

## Chapter 1

Jimmy could hardly wait for the bell to ring. He had been receiving text messages all afternoon. The pictures his cousin, Jake, posted on Instagram were outrageous. There was a link to their website too. There was happenin's goin' on at the Beach Hut Bikini Barista stand.

When the bell did finally ring, Jimmy and Dave piled into Jimmy's beat up old Camaro and burned rubber out of the Mariner High School parking lot. They were on a mission.

It was only a few minutes' drive up Evergreen Way to the coffee stand, but traffic slowed to a crawl when they got to within a couple of blocks of their destination. Jimmy saw that cars were backed up for over two blocks waiting in line. They weren't waiting for coffee.

He pulled into the line.

"Hey man, how long's this gonna take?" Dave asked.

"Who cares? Did I show you the picture?"

"Yeah, it was sick, man, but I gotta go."

"Get out, go behind one of those buildings."

Dave rejoined Jimmy a few minutes later. Jimmy's gold Camaro had only moved a couple of car lengths.

It took almost an hour to get to the front of the line, but man, was it worth it.

“What can I get for you boys?” The heavy chested woman with long curly black hair asked.

“Uh . . .” Jimmy had a hard time making his tongue work. “Uh . . . cap-oo-chee-no.”

“Is that two cappuccinos?” the woman asked.

“Yeah.”

Jimmy just stared. The woman was pretty enough, but who was looking at her face? She was only wearing a G-string and red, sparkly pasties with long red tassels on them. Her heavy hooters jiggled up and down when she moved.

She turned to her espresso machine and worked like she knew what she was doing. With only a few movements she drew the espresso, then she steamed the milk like a pro. It only took a minute or so for her to prepare the two drinks.

“My cousin says you can swing them things,” Jimmy finally stammered.

The woman stared at Jimmy for a moment and smiled. “That’ll take a twenty dollar tip, Sport.”

Jimmy handed over a twenty.

The woman wrapped her arms around her abdomen and began flexing her pectoral muscles. Her boobs bobbed and the tassels jumped around.

“Oh man,” Dave said. “The guys’ll never believe this.”

After a few attempts, the woman got the tassels twirling in a circle.

Jimmy pulled out his cell phone and started recording. “This’ll go viral, man.”

“Move it along boys,” the barista said. “Video costs extra.”

She stopped, picked up the two cardboard cups, handed them to Jimmy and slid the window shut.

“Have a nice day, boys,” she said from behind the glass.

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Ted Higuera needed to clear his head. After a summer scouring Mexico for her in the scorching heat, he needed to cool down and let his spirit run free.

He took the Burlington exit off of I-5, just north of Mount Vernon, Washington. The late August sunshine bathed him in a sense of well being. With the top down on his BMW Z4 roadster, he reveled in the open road.

He followed the signs to Highway 11, the world-famous Chuckanut Drive. The two-lane road wound north through picturesque farmland, then followed the shoreline of Samish Bay. One of the most scenic roads in America, it followed the base of Chuckanut Mountain, along the rocky cliffs with dramatic views of the Salish Sea, all the way to Bellingham. The blazing red and yellow leaves of the maples and alder reminded him that summer was winding to a close. Maybe a little faster here in the far north than in Seattle, but fall was on the way.

Fall meant football. Ted had spent nearly every fall of his life donning the pads and helmet. He was a whiz at LA's McKinley High School. His prowess on the field not only won him all the female attention he could handle but it was the key to his future.

A last minute offer for a scholarship at the University of Washington lifted him out of the barrio. Now, after five years of helping his father run his restaurant in East LA, Ted was back in his adopted home town of Seattle.

He needed the solitude. He needed to clear his head so he could think. He had spent the whole summer chasing her. He hadn't found a trace.

"Computer, open Internet Explorer," Ted said.

There was a slight whirring sound in his head. His wrap-around sunglasses gave the tiniest vibration. He would have preferred aviator style glasses; these were a little feminine for his taste. But this is what you got when your CEO was a woman.

Delphi was the brain child of Millennium Systems CEO Alison Clarke. Ted, and his partner, Catrina Flaherty, had done a job for her a few years ago. They bailed her out of a jam when the police suspected her of killing the company's chairman of the board. In gratitude, she gave Ted one of the astonishing computing devices to beta test. That and a pretty hefty fee.

A computer screen appeared before Ted's eyes. It just sort of floated in the space between him and the windshield of his black-on-black roadster. His Yahoo homepage appeared on the screen.

"Search: Maria Gonzales and Anthropologist," he said.

The sunglasses whirred and vibrated again. A listing of possible links appeared. Her LinkedIn page, her Facebook page. He stared at the Facebook link and blinked his eyes rapidly two times.

The screen changed to Maria's Facebook page. He looked at her picture, her red hair, fair skin and blue eyes. Not what you'd expect for someone named Maria Gonzales.

Maria was a striking example of womanhood. She stood eye-to-eye with Ted's five foot eight inch frame. Her long red hair, green eyes and pale skin spoke of her Irish heritage. With a Mexican father and an American mother, she had dual citizenship. She spoke English with ease and her cultured Spanish put Ted's street Spanish to shame.

He pictured her in his mind's eye. She moved with the fluid motion of a dancer, which she was. She didn't walk so much as she sort of floated down the hallway.

No new posts today.

Linked In and Twitter also were dead ends. He'd checked these sites a hundred times and found nothing. She had dropped off the face of the earth.

Ted negotiated a curve, then turned his attention back to his problem. Where was Maria? He hardly knew her. She helped him locate a major arms dealer in Mexico and find his kidnapped brother. She watched over his wounded brother in the hospital while he, Cat and Chris went after a drug cartel in Baja.

Then she disappeared. Her office at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City was empty, her apartment deserted. He searched Mexico City, then her home town of La Paz, Baja California Sur. He drove up and down the Baja Peninsula and all over the mainland. After three weeks of searching, he gave up and came home.

He heard the ringing inside of his head. The holographic screen hanging in front of his eyes showed the caller id as Chris Hardwick, Ted's best friend since college.

"Computer, answer phone," he said.

"Hey, *amigo*, where are you?" Chris said inside his head.

"Hi Chris. I'm out driving. Just had to clear my head."

"When are you coming back? We've got some work to do for your sister. You promised her, remember?"

*Caramba*. Where was his head? He had promised his little sister, Hope, to help her with the cleaning and restoration of her new restaurant on the east side of Lake Union in Seattle.

"Crap, you're right," he said. "I'll head back now."

He was just entering the Fairhaven district of Bellingham. He followed the signs to Interstate 5 and headed back south.

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Flying was hell under the best of circumstances. Seattle to San Juan, Puerto Rico was almost ten hours including an hour and a half sitting around in the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. The flight from Seattle to Dallas-Fort Worth wasn't so bad. It was long, boring and Richard Randall was cramped into a center seat, but it was bearable.

The leg from Dallas-Fort Worth to San Juan was sheer hell. The damned plane was loaded with screaming brats. He had a family in the row behind him and no matter how much he complained, the little twerp behind him wouldn't stop kicking his seat.

If all flights to Puerto Rico were such misery, no wonder all the passengers clapped when the plane touched down.

Then there was customs. Puerto Rico was part of the good old USA, right? Then why did he have to go through customs? It would be easier to get into Cuba.

But he had thought ahead. This was why he only brought nine thousand, nine hundred dollars with him. He wasn't about to get himself into trouble bringing ten thousand dollars. He spread the cash around. A couple thousand in his socks. A couple more in a secret compartment in his belt. Some in an envelope in his carry on. He threw in a couple of pictures of jewelry in case any suspicious customs agent should ask about the cash. He would say he was buying jewelry for his wife.

The damn fools should buy that.

Getting a cab was like picking a card out of the deck in the magician's hand. No telling what he'd get. They were lined up like at any normal airport, but as he walked down the row, the cabbies vied for his business like barkers at a Tijuana whorehouse.

Fortunately, the cabbie spoke English. This was part of America, right? So why didn't they all have to learn English? Well, anyone who he had to deal with spoke English, that was good enough.

Richard Randall, Dick to his friends, was an average size, average looking man. Middle aged, a head full of short gray hair, brown eyes, maybe a little chunky, but absolutely nothing to make him stand out in a crowd. He'd have to find ways to make himself more memorable when he got to the hotel.

The cab deposited him in the turnaround of the El San Juan Hotel. The place was magnificent. High ceilings in the lobby gave the feel of some old-time cathedral. The casino right off the lobby was anything but religious. Crowds bustled nosily about the casino. Garish neon signs touted the slot

machines. Women in cocktail dresses and men in tuxes made him feel like he was in some James Bond movie.

He'd have to avoid the casino though. He'd dropped enough cash in Vegas over his lifetime to realize that sitting down at one of the tables would be his undoing. He had other plans for his money.

His room was great. Luxury re-defined. He thought about the cost, three hundred bucks a day wasn't that bad. He needed to treat himself once in a while.

The thick Porterhouse steak for dinner and the Dewar's White Label in the Blue Bar off the lobby were pricey, but what the hell? He was making an investment in his future. He tipped generously. He wanted the staff to remember him when some nosey cop came looking.

The next morning he was back at the taxi stand.

"Banco Popular," he told the cabbie.

The dark-skinned man grunted and pulled into traffic.

*Shit!* Driving in San Juan was taking your life into your own hands. He was glad he hadn't bothered to rent a car. He wasn't going to be here that long anyway. Just a quick trip to the bank, then he'd be back on his way to the airport.

His first stop was at the Western Union office. He slipped the cabbie a twenty and told him to wait, then went in to rent a mail box. He had to have a local address for the next step in his plan. It only took a few minutes, then he was back in the cab and they were off.

The Banco Popular headquarters was in a tall white sky-scraper in downtown San Juan. Vertical rows of windows gave it the appearance of being striped and the windowless top floor had the name blazoned in sky-high letters.

Randall waited in the lobby for an officer to approach him.

"May I help you, señor?" the dark-haired woman in a blue suit asked.

"I certainly hope so." He gave her his best smile. "I need to open an account."

“Come with me, please,” she said.

“It will be my pleasure.”

In the form-fitting business suit, the dark eyed woman was breath taking.

“Are all the bankers in Puerto Rico so beautiful, or did I just get lucky?” he asked. He knew that the woman would remember his flirting.

And it was just that easy. He left the cash with the pretty bank officer and caught a cab back to the airport.

In and out. No one the wiser . . . for the time being.

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It was late afternoon by the time Ted pulled into the parking lot of his sister’s new restaurant. He immediately spied Chris’s silver Porsche Boxster. The expensive German sports car had been a graduation present from Chris’ dad, Harry, those many years ago. Chris kept the sleek car in showroom-new condition.

*Location, location, location,* Ted thought as he climbed out of his low-slung roadster. *You’re going to do okay here, chica.*

His sister, Hope, his mother and two of his other siblings moved to Seattle with him from East LA after Papa was killed looking for his missing brother in Mexico. Mama couldn’t stand to live in the family home anymore. Hope had other reasons to move to Seattle.

They sold the family business, the *El Chaparral* restaurant, where Papa had worked for over twenty years and headed north. Ted found them a house in the Magnolia district and the family settled in.



It didn't take long for Hope to find a new restaurant location. With a spectacular view of Lake Washington, the building had started out life as an Italian restaurant. It didn't take much to give it a Mexican look. It already had a round domed dining room and stuccoed archways. The Mediterranean colors worked too. Hope was supervising an extensive kitchen remodel and a redecorating effort.

She insisted on building an outdoor patio overlooking the lake. Ted questioned the wisdom of investing in an area that would only get used a couple of months in the summer. No one was going to want to dine *al fresco* during Seattle's interminable drizzly winter.

Chris agreed with Hope. During the two months of summer Seattleites flock to anyplace where they could sit outside, especially since she had a view of the lake.

"It's about time you showed up, *hermano*," the short, dark beauty called out as Ted came into the entry way. She was dressed in jeans and a scrungy old Cal State LA T-shirt. Her shiny black hair was tied back in a long pony tail and covered in a red, white and green bandana.

"Sorry, I got caught up in stuff and forgot." Ted pulled off his light jacket and hung it on the coat rack. "What can I do to help?"

"I was going to have you hang the light fixtures," Hope said. "But I found someone taller for that job." She pointed to the dining room where the tall, blond-haired Chris Hardwick straddled a step ladder while he wired a black wrought iron chandelier to the ceiling.

"How'd you rope ol' Chris into working for you?" Ted asked. "I thought he'd be so busy with his new job that he'd never get a free minute."

"He brought me lunch and I just kinda drafted him. Look what followed me home, can I keep it?"

"Hey *'mano*," Chris shouted from the dining room. "It's about time you showed up."

"Hey, yourself. How come you're doin' my job?"

"Well, Hope needed someone actually tall enough to reach the ceiling." Chris broke into a huge grin.

The Mutt and Jeff height difference between the two friends had been a joking point since their freshman year at the University of Washington.

“Maybe Hope can find me a job that actually takes some skill,” Ted rejoined. “Any dope off the street can hang lights.”

Ted was his father’s son. Put a tool in his hand and he could fix anything. Hope soon had him hooking up the new broiler and stove in the remodeled kitchen.

“*Oye chico,*” Ted said to one of Hope’s workers, “*¿Dónde está una llave iglesia?*”

“*Aquí,*” the young man replied, handing Ted a crescent wrench.

Hope found a Mexican-American contractor to do the remodel and all of his crew were Latinos. More Spanish was spoken on the job than English.

“Have you reported to work yet with Katrina?” Hope asked.

“I’ve checked in,” Ted said. “But I haven’t really started any cases yet.”

Ted worked for Katrina Flaherty, a former police woman turned PI. He left her employ after the Millennium Systems case to work for his father for five years, but now that he was back in Seattle, he was back at Flaherty & Associates.

“I’m supposed to move into Jeff’s office,” Ted went on, “but somehow, it just doesn’t feel right.”

Jonathon Jefferson was Katrina’s partner who was killed while capturing a drug dealer in Mexico.

“She wants me to be a full partner, but I don’t quite feel like I belong yet.”

“Cat’s good people.” Hope pointed her dripping paint brush at him. “You’ll be just fine. Jeff would want you to have his office.”

Ted, Hope and Chris labored into the night, long after the work crew knocked off for the day. By the time they called it quits, Ted was exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to return to his Capitol Hill apartment and crawl between the sheets.