, Abuela found my eyes. Her brow wrinkled. It always did when she had questions. I didn’t volunteer any answers.

Abuela smoothed Sofia’s tiered skirt. Then her fingers lingered on the words embroidered on its hem: With love, *Mamá*.

A gift, *Mamá* 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 *Mamá* died. There by her coffin, I learned death’s finality. She’d never tuck me in bed again; bake me chocolate cookies on Sundays. Yes, God had called my mom to Heaven. I refused to let her go. *Muñequita* became ‘Sofia’ that day. That was my mother’s name.

My Sofia had changed since then.

“She lost her mouth,” I said.

“I’ll embroider it back when you return from Mass.”

“No—then it wouldn’t be Mom’s doll, would it?”

Abuela smile, a grin set on lips age had withered. She’d understood.

I tucked Sofia into my backpack. My security blanket, I carried my doll in times of stress. Although Abuela didn’t ask, she must’ve guessed was wrong. 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—”

“Nothing bad ever happens in Aguas Mansas, remember?”

Docile Waters in English, Aguas Mansas is part of Cabo Rojo. We’re a resort town on Puerto Rico’s Western Coastal Valley. Nature gave us spectacular beaches, forests and salt mines.

We’re unique. The Jones-Shafroth Act made us American citizens in 1917. In return, Puerto Ricans fought in WWI, and have defended democracy in U.S. wars thereafter.

Many speak English on our island. We’re a people shaped by Hispanic, Taíno, and the African cultures. But Spanish is the language that forged our national identity.

Like anyone else in the United States, we enjoy Sunday afternoons at the mall. We go there to shop; to socialize; or see American movies.

The Recreation Plaza, where Saint Michael the Archangel Church stands, is the elders’ hub, though. They meet there to chat ... to play dominoes. Some just enjoy the shops around the plaza. Not for them the malls, expensive on a fixed income.

Born and raised in Aguas Mansas, then, I felt safe in my part of the world. I'll admit Abuela's comments had made me uneasy, though. After Mass, I took a *publico*—a taxi—and headed home.

Well, I changed my mind. Abuela's concerns made no sense. Nothing bad ever happened in Aguas Mansas.

I had the driver let me off down at the entrance to the barrio. The sun had begun to set. Behind the houses that adorned the road, palm trees and cacti surrounded a man-made lake.

Further on down the main roadway divides. The lane surges upward to the Mount and the barrio. From its highest point, one can see the houses on stilts. They huddle by the waters below. Their rooftops, peach, green, purple, and black are specks against the valley.

That evening, the sun had begun to sleep. Rain having swept the land earlier, the weather had cooled. What a perfect night to enjoy the Caribbean breeze.

"Good evening, Elena." Doña Leticia called from her porch. She lived at the blue house on stilts, there on the left at the entrance to the principal road. "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." Doña Leticia dropped the kitten on the ground. She smiled. Her gums were rotten to their core. "Have Rosalina come over to clean, won't you?"

"She can't—Rosalina moved to Mayagüez, remember?" Rosalina, my cousin, was married Federico de Santos, Doña Leticia's son.

"But I want her here. I need groceries, you know."

“I’ll be glad to help you tomorrow, señora. Rosalina can’t make it, remember?”

“Tomorrow ... well, you’ll do.” Her right hand fluttered in dismissal. “Go... go home now, child. No sense courting trouble.”

Both palms on my knees now, I inhaled the night air. I breathed it out in one spurt. I began my climb up the Mount.

All was well. Aguas Mansas slept in peace.

Coquí... coquí sang the Puerto Rican miniature frog. *Coquí... coquí...*

Ring!

Damn cell phone! I thought I had turned it off at Church.

I came to a stop. I had spoken to Gerardo earlier in the day. He lived in California now that he went to UCLA. *Why was he calling me again?* Without checking the number, I answered, “Hola, Gerardo ...”

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

I hung up; put the phone on vibrate, and dropped it again in my skirt’s pocket. Once, twice, the cell phone quickened against me. I ignored its cry.

I rushed my step. Ahead, someone called my name. *No one there—had I imagined it?* No, a woman pounced from behind a tree, there to cut short my trajectory. At five foot ten, she cut an impressive figure dressed in a tight mini skirt. Blue pantyhose complemented the white sneakers.

She wore a black wig styled in a pageboy. A lace mantilla framed a tortoise-shell Spanish comb perched on the woman’s head.

Blue eye shadow smudged the brow bone.

I leaned closer. I knew *he* who batted his greenish-blue eyes at me, his lashes dry seaweed.

“Federico,” I said.

“*Hola, belleza.*”

“Hello, beautiful,” he’d said. Federico grasped my hands, ice, in his. “Relax; I ain’t going to hurt you, man.”

He wasn’t supposed to be here. Since when did he visit Doña Leticia?

“Don’t let stupid ideas creep into that smart head of yours. I ain’t here visiting my sainted mamá. I saw you on the way out of Church. Figured I catch you on the way home. I gave you fair warning, didn’t I?”

“Tell me what you want. Get it over and done with, okay?” I began to walk at a leisure pace. I couldn’t let Federico see my panic.

“You dare talk to me like that, shit?”

“I’m ... I’m sorry—”

“*Coño*, I’m kidding man.” Federico nudged my arm. “Look, I wanted you to know I scored big. I mean ... My Rosalina told me you think I’m wasting my time acting.”

I didn’t respond: Federico didn’t pursue the conversation until I said, “Okay, you got my attention. What’s this big news?”

“I just auditioned with Bernarda Alvarado, man.”

“Not the Mexican producer?”

“And she liked me, you know.” Federico swatted away a mosquito that had landed on his nose. “*Coño*, we had a good time on that couch of hers, know what I mean?”

“And not a thought of Rosalina, isn’t that something?”

“I’m doing this for my family’s future, man.”

“Your kids are not going to have a mother—not if you give Rosalina AIDS, Federico.”

“I’m 32, not stupid—I use condoms. Well, except with that cousin of yours. Why do you think we have eight kids? Because Rosalina’s a slut, man.”

Federico’s words brought me to a halt, there by the road.

“Damn you, Federico. My cousin has never slept with anyone but you and you know it.”

“You’re a spitfire, just like my Rosalina used to be. I like that.” Federico grinned, the gold caps on his center front teeth stark against his face. “Look at you.”

“Go home to Rosalina and the kids.”

“You sure ain’t nine any more. Filled up in the right places, didn’t you?” The wind had shifted. He lifted a hand to brush away a lock of my hair. I backed off.

“Go home to your family, I’ve said. Leave ... just me alone, okay?”

“Ah-ah—you’ve been avoiding me since I made a pass at you at my Jose’s baptism.” He lowered his voice. “No more. Tonight it’s you and me—one flesh, you understand?”

I slapped him. Federico stumbled. He regained his balance. I let out a cry, not that he had touched me. I realized what I had done. In my culture, a woman who slaps a man risks getting hurt. I shirked away, and then began my trek uphill again. I’d pushed my luck. The sooner I got away, the better.

Federico’s skirt rustled behind me. He matched each step to my own. Once I sauntered at a swift clip. He panted in his struggle to keep up.

My sneakers squealed against the leaves, moist on the ground. Federico’s shoes then I didn’t hear. *Where was he?*

I swung about to find Federico had caught up. He was a twisted twig, his shadow etched on the field beneath us. I wanted to flee then, but couldn't. I'd broken my pace, my body now against a palm tree. Next to me, he left me little room to escape.

"Listen, *belleza*, how about if we strike a deal?"

"Let me pass. If you don't I'll—"

"What? You're going to tell Rosalina on me?"

"I ... I... maybe ... no, I won't but—"

"No, but—you see, Federico holds your future in your hands." He rushed into his skirt's pocket. "New World University ..."

"What?"

"No more waiting, shit. Your room mate's name ... I have it right here. See ..." He slapped the envelope against his left palm. "Right here, Elena."

I had used his address to apply for a scholarship in New York behind Grandfather's back.

"Let me have it." I made a dash for the envelope; Federico pulled back.

"Lay me first, *belleza*. I ain't asking too much, am I?"

"Give me my mail, I've said." Again, I tried to capture the missive.

"Tell you what, you're off the hook. Come—get your damned letter, Elena!" He whistled. "Pry it from my fingers. Come on, man!"

The wind carried my name to the heavens. A rabbit, I hopped here, there to no avail. Each time I closed in, Federico ran farther ahead, his laughter a slap to my face.

When he seemed to pause to let me catch up, I found Federico had led me to a wooded area behind a rundown barn. Up yonder, stood a two-story home, its windows darkened. I knew the owners. Friends of Grandfather they were on vacation in New York.

In the mornings, a farmer came to milk the cows that grazed behind the barn's fence. But now the sky had turned murky. My bad judgment had placed me in danger.

I lunged forward once more. The envelope Federico tucked in his pocket. A tiger in wait, he jostled me face down to the ground. His hands trapped mine. He forced my arms taut behind me.

I let out a cry. I jerked my elbows sideways, folded them. Downward I brought them. I struck Federico on the ribs.

“Shit!” I heard him wail.

Arms wrapped around his chest, Federico wobbled upon rising. He caught his foot on an empty milk pail inches away. Downward he plunged. The wig, the comb, and the mantilla joined him on the ground.

I, too, fought to get a footing. Federico crawled on his stomach to grasp my ankle. He draped his arms around my hips, instead. Hard he tugged to topple me down beside him.

“You bastard—let me go!”

My fingers I burrowed in Federico's scalp. I coiled my fingers around his hair. And then I yanked, my strength undiminished by the fight.

“Damn you slut!” Federico swept a hand under my skirt. Like a wild cat that hasn't eaten, he bit my thigh.

I howled: I didn't fall.

Federico clamped tighter, his teeth visors that refused to let go.

My knees buckled one against the other. Time stood still. The present didn't count; neither did the future. I was doomed.

I let go off Federico's hair. The backpack skidded down my arms to the earth. I crashed next to him. He pinned me beneath his body.

"Come on, belleza. You know you want it, *coño*."

"No!" I shoved my palms against Federico's chest, then, to no avail.

My rag doll ... Where was she, my friend in times of stress? Behind my left shoulder, that's where I saw her. She had one leg folded beneath her, right hand in salute. Inches from Sofia's hand rested a bottle, broken, its bottom jagged.

Mamá came to mind. On the day she died, she fought the tide that carried her and Father out to sea. This my grandmother learned from eyewitnesses. My mother wasn't a coward: I was her daughter.

I relaxed against Federico, my body pliable clay.

"Así me gustas... sumisa... dócil por ahora... una tigresa mas luego, ¿me entiendes?"

"I like you like this ... submissive ... docile ... a tigress later—like my Rosalina, you understand?"

His lips pecked my own once ... twice. I don't remember how many times more.

My arms around Federico's neck, I whispered in his ear, "Just ... just love me like you do her ... I ... Rosalina must never know ... tonight ... never again ... promise."

"I call the shots. As of tonight, you're my woman ... I'm your man, *coño*. You get that, shit?"

"Yes ... Oh, Federico ... I ... I want you." My mouth changed course, my tongue coiled around his. I almost choked on Federico's breath. He tasted of garlic and rum.

I whimpered. He challenged me next. His fingers crept beneath my white blouse. I realized I had not worn a bra that day.

I captured his hand. “Not that—not now. Kiss me ... kiss me for now ... that’s all.”

Federico obeyed. He grunted like a pig in hunger. His breath came in spurts. His body dance against mine. He hardened against me.

I drew my left arm from his neck. *Where was it, the glass I had seen before? There, I almost cut myself when the shard escaped my hand.*

He reached forward. One hand swung around, beneath his skirt, a dash to lower his underwear.

“*Coño*, tell me you want me ... show, me, shit.”

Thank God. I had recaptured bottle’s neck.

“Like hell I want you, *cabrón*.” I stabbed Federico’s left upper arm. Deeper I dug into his flesh.

He never took off his boxer shorts. Instead, Federico de Santos screamed a yell Aguas Mansas must’ve heard.

I jumped to my feet. My heart raced.

Lord, not a panic attack!

I counted to five. My heartbeat settled down.

Night had folded its dark canopy over Aguas Mansas. There, by the moonlight that embraced us, the glass dribbled Federico’s blood over my blouse.

He rocked sideways.

I thought he’d slammed head on unto the ground. Federico again regained his balance.

“One more step and I’ll cut your face,” I said.

“Damn blood won’t stop.” Pain etched on his brow, Federico picked up the mantilla.

“Shit, you’re one tough bitch.” He pressed the head covering against the wound. “You won this

round, Elena, just this one.” Federico motioned to his skirt. “Go into my pocket—take the damn letter, already.”

I hesitated.

“I’m giving you what you want, man. Take it, shit.” He winced, the skin now taught against his jaw.

I approached him, a lion tamer afraid its prey might pounce to kill. The bottle in my other hand, I reached into Federico’s skirt pocket. One tug; the envelope yielded. I folded it, slipped it into my right shoe.

I dropped my weapon. Its remains bounced to a standstill two feet away.

“Shit ... oh, shit.” He uncovered the wound. Two inches in length at least, he’d need stitches to repair the damage.

“Let me have the mantilla.”

“I don’t need your fucking sympathy, man.”

“Oh, be quiet. Last thing I need is you passing out and me not doing anything to help.” He released the mantilla then. “And for God’s sake stop squirming.” I rushed to fend off the bleeding. “There, I’m done.”

“Not before you promise you’re not flapping your gums to Rosalina, you hear me shit?”

“I’m not telling anyone, Rosalina included.” I gathered my backpack and Sofia in my arms. “God knows she needs you to bring up the kids.”

“Then get the hell outta’ here, shit.”

I swung about. Federico called out to me. I looked back at him over my shoulder.

He jabbed an index finger to his chest. Then he pointed at me.

“One day we’ll finish what we started here, Elena,” he said. “Count on it.”

That night I learned bad things happen in Aguas Mansas. On my way home, I fought off a sex maniac one Sunday night in August.

JULY 25, 2010

I gathered a stack of cookies, milk on the side, on my plate. Then I headed to Katí's room. There I paused at its threshold. My roommate came within my view. She sat on the floor in the center of the alcove.

Red dominated the bedroom. One found it on the walls, the pillows, the chenille bedspread, the area rug, too.

Katí, legs crossed one over the other, looked at peace in the moonlight that embraced her. In front of her laid a red velvet cloth.

Earlier she'd worn her hair in a braid. Now, like the mane of a lion, Katí's tresses lay unfettered beneath her red kerchief.

On a table beyond, an old record player lifted its arm. The "Ave Maria" had ended.

I saw it, then, the red candle that flickered on an altar above the bed. A silk canopy covered the platform on which sat the black idol, his lower limbs crossed one over the other. Male, his wide smile betrayed a love of life. That grin played, too, in eyes round like a dish.

I recognized *Changó*, a god in santería. Black, a child of Africa, a king, he wore Saint Barbara's white face during colonial Spanish rule. Only then could slaves worship him without the master's interference. Mightier than any saint, several objects represented his power.

The crown, the breastplate, the bands around *Changó's* arms betrayed his rank: a king. A monarch must rule over a kingdom: the castle symbolized the god's empire.

Changó was industrious; the pestle spoke of him as the maker of thunderbolts. He was vengeful, it seemed. He used a doubled edged axe to bring his enemies to their knees.

My attention again turned to Katí. Their tips curved, her nails tapped the cloth's surface. One, then three, two, then, one ... silence. Again, she began the strange ritual.

"Listen," I entered the bedroom, "I've had enough of you trying to set me up with that jerk friend of yours." I continued in one breath, "Get him off my back. He won't listen to me, I'm sure. You do it, okay?"

"Don't turn on the light. Come. Sit in front of me."

"No. Your manipulations stop here, you hear me?"

I drew away; then came closer. Katí's eyes were downcast. A deck of cards nestled in the folds of her white dress. On a dish by my roommate's right thigh, a lit cigar shriveled in size.

As I turned to head back to the kitchen, Katí said, "When it was over in that closet, you walked out upset it was Anne Rosenberg he'd made love to and not you. Tell me, do I lie?"

The glass plunged out of my hands, the plate to the floor by the doorway to Katí's bedroom.

Shaken, I joined her on the floor.

"A young man named Gerardo is coming to visit." Her gaze rose to meet mine. She seemed not to know me. "He's not for you." Again, Katí cast down her eyes. "But come, shuffle the deck; you have a question."

“None,” I said.

“I’ll give you the answer.”

Back home a gypsy once read my cards. Though I was seven then, I still remembered the routine. Mix the cards. Return them to the reader. Choose one from anywhere in the deck. I played along.

“The page represents you.” Her right hand an open fan, Katí’s fingers danced to and fro’ over the card I’d chosen. She then slipped it in the middle of the deck. The stack came to rest on the velvet cloth. “Now, cut the rest in three piles. Not with your right hand; the left is closest to your heart.”

I broke the deck into three stacks. In silence, I watched Katí turn each card. Over from side to side, not from top to bottom she arranged their placement. When she finished, the page lay trapped in the center, three cards above, and three below.

“Here you are again: the page. Your hair is light. You’re a woman of passion.” Pointing to another card, “Look, the seven of cups reversed. You’re confused about someone, I see.”

“I miss my boyfriend. That’s all there’s to that damn card, period.”

“Then there’s this one here. The King of Swords says a mature man will make you cry, but one day he’ll bring you great joy ... a doctor... an engagement ... a commitment of sorts, that’s what I see.”

“Does your Nico pay you to promote him?”

“And look—over here. The High Priestess says you’ll be a success.”

“That card over there—the six of staves—what does it say?”

“In the midst of problems, he’ll always be in your thoughts.”

“That’s it. I’m cutting out.”

“Don’t run away. You wanted to know.”

“I was playing your game.”

“I do not play.” Kati’s fingers tightened around my wrist. “Yes, he is your one true love.”

“I don’t even like him.”

“Soul mates ...” Kati noted a card: A man and woman walking hand in hand.

“You were with him before.” An old woman now, my roommate’s chest heaved, a wheeze careening through her nose. She held her breath, and then let it go all at once.

“And as long ago, you’ll wind up in this man’s bed. You’ve always been in his heart ... always.”

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