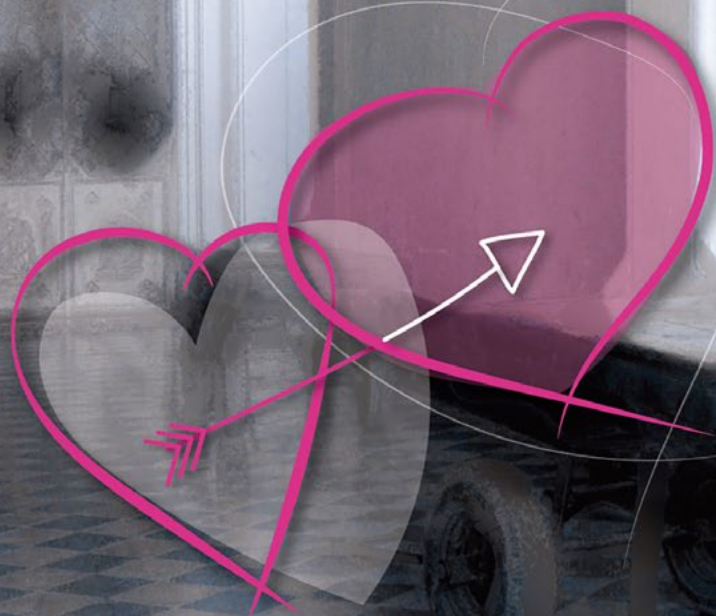
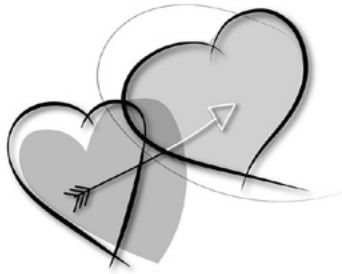


Hard Bed Hotel



A novel by
Edie Ayala

Hard Bed Hotel



A novel by
Edie Ayala

© 2022 Edie Ayala. All rights reserved.

Print ISBN 978-0-9880032-2-4

Ebook ISBN 978-0-9880032-3-1

Publisher: Stories with Character
www.storieswithcharacter.com

Publication Date: April 30, 2022

(First published June 2013,
author name, Andrea Carter)

FIC056000– FICTION / Hispanic & Latino
FIC061000 – FICTION / Magical Realism
FIC016000 – FICTION / Humorous / General

Book and cover design: berthaclark.com

www.edieayala.com

CHAPTER 1

Too Late

It was just after the earthquake. The “Mexican Hat Dance” began as a soft vibration and grew increasingly louder from inside the dead man’s pocket. It was insisting. Astrid’s toes twitched to the beat as she stood, limiting the inclination to dance to inside her shoes, and wondering if the call might be high enough on the list of divine priorities to bring the man back to life. But he remained dead. So she bent down and reached into his vibrating right trouser pocket to retrieve his cell phone.

“Aló?” She answered, her voice betraying her trepidation. Who didn’t know that this man had ceased to exist?

A noticeable hesitation. “With Adolfo, please.” the woman’s voice was brittle.

“Uh... he can’t come to the phone right now,” was all Astrid could think of under the circumstances.

“Well, I’ve called him over and over and he refuses to answer. And just now, with this emergency... well, I was lucky to get through at all...” There was an annoyed pause, “And now you! Who are you?” Astrid could almost feel the spray of saliva through the phone as the woman forced angry words from between what Astrid had no doubt were very cherry red lips. “You mean to tell me that even in this dreadful disaster he has a strange woman answer his phone to tell me he can’t take the call?” Incredulous, her voice became shrill. “Well then, you can just tell him for me that his excuse better be a good one!” And she hung up.

Astrid pushed the ‘off’ button, slid the phone back into the dead man’s pocket, straightened up and tried not to judge him. Nevertheless, she noticed that he was not particularly handsome, nor was he young, and he was overweight by at least 30 kilos. His suit was not expensive and he wasn’t wearing jewellery. She wondered why someone would be quite so jealous of this dead man. Whatever the woman’s excuse for her interest in him, the man himself definitely had a good one for not returning in kind.

She didn’t know much about him other than that two days ago he had died, ceased to exist, become obsolete, was inoperative, kaput, done for. And now

he was her new client, the defunct resident of Niche Number 170, Wall 3, Patio Number 62, General Cemetery of Santiago, Chile.

His niche had been made ready for him – a hollow space that receded into the deep wall from which rubble, small chunks of concrete, crumpled paper, empty cigarette packages and broken bits of plastic had been hastily removed. Beyond that, nothing humanly possible could be done to make his resting place less dank and more welcoming. The niche walls in the cemetery were like competitive, low-end real estate developments – pretty and inviting on the outside but barren and cold on the inside. In a sense this made Astrid a public relations professional as well as a tomb janitor because although there wasn't much she could do to the property interior, she was charged with creating cheerful exteriors on those occupied by her deceased lodgers. Her patrons, the surviving relatives paid for the care and maintenance of the family's final resting place.

Unlike more affluent patios comprised of mausoleums and elaborate underground bone hollows, most of the tombs in Patio 62 were rows upon rows of niches, reluctantly butting up to one another inside three-metre-high walls. Each niche was fitted with a locked glass display case, which housed a selection of flowers, ornaments, photos and other sentimental embellishments. More modest niche shelves were minus the glass enclosures but families made an effort to at least buy a nameplate, which was attached to an otherwise desolate concrete wall.

Because everyone is identified by his or her idiosyncrasies and since the personality of the deceased is reflected by what's on their niche shelf, the importance of paraphernalia cannot be understated. Thus, kind strangers often take pity on a barren shelf, donating flowers and small ornaments to help lift it out of its loneliness. And eager to provide amusement in the afterlife, families regularly add to their child's afterlife toy collection, smothering the narrow shelf space to the point where the child's nameplate is hidden from sight.

When visitors drop by, it's the tomb decoration that provides conversational starting points. For instance a football pennant would get things off the ground – “You're looking good today, Señor. Once a fan of Universidad de Chile, always a fan, I see. You're lucky the sun hasn't faded the pennant. God must be doing you some favours. You know they won the championship again this year. Maybe you interceded on their behalf?” The visitor might chuckle and a cordial – often transforming into bawdy – dialogue might ensue. The live visitor will kindly leave space in the conversation should the deceased desire to respond

from the tomb. Thus as you wander the paths between the walls, you often see visitors looking up in long, silent pauses at a photo in the niche.

In death as in life, one's home is one's home, to be appreciated for its distinct character and charm, to be welcoming and hospitable, and above all to provoke pleasant memories that will leave all parties satisfied. The visitor is meant to return home full, as though having consumed a hearty meal, one that he can digest until it's time to return for the next visit.

Preparations for this man's arrival – a Señor Adolfo Rodríguez-Rodríguez who had died an accidental death – had been completed only minutes before Astrid's two colleagues came into view. They chatted and nodded to one another as they pulled the trolley with the man's coffin. A few sombre mourners followed in an informal procession, trudging forward, heads down, hands folded at their waist, feet so heavy with grief that even the funeral pace was too much effort.

Astrid's colleagues parked the trolley in front of her, one of them removed his ragged straw hat, and with a sweeping bow and boyish grin indicated that the dead Señor Adolfo was now in her capable hands. "Take over for a minute, will you, my dear?" They headed off for a cigarette and promised to return shortly to cement Señor Adolfo inside the yawning mouth that had been reserved for him in the wall of Patio Number 62.

But that was five minutes ago. Things had changed drastically since then because of the earthquake.

Still trembling, Astrid glanced around at the current scene. A low voice carried on a wisp of jasmine-scented air entered her ear, "Stay calm, my dear. You're in shock but it will pass. What did I tell you? And don't worry, you and your loved ones are safe." It was the voice of the old woman from Santa María Street. More than the voice, it was the scent that triggered the memory of the old woman's wrinkled skin over bones and her haunting dark eyes.

The quake must have destroyed a good number of the two million tombs that populated Santiago's General Cemetery. Astrid was standing in the middle of her Patio, facing the vaults of human remains under her care. Her heart was pounding as she realised the gravity of what had just happened. The unexpected ringing of the dead man's cell phone added to the present shock, increasing the velocity of her pulse and making the situation even more surreal.

Five minutes earlier her colleagues, who had parked Señor Adolfo's trolley in front of her were just out of sight around the corner when the earth started

to shudder, and an escalating rumble launched itself from somewhere deep below Astrid's feet. It devoured the ground from bottom up. The rumbling, like a monstrous truck speeding towards the heavens threatened the peace. Trees waved their branches but like giddy children in a school play who were rooted to the 'Xs' marked on stage, they could not abandon the production and had no choice but to continue the dance. They shook thousands of terrified birds out into the open sky. Dust rose from underfoot and billowed down from the surrounding hills to weigh in on the smog that already held the city captive.

Like a dog shaking off parasites, Mother Earth frantically tried to free herself of the countless structures and nuisance artefacts that had, over the years, become attached to her surface without permission. In a determined house cleaning she shook her rugs, releasing the dust – an invasive powder as deadly as any used to exterminate pests. It formed heavy brown clouds that hung over the valley. The sun, who watched from across the heavens flushed an embarrassed, cowardly red. Not that he was inclined to intervene anyway; he was not the omnipotent power of his reputation, but a fraud, nothing but a huge, blustering fireball. Untouchable, safe at his distance, a meek little, "sorry," which could not be heard above his gassy explosions was his only intervention. He shone down, slightly apologetic over the episode, his red eyes squinting past the dense clouds. Then he turned and shrugged because he knew that at least for him, things would still be the same tomorrow.

As the ground shifted violently, the cement and ancient adobe structures of the cemetery wobbled and twisted, glass windows in the niches exploded, giving way to a barrage of personal photos and ornaments that crashed to the ground. Slabs of concrete chunked off the walls and collided in the air before smacking the earth at Astrid's feet. She jumped back, instinctively positioning herself in the middle of the wide passage between the rows of niches.

The long cemetery dwellings cracked open at irregular intervals, revealing dark, brooding secrets that sloped, slid and crashed into one another – decayed coffins on angles, bony hands reaching out from under shattered lids, calcified fingers accusing no one and everyone, arthritic knee joints exposing themselves to the warm air, hollow skulls with gaping eye sockets looking joyously up into the open sky for the first time in decades. Voices that had been recorded and trapped inside the molecular structure of the walls for more than a century saw their chance for escape and they released a gigantic symphony of sighs, moans, screeches, ferocious yells and doleful whimpers.

Suddenly the trembling stopped. The tortured, silent reprieve was followed by another light shuddering as Mother Earth relaxed her shoulders and more concrete and wood finally let go and clanked into place on the ground. Astrid remained fixed to her spot on the path as the world began to breath normally once more. The sounds of crashing porcelain, exploding glass, collapsing tin awnings, splintering wood, crumbling concrete, wrenching ground, rupturing pavement, human screams and deathly groans from amongst the patios were all swallowed into an eerie silence that echoed in extended seconds somewhere beyond time. The sun receded sheepishly into the dark green sky.

Señor Adolfo had been dumped precipitously from his coffin, which had been hurled off the trolley. He landed on his side at Astrid's feet, his stiff body settling into a shallow concave blemish on the tarmac. His eyes were closed, he had a sort of blissful grin on his face, and although his hair was slightly dishevelled, he was no worse for wear. Astrid stared down at him for several minutes, the part of her brain that triggered logical thought having seized up like a set of rusty old cogs. That was when she answered the first phone call.

There was no sign of Señor Adolfo's family. Common sense must have sent them running to one of the main passageways, clear of the walls. Perhaps they had been hurt or were too frightened to move. Nevertheless, it occurred to her that they should have informed the lady with the cherry red lips of Señor Adolfo's permanently indisposed state.

Astrid had barely recovered from Cherry Red Lip's call when the defunct man's phone rang again, the incongruous "Mexican Hat Dance" playing foolishly into the post-quake air.

Astrid felt an obligation once again to take the call, partly because the tinny music was mocking the disaster, like someone laughing aloud at a funeral, but also because she was Señor Adolfo's caretaker, and ironic as it was, someone wanted to know that he had survived the quake.

She fumbled into Señor Adolfo's pocket once more. "Aló?"

"I want to speak with Adolfo, please. This is Sergio. I'm calling from Arica."

"I'm sorry but he is permanently indisposed."

"That's not a very classic excuse. I don't know what you have to do with him, but I suppose he didn't tell you that he owes me one million pesos. I may be two days away by bus, but I can still get there and break his legs. You tell him that for me."

“Si, Señor. Good day.” She looked down at the man who failed to be alive. His legs were the least of his worries.

She pushed the ‘off’ button but couldn’t bring herself to turn off the power. Even though the man who in life was known as Señor Adolfo Rodríguez-Rodríguez, now found himself among the non-living, the ringing phone seemed to prolong his relevance, bring him back to where people needed him. She didn’t know if he would have wanted it but decided not to second-guess his wishes or those of the family. They must have left the cell phone in his pocket, perhaps deliberately, perhaps not. Like him, his phone would stop ringing when the battery died. So she deposited the apparatus into his trouser pocket once again and hoped it would not ring again soon. It was one thing to take care of him after he had passed into his current state, but quite another to be the messenger of his fateful news.

Yesterday Astrid had been tipped off about the planned arrival of the new Patio Number 62 resident when cement workers had come to survey the niche. They were accompanied by Señor Adolfo’s brother, who was drunk – “...out of profound grief,” he said.

He introduced himself as Señor Carlos and explained to Astrid how Señor Adolfo’s passing had been entirely unexpected. They had just been together in his very own garden, drinking wine, slapping their knees and laughing, enjoying the true story about a fat woman on a bus.

The inebriated Señor Carlos saw fit to go into detail about the story, assuring Astrid that it was relevant to the cause of death. He began somewhere near the beginning, where he was saying to his brother “...the bus stopped and the rush hour crowd crammed in the door. The bus was so packed that this fatso was forced up against the bus driver... other people were still hanging outside the front door when the bus took off. Crammed in there like sardines falling out of a net.”

“Yeah, I heard that her huge ass was like an overstuffed pillow against the back of the driver’s neck.” Adolfo was already red with laughter.

“With her weight against him, it took all of his strength just to turn the wheel, so you can imagine what happened when she farted.”

“He must have felt a warm gust, maybe even some debris. And what about the vibrations coming off of a pair of buttocks like that?”

She apologised, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m so sorry. It escaped. It simply escaped.”

But her apology was not heard over the din of rude retorts from passengers — “Señora, you should have let it escape before you left home this morning,” — “Señora, how do you expect us to breathe in this atmosphere?” — “She doesn’t need a tuba, she is a tuba!” — “We have no room for buskers, Señora,” — “Yeah especially someone the size of a tuba!” By now the driver was weeping and groaning and sweating profusely.

“Lucky his head wasn’t separated from his body!”

“Forget about the headless horseman. What about a headless conductor?”

“Señora, have mercy!”

The imagery was too much and the brothers were beside themselves, spittle and bits of pastry from their empanadas blowing from between their lips. Tears from helpless laughter streamed down their cheeks.

“The driver must have been in shock. The strength drained from his arms and he froze.”

“Yeah, but his neck must have been on fire from such an explosion.”

“And that’s when the bus hit the building on George’s Avenue.”

“Yeah, demolished by a fart!”

“Not only that...” Señor Adolfo’s red face grew even redder as he forced out the last bit of the story. “Not only that...” he sputtered in between guffaws, “Three people died in the accident! And one of them wasn’t the fat lady. She survived to fart again.”

They both howled.

Señor Carlos slapped his thigh and through his own stream of tears he watched Señor Adolfo roll out of his chair and onto the grass in a fit of merry hysteria.

As Señor Adolfo flailed about on the ground, red-faced, and sputtering, a very drunk Señor Carlos continued to embellish the fat lady story, exaggerating the details and laughing even harder. It was out of control.

Anyway, the truth of the matter is that as Señor Adolfo was rolling on the ground he was actually choking to death on an olive pit. And Señor Carlos continued howling uproariously as his brother, flailing about, finally ceased moving and fell deathly still.

After that horrendous experience, Señor Carlos vowed that he would never again permit anyone to use the expression, ‘he laughed himself to death’ in

his presence. "It was very traumatic for me and a sad situation all round and, as you can see, a shock to have to deliver my dear, beloved brother to his final resting place so early in his life, God bless his soul."

After this comprehensive account, which moved him into a state of visible despondency, the drunken Señor Carlos pressed 3,000 pesos into Astrid's palm and promised to pay her the same each month for the watering of flowers and the general care and cleaning of Señor Adolfo's post-mortem place of residence.

But now the earthquake had eliminated that need for care, along with its associated potential income. Once they steadied themselves and came out of hiding, the family would not leave Señor Adolfo on the ground in front of his cart. Nor would they bury him in the ruins. They would be wise to cremate him. In this case they would take his ashes home and they would try to sell his niche. But since it was in ruins, it would be a long-term real estate challenge. Even if they succeeded, Astrid would have to wait for a member of the new buyer's family to die in order to make up for her lost income. She sighed. Business was going to be slow.

Under the circumstances, she knew that her monthly earnings would be suspended. The patrons would not pay to maintain ruins. The bodies of her muertitos would all be temporarily relocated while the patio walls were reconstructed. It could take months but probably more likely it would be years before she would be able to make a living from her patch in Patio 62 again.

Perhaps she would accept Señora Ruby's invitation to share her Patio. Señora Ruby was the sole caretaker of Patio 35, which consisted of a stretch of niches in the outer wall and several older, more upscale family mausoleums. Señora Ruby had tried to convince Astrid to transfer to her sector so they could work together because she was getting too old to care for the entire Patio herself and she complained that she had no children to apprentice and inherit her post.

Today Astrid looked up to the heavens and prayed that Señora Ruby's Patio had not suffered serious damage. At that moment, the earth gave itself another strong shake and Astrid crouched down, absent-mindedly leaning on Señor Adolfo's large shoulder for support. Her weight was apparently all that was needed to disturb his own fragile balance and he suddenly rolled over, nose to tarmac. Startled, she jumped back. She would have to abandon him this way. He was too heavy to roll back over again.

After a time, the putrid smell of death and decay began to filter into the air. She estimated that it was only a matter of minutes before Señor Adolfo's brother would be back to demand the return of his 3,000 pesos. So Astrid hustled away from the prone body lying on the path of Patio 62. She kept her head down, intent as she picked her way over the ruins. But she was aware that she was successfully sneaking past Señor Adolfo's family. They were huddled in the centre of a path, shaken and muttering about the end of the world. She stopped to watch when Señor Carlos' cell phone rang, sending out a ring tone that interrupted the silence of disaster with its rock organ version of 'Stairway to Heaven.'

Señor Carlos fumbled for the phone and then stood frozen, staring at the small screen.

"It's Adolfo! This is a call from Adolfo! What?" He pushed the button and raised the phone to his ear, "Adolfo? Adolfo? Adolfo...?" He choked and held his cell up to the sky. Then he announced to his stupefied family, "Adolfo called but I can't hear what he's trying to tell me. God help me, I can't hear him!" He broke into desperate sobs and sank to his knees as the small group bent around him. They all stared trancelike at the square screen on his phone, a disconcerted human sculpture in the midst of the broken path.

In awe of the mystery of such an unlikely event, one of the more religious sisters sank to her knees, raised both arms, gazed up towards the heavens and coughed into the dusty air, "Holy Virgin, you've made us witness to a miracle. It's a miracle. Adolfo is a saint. We must tell the bishop." Another woman – a more practical soul – turned around, palms up to the sky in a gesture of gratitude. "Thanks be to God for Telefónica. He has given them an exceptional network. God bless the Spaniards and their technology."

With the 3,000 pesos jammed deep into her pocket, Astrid scurried past them like a guilty cat. It was her fault. Why hadn't she just turned the phone off? Señor Adolfo must have rolled onto it when she leaned into him and now the autodial, which happened to select his brother's number, was activated. The call would be repeated until the battery finally died or until Mother Earth shook Señor Adolfo enough to roll him back, which was extremely unlikely. Señor Carlos better be prepared for a lot of calls from heaven.

No doubt because of Señor Adolfo's powers from the afterlife, his family would declare him a saint and they would set up an altar for him in the cemetery, perhaps not far from the rock of the 'poor Christ.' Strangers would come to visit him and repeat the story of the miraculous telephone call from

life beyond, gaze into the faded eyes in his photo, and return to petition him for favours. Soon he would be known as Saint Adolfo. “And all for what?” Astrid answered her own question, “For choking on an olive pit and for being so overweight that pressure from his dead gut pushed a button on a cell phone that someone left turned on? Who am I to judge?”

As she approached Señora Ruby’s shack at the corner of Patio 35, she was witness to another disquieting scene. The tremors served to evict groups of cemetery squatters. They were scurrying about like rats blinded by daylight.

As was customary in many cemeteries, indigents made their way inside the gates to bed down and take shelter beside tombs and inside mausoleums, staying for days or months, sometimes even years. The cemetery, being what it was, was affectionately referred to as ‘Los patios de los Callados’ (‘Patios of the Mutes’), or ‘Hotel Cama Dura’ (‘Hard Bed Hotel’).

Today’s tragedy would make many squatters homeless once again. Astrid paused to watch as they hobbled helter-skelter away from the stench and disaster, having hastily slung plastic bags stuffed with limited creature comforts over their shoulders. Some would not have escaped at all on that day and only later would the authorities discover several unidentified bodies huddled under rough woollen blankets, crushed beneath the ruins. The death of these homeless people would never officially be recorded because cemetery regulations prohibited anyone from actually living within its walls. Therefore they had never officially existed but the administration would make room in a common grave and, in death as in life, their bodies would be overlooked.

In spite of the strict no-squatter regulation, most cemetery caretakers took pity on the homeless and turned a blind eye to the rules. Less sympathetic caretakers could usually be convinced by the occasional gift of a cigarette or a 100-peso coin offered up by the grubby hand of someone in greater need than themselves. Señora Ruby did not accept gifts but if she granted anyone space in her patio, she insisted that they pick up their own garbage, donate one or two empty bottles a month for use as flower vases, and above all, discreetly use the approved cemetery toilets. She would not tolerate the sacrilege or stench of urine on tombs and pathways.

So squatters snuck in each night before the gates were locked. After the gatekeeper became familiar with them, he would permit them to wander in at later hours in exchange for a cigarette or a few ounces of wine. The next day, they tidied the space outside of their quarters and either left to go about their business downtown or they lounged around the passageways and sprawled

on mausoleum steps chatting with neighbours and playing with homeless dogs.

In relation to squatters, but unknown until it actually investigated, the administration had, on occasion, received complaints from residents of a neighbourhood upwind of the cemetery. They objected to the offensive odour of night-time cremations, claiming it ruined otherwise peaceful meals and family evenings in front of the TV and they demanded it be stopped at once. The administration insisted that night cremation was not a cemetery practice. However, the barbecue odour persisted and finally several elderly ladies with thinning, coiffed hair, dressed in their Sunday best with large butterfly broaches and strands of pearls, went to protest with placards outside the cemetery offices. Their presence and persistence drew television cameras and bad publicity, forcing the administration to look into the matter.

Reporters followed cemetery officials as they uncovered and displayed the evidence. Their cameras panned across three barbecue grills, two half-barrels with wood charcoal and soot and two dozen empty wine bottles. The hangdog, stubbly faces of 20 squatters were flashed across the news with intermittent images of the dismayed, well-coiffed ladies with pursed lips, one of whom suggested the homeless people were very likely cannibals. All of the squatters were evicted and three caretakers were reprimanded and threatened with losing their Patios. However, several squatters returned after a few days, offering every spare cigarette and coin in their possession to non-conformist caretakers. Having regained access, they reduced the size of their fires and eliminated barbecues from the menu. From then on, the only safe options were stew or fried fish.

Under normal circumstances, the night-time population of the General Cemetery increased by several hundred souls, all locked safely behind the tall gates where they slept side-by-side with the muertitos.

But as of about five minutes ago, as a result of the earthquake, these were no longer normal circumstances.

CHAPTER 2

The Old Woman of Santa María Street

It had been more than a month since the earthquake and Astrid and Señora Ruby passed the days in stops and starts at Patio 35. They were still surrounded by destruction and much of their time was spent hunting for lost tools, reorganising and marvelling over small mercies, such as how the decaying virgin statue on the abandoned tomb of Mercedes de la Fuente was spared the lamentable fate of toppling and smashing into a million pieces. Señora Ruby was disconcerted by this particular phenomenon but did not discuss the inner anxiety it caused. Instead, she redirected her thoughts, and the conversation to a different one – one they had had at least a half dozen times since the quake – that of the old woman of Santa María Street.

Señora Ruby planted her feet firmly at the base of the concrete wall beside her tool shed and leaned back into it. She was hunched over, her shoulders rounded so much that her torso looked like a big mitt ready to catch anything that came at her. She rolled her back into the wall as she listened, eyes closed, arms folded across her chest, face tilted up towards the sun.

With her light blue smock, her short, dusty grey rubber boots, grey hair and complexion the colour of cement, she resembled a wrinkled lizard. Astrid affectionately thought of her as the cemetery chameleon.

It was Señora Ruby's custom to develop an itch between her shoulder blades when she and Astrid relaxed to gossip or when she stopped to listen to a romantic bolero on the radio at the door of her shed. Sometimes her eyes watered in nostalgic bliss and she hummed softly. Who knows what came to mind from decades gone by? She claimed that her rocking motion relieved the itch in her back and helped her to concentrate, but Astrid attributed the habit to advanced age – something always itching and aching.

Although Señora Ruby said that as far as her age was concerned, she could never count higher than the number 68, Astrid estimated Señora Ruby to have lived through at least 74 or 75 summers. She was a well-seasoned fixture on Patio 35, having inherited this caretaker post from her own mother, who inherited it from her mother before her, which, if you added it up, meant

that she was from a line of cemetery caretakers who dated back to its inception. Therefore, Señora Ruby knew everything there was to know about the Santiago General Cemetery.

Today, as Señora Ruby's lids drooped heavily over her eyes and she chewed on the inside of her right cheek, Astrid noticed how the fingers of time had scratched and blended their years across her weathered canvas. Her cheeks, which she dusted heavily every day with coral-coloured powder that, in Astrid's estimation, only served to attract flies, were sallow, and the creases in her forehead appeared deeper in the afternoon light. Her lips curled downwards in a frown that didn't mean she was unhappy, just concentrating. Her grey eyebrows, from which occasionally leapt one remarkably long hair, came together in a furrowed V at the bridge of her nose. The wrinkles that spidered out into her cheeks from her upper lip, and especially those around her eyes were oily and attracted black particles of smog, making her face look like a charcoal drawing, black on white with two uneven round daubs of coral. Recently, her grey hair had thinned rather drastically and strands fell out when she ran her fingers through it. But she refused to cut it and it hung to the middle of her back in straggly, often oily tresses.

Today Señora Ruby was listening to Astrid's account of the mysterious old lady from Santa María Street. Señora Ruby's opinion was that the old lady was one of Astrid's guardian angels. She was one of her muertitos, who had come to her rescue, as some are known to do.

"Yes, Astrid. There is little doubt." She opened her eyes and took a moment to focus. "But tell me again and don't leave out a single detail."

Astrid took her time. She extracted a cigarette and offered one to Señora Ruby, who declined. Astrid sucked in one long drag, exhaled slowly as she thought, inhaled again and then expelled the smoke forcefully out the side of her mouth as she began a recount of the events.

.....

"On the day of the earthquake – of course I didn't know there would be an earthquake – I went to the bakery, as usual... you know, the one on the corner of Santa María Street, to buy a bun for my lunch. I had a few extra pesos, so I thought I would stop for a slice of cold cut meat at Siete Pelos' corner shop. I always think it's worth it to go the extra distance because his meat is cheap. It's because he cuts from the outdated pressed ends, but I don't mind that. Anyway, even though his shop is a block off my route, I still had time. The

only thing was to make sure I got there before Siete Pelos disappeared on one of his hair repair interludes. You know Siete Pelos (“Seven Hairs”), don’t you Señora Ruby?”

Señora Ruby nodded. “Who doesn’t? Go on...”

Siete Pelos was baptised Omar Marco Lopez-Parra but most people forgot his true name upon the launch of his new hair style, which he invented to cover up premature hair loss when he was only 23 years old. At that age, Omar’s scalp failed to produce new hair and what hair he already had, began to fall out surprisingly rapidly from the centre top area of his head, forcing him to take drastic measures. Among other things, he began to pray to San Expedito to help him grow at least the one essential lock of hair he needed to achieve the style he had seen atop the heads of several distinguished, albeit older, gentlemen. “That’s all I ask, San Expedito. It’s not much considering most men my age still have a full head of hair. All I need is this growth. Just in this one spot. If you grant me this, I’ll be your humble servant until I die.”

San Expedito, the patron saint of all who need to expedite events – in Omar’s case, hair growth – is a popular saint, not only in Chile, but also in all of South America. The story behind San Expedito is worth knowing:

He was a Roman legionnaire in the 4th Century AD and according to one of the common versions of the story, he was walking along a road one day when the spirit of God touched him, encouraging him to convert to Christianity. But an evil spirit in the form of a crow intervened, cawing “Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow... leave your decision for another day. You should be in no rush to convert to Christianity.” In response, San Expedito stepped on the crow, crushing and killing him, and declared, “There will be no postponements!” He therefore became known as the saint who answers those in need of an urgent solution and he is most often seen in his Roman uniform, one foot on a dead crow, and sometimes with a clock in one hand. Of course his original calling was to help others approach God and to become good Christians without delay. But he has evolved to entertain petitions that include help with business dealings as well as almost any other project considered to be urgent or that simply has to be completed at some point before you die.

The Catholic Church in Chile, having initially rejected a request to build a chapel in San Expedito’s honour, ended up themselves praying to the Saint and within the expeditious period of only nine days, decided to give it the green light. So there is now a chapel just outside of Viña del Mar that houses a large

San Expedito statue. It has come to be known as San Expedito's home in Chile and a priest organises heavily advertised annual pilgrimages to the site.

Anyway, Siete Pelos' negotiation with the Saint was satisfactory to both parties – in exchange for his long strand of hair, Siete Pelos would close his shop each year to travel to the San Expedito chapel, where he lit a candle at the foot of the larger-than-life icon. More importantly, in addition to the annual pilgrimage, Siete Pelos' secret pact with the Saint was that he would source, stock and sell San Expedito pennants, photos and trinkets in his shop. Each year, expedited by the priest of the chapel, Siete Pelos set in motion new deals with an ever-expanding list of foreign suppliers of holy gift items and he returned home, excited about his motley collection.

He even managed to source San Expedito handkerchiefs. Not a practical item, when you think about it, since people would end up blowing their noses in his face. Nonetheless the Saint was there to help turn a peso and, if necessary, to catch nasal mucus. Siete Pelos had the largest collection of San Expedito paraphernalia in Santiago and he shamelessly promoted it at every opportunity. His sales were so successful that he and the priest realised the sky was the limit and they arranged for the production of yet more rare San Expedito branded goods such as underwear, soap, hair pomade, embroidered insignias, belts, neckties, earrings, cell phone cases, toilet paper covers and air fresheners (to name a few) as well as the standard saint cards, candles, framed photos and lighters. He and the priest ran a booming business but there was no doubt about who was really responsible for their success.

But, back to Siete Pelos and the point about his hair... It took about four years to grow this single thin strand to a satisfactory length. The initial witty estimate was that the strand consisted of only seven hairs and even though this was a gross exaggeration, the name, Siete Pelos ("Seven Hairs") stuck. The sad tress grew out of the left side of his head above his ear and just below his part. At its optimum, it stretched about 60 centimetres and with that, Siete Pelos was able to maintain his distinct look. Each morning he stretched out the strand and, coating a comb with San Expedito pomade, he stroked it a few times from the root to the tip before winding it back and forth over his bald cranium and patting it in place.

Over the course of the day, because he constantly bent and stretched as he served his customers, the strand slowly unwound, revealing more and more of Siete Pelos' greasy scalp until it reached the point where he had to fling it over his shoulder to keep it out of his way. This did not go unnoticed, and more than

one customer threatened, “If I find one of your seven, long greasy hairs in my sandwich, I’ll come back and pull out the other six!” Therefore three or four times a day it was necessary to hang a sign that said ‘I’ll be back in five minutes’ so that he could run to his room next door to re-wind and re-grease his precious plait of hair. Most often, the five minutes extended to thirty.

The morning of the earthquake, Astrid was spared the concern about this extended five-minute hair recess because the mysterious old woman of Santa María Street discouraged her from going to Siete Pelos’ altogether.

Astrid glanced at Señora Ruby to check if she was still awake and then continued with her story. “When I left the bakery, before going over to Siete Pelos’ place, I saw an old lady shuffling along on two legs as thin as raspberry canes. It looked like she was curling her toes hard inside her pair of pink Adidas so that they wouldn’t fall off. The shoes must have been three sizes too big. The old girl hesitated at the edge of the sidewalk. I remember she was wearing a pair of white hand-knit socks that had fallen down around her ankles; it reminded me of the plumage around the neck of a condor and I thought to myself that maybe she was hiding a beak and a pair of beady eyes under her skirt.” Astrid laughed at the image, but Señora Ruby remained expressionless, flipping her wrist as a signal for Astrid to get on with it.

“Anyway, like I told you before, but just so you remember... you know, in case it triggers a memory... the old lady was wearing a light beige sweater with holes in the elbows. The sweater was stretched out of shape and it hung down past her hips. She had on a faded flower cotton skirt. Her hair was a dull grey and it was pulled back into a loose bun and there was a big red double dahlia sticking out of it. She was wearing a huge pair of long, dangling silver earrings, her cheeks were caked with powder and she wore heavy red lipstick. My first thought was that she was on her way to an early morning fiesta. But she looked worse for wear, so maybe she was just coming back from an all-night one. I mean I didn’t know what to think of her. She was a rare old bird and you never know what some of these ancient types get up to.”

Señora Ruby looked at her sideways.

“Sorry, Señora Ruby. I didn’t mean anything by that.”

Señora Ruby just nodded for her to carry on.

“You know, I was afraid she was going to lose one of her big shoes on the street, so I approached her and offered my arm. That’s when I noticed a fresh jasmine scent around her. I mean – I was surprised that she smelled so nice

considering the state she was in. And this changed my perception of her. The aroma created the impression that she was more elegant. She just looked up at me, didn't smile or anything, and she slipped her hand under my arm. Her fingers pinched my elbow and I noticed her long fingernails had been freshly varnished with bright red nail polish. Really odd, don't you think, especially so early in the morning?"

Señora Ruby nodded in agreement and squinted up into the blue sky as though she was going to respond with something wise. But she didn't. So Astrid continued.

"Where are you going?" The old woman's voice was raspy.

"I'm going over to Siete Pelos' for a slice or two of meat. Are you going that way?"

"No. I'm not. And you shouldn't either." The old lady snapped. "You must get away from here. Go home instead, or go and visit a friend." She stopped walking, looked up into Astrid's face and ordered, "Now!"

Astrid was shocked. It was like an order delivered from a sergeant. She paused in the middle of the road to look down at the old lady, who stood staring back intensely.

"Why should I do that?" Astrid decided to humour her, patting the old lady's shiny red fingertips.

"Because there's going to be a tremendous earthquake this morning. And soon. And you shouldn't be on the street alone." The old lady's eyes drilled into Astrid's. Astrid rolled back on her heels, feeling the need for more distance between them.

"Oh, Señora, I doubt if there will be an earthquake. Where would you get such an idea?"

To dismiss the notion, Astrid gently tugged the old woman's arm and they resumed their trek towards the other side of the street.

The old lady's fingers tightened, her sharp nails jabbing the interior softness of Astrid's elbow. "Now listen to me. Go wherever you're going then but forget about stopping for the meat. Go, I tell you!" She pressed her bony shoulder into Astrid, forcing the two of them to halt again. The old lady just looked up, her eyes penetrating Astrid's. Astrid felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle.

Now it was the old lady who tugged at Astrid to continue.

When they reached the other side of the street, the woman unhooked herself from Astrid's elbow, wagged one red-tipped index finger up at her face and repeated. "Forget the meat, Señora. Get away." Her eyes were fierce but had an unnerving background stillness, which Astrid found vaguely familiar but was unable to identify. She wanted to ask the old lady's name but in an instant the leathery stick of a woman was gone, bones clattering off in the opposite direction, her big pink shoes slapping the pavement and her oversized dahlia flopping loosely out of the grey nest of hair on the back of her head. She faded off before Astrid's eyes and Astrid turned away, her empty stomach beginning a sick dance.

Trying to forget the old woman's warning, she continued along the sidewalk. But she kept her head down, alert for the slightest vibration or groan coming from the street, and when she became suspicious of irregular cracks in the pavement – perceiving one or two to have lengthened and broadened as she passed them by – real or not, she was unnerved and she stopped and turned around. The old lady was nowhere in sight.

Maybe she'd eat jam today instead of a slice of Siete Pelos' cold cuts. She did an about-face and avoided the cracks as she strode onward, increasing her pace with each step. By the time she reached the cemetery gate she was in a flat-out run, her knees and ankles grinding under her weight.

Safely at work, she calmed down, unlocked her tool shack and donned her dusty blue caretaker smock. She wandered round to the front of the main wall of Patio 62 to do a quick revision of her muertitos, and headed over to inspect the newly prepared niche. She estimated that it had only been about 20 minutes from the time the old lady on Santa María Street had disappeared to when the two caretakers pulled up in front of her with Señor Adolfo on their trolley, just before the earthquake struck.

.....

Señora Ruby's eyes were still half closed and she resumed rolling her back against the wall. "Well, if you and no one else in the neighbourhood has seen the old lady before or since, then my professional opinion is that she is one of your muertitos. But I can tell you she doesn't sound familiar to me. And if she appeared to you, it's because she knows you from your patio."

"About a week after the earthquake, I asked Norma, at the bakery... you know Norma... she's the biggest snoop on the block, always watching every-

thing. She knows everyone in the neighbourhood and nothing gets past her. Anyway, Norma saw me help the old lady across the street. But she said she doesn't know who she is and hasn't seen her since that day either."

"Do you recognise her face from any of the niche photos?"

"Well, you know that so many of those muertitos have been there since before my own mother's time, long before I took over, and some of the niches are too old to have photos. But, Señora Ruby, there was something about the old lady's eyes... something I recognised. I don't know if it was the eyes themselves or just their expression. Maybe I've seen the expression before. There was something disturbing there... behind her eyes, you know... like she saw from far, far away."

"This is the look from beyond the grave."

Astrid stared at Señora Ruby without seeing her. She knew she was right. She was always right about these things. She was old, had lived through countless unnatural experiences, and was a good judge of things that happened between one reality and another.

Señora Ruby continued to make her case, "There can be no other explanation... and she accurately predicted the earthquake. I mean... how? And she was a stranger to our streets. No one knows who she was. And no one has seen her since. She appeared for no other reason than to warn you."

"So in my opinion," Señora Ruby was closing the conversation, twisting her back, stretching, preparing to return to work, "she was one of your muertitos who came out to protect you."

"Yeah." Astrid took a last drag on the remains of her cigarette and squinted through the smoke. "Maybe she even saved my life, Señora Ruby. You know that Siete Pelos' shop ended up in a complete shambles? He was crushed under the rubble."

"Susana told me."

"Did Susana also tell you that a good portion of his floor collapsed into a sink hole, like it had been bombed?" Astrid shuddered and ground her cigarette butt into the dust under her loafer. "And everything on his shelves either went down with it, or was blown out onto the sidewalk. When things calmed down, Señor Oscar's youngest son – what's-his-name? – ran over to steal candies that had scattered across the ground. If he hadn't been such a little thief, Siete Pelos could have died."

“Yeah, Susana told me that too. She said that the little bugger was scared out of his wits because he thought a snake had slithered out from under the rubble to bite his grubby little paw when he reached into the candy jar. Thought it was Satan himself. A miracle the kid didn’t die on the spot from fright.” Señora Ruby laughed her throaty laugh.

Astrid picked up on the story, “I heard that he dropped all the candy and stood there shaking like a leaf, pointing at the snake and screaming. When Señor Oscar ran over he recognised that the snake was not a snake at all, but Siete Pelos’ single strand of hair. It was like it had taken on a life of its own. Señor Oscar said that when he tugged on it, Siete Pelos yelped. Anyway, that’s how he knew for sure he was alive. But Siete Pelos begged him to spare his hair. Poor Siete. Can you imagine? So Señor Oscar dug him out with his bare hands. They say he’ll be okay but he’ll have to walk with a cane.”

“Saved by a hair.” Señora Ruby commented under her breath.

Astrid was more serious now, “I understand he’s already rebuilding the front of his shop... and without government help. Imagine! I heard he made a new sign for it and it says, *Conversé con los Santos* (“I spoke to the Saints”). Of course he’s stocking even more San Expedito cards. And he gave Señor Oscar a sample of every single San Expedito item that he has. You should see Señor Oscar’s taxi now. With all the knickknacks, there’s almost no room for passengers.”

“Yeah, I heard someone say that there are so many San Expedito images in the taxi now that you feel like you’re being escorted to your destination by the whole Roman army. And apparently the air fresheners are so strong that by the time you get out, your skin turns green and you smell like a pine tree.”

“Yeah, but you know what I heard? I heard that Señor Oscar actually started to re-sell the gifts from Siete Pelos. In fact, he almost forces them on you. Susana said it’s so bad that he locks the door and doesn’t let you out unless you buy something.”

“Oh, do you really think so, Astrid? I mean you know the stuff Susana comes up with.”

Astrid shrugged.

“The point, Astrid, is that the old lady saved you from being buried alive with Siete Pelos. Had you not turned around and walked the other way, you could have died there, or at best, been seriously injured, or maybe even discovered strangled to death by Siete Pelos’ hair.”

Astrid rubbed her throat and shivered. She recalled that she had heard the old woman's voice again after the quake when she was standing alone in the eerie silence of the path. The voice was telling her not to panic. And she had been conscious of the calming scent of jasmine, if not the coolness of a ghost brushing past her in the gloomy air.

“But Señora Ruby, I'll never find the old woman of Santa María Street now. My patio's been torn down and they're rebuilding. All of my muertitos were removed to the temporary services area. If there was a chance to recognise the old lady, it would have been while her niche was still intact.”

“Then it is as it is. We can't explain things the dead do, my little heart.” (Astrid was particularly touched when Señora Ruby used this pet name.) “Whoever she was, she did what she wanted to do and has gone again now. God knows that many of my own muertitos have saved me through the years. And you know it too. I've told you. I can't even count how many times they've protected me from delinquents within these very walls. Don't ask questions. Just call up these things that you will never forget and be grateful.”

CHAPTER 3

One Side of the Coin

Astrid was humming ‘Everything Changes’ as she ambled through the west gates towards her shack. This morning she had awakened with an unusual amount of vigour, happy with the world. She had lain in bed smiling up at the fine cracks in her ceiling, which, when she squinted, sketched trees and brooks and smoke from old trains that dragged themselves over one mountain after another, across imaginary bridges that eventually disappeared bravely into the broken sea that was her roof. Something good was going to happen today. She could feel it in her bones.

She didn’t notice Juan Bonifacio Maluenda-Valdéz drive up in the 1975 Volvo Amazon and she didn’t hear the brakes squeak as he pulled in across from the cemetery gate. He extracted from his pocket the loose cigarette that his friend Mario had sheepishly bestowed as a going-away gift, lit it, leaned back and inhaled. For a moment the smoke obscured his gaunt face, the handsome features faded behind years of hard living, grey eyes once a steel blue that drove the girls wild. His fine nose had a knuckle dent in it and there was evidence of a fist having hammered into his slightly deformed lower lip (possibly more than once) and one of his bottom molars was missing. He tossed his hair, running his fingers through it several times, ignoring its dull, brittle ends. Juan loved the length and thickness of his hair, denying its less than healthy condition. He insisted on the 70s’ style, feathered and long at the back, because it made him look so damned handsome. “Watch,” he predicted, “the rest of the world will come round full circle because this is a classic ‘do’ and I’ll be the first one to say ‘I told you so.’” He was lost in the past, stuck in the groove, like a needle caught in the vinyl track of his most popular hit song whose title was ‘This is the Moment of Forever.’ Juan studied the entrance to the cemetery, absent-mindedly watching a woman with huge hoop earrings and big leather loafers, her short, slightly waddling strides carrying her along the outside wall of the graveyard.

Mario had apologised, saying that a cigarette was the most he could offer because his wife had threatened to divorce him. “If you don’t boot that ill-begotten, blue-eyed loser out the door now – yesterday – then I’ll throw you out with him! And don’t think I won’t.” Mario, being basically honest and

lacking in diplomacy, confessed to Juan what his wife had said. Nothing he could do. “So sorry, amigo. But, here... have a cigarette.” Juan didn’t hold it against him. He accepted and cleared out.

He squinted through the smoke. His last option lay inside those gates – specifically, in the family mausoleum. He tried to remember exactly where it was located. Patio number 46 came to mind, but who knew? It had been so long. He tossed the cigarette butt to the sidewalk just as the woman bustled around the gate and disappeared from his consciousness.

On his way over to the cemetery, he had detoured past his old apartment building in the centre of Santiago. It was still in shambles. The earthquake had sealed its destiny – it would finally be demolished next week along with most other buildings on the street where he had lived the last twenty unlucky years of his life.

Long before he had made it his home, half of the building had been burnt out by a fire and it was legally declared unfit to inhabit. But at the time, he was desperate and the landlord was greedy, so they made a deal. The landlord removed the tape from across the door and with a toothless grin trenched across heavily whiskered cheeks, ushered Juan in with a sweep of his arm. “Welcome to the palace. Just be careful. I don’t want any legal troubles here. So we don’t know each other and I’m not really renting this to you,” he had told him. The walls were still charred, soot clinging to everything, but Juan improvised and, although he could not call it home, this hovel was a place to lay his head. Before he knew it, twenty years had gone by.

The day he found the burnt-out rooms, he was kicking aside some soot on the kitchen floor when he stepped on a rock. Nudging it with the toe of his boot, he saw that it was a smooth, polished gem that had come loose from its setting. He bent down to examine it and discovered a precious lapis lázuli stone clinging for its life to a single clamp on a long silver chain. He picked it up, dug it out of what was left of the pendant, gave it a quick shine on his sleeve, kissed it and christened it his ‘ojo azul con suerte’ (“lucky blue eye”) before dropping the rare, blue rock into his trouser pocket. Why he should believe the stone to be lucky after it was ill-fated enough to fall out of a pendant into the soot from a disastrous fire was a mystery, but probably the answer lay somewhere in the fact that he needed something, anything at all, to give him hope.

After all these years, he still had his lucky blue eye and every morning he pulled it out of his pocket to perform the ritual that called up its good for-

tune; he rolled it between his fingers, no less than three times – back and forth, round and round, over and out – and then raised it to his lips to kiss it twice with the respect one might give the pope’s ring. His luck, which had gone bad somewhere around the year 1978, hadn’t changed much since he found the stone. But he was optimistic because the discovery of his lucky blue eye was 20 years ago and someone had told him (he couldn’t remember who) that bad fortune never lasts for more than 21 years in a row. So if he could guard it carefully, then this year was bound to be his year of fortune.

Juan never considered that maybe his kisses and affectionate fondling of the lapis lázuli – the repeated whispered pleas for something good to happen, anything at all – might be such a nuisance to the stone that it would result not only in its ability to perform magic, but its psychology, its very desire to be lucky. In fact, all of this unwanted attention could even cause a stone (depending on its disposition) to become quite depressed. That Juan himself was the source of his own bad luck, and that the care he gave the stone actually served to perpetuate the negative energy that hovered around him as a grey aura, never entered his mind. He was fiercely determined that his blue stone brought him luck, even though it stubbornly refused to do any such thing.

Juan had convinced himself that the earthquake was the last bit of misfortune to perpetrate itself upon him before the all-important twenty-first year rolled around. It was the turning point and the stars would now begin to shine down upon him as they had once done. He was confident.

The day of the earthquake (now three months ago) Juan had been performing a little romantic number at Slaughterhouse Square in front of a bleary-eyed audience of exactly eleven. It was early. All eleven of them were all either too shocked, too scared, or too hung-over to move, so they clung to each other as the earth jostled them about on the wooden bench until eventually, with the pressure of the group all leaning in the same direction, the man at the end fell off. From there, it was a slow-motion domino effect. As the earth continued to tremble under their sprawling bodies, mouths hanging open, jaws trembling in time to the karaoke tune in the background, they all looked up at Juan for answers because he was, after all, the man with the microphone. He stopped singing but managed to remain on his feet, wobbling on the spot, microphone making a hollow sound as it repeatedly clunked into his bony chest. Perhaps it was really the sound of his heart. Whatever it was, it reminded him that he was still alive. When the tremors finally ended, the audience stumbled over one another and staggered off in shock, leaving Juan standing there with an empty hat that had bounced at least two metres away from his feet.

What does one do after an earthquake? One goes home, hoping to be able to sit down peacefully in one's familiar surroundings and sigh with relief, grateful to be unharmed. But as he made his way on foot from Slaughterhouse Square to the city centre, clambering over rubble and through the turmoil of the streets, he knew long before rounding the final corner, that his building was a lost cause. What chance did its charred timbers and twisted rebar have against such power? He reached into his pocket to fondle his lucky blue eye and as fortune would have it the Salvation Army was on the scene. "Well, my friend," the Salvation Army sergeant announced as he placed a hand on Juan's shoulder, "You have no choice but to abandon everything in your room. It's been crushed and lost under someone else's floor." So with just the clothes on his back and his lucky blue eye, Juan followed the kind volunteers to the Salvation Army shelter.

After more than three weeks of not much else other than sleeping on one of the cots that lined the main room of the sparse accommodation, eating two meals a day, hanging out on the streets, lounging against the walls and watching the world go by, Juan was told he'd have to leave to make room for new people in need. Either that, they said, or he could agree to don one of their Salvation Army uniforms and make himself useful by collecting funds on the sidewalks in the more fortunate east end of the city, which had not sustained much damage from the quake, and where, as the whole world knew, people had more money.

Juan opted for the uniform. He had to admit that it suited him well, the navy blue making him look taller, picking up the few remaining celestial sparks in his eyes. He arranged his hair around the collar and stood erect, chest out, buttons shining, tilting his head and smiling a crooked smile. The suit would help project his natural charm to the ladies, warm their hearts and open their wallets. He would do well with a suit like this for his act. He looked so suave, cool and sleek that he was certain his appearance alone would result in a few extra pesos being thrown into the hat at the end of one of his musical interludes.

He collected more than 18,000 pesos the first day and returned to the shelter with coins jingling in the Salvation Army pot. The next several days were about the same. But on the fifth day, the irresistible urge for a drink, coupled with the coins in the pot, got the better of him and he removed his tie and jacket, thoughtfully folding it inside out over his arm. He bought twelve boxes of wine, and settled down under the bridge where he felt obliged to

share his booze with five other homeless men. They whiled away the evening, all reliving their unique experience of the quake and several times they were sent scrambling out from under the bridge by more aftershocks.

Juan returned to the Salvation Army shelter at dawn, banging on their door, crying that he had been mugged by a group of young, god-forsaken delinquents who knocked him unconscious and locked him behind the gates of a liquor shop, and that it took several hours before the owner arrived to release him. The shelter volunteers ignored the stale stench of wine and gave him another chance. They served him soup and sympathy and offered him a bed for the next night. He gratefully accepted and promised to be more careful in the future. The following day he went out onto the street and produced excellent results, collecting the remarkable sum of 22,650 pesos. He managed to walk the straight and narrow for another couple of weeks, returning obediently to the shelter each evening, bounty in hand like a proud hunting dog.

But on the fourteenth night he could no longer resist temptation. Fourteen boxes of wine and two nights beyond that, and he knew the Salvation Army sergeant wouldn't believe his story again. So with a stolen X-Acto knife, he removed the Salvation Army insignias from the fine blue jacket, he spit and rubbed until the ghosts of their stitching had all but disappeared, brushed down the suit with a damp cloth, straightened the tie and went back to Slaughterhouse Square dressed in his semi-military, and he had no doubt, extremely attractive new look.

His fans, lined up hodgepodge on the wooden benches, gazed up at him as he swanked to the far end of the patio and they murmured to one another before throwing out the odd compliment. "Jhonny, you're positively dashing today. What have you done to yourself?" "Jhonny, march on over to my place!"

He rehearsed with the suit to check its ease of movement, bending a tad here and stretching a little there, being forced to hold up a hand in order to quell imaginary heavy applause that arose because of the Salvation Army vogue. He whispered under his breath as he pivoted in tight circles, his arms fluttering overhead to silence the enamoured crowd. "Thank you. You've been wonderful, as always. Don't hesitate to contribute to the cause."

It turned out that the Franklin market sector, where Slaughterhouse Square was located, had escaped the quake with a mere warning. Mother Earth had shaken her fist but had not visited her full wrath upon them. The place was electric with stories and excitement. Saved. Everyone said they must be do-

ing something right, must have been spared for a reason. But just in case, they were all on evacuation alert, fearing one big aftershock would loosen a vital cornerstone somewhere (who knew where?) that was capable of causing it all to tumble.

Juan liked to describe Franklin as a 'less refined' sector of the city. It had its own culture, a coarse, pugnacious synergy that flowed through its veins. It was mean and bustling on the surface, but it was friendly if you knew your way around. It was home to the famous Persa Bío Bío, a market area that covered multiple city blocks with a mish-mash of stores in old, adjoining one- and two-storey brick and adobe buildings. Since the sector's awakening as a market decades earlier, it had grown like a jungle, too fertile to be contained indoors. Its merchandise sprawled and wound its way out of the narrow doors and crept out of the tall windows. Multifarious goods crawled along sidewalks and into empty lots, expanding into the spaces under tents and then reached up to display themselves from hooks and improvised hangers that had been hurriedly stabbed into walls. The market was a paradise for things – things under multiple layers and over numerous levels. As if by magic, unlikely items were pulled out from behind other even more implausible articles. Discarded products were tossed up onto roofs and into forgotten pigeonholes. It was a place for foot traffic, where delivery trucks, if they must enter at all, had to inch along behind streams of browsing pedestrians, meandering dogs and busy vendors. Narrow passageways were crammed with all nature of new and used goods from nuts and bolts, perfume, pliable two-headed dinosaurs and plush toys, machetes and rifles, live tarantulas and kittens, large appliances and autos, sandals and beach balls. Whatever you needed. If you couldn't find it elsewhere in the city, you would find it somewhere in the Persa. It was a well-known fact that an unspoken quantity of the market's products had been stolen directly off the backs of trucks on some hapless highway. But even if the authorities were so inclined, there was just too much activity to monitor.

After the quake the vendors rearranged and rebuilt their pyramids of radios, shoes and telephone parts, posters, clothing and batteries, bags and boxes of plastic toys, second-hand tools, firearms and books, ironing boards and plants, televisions and car parts, refrigerators and industrial stoves. They dusted off their hands and repositioned themselves on their tall stools, one foot on the ground for balance at one corner of their merchandise. Using a long, hooked pole they jumped up to snag anything you showed the slightest bit of interest in, holding it up to detain you while they rattled off sales

spiels about why you couldn't live without it. Persa Bío Bío, always open for business.

At the curbs, delivery men in oversized, stained jogging pants and too-tight t-shirts over spongy paunches slept across their sloped, dual-wheeled wooden carts until someone whistled and, like firemen called to an emergency, they jumped awake. Piling furniture and appliances onto their planks on wheels, they danced like ballerinas between sleeping dogs and street sellers down roads and around corners. Vendors threw up their arms and yelled at each other; music blasted out of every entrance; an auctioneer shot words into his microphone, pulling in curious browsers; fruit sellers with portable wagons stopped to weigh bags of fresh fruit on their fraudulent scales, blues buskers against red brick walls wailed out tunes, young boys scuffled with each other here and there as pretty girls stood by, ready to take the arm of the winner; a family of chinchineros (street drummers) danced – twirling and jumping to the beat of the drums and cymbals on their backs; men with the Polaroids stood beside haughty llamas who batted long eyelashes from behind bright green and pink tassels; puppies scrambled to escape cardboard box prisons as their owners quickly snatched pesos offered in exchange for 'giving away' their pets.

Persa Bío Bío was the kind of place where you could conveniently lose yourself between countless stalls and passageways that spidered off the main streets but it was relatively easy to find your friends if you knew where to look. Both things made it the perfect hangout for a guy like Juan Bonifacio Maluenda-Valdéz. His place of business was Slaughterhouse Square, the plaza with a gazebo behind the old meat packing plant. Over the years it had morphed into an informal performance stage for washed-up singers who were down on their luck and in need of a drink. In general it attracted the same class of fans – their glory days either a thing of the ancient past or nothing but dreams for future greatness bottled in cheap wine.

Juan took turns singing to the background music of the karaoke system shared by the performers. He appeared in sets between the likes of Roger, who sang old romantic tunes made famous by Charles Aznavour, Marlen who had a Mexican ranchera act, the gay Ramirez Duo who were favourites with their flamboyant performance, which included tossing metallic confetti from their pockets so it fluttered into the faces of adoring patrons, and Lizbet who purred like a kitten between stanzas. There were others on weekends. Sometimes the regular performers got lucky and booked wedding gigs or

community parties, leaving an opportunity at the plaza for less-known artists to step up and show their stuff. The truth is that most of the performers at Slaughterhouse Square were extraordinarily gifted individuals and if you were lucky enough to catch them on a good day, you would be entertained like a king for the price of a peso.

Juan was not a bad person; his lot was simply the accumulation of a series of unfortunate events. For years he had coasted along in survival mode believing that one day his luck would change. Over the last couple of decades his life revolved around crony has-beens and up-and-coming karaoke artists at the plaza. He tried not to dwell on the sharp, downward spiral in which he was captive and he managed (for the most part) to drink himself into a state of ignorant bliss. He was, however, capable of a certain discipline when it came to singing, especially on weekends. These were the most profitable periods. He liked to be at the plaza for both the money and the camaraderie. After their gigs, he and his fellow performers partied late into the night. During weekdays they all took it easy, doing whatever came naturally whenever the spirit moved them.

Jesica, whose car Juan now sat in outside of the cemetery, was one of the plaza regulars. She used to sing but found her true calling as technical support, operating the karaoke machine, burning and organising CDs for sale, ensuring the sound system was in working order. Juan and Jesica had a fling and he even called her his girlfriend once, but for how long he couldn't remember. The affair blew itself out naturally, coming to a mutually satisfactory end when they intuitively followed different drinking partners. No hard feelings.

The one thing Jesica still had that Juan sometimes needed, and that she occasionally conceded, was her mustard-coloured Volvo Amazon. She had inherited it from her father along with his little house. The car was her father's prized possession and he would have sooner let the house go up in flames than let someone scratch his Volvo. So Jesica hung onto it tooth and nail, never once being tempted to sell it for a fortune worth of wine. 'The tank' came in handy to haul speakers, CDs and an accumulation of sound equipment, some of which had been in the trunk so long she thought it was part of the car body. She sometimes rented out the tank and spent the extra money on tasselled and sequined Saturday night outfits. Everyone at Slaughterhouse Square, by fair means or foul, made ends meet, and in comparison, Jesica was a successful businesswoman.

Juan promised to pay Jessica for the use of her car today. He told her that he had suddenly remembered where there were a few valuable family heirlooms and that she could take her pick when he returned, which would be the next day, since it was an overnight trip. The truth was that he didn't need to drive far, but the errand would take time – perhaps a day and a night. It wouldn't have been necessary at all if Jessica would have allowed him to stay at her house.

At the best of times, Jessica's house was packed like a can of sardines with Slaughterhouse Square regulars, but during these days in which the earth shook under their feet and people were forced to flee from between their own walls, there was neither a spare place on the floor nor enough room to hang one more hammock.

After he failed as a Salvation Army resident, and given the crowded circumstances at Jessica's, Juan managed to charm Mario, who ran a small restaurant at the edge of Slaughterhouse Square, into providing him with a blanket and a spot on his living room floor. Mario's hospitality lasted less than two weeks because Juan's raucous, late-night arrivals and the rancid smell of wine permeated the little house and over-saturated Mario's wife's patience, who threatened to throw them both out on their ears if Mario didn't do something about it.

So here he was, outside the cemetery – his last chance – absently watching a short, stout woman as she disappeared beyond the gates. Juan took a long drag of the cigarette, sucking the last bit of flavour out of it. "Bless you Mario, it was a pleasure." He tossed the butt out the window and gathered his wits for his approach to the cemetery guard. He knew that he would need permission to enter under the current health restrictions.

He had no trouble convincing the cemetery guard that he had legitimate business in a family mausoleum somewhere on Patio 46. This was mostly because of his rather fine, new navy blue suit and tie, and a skeleton key that he withdrew from his pocket as evidence of a right to enter a door somewhere. The guard checked his map and confirmed that Patio 46 had not suffered much damage, gracias a Dios. "And here, exactly here," he pointed with military precision to a spot on his map, is the location of the Maluenda-Valdéz family tomb. Am I right, Señor?"

"Yes, absolutely. That's the one," said Juan. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief and fingered the lucky blue eye in his pocket as he looked up to the heavens. The guard whistled and a one-legged cemetery guide in a heavy blue smock

and a white mask over his face emerged from the shadows of the same shack. He handed Juan a mask, indicating with a hand that had only three fingers that Juan had to put it on before they could proceed.

Juan followed him in silence. Clutching the skeleton key inside one pocket and his lucky blue eye in the other, he beat out a rhythm in his head in time to the click-clack of the crutches and the flopping pant-leg, which was loosely pinned around the man's stump. The one-legged guide turned around four times to ensure Juan was keeping pace.

Juan had come across the skeleton key under a bench at Slaughterhouse Square the day before, just after he received the unfortunate news that he was no longer welcome to sleep on Mario's living room floor. Fingering the old key, the cogs in his head slowly began to turn. It reminded him of something. It wasn't the key to the mausoleum, but it could be. He immediately formulated a plan to take advantage of an almost legitimate family refuge. He kissed the key. It could possibly become a second lucky talisman.

"I understand entirely and without reservation, your desire to be left alone at your family tomb, Señor," said the one-legged guide. His eyes misted over. "I guess it's been a long time. But don't worry. These souls escaped the tumult of our recent disaster." He gave him a three-finger salute and clacked away down the path leaving Juan to slyly pull the wire cutter out from his trouser waistband and open the mausoleum door. He stepped inside and looked around.

There was less space than Juan remembered. He hadn't been here since he was a boy and childhood memories always made things appear larger. The walls to the left and right of the wrought iron gated entrance were lined with built-in crypts, stacked four-high, floor to ceiling. He didn't know who was buried in them. No doubt they were great-uncles and aunts of whom he had no memory, let alone sentimental attachment. His grandfather, the family patriarch, was entombed under the marble altar on the back wall. His name carved in elegant letters reminded Juan that he was born into privilege. He pursed his lips and exhaled in a semi-whistle. The privilege had long since been squandered.

On top of the altar was a tall crystal vase, its expensive cut still obvious through the years of dust and neglect. Two brittle, barren rose stems leaned out of it. Clinging to the altar at a sad angle was a soiled, yellowed cloth with appliquéd edges. He remembered it had belonged to his sister, who donated it to the family crypt when their father died. His sister, now dead and buried

too, was in the basement along with his parents. Colours from the stained glass window on the back wall streamed across the altar. A couple of panes were shattered allowing scant yellow rays of sunlight to warm the shoulders of a small bronze statue of the Virgin Mary that sat opposite the vase. He noted the brushed silver urn in the floor near his grandfather's tomb but couldn't recall whose ashes it contained. Outside of several distant cousins, Juan was the lone surviving member of his clan; there was no one left who could inform him about the ashes. Juan had allowed the mausoleum to fall into decay when he stopped paying a caretaker more than 20 years ago and he didn't remember the urn being there then. He felt a twinge of guilt for his lack of responsibility. But just a small one. He decided the urn contained the ashes of an unrelated person, someone who needed a free place to rest, a squatter like himself, a kindred spirit.

The trap door to the basement level was as he remembered. He bent down and tugged on the brass ring until the old door creaked open. He threw it back and gaped into the underground darkness, then pulled out some matches and crawled down the sturdy wooden ladder until he reached the concrete surface below. His family's private catacombs. The walls were lined with tombs here too, and there was one with his name on it. Bless his mother for always being prepared. He shivered. She had really outdone herself. She had always vowed that the family would remain together. She had made it as pleasant a dungeon as possible. The tomb façades were marble and the floor had been painted dark green with specially treated chemicals to protect against the damp. There was enough space down here for a narrow mattress and a box of clothes, maybe even a small bedside table. He circled around slowly, nodding to himself with satisfaction. This would do nicely as long as the trap door allowed for a bit of fresh air. He'd have to arrange a wooden frame for the mattress. It might also be possible to make minimal use of the upstairs if he could pull it off inconspicuously. He smiled, content, and he dared to imagine a small portable radio or maybe even a miniature TV with antennae. He wondered what sort of reception they got in this neighbourhood. He'd have to pirate electricity from one of the cables that ran along the wide path leading to the crematorium, but anything was possible. It was just a question of getting around to it.

Unfortunately, rather than a solid door, his mother had chosen an ornate wrought iron entrance gate, which allowed a virtually unobstructed view of the main floor. But if he placed a box and cloth there for odds and ends, it would simply be shrugged off as some sort of family idiosyncrasy. No matter,

it would work out. He turned in slow circles on the spot, nodding and grinning with satisfaction.

Astrid didn't see Juan Bonifacio make his entrance to the mausoleum that day and she didn't notice when he walked back down the path towards the cemetery gate. She was oblivious of his gift of a few peso coins, which the guard at the gate accepted with a sideways smile and a discreet nod. She wasn't aware that he returned ten minutes later with a boxful of CDs, two blankets, a pillow and a worn leather case. She didn't know that he attached a new padlock to the iron gate of the Maluenda-Valdéz family mausoleum and that he left the grounds with a crystal vase and brushed silver urn packed in a ragged cardboard box.

[Buy Hard Bed Hotel](#)

Other books by Edie Ayala:

[South of Centre](#)

[Threads](#)

[Visit Author Website](#)