

# South of Centre



A novel by  
**Edie Ayala**

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## CHAPTER 1

# Clorinda –

Tocopilla, 2001

Clorinda exhaled heavily and watched as the taut strands cut her breath into thin slices. The wooden hand loom was braced in primitive blocks so it leaned slightly away from her. She tied a knot around the last nail and sat back to scan the result of her efforts.

The warp stared back at her, its vertical lines submitting themselves to the crazy idea that she would make something of them. Knotted together across her ambitious three square metre wooden frame, the threads were strangers to one another. They were disenfranchised scarves and sweaters that had been reduced to random lengths of yarn of various colours and textures. They cringed at their forced intimacy. Imagine the atrocity of genteel red English wool united against its will with loutish brown llama yarn and in turn, the loud protests of these coarse yarns raging against the weakness of such refined threads. Clorinda's indiscriminate fingers had tied them tightly together and then drawn them up and down around the metal posts that restrained them. These silent stringed prisoners quivered with tension, if not with a certain bizarre and perverted excitement. They were the foundation of her 'life's work.'

Clorinda dared to lightly caress the woollen strings. Her hands were rough and gnarled for a young woman who wasn't yet 28 years old, and her nails were ragged and broken but when she touched the yarn, her fingers became graceful ballerinas who danced across the bows of so many violins. Clorinda's olive complexion was somewhat lighter than the other locals who were a heavy mixture of altiplano Quechua native with Spanish blood. But her eyes were black diamonds that glinted from within the shadows between her brows and high cheekbones. They darted crazily as one thing or another caught her interest and then like a cat, she focused single-mindedly on the object that was her prey before pouncing and playing with it in her mind.

Clorinda had thin, unremarkable lips and when they parted to form one of her infrequent smiles, a full set of teeth, somewhat yellow but still all there, was displayed in straight rows, top and bottom. Her sleek black hair was cropped just above her shoulders with bangs that ended in a straight line

barely covering her eyebrows, a rare style for a Latina woman. She was influenced by photos she had seen of Joan of Arc and didn't care what anyone thought about it because somewhere in her own mind she too was a heroine directed by an inner voice. Clorinda's trademark characteristic was her 'calendar' wardrobe – an eclectic collection of clothes she designed and sewed herself, outlandish outfits that fell into one of seven themes according to the days of the week.

She sat up straight, which for Clorinda was still decidedly hunched, a habit her spine had developed from bending over her fabric treasures and, as a young girl, skulking around school yards spying on the groups from which she had been excluded. Today was Saturday so she dressed in one of her semi-full skirts – a patchwork of yellow floral print and green jungle motif, and she complemented it with a green and orange striped cotton pull-over. Since she had stricken Wednesdays from her calendar, she re-assigned her traditional Wednesday flower and scarf accessories to Saturdays, meaning she was permitted this yellow and orange polyester bandana. Her ears protruded from under underneath, parting her hair and assigning her an attribute akin to a perky feminine monkey.

She leaned forward, closed her eyes, and touched a line of fine grey alpaca wool with her tongue several times. She was careful not to lick it as she did with cotton or silk because that would leave little beads of saliva on the wool, something she didn't want to do. Rather she simply wanted to identify it for certain. It tasted like the sweater of the old man across the street who had died last week. The flavour stabbed to her heart and she sat silently praying for the wind to come and carry away the pain.

She thought about him at the cemetery. Three weeks ago the old man's coffin had been pushed deep into the hollow concrete niche, scratching roughly along the bottom until the end with his head brusquely collided with the back wall. The cemetery worker unceremoniously heaved a concrete block across the opening and with a fresh cement mixture he sealed the old man and his coffin into darkness with only Clorinda as witness.

Clorinda had stroked his name, Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras, with red house paint onto a board that she ripped from his patio and she leaned it against the cement seal of his tomb. His name revealed nothing about him and his date of birth was unknown, or at least no one took the trouble to research it. And it didn't make much sense to note the date of his ending if

his beginning was a mystery. Clorinda had placed a single yellow daisy and Señor Ortega's stylish black fountain pen on the ledge beside it. She blessed herself and asked God to please ensure that no one would steal the pen. To help God in his vigilance, she reached up and carefully wedged the pen into the wet cement just behind the name board and repositioned the daisy in front. Only she would know about the pen, she and God and Señor Ortega, just as it had been when he was alive.

Inside his coffin, Señor Ortega wore his British wool sweater and Italian-made trousers. Only a week earlier, he had stopped wearing his finest alpaca wool vest because he had donated it to Clorinda. –What do I need this vest for?– he said to her. – I won't be invited anywhere these days.– Obviously his burial, which he knew was imminent, was not going to be very elegant. He knew he would not attract a crowd of townspeople to say goodbye to him. He would not feel one hand after another, planting a kiss on the top of his coffin as he was carried past a steady stream of inconsolable onlookers. He wouldn't hear anyone say, "Go with God" or "I'll miss you, my old friend."

The day of his funeral, Clorinda wore her special frock, the one made with deep turquoise, blue and purple satin patches joined so the light reflected the various deliberate angles of the nap. It was Señor Ortega's favourite dress. She started sewing it the day after she first saw him and finished it only six months ago. It took a long time to come across just the right fabric swatches and she considered herself blessed to have found them at all.

Now Clorinda studied the soft grey threads of the vest that were stretched up and down on the frame in front of her. It, like the old man's life, had unraveled in the most unexpected of circumstances. The vest gave her far more yarn than she needed to finish the warp. She would use the rest to weave across itself. She imagined a large grey, nonuniform area. It would be the base for Señor Ortega's patch on the world.

She stared at a red knot near the bottom right corner of the frame. This is where she tied the yarn from her favourite red sweater to Señor Ortega's grey. – This, Señor Ortega, is where you end – she thought. She followed the grey yarn upwards and let her eyes scan the rest of the threads to find where his life might begin. Her eyes stopped and focused on the knot that joined him to a string of rough ochre llama wool.

She stretched her legs out in front of herself, dropped her arms, fell back into her wooden chair and squinted her eyes until the coloured threads blurred into one solid canvas. She had hopes that images would magically emerge

from the warp, especially at the point where her red joined Señor Ortega's grey. But they didn't. It is Señor Ortega who should be red – she thought – his life was much more vibrant than mine.

She reached into the plastic bag on the floor and drew out a short piece of the grey wool from Señor Ortega's vest. She would allow herself this luxury. And as she pulled the strand of wool across her tongue she tasted a bit of his life. It was a foreign flavour that both saddened and excited her, arousing great curiosity.

She stood up, short piece of wool still in hand, and walked out of her patio and across the street where she planted herself in front of Señor Ortega's abandoned house.

She remained there frozen, just two metres from his front door, staring at the dark windows, dragging the short piece of grey wool back and forth across her tongue like a bow over a violin. The sound that she heard was the emptiness from Señor Ortega himself.

## CHAPTER 2

# Clorinda –

Tocopilla, 2001

Clorinda had spied on Señor Ortega from the day he moved in across the street a year ago. She remembered his arrival on that first day. It was a Wednesday. She remembered because she was wearing a heavy patchwork linen jewel-neckline shift with a pair of dangly earrings that chimed in the wind.

It was mid-winter and she was sitting on a wooden kitchen chair outside her door watching the vultures circle above the black and rusted-out mine ruins down at the shore. A few small fishing boats bobbed a short distance out in the water and a Japanese freighter was being loaded at the dock. From the distance, noise from the town centre was muffled but she could see the activity on the main street. Intercity buses arrived and left as usual, cargo trucks headed back up the main road towards the desert high plains to the copper mines.

Tocopilla was no longer the commercial hub it had once been but ships continued to dock and loads of saltpetre from the world's only remaining saltpetre mine still made their way down from the altiplano to be loaded before setting sail for somewhere. Clorinda never asked where. The town's location on the coast about eight hours south of the Peruvian border and two hours from the world's largest open pit copper mine in the high desert interior used to be strategic. But the port city of Iquique to the north and Antofagasta to the south had become more important in recent decades and the powers-that-be relegated Tocopilla to become the centre for two highly-contaminating electric plants. The electricity was pushed along a set of huge transmitter lines that crossed the south end of town and climbed up over the mountain barriers until they were free to hum eerily over hundreds of kilometres of otherwise empty desert plain to the mines.

Some people accused Tocopilla of being an ugly little place because of its monotonous blend of grey metal roofs, grey cement walls, grey and rusted corrugated metal fences, its lack of greenery, and its otherwise broken and disorderly makeshift buildings. But Clorinda didn't know because she had never been far beyond its borders and couldn't make a comparison. She



heard that the Andes were covered in trees in some parts of the country, and that streams ran through them, but she couldn't imagine such a thing. The mountains that punctured the blue sky on Tocopilla's eastern edge were rocky and barren. Nothing grew out of such hostile soil. Nothing grew anywhere in Tocopilla unless someone had money to water it. The place saw rain only once every 20 years, and even then the drops would evaporate before they hit the ground. Townspeople were proud of the palm trees in the plaza and those that had been planted around the main traffic circle by the gas station, no matter if they were covered in dust and smothered by diesel fumes.

Tocopilla was trapped in a slightly concave strip of land between the Pacific Ocean and the high Andean cordillera. The town had limited options both in terms of space and opportunity. Men eked out a living either at the electric plants (if they were lucky to have a cousin on the inside), by labouring in their own small mining stakes or for a corporate mine outside of town, or as fishermen. Sometimes they just laid around on the beach or sat on a bench at the central plaza and waited. It was never clear what they waited for.

Occasionally Clorinda wandered down to the beach at the shore two blocks from the main street, where the sand was black and the water was always cold. She watched boys play fútbol and sometimes hovered above couples who were oblivious to her presence as they locked in passionate embraces. She passed the ancient Bolivian mine ruins that they said were being kept as an historical reminder of Chile's victory in The War of the Pacific in 1876. But even she had to admit that it looked like nothing more than piles of gnarled, rusty metal and was a playground for rats. Even so, it held a mysterious attraction for her.

Today she was spending the afternoon at home. She turned to watch the ore train snake its way down the scar that scratched a spiral path around the steep back of the Andes. It had just wound its way to the base of the closest mountain when her attention was captured by a red convertible Bel Air that pulled up and lurched to a halt in front of the house across the street.

The driver, a man in his early 60s, sat for several minutes studying the house, melancholy tango drifting into the air from his car radio. Clorinda watched as the man slowly ran his fingers through his hair, massaging memories that had lain undisturbed for years. He had a handsome, boldly defined face, dark-skinned (or tanned at least) with black eyes and thick greying hair. He reminded her of Clark Gable, whose face was on the faded remnants of the old poster still hanging at the entrance of the long-since-closed movie thea-

tre on Esmeralda Street. Gable, the gringo who made all the Latinas' hearts throb. She had always admired the poster and once even tried to steal it by scraping it from the wall but the glue was too strong and it began to tear into small pieces. Better to leave it intact where she could at least admire it once in awhile. 'Gone with the Wind' the poster said. She imagined herself being caught up in a gust and carried high into the clear blue over the town where she could oversee everything, like she was a goddess or at least an angel. She would glide through the air, arms open wide, and Clark Gable would suddenly appear and float along beside her, take her hand, smile into her eyes and together they'd fly over the Andes. After that her imagination got stuck because she didn't know for certain what lay beyond and she would sigh as the dream faded into blue.

The man turned off the radio and in a single smooth motion he opened the car door, planted one foot after the other firmly on the ground, stood up and closed the door so it latched gently as he stepped away. He proceeded in long strides to the front door of the little house. She had never before seen a man walk in that manner, with such confidence and dignity and grace. Yes, she decided he was graceful. He looked taller than most men. Clark Gable came to mind again; yes, he was Clark Gable, slightly older than when he was gone with the wind, and without the moustache, but Clark Gable just the same. She leaned forward fascinated, elbows on her knees and chin on her hands, dark eyes squinting as she studied him.

He pulled a key out of his pocket and inserted it into the lock, hunching his shoulders and leaning into it as he wrestled for a few minutes trying to get past the rust. Finally he straightened and pushed on the door. It creaked open, he took a step inside and stood for several seconds at the threshold, his eyes adjusting to the dim interior light. Then he disappeared, leaving the door hang open behind him.

Clorinda instinctively jumped up and sidled quickly across the street in her customary crab-like mode, arms bent weirdly away from her sides for balance, until she reached the exterior wall of his house. She flattened herself against its concrete surface, sniffing a little and shrugging her shoulders nervously. She was no James Bond but she'd been successfully sneaking around her whole life. Her sideways shuffle did not help make her less visible as she had believed when she was a child; she just never outgrew the habit. It was something she had developed when she started school. She was too shy to join the other girls but too curious to be left out, so she circled around them

believing that if she was crouched they wouldn't notice her. In fact, this manner of moving from place to place had become somewhat of a trademark and instead of providing her with a cover, she was actually more easily identified, even from a distance. But she didn't know that and was now too old to care. Her heart raced with anticipation as she listened to Clark Gable's movements.

The house had been empty for several years. An old lady named Doña Miranda had lived there and Clorinda assumed she had died quietly, abandoning it to no one in particular. She didn't remember a wake or a funeral at the house but maybe it happened during one of her rapturous periods when she would lock herself in her bedroom (sometimes lasting days at a time) to unravel, taste, and manipulate the woollen sweaters she had found at the back of the second-hand shop. The mystery of the empty house had never mattered before, but now it was suddenly extremely important and she berated herself for not having investigated over the years.

She slapped herself lightly on the cheek, both in punishment for her past lack of attentiveness as well as a sharp reminder to capture everything from this point on. She craned her neck around the open door and peered inside. The man was nowhere to be seen. She slithered around the door frame and entered the hallway, poised crookedly with weight on one leg, leaning away from the door, careful not to make any noise.

Clark Gable re-entered the house from the back patio and strode into the sitting room, did an about-turn towards the small room at the back, and walked directly to an old desk in the corner. He reached for a key from his pocket and opened the desk drawer. He emptied its contents – two thick stacks of yellowed papers and envelopes – onto the dusty surface and slid the piles of paper into an old basket beside the desk. Having obviously found what he was looking for, he tucked it under his arm and prepared to leave.

Clorinda gasped and slipped silently back behind the door, willing her feet to shrink. Clark Gable's musky men's cologne floated past her nose as he passed her. She swooned a little and promised herself to always and forever remember the scent. He locked the door and Clorinda stood alone in the silence. She listened as the car motor started, music resumed on his radio and Clark drove off to a tango rhythm. "Clark!" She breathed.

Initially she was so excited to be on this side of Clark Gable's personal history that looking for a way out of the locked house did not even enter her mind.

The house was typical of all the places in the neighbourhood. The entrance hall led past a sitting room, three small bedrooms and a kitchen that opened into the back patio. She noticed the tile and wooden floors were still in decent condition and the walls had not been damaged by the various earth tremors that had hit the region over the past several years. Doña Miranda was not a remarkable woman in terms of what she kept in her house so Clorinda considered that if there was anything special at all, it was already in Clark Gable's basket. However, she was compelled and could not pass up the opportunity to look around.

After about four hours, which included sitting down for a cup of tea in the kitchen and then at the desk in a back room near the patio (she found tea leaves in a can on the kitchen shelf and was surprised there was still gas in the cylinder beside the stove), she decided the best way out was via the back patio and over the roof. Her skinny legs scratched their way up the patio wall and carried her in a crouched sideways motion across the roof to the front of the house where she scraped her way down the corner using protruding uneven pieces of rebar as a ladder.

## CHAPTER 3

# Orlando Ortega –

Tocopilla, 1952

For Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras cosmic justice did not exist. As a young man he realised that justice was nothing more than a random consequence of man-made rules or perhaps a lucky coincidence. Some people were luckier than others. He didn't ask if it was because of the star sign under which they were born, or if God was on their side or if they were simply good people and got what they deserved, because in his opinion it was none of these.

Growing up, he was unlucky no matter what. His life was plagued by mishaps and complications of mishaps that never seemed to completely unravel, one thing constantly becoming knotted up in a remnant of something else until it became a way of life. Just when he considered a subject closed and wrapped in a neat little ball, he discovered it had a loose end that was tied to something totally unexpected. Therefore, in his early life he found himself falling into one pothole (or man shaft, as it were) after another, often around the edges of a smouldering, man-eating crater that he imagined must be something like hell.

Being born into a poor family in the town of Tocopilla at the edge of the Atacama Desert was the first sign that justice was a mythical concept. The perverse poverty of the place and the fact that a population struggled for survival in the harsh desert climate was enough in itself. But add to that an enormous wealth of ore and saltpetre just asking to be exploited by greedy foreign companies and the inevitable result was a tendency towards unbridled corruption and repression.

Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras was the last in a long line of increasingly less impressive and more downtrodden Spanish immigrants who had produced offspring by Quechua women. By the time what was left of the fighting and adventuresome spirit of Don Julio Ortega Villegas de Pamplona reached Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras' father, it had been watered down to complacency within an attitude of compliant servitude.

For an unexplained reason a flame from Don Julio Ortega Villegas had buried itself within generations of offspring until it found oxygen in the spirit of

Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras. He discovered it when he was 15 years old working in a lower shaft of a British-owned gold mine several hours inland from Tocopilla.

As with all the small, light-weight young workers at the El Camino mine, he was tied to the end of a rope and lowered head first to pass through the narrow crevices into low shafts. Using a small pick and the lamp on his helmet, he worked alone hacking at the rock, with the boss occasionally barking instructions. Several times per shift he was raised back up with a heavy bag of test samples. Sometimes, and especially if he had a stubborn boss who was sure the location was the site of a rich ore grain, he was lowered into the same crevice for weeks on end in order to do a thorough test. The gases were intoxicating and by the end of each day, his head was pounding and his young mind as pliable as that of a new-born baby.

By 15, he had learned to add beer and home-made pisco or chicha to the mix at the end of his shift. Most days being too tired to finish even one drink, he fell onto his bunk in the workers' shack where he lay still as death until the whistle blew him out of bed the next morning.

He was underground each morning by the time the sun heated the earth and mirages undulated across the sand. He was underground each afternoon during the relentless sand storms. And he was asleep each night when the moon hung over the sandy domain's peaceful star-filled sky.

Orlando Ortega was a bright young man who was following in the footsteps of his father. He was small for his age but that was what made him a perfect candidate to explore promising crevices. He was quick to catch on to new techniques, although there weren't too many tricks to hanging upside down on a rope. But by the time he was 15, his body filled out and he proved that he could handle a pick as well as any of the grown men. He sprouted quickly to become taller than many of them and he carried himself with confidence. Other than that, it would be difficult to pick him out of a crowd of shift workers, everyone with the same black hair, dark eyes, and solemn, sooty faces. To this point all he could remember of his life was being in the mine.

All he knew of the altiplano was its eternal underground and all he could see for the future were dark rock caves – that is, until he knocked free a piece of quartz about seven centimetres in diameter that was more gold than crystal. Standing at the end of his rope, his helmet lantern focused on what was sitting on the palm of his oversized glove, Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras made a decision to run with it.

The only way to get past the fastidious British shift boss and the routine body search was to be injured, but it had to be something serious. Minor cuts wouldn't get him anywhere. Workers with major injuries were immediately hoisted up to the shack near the office. If they stopped bleeding, they'd be bandaged and sent back down. If not, they'd be bandaged and dismissed, replaced immediately by one of the hopefuls peering in from their perch on the big rock just outside the gates.

That's how Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras came to have two less toes on his left foot. It was the most major minor injury that he could think of as he stood in the semi-darkness of the underground inferno staring at the chunk of gold in his hand. He ripped his handkerchief with his teeth, wrapped half of it around the gold and tucked the small package down into the front of his underwear. He adjusted his balls to make room for his golden extra and then closed his eyes and swung his pick into his boot. His prolonged scream of pain and freedom echoed through the shafts.

They pulled him up, the boss cursing him for losing valuable time and occupying man power that was better spent hacking rock and not hauling the body of a useless boy up to the surface.

That afternoon Orlando found himself on an ore train headed towards Tocopilla. With his duffle bag and the gold quartz still stuffed in his crotch, he jumped onto a car loaded with saltpetre and rumbled across the altiplano, swirling white tornados picking up around every ore car on the train. Descending the mountains towards the coast, his dark eyes blinked through the thick white powder on his face. Except for a persistent, growing red stain on his left foot, his hair, his arms, his legs, his entire body was covered with the acrid dust of saltpetre.

When the train slowed to round the curve near the first group of houses at the outskirts of Tocopilla, Orlando grabbed his duffle bag, heaved himself over the edge of the car and rolled down the hill.

Still white from head to foot except for his dark brown eyes and the red stain on his foot, he walked into his mother's house and slumped onto the nearest chair. She shrieked and hugged him tightly to her ample bosom. Once she realised that his presence at home meant that he wasn't at the mine earning money, she swiftly swatted him across the ears and berated him for his carelessness. How long would it be before the mine would take back a boy with two missing toes? Now he'd have to stand at the end of the line, and God knows how long it would take for him to get close enough to the gate once more.

He limped to the patio where he stripped and washed and rewrapped his foot, careful not to look too closely at the half-cauterised wound where his toes used to be.

That night he climbed onto the roof of a bus heading south and held on for dear life as it zigzagged along the coastal road. Half way to Antofagasta the bus stopped for fuel at Michilla, a pueblo consisting of a gas station, a restaurant, 3 bare-bulbed street lights, and about 20 concrete houses with plywood-covered windows, lining either side of the highway. He slithered down the back and joined the four solemn hopeful workers who sat on the ground waiting for a ride to the Michilla mine. Before dawn, what was a dot in the distance turned out to be an approaching pickup truck with one good headlight. It rattled to a stop and men who had already hooked themselves onto the broken wooden sides of the pickup watched, uninterested, as the others climbed in. The truck turned and rambled up into the mountains, reaching the mine gate just as the sun peered over the tallest peaks.

Michilla was a small mine as mines went, but it was well-protected against unauthorised visitors. A barbed wire fence was strung across the mine entrance, which was blasted out of a cliff. A heavily-whiskered man with a shot gun stood vigil at the gate. The guard's hut was inside on the right, his family subsisting in a cramped one-room adobe house at the back. The ore-buying office was on the other side, in front of the chief engineer's hut. The on-site buildings, all unpainted plywood caked in black grease and dust were slightly larger than outhouses, boasting one door and no windows.

The armed guard refused to allow him to pass until Orlando was finally able to convince him with three home-rolled cigarettes that he had stolen from his mother's cabinet on the way out the door, that he was there to sell gold and not to look for work.

Inside the buying office, a stout, unshaven man with dirty, thick-framed glasses, wearing a heavy jacket buttoned up to his chin, beckoned him to step forward. He rubbed his hands trying to warm his stubby fingers, the valuable instruments with which he weighed gold and counted money.

"What have you got?" He asked without looking up.

Orlando reached into the front of his trousers and rummaged for a few seconds before pulling out the half-handkerchief. He laid it on the counter and unwrapped the gold quartz. The man said nothing as he scrutinised the ore with a magnifying glass. After a minute, he glanced up at Orlando.



“How much do you think it’s worth?”

“That’s your job. You tell me, and then we’ll talk.” Orlando tried to sound confident, as though he had some idea of its value.

The man picked up the ore in his grubby fingers and tossed it up and down a few times, feeling its weight in the bloated palm of his hand.

“Not as much as you think,” was his estimate. Then he reached under the counter for a small cobbing hammer and his thick fingers expertly chipped away at one corner until three small chunks of pure gold lay beside the large crystal. Most of the gold remained embedded in the quartz. Orlando shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

Corruption, like lust, sometimes erupts in a powerful unexpected explosion. Maybe it smoulders undetected beneath the surface but once you taste it, the flavour becomes a powerful addiction and the sickly-sweet smell of its smoke hovers and clings to you until it becomes part of your person and you don’t even notice. Some people can sniff it on you, some can’t.

That day in the buying office of the mine located halfway between Tocopilla and Antofagasta, Orlando lost his innocence to a foul-smelling, grubby, fat-fingered man with dirty glasses. It was his first taste of the real world of business, Chilean style. “We help each other, compadre.”

Lust at first sight.

There was a lot of gold in that chunk of rock. “But,” said the dirty man, “I have to offer you the going rate, which unfortunately isn’t as high as it was just last week.” And to emphasise the point, “Not even as high as yesterday’s price.”

He leaned forward and Orlando noticed the bread from this morning’s breakfast stuck like glue in the wide space between his front teeth. The two centre bottom teeth were missing. He had long hairs hanging out of both nostrils and his breath smelled like fish. Orlando thought he saw a flea jump from the man’s left forearm to his shoulder.

The man winked at Orlando, “I know something about the world gold market, my boy, and the price will be higher tomorrow. So I can offer you in pesos the equivalent of \$350 US for this piece of rock.”

“I want the American dollars, Señor.”

“Hmm, yes,” the man rubbed a stubby finger under his nose and sniffed several times. “But in that case, I will be able to pay you only \$300 American

dollars because there is an unreasonable exchange rate these days and it is a lot of trouble for us to get American dollars in this place. You see..." He gestured with open arms, "We are hundreds of kilometres from civilisation."

Orlando's two missing toes suddenly began to ache and the desire to rub them became unbearable. He shuffled. He was overcome with pain but didn't want to give the fat man an advantage. He grimaced and fixed his gaze on the crystal and three gold chunks that were still on the counter, reasoning that if he concentrated on it hard enough he would forget about his toes.

The fat man interpreted Orlando's hesitation to mean that he might snatch the rock and run, and he didn't want to let this opportunity slip away. "Listen. Listen. We can make a deal, just between the two of us."

A glint in his eyes, he leaned forward and beckoned Orlando to do the same. "I can do us both a favour." He winked, as their faces met, nose to nose for just an instant. The smell of the man was too much and pains were shooting up from his foot, so Orlando drew back, driving his left foot into the floor in an attempt to mitigate the torture of his two missing toes.

The fat man glanced over both shoulders and then half-whispered, "I can do you a favour because you look like a nice kid. I can pay you \$400 American dollars even though it will be more than this rock is worth."

"I will accept \$450." His two missing toes were really putting on the pressure.

"Okay, but there is something else – because of the exchange problem," he feigned an expression of sympathy, "You know – the one I just explained to you – you must give me \$75 for my trouble."

"Yes, okay, I understand. Something for you... I will agree to accept \$450 and pay you \$50, not \$75. If that's not enough, I'll take my gold elsewhere."

No point in arguing, he would make more from this than the kid would know anyway. "Okay. It's a deal, but I'm doing you a favour because you are just a kid." The dirty man smiled, exposing the breakfast in his teeth once more and rubbed a chubby hand through his hair. Orlando thought he saw at least two more fleas escape.

He kept his distance while the man filled out several forms and then turned his back to search through a box of official stamps on a shelf behind the counter.

With the speed of a lightning bolt, Orlando reached forward and snatched two of the three small chunks of pure gold the man had chipped off the rock

and slid them into his pocket, backing silently away from the counter so as not to arouse suspicion.

The man at last found the three necessary stamps and held them up with a broad smile. The importance of a man with stamps in his hand cannot be underestimated. Then he needed to locate the ink pad. This took another several minutes. Finally he stamped the forms with a pageantry common only to isolated mining offices in northern Chile.

With one hand he reached under the counter and brought out a tin box with a big padlock. He set it down with a thud, and with the other, he pulled out a shiny Colt .45 that he slowly and deliberately positioned beside the box, muzzle pointing in Orlando's direction. He smiled directly at Orlando. "Insurance." He said. Orlando stared back at him.

After his stubby fingers had been licked repeatedly and he had counted the American bills several times, the fat man set them in a pile beside the official document and moved the Colt .45 to rest on top of them. "Sign where the X is."

Orlando signed. The fat man counted out \$400 and slid it across the counter to Orlando, then flashed the \$50 for himself and stashed it into his pocket.

"Everyone is happy." He said.

"Yes, everyone is happy." Repeated Orlando. "Adios". He turned on his heel, bills scrunched tightly in his sweaty fist, and walked as swiftly as his two missing toes would allow, saluted the guard at the gate, crossed the road and headed down a path that he knew would lead him back to the town of Michilla.

The man in the buying office quickly slipped the third small chunk of gold into his pocket and went crazy looking for the other two. Orlando was long gone before he could stop him.

The next day the English boss at Michilla valued the gold in the quartz rock at 700 US dollars. The company was not stupid enough to inform their employees about the real value of gold from day to day. Their healthy margin to cover 'employee error' at the buying office increased profits dramatically.

When Orlando arrived in Antofagasta two days later and sold the small chunks of gold at the regional survey office, he received an additional sum of \$70.

He calculated that each of his toes had a value of \$235 and that, given the fact that their absence did not inhibit him to a great extent, especially now that the bleeding had subsided and the pain diminished, it had been a brilliant decision to end his work at the mine as he did. However, there was a niggling measure of anxiety over the suspicion that if he had sold the entire rock at the Antofagasta survey office rather than in the Michilla mine office, the value of each of his toes would have been even greater.

## CHAPTER 4

# Clorinda –

Tocopilla, 2001

Clorinda invented her ‘calendar wardrobe’ long before Señor Ortega arrived in Tocopilla. Her neighbours judged it to be an incredibly original idea that sprung from her eccentricity, which itself was the result of a deep well of creative genius. The truth is that it was simply the result of total lack of self-control. She lusted after fabric and threads of all kinds, and needed to be surrounded by it, to work with it, feel it and manipulate it. She wanted to weave herself into it, knitting the threads across the surface of her skin, penetrating, and shaping them around her organs. Tasting and even consuming yarns was her first and strongest impulse, but it was uncivilised and impractical, so she could see no better solution than to envelope herself in it, to turn the idea inside out and herself become a meal for her fabric. She submitted herself to its appetite.

While the calendar concept provided some structure, it also allowed a great deal of freedom to mix and match textures and colours. She wore the skirts that were constructed from old bleached jeans patches and blouses with sleeves of at least two different colours on Mondays. Tuesdays were her heavy cotton, full-length patchwork circle skirt days with soft, fuzzy sweaters (cashmere if she could find it). Wednesdays she donned one of her simple but elegant jewel-neckline shifts accented with a feather or flower in her hair to brighten up the middle of the week. Thursday was broadcloth caftan day, especially nice when the wind ducked underneath and the fabric rippled against her legs. Friday was ‘casual Friday’ (something she overheard her neighbour Norma say was a North American custom) so she slipped into heavy cotton trousers that zipped up the side, the back of the jeans always a different fabric than the front, and she imagined her life as a casual North American. She was known to swagger like a cowboy on Fridays. Saturday was ‘retro day’ and she liked to dress up in calf-length semi-full skirts made of a combination of floral prints that she complemented with striped cotton or linen pullovers. Sunday was reserved for slightly more formal a-line dresses with cap sleeves. She patched together several of these from crepes and tafetas, mixing different weights and patterns into one finished garment.

Clorinda was pleased with her calendar wardrobe creations partly because they spoke for themselves, but mostly because they fulfilled their obligation to provide a medley of constant fabric delight. Angélica, and her mother Norma who lived down the street, caught onto the calendar concept only weeks after its inception and were quick to point out to the rest of the town that if anyone was in doubt as to what day of the week it was, they need only see what Clorinda was wearing. Perhaps their astute powers of observation were due to their experience with garments. Norma worked as a clothing sorter at the dock, which put her on the front lines of the second-hand clothing business.

She saw the items before anyone else, including her boss. In fact, he rarely saw anything. He offered the dock workers a flat rate per container of clothing, which they slid into their pockets, and he paid a low wage to Norma and a handful of others to sort garments according to his instructions for 12 hours per day, six days a week. As soon as the container of donations from well-meaning foreigners hit the South American shores it was fair game for profit. Norma saw no reason why she shouldn't share in some of it, and she stole select items when the surveillance camera was not working (which was the majority of the time) and threw them, one by one, over the wall to where Angélica waited on the other side. Mostly Norma and Angélica treated themselves to the new clothes, but if the garments didn't fit as expected (very often a problem because they saw themselves as slender beauty queens rather than the short, stout figures with extra belly rolls that they really were) and if they couldn't find a buyer, they gave them to Clorinda to disassemble and recreate.

Nothing could explain Clorinda's deep desire to taste and sometimes consume the very fibres that she needed to touch. When she was a young girl she assumed it was a human instinct and that the whole world managed to politely resist. But for an unknown reason it overpowered her. She thought it must have been due to a faulty gene and she left it at that. Her unnatural talent had its benefits. If ever in doubt about the origin of a thread, she identified it by its taste.

Some threads were so savoury that she bit off a short length and chewed, closing her eyes, the ecstasy of its flavour penetrating her senses until she achieved a taste orgasm that was even better than chocolate. She was able to distinguish fabric dyes by their plant origin and sometimes she even knew in which part of the world the plant had grown. All of this was self evident, and obviously a God-given intuition, a blessing.

She could distinguish the purity of material, the characteristics of Egyptian cotton versus Indian cotton, the rare pleasure of Italian silk, the weave of a double-faced satin, yarn-dyed versus piece-dyed, the luxury of a fabric with high thread count. All of these things were second nature to her. Fabric was her passion. Ever since she could remember she had dreamed of flying across the desert sky on wispy flowered chiffon or washing herself in a sea of deep blue silk and then lying under the sun on a flowered-appliqué velvet field.

Clorinda's new project – her weaving – which she proclaimed as her 'life's work' was much more ambitious than her calendar wardrobe and would of course mean that she would sacrifice plans for further calendar wardrobe items. All of the fabric would have to be categorised and all knits unravelled for use on her new tapestry. She perused her wardrobe and stood tall, chest expanding with pride as she proclaimed aloud that she had enough clothes to last 100 years after she died. Her closet was an patchwork mosaic of textiles and colours, each with its own inspiration and schedule for use.

Clorinda had become aware of her special talent with yarns and threads at a young age. No one had to tell her. In fact, she never discussed it. But she felt that her intrinsic knowledge could be augmented with specific information. She discovered the local public library when she was ten years old and her eyes were opened to stories and photos related to (but not restricted to) fabric. Even though the library collection was very small it provided a narrow glimpse of Asia and Europe and the Americas. Her heart quickened and blood rushed to her face whenever she happened upon an image associated with textiles. The library rarely acquired new books but when a new donation was made, the librarian always informed Clorinda because, although the librarian never admitted it to the rest of the community, this odd, rag-tag little girl was her most loyal client.

Her first visit to the library happened quite by accident when Clorinda ran, practically tripping on her own feet, from a gaggle of school girls whose accusing fingers pointed in her direction. She had just managed to slip a small cotton handkerchief with pink lace edges into her pocket after one of the girls dropped it at Clorinda's feet. How could she resist? She ran with it. Desperate to escape, she threw herself through the first entrance she came across, ducking through the old, infrequently-used glazed glass doors of the local library. Her eyes adjusted to the soft golden light, dust sparkling in the quiet air over stacks of books. A small woman with the thickest eye glasses she'd ever seen looked up from her desk and smiled. Clorinda's world stopped for a minute as she realised she had just entered an other-worldly chapel for books. She

froze, nostrils expanding, eyes alternately growing round and then squinting, ignoring the smiling lady as she gazed around the room. It was a new sensory experience. She loved the musty odour of the shelves that were home to a small collection of mostly hard cover books in various states of disrepair, some of which had not been moved in 20 years. The earthy smell of old paper provoked a nostalgia for something but she didn't know what. External sounds were muffled by the thick walls and a single, square, double-paned window (unheard of in Tocopilla and no one could explain the reason for such an installation in the library). There was a magazine rack with a label at the top announcing the news of the day in playful art deco letters. It was partially filled with 30-year-old publications. There was even a low shelf at one end with a dozen children's picture books. Someone had pasted small white paper shapes with neatly printed Spanish translations over the original text.

"How can I help you?" The lady with coke-bottle lenses sidled up to her.

"Well... I don't know. I mean... I just came in..."

The glasses lady was obviously thrilled with Clorinda's presence. It was as though she hadn't spoken to anyone in years. She anxiously emerged from her cobwebs to be of service. "Well, what are you interested in?"

"Well, I like textiles and yarn and fabric of all type." Clorinda wondered if she answered the question correctly.

Before she knew it, the lady had her seated at the rectangular wooden table that was blemished with carved hearts and initials, and she was piling books in front of her. "We have something about the history of cotton production. We have this wonderful book with an amazing photo of a silk worm. We also have something about weaving, but the illustrations are not very good." The lady bustled back to the shelf and returned, her face beaming, coke bottle lenses magnifying the light in her eyes, with something about Andean art. She said it had a few black and white photos of ancient belts and hats amongst some facts related to pottery.

Not only did Clorinda find astonishing new information, she warmed to the librarian, who was especially kind. Her flight from the schoolgirls as a response to the accidentally dropped, and subsequently stolen handkerchief was a stroke of pure luck. Clorinda was safe here, even welcome. The girls' chides disappeared once inside this haven.

Now, rather than slinking from one corner of the school ground to another in her sideways crab walk in an effort to make herself invisible, she actually



could disappear into the safety of the library. The girls teased her because she was friendless, and they openly mimicked her habit of avoiding eye contact. The unexpected result of their cruelty had not been pain, but comfort and joy – in a wooden chair at the quiet table beside the main library stacks where she was served by a be-spectacled librarian who, she knew instinctively, could remember similar schoolgirl taunts.

Clorinda dedicated many afternoons to sitting at one of the two tables in the open library space. The librarian's magnified eyes watched as Clorinda's scrubbed but stained fingers turned pages and lightly caressed the photographs. When she turned her attention to written content, she ran her index finger under each line of text, sucking the words in and exhaling them without pause. Then she would pass over the text again and again, finally smiling to herself. One of her favourite books was the one with an illustration of a black slave picking cotton in southern USA and, as predicted, the other was the one with the amazing full-page macro photo of a silk worm. Without fail, she requested these books upon each visit. The librarian made a habit of pulling them and placing them on the counter and eventually they were never re-shelved. Clorinda would walk through the door, collect the books with a silent nod and sit at her table to pour over them.

In the library, she also occasionally browsed through books with photos of chocolate. One such book had colour photographs of chocolate-sculpted animals (not just rabbits) and balls covered in chocolate flakes and slices of deep chocolate layer cakes adorned with glistening cherries. Next to fabric, chocolate was the next favourite thing to put into her mouth. The first time she stole chocolate was when she was barely tall enough to see the top of a sweets counter. Her 6-year-old nose led her into the shop just as a clerk was preparing to wrap some beautifully formed chocolate drops for a customer. The customer distracted the clerk with another item of interest, and when they both moved away leaving the drops unattended, Clorinda swiped them with both hands and ran like the wind. By the time she hunched down behind the deserted shack at the beach, the drops were nothing more than brown, greasy liquid squished between her fingers and smeared over the dusty palms of her hands. She had never dreamed appendages could be so delicious. She sat, skinny legs outstretched on the sand, for an exquisite hour of licking and re-licking the chubby valleys between her fingers, her tongue repeatedly re-visiting every crease of her palms.

She missed the chocolate evenings with Señor Ortega.

She missed the world he introduced her to – chocolate being part of it – chocolate and other things that required money. She tried to imagine having enough pesos to buy tea and still afford chocolate. If she allowed herself to question much beyond that, her head began to spin and she had to abandon any attempts to connect her reality with Señor Ortega's world of riches and the kinds of things she saw in library books. She was an adult woman but before meeting Señor Ortega, she had never travelled beyond Tocopilla, and had never dreamed to come close to a vehicle as beautiful as his red convertible. Even the cost of a ticket on an old microbús to María Elena was out of the question.

Clorinda didn't resent people with money. But it was a mystery how they came upon it, how they gathered more than they could spend on tea and bread and electricity and water. All the people she knew carefully juggled their pesos day by day while individuals like Señor Ortega thoughtfully and even playfully invested their dollars. She was wise enough to understand that probing this gap between herself and Señor Ortega was futile, so the questions were either discarded altogether or they took their rightful place in the back of her head as he described fine sculptures and paintings in beautiful buildings, gold-plated altars in churches and exotic clothing on the backs of gentlemen and ladies.

Her personal environment was a barren one, but it was something she had become accustomed to at a young age. Things had seemed to slowly decay after her mother disappeared – dishes broke and were never replaced, the radio stopped working and was never repaired, one of the gas burners on the stove gave out, so they cooked on three, the walls of the house cracked and needed paint, so she lived with the shady crevices and small black holes. Years later, after her father died, because of the cost of doing so, it was difficult to replace items that other people took for granted such as an electric kettle or an iron. When the cost of electricity increased, Clorinda counted the broken appliances as a blessing in disguise.

In fact, Clorinda had two true blessings in her life. The first was her friendship with Señor Ortega and the second was her life's work. Señor Ortega was key to both, not only because he bought her the loom and made the project physically possible, but also because he was the inspiration for the work itself. And she was free to move it forward on a whim – if only she could find her muse.

At this point her tapestry was still just a blank warp created with her found threads and recycled yarns. She looked around at the plastic bags of fab-

ric she had accumulated in the last few months. She had years' worth of yarn in the closet in her room and bags inside bags in the far corner of her father's old bedroom. She had to be attentive to them, opening them, shaking them out, ensuring no insects feasted or nested. Apart from tending to them, every spare moment was spent picking apart the seams of second-hand lives and unravelling fabric stories of strangers that she collected from behind the second-hand clothing store. Fortunately, with the recent boom of North American and European second-hand clothing shops, she no longer frequented the garbage dump. And with Norma's and Angélica's generosity (largely because of their erroneously selected 'slim line' items) she had years' more worth of raw material. Surely, despite its humble beginnings, her tapestry – her life's work – would be a beautiful piece of art. If only she knew where to commence.

Of the one dozen plastic bags of textile and yarn that Clorinda had selected for immediate use on her life's work, three of them were filled with the most exotic, refined fibres and swatches. These bags were branded with shop names that didn't exist in Tocopilla, which gave them an elite status. One was a green Falabella branded bag, the other a blue Almacenes Paris version (both, she knew were from Santiago) and the third and most impressive was a heavy off-white plastic bag with a stiff cardboard bottom quietly but powerfully labelled 'Marks & Spencer.' She had no idea where this bag originated but there was no doubt it advertised a quality company, so she designated it as the temporary new home for Señor Ortega's vest. The grey balls looked rather lonely in their rows at the bottom of such a spacious bag so she covered them with her favourite fabric swatch, a luscious emerald green square of crushed velvet that she cut from one of Norma's too-small dresses. She regretted not having the foresight to have draped it like a small flag across Señor Ortega's chest, tucking it under his chin, before closing his coffin. He would have appreciated its lush sensuality. She imagined him smiling up at her, a corner of the emerald crushed velvet brushing against his cheek.

Clorinda also had a lovely supply of small silk remnants, some as big as table runners, others as small as handkerchiefs. The other nine bags were used to store polyester blends from China and sheep and llama wool from locally produced sweaters. If it was an appealing colour she also kept some of what she referred to as 'plastic wool,' mass produced synthetic fibres from unknown sources. Since she wasn't sure yet what fibres and colours she would need to include in her tapestry, it was best to save everything.

Clorinda's special bags of wool consisted of strands she had unravelled from

fine cotton or woollen European and North American-made garments. If she had known about the donors, she would have predicted how delighted they would be to have their old things transformed into an exotic tapestry – someone's life's work – rather than remaining intact and warming the body of a less fortunate South American.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Orlando Ortega** – Northern Chile, 1961

A nickname like Pelota Dorada – Golden Ball– or Dedos de Plata – Money Toes – can take a young man a long way in the wrong direction.

At the age of 24, Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras was the youngest president of a first division fútbol club in Chilean history and he was thinking about retiring. He managed it (in a small town in the interior of the third region) with a trademark nonchalance, making dispassionate decisions. His style was either harshly criticised to the point where the mere mention of his name triggered whistling and booing among fútbol fans, be it at the stadium or the local pub, or he was duly praised with compliments by businessmen who raised their glasses to his good health.

Orlando was so hated by his fans that midway into each season, he had to increase his personal security at the stadium to four policemen, who escorted him in, sat with him during the game and escorted him back out. Other than to watch games – the essential public duty of any team president – he endeavoured to keep an extremely low profile.

Nonetheless Orlando became accustomed to his VIP status and developed a certain personal style that earned him either greater disdain or deep admiration, depending on where you sat in the stadium. He was taller than normal for a northerner and had a naturally thin, well-proportioned frame over which he liked to drape clothes of only the latest style from the most exclusive men's shop in town. Fine wools and linens were his preference along with a few favourite felt fedoras. His fingernails were impeccable, something that set him apart from other working men, and his thick black hair was always neatly trimmed and combed. He preferred to be clean-shaven rather than wear a moustache. The thought of catching crumbs or bits of vegetables from his soup in a brush of hair on his upper lip made him shudder. Orlando had deep, dark eyes that revealed only the fact that he kept a thousand secrets. He was one of a select few men that, at his age, had been able to maintain a full set of white teeth, which was so distracting in its completeness that when he talked, people often focused on his mouth rather than looking him in the eyes. Whether he intended it or not, he had a magnetic charisma that few men or women could resist. Even if they hated him, they secretly loved him.

While the fans saw him as cold-blooded and disloyal, the businessman applauded his astute decisions and timing. He was able to maintain the team in first division by calculating exactly when to sell star players for a sizeable profit. As soon as, and only when it could be safely determined that the team would remain in first division where it would benefit from higher corporate sponsorships, radio royalties and gate revenues, he sold his best players for all he could get. At the same time, he sent scouts out to small desert towns to pick up young talent at no cost and he exposed them the next season, so the wolves of the wealthier teams in the Capital could prepare acceptable offers.

By the time Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras sold his second player, he had learned that if he negotiated to lower the official asking price by 10% and then asked for 5% under the table, everyone would be happy. The other board members were none the wiser.

In addition, he made friends among the referee community to ensure no-risk, highly profitable wagers for himself and his associates. He also greased the palms of mid-level municipal bureaucrats to ensure that stadium rental remained a minor, if not a non-existent expense. He knew which players he could illegally sign on under false names for low one-time fees in order to ensure a strong team in an important game. He also knew which bookkeeper would do a good job of balancing gate revenues in his favour against actual attendance. If Orlando del Transito Ortega de Riveras did anything honest at all, it was to pay his players. Azul Unido was the only team in Chile to keep their promise to the talent, albeit with traditionally low salaries, reminding them that their greatest reward was the mere privilege of participating in this most glorious of games.

Although, up to now, he hadn't been to the Capital, his reputation preceded him in some of the Santiago coffee bars and private business clubs. The story around town was that this youthful club president was nicknamed 'Golden Ball' because as a young player he was able to score from midfield with an incredibly powerful, well-placed kick. And others referred to him as 'Money Toes' because of his magnificent dribble, the ball clinging like a magnet to his shoes, from one end of the field to the other, never disappointing a betting man. He had been the all-round super-star of his barrio whose potential career ended in tragedy when he tripped into an old sink hole on a dark night. Apparently he was lucky to escape with his life, the broken ankle was never properly attended to, and it ended his career before he ever really got started. That, they said, was the reason for his slight limp. "Raise your glasses to Money Toes."

These fairy tales that had been concocted to account for the nicknames, are what originally qualified Orlando to become president of Azul Unido. But it was his excellent performance as a businessman – benefiting not only himself, but associates – that kept him there. He was elected unanimously by the contributing investors, a group of *pirquineros* (small, independent miners) who contributed a minimal percentage of their weekly salary to the club. The general expectation was that they would see a return equal to what they had invested, and most importantly they would have free passes to each game. Once the club investors realised that Orlando was also skilled at making money, greed overtook pride as the reason for loyalty to him. Before the ‘Ortega era,’ participating miners sauntered the downtown streets proudly sporting team shirts on their backs. But now they strutted around the main plaza with rat tail combs waving stiffly to the world from their back pockets. They all wore thick-framed, reflective sunglasses and greased back their hair. Their gold chain-adorned chests were so inflated by their own importance they looked like mating pigeons. They frequently waved to one another just so their smug, square-faced club rings that signalled exclusive membership, could be exhibited.

Orlando never corrected any of the stories that led him to this point. Once a rumour started burning through the minds of men, it gained a momentum and life of its own and didn’t, at least in this instance, cause any harm. If it served a good purpose, then let it be.

In truth, the events leading up to Orlando’s nickname were sometimes a little blurry even for himself. The afternoon he escaped the Michilla mine, American dollars stashed in his underwear, he headed south by bus to Valle del Elqui where he found lodging in the adobe house of a campesino who was renting rooms by the night. He felt safe there and stayed for several weeks, heading into the bigger centre of Coquimbo to change some of the American bills to peso notes. In order not to be an easy target he exchanged small amounts of money in various different places over a period of weeks. Meanwhile his underwear was a vault. Unfortunately, his mouth was not.

On one of his visits to town, he entered into a conversation with a typical, hard-working miner at a local bar. Weeks had passed since his escape from El Camino mine. It was hundreds of kilometres behind him now. After more pisco than he could handle at his young age, he couldn’t resist leaning across the bar and whispering his story to his drinking companion. The miner was outwardly impressed not only with Orlando’s audacity but also with his ap-

parent success – stuffing the gold into his crotch and then cutting off his own toes! Brilliant! He immediately turned around and with pisco sloshing out of his raised glass, invited everyone and no one in particular, “Hey, let’s drink a toast to Pelota Dorada – ‘Golden Ball’ This,” his index finger pointing at Orlando from above his head, “is Pelota Dorada.” A communal ‘Salud’ rang through the bar as everyone turned to raise their glass in obliging good humour. After more low conversation during which Orlando earned more of his companion’s appreciation – who was shaking his head in disbelief and repeatedly pounding the bar – the companion turned again to the crowd, and raised his glass, pisco sloshing onto the floor, and said, “Hey, I have another one. Let’s drink to Dedos de Plata – ‘Money Toes’ here!”

“Cheers to Money Toes.” The bar crowd, undoubtedly all fútbol experts, focused their attention on Orlando and murmured about his physique – perfect frame, good height, strong arms, just the right build for a fútbol player – and the speculation about his level of fútbol skills began. Within days the murmurs that were sparked by the nicknames the young miner had given him, grew to a steady stream of gossip about Pelota Dorada. It was only a matter of days before Pelota Dorada was a fútbol legend. Out of nowhere, there were even incredible eyewitness accounts attesting to his rare skill and everyone lamented its loss on the tragic night he tripped into the sink hole. These tales were repeated so quickly and from so many different sources that no one knew exactly who the eyewitnesses were, but their authenticity was never doubted.

The night that his fútbol legend status was born, Orlando and his companion left the bar together. Having consumed several glasses of pisco, they decided to return to the valley on foot. Neither of them had a grasp of the distance they needed to cover as they stumbled drunkenly, leaning on each other for support, beyond the lights of town and into the quiet moonlit hills. Once they had meandered a few kilometres from the outskirts, the companion suddenly planted himself solidly in front of Orlando and surprised him by drawing a switchblade from his pocket. Wavering unsteadily like a dead tree in a strong wind, he held the knife to Orlando’s chest, and spit out his demand, “Give me all of your money, Pelota Dorada.” Shocked and too drunk to respond, Orlando could only stare down at the knife, the tip of which was about to pierce his sternum. When he raised his bleary eyes to look up into the smirking face of his drooling companion, he lost his balance. He wobbled and shuffled in the sand attempting to regain his equilibrium and trying to locate his wit. However, any creativity and all instincts were swimming in his



pisco-pickled brain and he was not successful. He just stood there numbly, in no position to argue, with his ankles about to give way.

Agitated, the companion shook the knife, poking Orlando in the chest. “Cough it up, Golden Ball.”

As Orlando nervously reached into his pocket to pull out some bills, he shuffled, slipped on the loose gravel and fell to the ground, landing on his back with a heavy thud, one hand still in his trouser pocket. He noticed for the first time in his life how the multitude of twinkling stars hung so close he could almost touch them. But he was too drunk to extend an arm.

The companion was short on patience and he threw himself into a crazed, childish tantrum. Threatening the moon with his knife and punching into the night with his other fist, he jumped up and down several times on the spot. Suddenly exhausted, he leaned forward, hands on his knees and he leered down at Orlando. “You useless, toeless little runt. You thought you didn’t need your toes, but now you can’t stand up. Well, you’ll need more than your missing digits to save you tonight, you smart-ass.”

The companion lunged forward in an attempt to grab Orlando’s foot. Orlando kicked at him and succeeded in throwing him off balance. The knife slipped out of his hand and flipped through the air. The companion fell back several steps, arms flailing in wide circles as he tried to regain his footing. After skidding and tripping across the sand, he performed a couple of clumsy half-cartwheels and disappeared over a mound. There was a high-pitched, drawn-out yell that fell away into the distance. Then silence.

Orlando lay frozen for several minutes, leaning forward on one elbow, eyes squinting into the starry sky. He turned onto his belly and slithered over to the embankment where the companion had dropped from sight.

In the moonlight, he couldn’t see the true depths of the shaft, the edges of which had surrendered under the companion’s weight. He doubted whether even the light of day would reveal the body that lay broken numerous hundreds of metres in the shadows below.

Old ghost shafts were occasionally discovered by chance, normally by fatal accidents such as this. Earthquakes frequently rearranged the land, slyly folding sand over lightweight tin shaft lids, fooling even the miners who had left them there. One of Mother Earth’s cruel tricks, it was the most underestimated danger of walking across desert mine areas, day or night.

The unexpected disappearance of his unfortunate companion immediately sobered Orlando. He pushed back from the edge, brushed himself off and began the long walk towards his lodging, gazing at all the lucky stars in the naked desert sky. He reached up and felt their light bless his fingertips and smiled. If the companion had not stopped to rob him they would have both staggered into the shaft and disappeared forever. His luck, if he dared to believe in it, had turned.

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