

Chapter 3

God damned traffic. Dick Randall pulled his Ford Excursion SUV into the parking lot surrounding the Beach Hut Espresso stand off of Evergreen Way in Everett, Washington at least a half hour after he planned. He had to drive the fifteen miles north from Seattle in excruciating traffic, to get to his top grossing espresso stand.

The whole metropolitan area was littered with coffee stands. You couldn't turn around without bumping into one. These damned Seattleites ran on coffee. You draw blood from them and you'd probably get French Roast.

He had thought about it long and hard. He got the idea while he was in Vegas. Why not bring a little Vegas to Seattle?

He needed to find a way to differentiate his coffee huts from every other coffee shack on the drag. They all had some kind of gimmick. There was the Buckin' Bronco chain. Their baristas dressed up like cowboys and cowgirls. Why not a little T&A? Nothing sells like sex.

So, the Beach Hut was born. It started out innocent enough. His girls wore bikinis to work. The girls themselves found ways to increase their tips and his clientele. Dick was doing a land-office business.

The sign, with a voluptuous girl in a bikini lounging on a sandy beach under a palm tree matched the logo painted on the doors of his SUV.

It was early morning and a line of seven cars filled the lot around the stand. As each car got their coffee and pulled away, another, driven by a sleepy looking man, pulled off the highway and joined the queue.

"Morning girls," Dick said as he opened the door to the stand and stepped in.

"Dickie," Judy Wise cried and gave him a big hug.

Dick checked Judy out. She was dressed, if you could call it that, in a red lace Teddy that left little to the imagination. Dick smiled at the memory of playing with those massive tits. He gave her a little pat on the butt. Life was good.

“How was business yesterday?” Dick asked.

“Not bad.” Judy was the lead barista at the Evergreen Way stand. “We made your minimum.”

Dick paid his girls minimum wage. Why not? With the tips they made, they were making twice as much as a school teacher. He required that they deposit at least three hundred dollars a day into the stand’s bank account to cover expenses. After that, he split the take with his girls fifty-fifty. None of his stands ever had a problem making his minimum.

While Dick and Judy talked, two other scantily clad women made coffee drinks at lightning speed as cars pulled up to the drive-in windows on each side of the stand.

“I’m thinking about doing some advertising,” he said. “They say it pays to advertise if you’ve got a good product.”

The girls laughed.

“I had an idea for you.” Judy put down the stainless steel measuring cup and turned to her boss. “I was thinking about running a promotion on Tuesdays, you know, to pick up business on a slow day.”

“Uh-huh.” Dick picked up the red notebook that each of his stands kept with a record of daily receipts and expenses.

“You could show a little enthusiasm,” Judy pouted.

“Okay, what you got?” he asked.

“Tassel Tuesdays.” Judy stood with her feet planted wide, hands on hips and smiled at him.

“Tassel Tuesdays?”

“Yeah, all the girls would wear G-strings and pasties. I tried it last Tuesday and by the end of the day, I had a line down the side of the street.”

“Hmmm . . . not a bad idea.” Dick rubbed his chin. “The more you show, the more we make.”

“Hell,” Tammy cut in. “There’s other ways to make more money.”

Tammy was very young. Her slim body wasn’t exactly Playboy material, but she had that wild-child-lost-little-girl look in her eyes. She wore a tiny plaid skirt with saddle shoes and thigh high nylons and a push-up bra with red lace trim. Her brown hair was pulled back into pig-tails and she wore thick rimmed black glasses. Dick knew that middle aged men lined up to try to win her affection.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

“I have a special menu for when it’s not busy,” Tammy replied.

She reached under the counter and pulled out a hand written placard. It said:

Latte	\$3.50
Capucino	\$3.50
Special Latte (hold the topping)	\$25.00
Hot buttered bun	\$50.00

“I like the pricing,” Dick said. “What’s the gimmick?”

“Hold the topping means I take off my bra to make their coffee.” Tammy gave Dick her wild-child smile. “If they want the hot buttered bun, I climb up on the counter, drop my panties and expose myself.”

“You know that lewd acts are illegal. Remember that you signed an agreement when we hired you not to perform any lewd acts,” Dick said. He winked and they all laughed.

“The last thing we need is the Law coming down on us,” Judy said. “We already have the church ladies picketing us and going to the City Council to get us shut down. I don’t know about you, but I need this job.”

“I had another idea,” Judy said.

“Yes,” Dick said.

“How about Chippendales?” She smiled a dirty smile at Dick. “We could get a lot of bored housewives in here if we had one window with some hung guy in a banana hammock and the other with Miss Sweetness over there.” She pointed towards Tammy.

“Hmm . . . that’s an interesting idea. I’ll do some thinking on it.”

“Hey, can I get a little help here?” Sherry asked. “I’ve got a line down the street.”

Sherry was a pretty blonde in her mid-thirties dressed in a Captain America red, white and blue bikini. *She looks damned good in a bikini, Dick thought, despite her age.*

“You know,” she said, “we’ve still got a business to run.”

Tammy turned back to her espresso machine and brewed up a cappuccino for the young man in the yellow Mustang convertible.

While Tammy and Sherry’s hands flew around their work stations, Judy restocked their supplies.

“How’s your boy doing?” Dick asked Sherry.

She stopped and turned to him.

“You know, he has good days and bad days.”

“Not getting any better, huh?”

“I talked to the school counselor. She says that I need to get Tommy special help.”

“What kind of help?” Judy asked.

“She says Tommy has ADHD. He can’t sit still in the classroom. He’s always disrupting class so the other kids can’t learn. They want to pull him out of the school if I don’t get him counseling and fill him full of drugs.”

“I can relate,” Dick said. “I never liked school much myself.”

“I can’t afford it. I’ve found a child psychologist that charges on a sliding scale, but still with that cost and the drugs, I won’t be able to pay the rent.”

Dick stared into the red notebook for a moment. What the hell. Sherry was one of his best producers.

“Take it easy, Sher. Maybe I can help. Give me a call when you get off work. We’ll see what we can work out.”

Sherry dropped her spoon and threw a big hug around Dick’s neck. “Oh, thank you. Thank you. I knew you would help. Judy said all I needed to do was ask. You have such a good heart.”

The grand opening of the *Nuevo Chaparral* was a big deal. Hope and Mama had done an exquisite job of remodeling the old building. The slightly pink stucco walls with fresco murals and brightly colored Puebla tiles screamed “Old Mexico.”

Rustic handmade tables and chairs were covered in bright Mexican colors. Oil paintings of Spanish dons and señoritas graced the walls, alongside blown-up photos of Mexican revolutionaries.

From the outside, the building resembled the *La Capilla de la Virgen de Guadalupe*, the chapel of the Virgin on the outskirts of Mexico City. In the center of the building was a round dining room with a windowed dome, exactly like the chapel. Rooms extended east toward Lake Union and north from the rotunda. The entryway was in the north wing; with some dining space and the bar with eight big screen TV’s. Ted made sure that they would have all the NFL and college games available. The east wing was all dining, with floor to ceiling windows that opened unto a stucco-walled deck. The east room and the deck had an amazing view of Lake Union.

The Higuera family had lots of experience in running an up-scale Mexican restaurant, but the Hardwick family provided the connections.

Harry invited the mayor and the chief of police to the big opening party. The place was lousy with judges and lawyers. Two of the Nordstrom family munched on *antojitos* at the bar. Harry held court in the circular dining room with the CEO of PACCAR, the president of Starbucks and the owners of the largest jewelry chain in the northwest.

Catrina invited Allison Clarke, the CEO of Millennium Systems, the largest computer company in the world. Allison brought friends from Microsoft, Intel, Adobe Systems, Amazon and many of Seattle's other high-tech companies.

The crowning glory though was Ted's old University of Washington team mate. Germaine Washington, fresh off a season as the NFL's MVP and sporting a nifty new Superbowl ring, was the belle of the ball. Germaine dragged his entire offensive line, as well as his quarterback, the man who could be elected King of Seattle on one ballot, to the party.

"Hey man," Germaine poked Ted in the ribs with his elbow, "You didn't tell me your sister was H-O-T." He pointed towards Hope with his champagne glass.

Hope was decked out for the event. She wore a low-cut peasant blouse with a brightly colored Mexican skirt and red cowboy boots. Gold earrings dangled next to her head, to be matched by the lavish gold necklace. Her silky black hair was braided into giant loops on each side of her head.

"You like, huh?" Ted asked. "Well you better get in line. I have a feeling that her dance card is filling up."

Mama came through the swinging doors from the kitchen. She was still dressed from head to foot in black, but she was a striking woman. Short like her daughter, she also had deep dark pools for eyes and lustrous black hair.

As Mama came into the dining room, Allison Clarke descended on her.

"Mrs. Higuera, It's so nice to meet you. I'm Allison Clarke." The petite brunette extended her hand to Mama.

“Thank you, and please call me Mama.” Mama shook Ms. Clarke’s hand. “Everyone does.”

“I know your son well,” Allison said. “He got me out of some very deep trouble a few years ago. I owe him a lot.”

“Teddy, he’s a fine boy.” Mama still had her heavy Spanish accent. “Where ees he? Have you seen him?”

“Oh, he was hanging out with some football players.” Allison put her glass of sangria down and took both of Mama’s hands. “I want to tell you how very sorry I am about your husband. Ted told me a lot about him. He sounded like a fine man.”

Mama wiped a tear from her eye. “He was my life.”

“Well, I hope you adjust to your new home. I wish you all the happiness that having family around you can bring.”

“Thank you. My middle son, Guillermo, he stayed in LA. He wants to own a mechanic shop. He’s working with my brother, Ernesto, een his shop. Ernesto is reelly old-fashioned. He only has daughters, so he theenks he should leave his business to Guillermo, even though his daughter, Celli, ees twice the mechanic that Guillermo ees.”

“The world still has a long way to go when it comes to chauvinism.” Allison put her arm around Mama’s shoulder. “Come with me, I want to introduce you to some people who will be important customers for you.” She waved at the mousy looking middle aged man in wire-framed glasses talking to a heavy set pale looking man next to the windows. “Bill, Paul, I want to introduce you to Mama.”

Ted broke away from his football friends and wandered out onto the deck. The early September evening was cool and clear. He set his bottle of Corona down on a table and looked out over the lake. A fleet of small sailboats vied for the lead in a race below him.

Maria would like this. He couldn't get her out of his mind. There was something about her that just clicked with him. Why had she disappeared? Was she running from him? He would have sworn that she felt the same attraction he did. So why had she run away?

Chris felt warm hands wrap around his waist. He looked over his shoulder and saw the top of a black head.

"Your party looks like a success."

"Mmmm . . ." Hope nestled her head into Chris's shoulder blades. "Everybody who is anybody in Seattle is here. How did your dad manage to get them all here?"

Chris took Hope's hands in his and pulled her around in front of him. "He has connections. He's been an important man in Seattle for a long time. He has a lot of markers out. When he calls, people come running."

"I saw the food critic from the Seattle Times a minute ago," Hope said, "but I was too embarrassed to talk to her."

"C'mon. Let me introduce you." Chris led her by the hand towards the outdoor deck.

"Pru," Chris called across the deck. "I want to introduce you to our hostess, Esperaza Higuera."

The dark haired woman reached for Hope's hand. "Very nice, Ms. Higuera. I'm really impressed."

"Thank you. It took a lot of hard work from everybody. And call me Hope, everyone does."

"Okay Hope." Prudence Kilgore picked up a menu from the table in front of her. "I'm surprised at how young you are, to be running a nice establishment like this."

"My father was a cook for twenty years for a restaurant in LA. When he won the lottery, he bought the restaurant. My brother, Ted, helped transform it into one of LA's top spots. I just happened to inherit the family business." Hope sipped delicately at her sangria. It was so sweet and refreshing; it was easy forget what a kick it packed. No sense in getting soused at her party. This was business.

“Chris told me about your father. I’m really sorry. I’m glad to have you here in Seattle though. Your menu is really innovative.”

“Thank you. I wanted to bring a touch of authentic Mexican cuisine to the northwest. Most of what we have here in America is California-style Mexican food. I wanted to introduce Seattleites to what they’d find if they went to Mexico City.”

Chris stood and watched the two women talk. The tall food critic was about as different from the short Mexican-American girl as you could get. She came from a good family and went to the best schools. Hope had come up through the school of hard knocks in the *barrios* of East LA.

“How do you know Chris?” Hope asked.

“We go way back,” Prudence said. “I used to baby sit for him when I was a teenager.”

September can be a glorious month in Seattle. After a week of rain, the sun returned and the leaves turned brilliant reds and yellows. The days were short, the nights cool and Ted could feel football in the air.

After several horrible seasons, his Huskies had a new head coach and things were turning around. He was looking forward to seeing them in a bowl game come December.

And the Seahawks. Man oh man. The Seahawks. After their Super Bowl season, they were on top of the world.

As Ted put the finishing touches on a bowl of guacamole, he reflected back on the last couple of months. Mexico can be damned hot in the summer. Ted had spent the better part of two months combing the blazing desserts and coastal resort towns looking for Maria. She had disappeared without a trace. He was glad to be back in the coolness of the Northwest, but he mourned his fruitless search.

He often thought of what could have been. In his melancholy, he could picture Bogey saying, "We'll always have Mexico City."

Ted shook his head and pulled the tray of nachos from the oven.

"Kick off in five minutes," Chris yelled from the living room.

"How's your beer?" Ted asked.

He looked through the pass through to see his sister snuggled up on the sofa with his best friend. How did he feel about that? *What would Papa think? Chris was his other half. He would put his life on the line for him, but his sister? They would definitely need to work out some ground rules.*

He heard a deep, loud bark from the hallway. *What the hell?*

Oscar, Ted's somewhat grumpy Burmese cat who had been cuddled up on the breakfast bar supervising Ted's cooking, sprang from his comfy spot and flew through the apartment. He bounded off the recliner, ricocheted off of Hope's head and flew to the top shelf of the book case.

"EEEEEE," Hope screamed, grabbing for her hair.

The door bell rang.

Ted took the three steps to the door and opened it.

A black and white monster awaited. As Ted opened the door, it rose up on its hind legs and put two giant bear-sized paws on Ted's shoulders. Ted stared up into the biggest mouth he had ever seen.

The giant creature emitted a happy bark and drool slopped down onto Ted's face.

"What the hell?"

"Where did the Great Dane come from?" Hope asked.

Ted's heart rate rapidly approached escape velocity.

"Popo, down."

Ted heard the familiar voice.

"I see you've met Teddy."

Ted pulled the paws off of his shoulders and the giant dog dropped back down on all fours. Ted was amazed at how calm the big beast was.

“Mr. Popo likes to do that,” Maria said. “He loves to greet strangers that way.”

“What the hell . . .” Ted froze as he checked out the tall redhead. He felt like he was in some kind of surrealistic Bergman movie. He’d spent the whole summer looking for Maria, and now here she was on his door step.

“Maria.” Ted couldn’t think of anything else to say. He’d been searching for her for so long he was shocked to see her.

“How? What are you doing here?” His mind finally started to turn over. He came out of his trance. He grabbed her off her feet and swung her around the hallway.

Maria hung on for all she was worth. She pulled him close and buried her face in his neck.

Ted pulled her head free and planted a huge kiss on her lips.

“How . . . how did you find me?” Had she been looking for him too?

“Mr. Higuera, you’re an easy man to track down. All I had to do was go to Catrina’s Web site. I gave her a call and she gave me your address.”

“She knew? And she didn’t tell me.” Ted lowered Maria back to the floor. “That gal can sure keep a secret. But, what are you doing here?”

“I’m in Seattle now,” she managed to whisper, coming up for air. “I didn’t know how you’d feel about it. I really needed to tell you this in person. I got an exchange professorship at the University of Washington. I’m going to be teaching Spanish and Anthropology for a year.”

“You’re here? For a year?”

“Yes, I managed to find a little house in the U. District. It has a nice fenced yard and a doggie door. It’s perfect for Popo. He can sit around the house all day while I’m at school, then we’re only a few blocks from the dog park for when I get home.”

The thought of the giant dog brought Ted's mind back to reality. How could she manage to control such a huge beast?

"He must weigh what? At least a hundred and twenty pounds," Ted said.

"Closer to one ninety," Maria replied. She reached down and patted Popo's head. "Ted, I'd like you to meet my best friend and soul-mate, Popocatépetl." Popo reached over and sniffed at Ted.

Ted checked out the giant dog. Its back was even with the Ted's hip, its massive head came up to his rib cage. The dog was white with black patches all over him. His tall, spiky ears moved constantly like some alien's antennae.

Hijo de dios, Ted thought, *I sure wouldn't want to get on his bad side*. Then he thought about *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. *This dog could kill you without a second thought*.

"He's a creampuff," Maria said. "I named him after a Mexican legend."

"Ah . . . yeah, I remember Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl."

"Who?" Hope had been eavesdropping.

"Popocatépetl was an Aztec warrior," Maria said. "He went off to battle and word came back to Iztaccíhuatl that he had been killed. She refused to eat or drink and eventually fell into a deep sleep."

Ted took Maria's hand and pulled her into his apartment. The big dog followed.

"When Popo returned to Tenochtitlan, he found her sleeping and carried her up to the mountains to ask the gods to wake her. They took pity on the couple and transformed them into two mountains so that they could be together for eternity. Those mountains can still be seen from Mexico City today."

"I can think of better ways to be together for eternity than by being a mountain," Hope said.

"Hope." Maria rushed to Ted's sister and took her in her arms. "It's so good to see you again."

Chris was still transfixed by the football game. The Golden Bears kicked off and the Huskies return man darted in and out of defenders for a fifty-yard return.

Then a giant snout poked itself into Chris's field of vision.

"What???" Chris jumped and nearly dropped his beer.

A huge black and white head was inches from his face. He could hear the sniffing as the dog checked him out. The dog's nose crossed Chris's face from left to right and his eyes followed. Chris held his breath

Was this a threat? Would the big dog attack?

Popo made up his mind. He walked casually past Chris and backed up onto the couch next to him, with his hind end on the couch and his feet on the floor.

"Holly crap," Chris said, patting the black and white monster. "Where'd the giant dog come from?"

Ted picked up his Corona and took a deep sip. *Maybe God does answer your prayers.*