

## [ CHAPTER ONE ]

**Michelle dropped the sarong** she'd started to tie around her waist onto her lounge chair. Nobody cared what her thighs looked like.

Sand burned the soles of her feet as she walked down to the water. Look at these people, she thought. Foreigners, mostly. Like her. Older, a lot of them. Sagging, leathered skin, the ones who'd been here awhile. Pale tourists, big-bellied, pink-faced, glowing with sunburn. A family of locals—Mexicans anyway, who knew if they were really from here? Dark, short, and blocky, eating shrimp on a stick from the grill down the beach, giant bottles of Coke tucked in a Styrofoam cooler.

Out of shape. Lumpy. Flabby. Aging.

*Nobody cares.*

And her thighs weren't bad, anyway.

She stood at the water's edge, watching the rainbow parasail from the real-estate company lift a middle-aged woman into the soft blue sky, the motorboat gunning its engine and heading out into the bay, avoiding the banana boat undulating up and down as it hauled a load of college kids south toward Los Arcos. She watched them gripping the yellow tube with their knees, shrieking

with laughter, several clutching beers, tanned and young and healthy.

They'd drink until they puked, screw each other till they passed out, go home and post about their awesome vacation on their Facebook pages.

She waded into the water until it was up to her hips. Warm as a bath, but the surf was pounding. She stood there trying to resist the pull as the receding waves sucked the sand out from under her feet.

After a while she'd had enough and went back to her lounge beneath the *palapa*.

She tried to read her book. It was about a woman whose marriage had broken up, and she'd learned to bake bread. Bread and muffins. After about thirty pages, Michelle was willing to bet that the heroine would end up with the overly educated woodworker and not the stressed-out options trader.

"Ma'am? Can I get you something? Something to drink?"

The hotel waiter, dressed in a white guayabera and smudged white pants, stood above her, round, sweating tray in hand. Nut-brown, gray-haired, creases marking his face like wrinkles in a crumpled shirt.

She thought about it. "A margarita, please."

Why not? She didn't need to be sober to follow this plot.

They'd already paid for the vacation. It still seemed like an extravagance. She and Tom were going to go together. A getaway. A celebration, he'd said.

She wondered what it was that he'd wanted to celebrate.

**She must** have fallen asleep for a while. That was sort of the point with these vacations. You partied at night. Got up earlier than you'd like. Grabbed your *palapa* while the sun was still low behind the eastern mountains, spread out your towel on your blue canvas chair, put on your sunblock, found your place in your novel. First cocktail at lunch, to wash down the greasy quesadillas brought out to you on a paper plate. Try to ignore the vendors

selling jewelry, blankets, offering to braid your hair, massage your feet. At some point you'd close your eyes, tired as they were from reading in the shaded sunlight, irritated from the sunscreen sweated into them.

When she opened her eyes, it was late afternoon. She'd been dreaming, about something. About being too hot. About . . . what was it about? About somebody breathing in her ear. Leaning over, touching her shoulder. A man, but not Tom. *Didn't you forget?* he'd asked. *Didn't you forget?*

A few clouds had come in, but it was still hot, and the sun glared in her eyes. She blinked a few times. Then something blotted out the light.

A parasail, between the beach and the sun.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. The parasail was its own small eclipse, dark against the sun. Now she could see it—the bloodred parachute, white letters glowing.

TOURISM KILLS! they spelled. In English.

Michelle blinked again and stood.

An atypical crowd had gathered on the beach. Elegantly dressed men and women—a wedding party, she thought at first. Waiters rushed to fill shot glasses with tequila. Photographers ringed the group, pointing their cameras at the parasail, which was heading back from the bay.

Now she could see the person in the harness. Even at this distance, he appeared huge, roughly as spherical as a balloon. As he descended, she saw that he wore a three-piece brown tweed suit and a red plaid tie.

She wished she had her camera. But it was locked up in the hotel's safe—too valuable to risk leaving on the beach while she napped or waded.

The parasail crew—tattooed, in surfwear T-shirts and baggy trunks—kicked up sand as they staggered under the parasail rider's weight, trying to guide him to his landing, and for a moment Michelle thought they would all collapse in a heap. But at the last second a third man dressed in a crisp linen suit stepped forward,

bracing his hands against the fat man's chest, pedaling backward until at last the body in motion came to rest.

The people in the crowd cheered and raised their glasses in a toast.

"That was different."

Michelle turned.

The man next to her smiled.

"Yes," she said. "What was it, exactly?"

"Arts festival. It's running all this week."

He was an American, or sounded like one. About her age. Tanned so dark that the creases around his eyes fanned out like tiger stripes.

"Should be interesting," he said, "if you like that kind of stuff."

He wore a pair of baggy swim trunks and a faded batik shirt. Gray flecked his hair and the stubble of his beard, but he was rangy trim. A fit fortyish.

"Do you?" she asked.

"It's kind of fun," he said with a shrug. "I mean, art, you hang it on a wall or put it on a pedestal. I'm not sure what this is."

"Performance," Michelle murmured.

By now a procession had formed around the fat man: the well-dressed crowd, the photographers, and a group of young musicians wearing matching T-shirts, singing "Paperback Writer" in perfect harmony. Together they set off down the beach, north toward the pier, laughing, drinking tequila. A brown dog followed in their wake.

"I was going to get a drink," the man said. "Would you like to join me?"

**His name** was Daniel. "I live here part-time," he explained. "Got a condo in Amapas."

"Are you retired?" she asked.

He drew back, mock offended. "Wow. I hope I don't look old enough to be retired."

"Not at all," she said. "But you never know what people's situations are."

“Well, I’m not loaded either,” he said with a grin. “I’m a pilot. The work is sort of freelance. So I have some flexibility about where I spend my time.”

They sat at a table under a *palapa*, on the sand. The sun wouldn’t set for another few hours; the restaurant staff had just begun to bring tables out to the beach for dinner. Michelle expected that the restaurant would not be full, even with the arts festival. Memorial Day weekend was the last gasp of tourist season in Puerto Vallarta, and it was still pretty quiet. Too hot this time of year. The crowds came earlier, for Easter and spring break, and later in the fall, after the rains.

“A pilot. For an airline?”

“No. Private company. We fly Gulfstreams and Citations mostly. Rentals.”

He scooped up guacamole with a chip, spooned salsa on top of that. “You know, businessmen who can’t afford their own but want to impress a client. Rich guys who want to get to a golf course or a football game in a hurry. That kind of thing.”

She nodded and sipped her margarita. They made good ones here. Not too sweet. You could taste the lime. “Sounds fun,” she said.

He smiled. “Works for me.”

The sun had moved behind a bank of clouds, illuminating them like a bright bulb in a shaded lamp.

“Check it out,” Daniel said.

She looked where he pointed. A pair of dolphins surfed at the crest of a wave. They leaped above its crest, plunged back into the water, caught the next swell, then shot up again, twisting in midair like a pair of dancers.

“Better than SeaWorld.”

She nodded. “It’s beautiful here.”

Daniel leaned back in his chair, took a final sip of his drink. “How long are you staying?”

“I’m not sure. My flight’s on Sunday. I might change it.”

She wasn’t sure why she said it. She had no real intention of

changing her flight. It was just that when she thought about what was waiting for her in Los Angeles, it was easy to indulge in the fantasy of staying a little longer. Of never going back.

“Nothing pressing back home?”

He was looking at her in that way, sizing her up, what her intentions were, what she might be willing to do.

She shook her head.

“Are *you* retired?”

She laughed briefly. “I’m between things.”

He didn’t ask questions. Michelle wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She wasn’t ready to talk about any of it, certainly not to a stranger, but on the other hand one does like to be asked.

“This is a good place to be,” he said. “When you just want to relax and figure things out.”

Maybe that wasn’t such a bad answer.

He was a good-looking man, she thought, with sharp cheekbones and a firm jaw, sky-blue eyes that stood out against his black hair and dark tan. The gray in his hair, the crow’s-feet around his eyes, made him more attractive. To her anyway.

Otherwise he would have been too perfect.

Men like that could have anyone.

“Another margarita, ma’am? Sir?”

Daniel grinned. “I’m up for it if you are.”

She hesitated. This was her second of the day, and she hadn’t eaten much.

Losing control would be a bad idea.

“How would you feel about dinner?” she asked.

**They had** another drink so they could watch the sunset, ate some more guacamole to absorb the tequila. “There’s a restaurant not too far from here I like,” Daniel said.

“I’m not really dressed.” She’d only put on a gauzy white blouse over her bathing-suit top, wrapped the sarong around her hips.

“What you’re wearing is fine,” he said, giving her a quick, appreciative look. “It’s a casual place. Lots of people go there after the beach.”

The restaurant was a few blocks away, on a street that ran up from the beach and bordered a small plaza, where there were a number of restaurants that catered to tourists. Farther up the street were shops, mostly clothing stores and handicrafts: Huichol beadwork, hand-tooled leather, embroidered blouses. Michelle had walked up there the day before.

“There’s always lines out the door,” Daniel said. “It’s one of the only decent places to get Mexican food around here.”

They waited outside, by the open-air grill, where a woman made tortillas and a man tended meats.

“Really?”

He shrugged. “Well, I’m sure there are some places the locals go to that I don’t know about. Here in Zona Romántica—you can get better Mexican food in Los Angeles.”

Michelle nodded. “I’m from Los Angeles,” she mentioned.

“Oh, yeah? I love L.A. Where do you live?”

“Brentwood.”

Of course, that wasn’t exactly true. The storage space with her things in it was in Torrance.

But she’d lived in Brentwood, before.

“Nice,” Daniel said. “Good weather, right, that close to the ocean?”

It was hot inside the restaurant, even with the fans, even though the front was open to let in whatever breezes there were. There weren’t any. The air was weighted down by heat and humidity, immobile.

Daniel recommended the tortilla soup. They both ordered a bowl. Had another round of margaritas. Mariachis played, whether anyone wanted them to or not.

“Hey, Danny!”

The man who approached their table was soft-featured, in his thirties, wearing Dockers and a polo shirt.

Daniel shifted in his chair. “Ned, hey.” Something close to a frown creased his forehead.

“Man, I can’t believe I ran into you here. I was just, you know, on my way to the restaurant, and I saw you.”

“Yeah, well, we’re having dinner,” Daniel said.

Ned shuffled from one foot to the other, rubbed his hands together. “I don’t want to interrupt. But, look, I really need to talk to you. When you have a chance. Are you around, or . . . ?”

“Can you make it to the board meeting? We can talk then.”

“I guess . . . I’ll try. . . . It’s just . . . kind of time-sensitive.” Ned looked around, eyes darting, still rubbing his hands. He reminded Michelle of the tweekers she used to know in high school. “Hey, you could come by the restaurant tomorrow night. I’ll hook you up. We’re running some great specials. Surf and turf. Got some good wines in, too.” He finally focused on Michelle. “You could bring your friend.”

“This is Michelle,” Daniel said. “From Los Angeles.”

“Oh, cool.” He extended his hand to her. She took it. Sweaty, not surprisingly. “My place is just down the street. The Lonely Bull.” He smiled at her for a moment and seemed to lose focus. “Hope you can make it.”

“I don’t know, man,” Daniel said. “I’ve got some stuff going on. Look, just give me a call tomorrow, okay?”

Ned nodded like a bobblehead doll. “Okay. Great. I’ll call you.”

“The board meeting?” Michelle asked after he’d left. “Are you in business together?”

Daniel snorted. “With Ned? No.”

By now their carnitas had arrived, along with another round of margaritas.

I’m getting pretty buzzed, she thought. She no longer cared.

“The board meeting, it’s just a bunch of us expats who get together on Fridays, at El Tiburón. We hang out, watch the sunset.” He stared at her. “Think you’ll be around?”

“Maybe,” she murmured. “Tiburón. Like the town in California?”

“Maybe.” He grinned. “It’s Spanish for ‘shark.’”



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**By the** time they finished eating, it was almost eleven. Not that late, but after all the drinks and a day in the sun Michelle had to step carefully off the high curbs onto the cobblestones. That was the thing here—the curbs were not a uniform height, you couldn't just assume you knew how to judge the distances.

“Whoa!” Daniel said, catching her elbow, steadying her.

Michelle giggled. “Glad I'm not wearing heels.”

Now they had reached her hotel, bypassing the open-air lobby and entering through the arches that bordered on the wide, cobblestone drive.

“Which way is your room?”

Through the courtyard, to the right, in the tower overlooking the beach. Watch for the slick terra-cotta tiles, the sand gritting underfoot. Wait for the elevator, and when it doesn't come, climb the stairs to the fourth floor.

Michelle felt around in her sisal tote bag for her key, found the hard plastic wedge stamped with the room number, the key attached. Her hand closed around it.

She turned, her back to the door.

“Well,” she said.

“Well.”

He leaned down and kissed her. She tasted salt—from the drinks? From the ocean? She leaned into him, let her hand rest above the small of his back. He pressed against her, hard. She wrapped her leg around his, felt his hands on her ass, lifting her up.

“Wait,” she said. She showed him the key.

He grinned. “I was hoping you'd ask me in.”

The room was stifling. She'd turned the air conditioner off, out of habit. She switched it on, and the unit rattled to life. It smelled musty, like the spoiled damp of an old refrigerator. Still, with the sliding glass doors that led to the balcony left open, you could hear the ocean, catch a whiff of its brine.

Daniel stood and watched her, a dark silhouette.

“Come here,” he said.

By the time they'd made it to the bed, the air conditioner had chilled the room enough that Michelle was grateful for the warm breeze that blew in from the balcony.

"You have a beautiful body," Daniel said, running a hand lightly over her belly.

"So do you."

The words sounded stupid as soon as she said them. You don't tell men they're beautiful.

Daniel didn't seem to mind. He looked pleased. "Gotta keep in shape for the things I enjoy."

He had a nice body, he really did. Lean but not stringy. Energetic. She hadn't been with anybody like him in a long time. Certainly not Tom, and she'd stayed faithful to Tom.

Tom with his big belly, his barrel chest. Twelve years older than her and not exactly a stud.

"Hey," Daniel said. "Hey, what is it?"

She was crying, goddamn it. She rarely cried. She hated it.

"Hey." He smoothed the hair around her face.

He was looking at her now, and she could tell what he was thinking: Great, I'm in bed with a crazy woman.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm sorry. Don't . . . It's stupid."

"Listen, I mean, if you're not into this . . ."

He tried but could not quite keep the irritation from his voice. "I am. I'm sorry. It's just . . ." She tried to smile. "I haven't dated in a while. My husband . . ."

"So . . . you're married?" Now the irritation seemed mixed with curiosity.

No disapproval at least. Perhaps a calculation about whether this was worth it.

"No. Not anymore."

"Oh." Daniel rolled over onto his side, propped himself up on his elbow. "Yeah. It's tough getting back into things after you split from somebody you've been with for a long time."

"My husband died, actually."

She enjoyed it in a way, getting the reaction, seeing the look on his face, the shock, the embarrassment.

“I’m really sorry,” he said.

The way he said it, so simply, made her flush with guilt.

“No, don’t be, I really . . .” She wanted to reach out, wanting to touch him, to encourage him, but it felt so awkward, so phony.

“I want to,” she finally said. “It’s just a little hard.”

Daniel extended his hand, rested his palm on her cheek for a moment. “Look. We both had a lot to drink. This is all kind of intense. Maybe I should just go.”

This time she did reach out. “No. Stay. If you want.”

They tried again. But the energy that had gotten them into bed was gone now, dissipated, and after a few perfunctory thrusts Daniel stopped and mumbled, “I’m sorry. I’m really tired.”

“Don’t apologize.” She tried to smile. “You’ve been great. I haven’t.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

His face was dark above hers, but she thought his expression was kind.

She kissed him, slowly.

“Mmmm. That was nice,” he said.

After that they both fell asleep, not spooning but close together, Daniel’s hand resting on the hollow above her hip.

So many noises here. The familiar: unmuffled motorcycle, snatches of music, pounding surf. The unfamiliar: songbirds singing foreign tunes, parrots squawking, the *toc-toc* cry of geckos.

What woke her?

A muffled thud. A clatter. She blinked her eyes open. Two men, one entering from the balcony, the other crouched over the chair, Daniel’s shorts in his hand, her tote bag on the floor by his feet.

“Hey!” Daniel flung the sheet off, bolted out of bed.

Now Michelle saw they wore kerchiefs over the lower halves of their faces. The second pulled something from his pocket, something dark that he gripped in his fist. For a moment Daniel froze

as the man took two quick strides to him, raised the hand that clutched the black pistol, and smashed it against his temple.

Daniel crumpled, as surely as if he'd been shot.

It happened so quickly that Michelle didn't scream; instead she gasped and clutched the sheet.

The man with the gun turned to her.

He was close to the bed. She could see that he wore dark clothes, a black T-shirt, jeans, and he took another step toward her. He had on a belt, woven brown and white leather; she could see it clearly in the light that leaked in from the balcony.

The buckle was a gun, and there were letters in the weave. She saw those as he tugged at the tongue of the belt to unbuckle it.

“*Pendejo!*” the other man spit, gesturing toward the balcony.

The man with the gun stared at her a moment longer before he turned and followed his companion out the sliding glass door, into the night.