

# Redemptions WARRIOR

JENNIFER  
MORSE

WILLIAM  
MORTIMER

# Redemption's Warrior

By

Jennifer Morse and William Mortimer

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE KILO

Do you believe in beneficence? Can you fathom a goodness requiring you to create acts of power and truth that resonate out into the world forming waves of intention where the impossible encounters the possible?

Redemption's Warrior is the story of Christopher Marcos and his journey into beneficence and beyond. His transformation begins in the shadows of deceit, betrayal and violence.

Stars fade as light edges the horizon. Dawn of Christopher's eighteenth birthday, to celebrate, he's driving his restored Chevy to Tijuana, Mexico. His errand is a journey to the Tuck and Roll upholstery shop. His Chevy will have a new interior before afternoon. Tonight friends and family will gather. Votive candles in glass jars will sparkle and light each guest's path to the front door. Lights already strung through the rafters of the back porch will twinkle. *The barbeque...* Christopher's mouth waters in anticipation.

His nagging worry: His parents don't know what he's up to. *Should I have left a note?* No, he decides. If no one knows the errand no one can discourage him. He'll be back before his party. The Chevy's wicked interior something to celebrate. Pushing the uneasiness to the back of his mind, Christopher's hands squeeze the steering wheel. Palms flatten pounding out a rhythm. This is his first trip across the border solo *I need to focus. Stay focused.*

Master Jojo's words echo across time, "Focus Christopher! Focus a resource of mastery. No one can take it away from you."

Visible through the wind shield, Christopher watches stars withdraw, light expands. Night recedes. For a fleeting moment they blend and balance. The world highlighted in sunrise, his Chevy drops into the curve. He loves how it hugs the road. Together, he and his Dad have worked on this car since he was thirteen. Accelerating onto Interstate 5 he reaches into the cooler gripping a thick molasses cookie, dusted in sugar, rich. Christopher closes his eyes for one inhale of appreciation. Looking down he sees sugar and crumbs covering his shirt. He brushes off white sugar from his blue shirt and reaches for another cookie.

The International Border is surprisingly free of traffic. He's waved through one of the five lanes designated "nothing to declare." Slowing down through the tourist area, friendly vendor's wave as his shiny car passes their booths. Further on, the road deteriorates. Garbage cans overflow. Woman bent with fatigue hang laundry on lines strung between houses patched with cardboard. They glare as his car passes. Old men leaning back on front porch chairs scowl behind half closed eyes.

A group of kids race after his car throwing stones and cans. They yell, "Go home *gringo!*" Punching the accelerator the Chevy leaps forward. Out of range of the missiles Christopher slows once again to navigate the potholes. The Chevy chugs up the hill, its growl subdued. His car is too

bright in this impoverished landscape, Christopher sinks deep into the seat. Catching himself he sits up straight. He will not shrink.

The rumble of the modified camshaft and dual exhaust vibrates off the asphalt announcing the car's muscle. The Chevy's power music to Christopher's ears he never tires of hearing.

At the top of the mesa he finds the warehouse and the sign: Tijuana Tuck and Roll. He has arrived. Anxiety and excitement stream through his body vying for his attention. *I should have left a note.*

Once the tuck and roll is installed, he imagines his Dad running his hands over the smooth leather and nodding. He can picture the smile they will share.

In stark sunlight bins overflowing are sentinels guarding the three garage bays. Women sit at sewing machines stitching tubes of leather. Teams of men rip out old upholstery and staple in rolled leather. Christopher parks as directed in the empty bay. Circling the car he pats the hood before walking through the door marked Office. Sweat heavy with bacteria and glue bombard him, a toxic perfume.

He stands behind two surfers with sun bleached hair paying the owner. They are peeling money, overflowing, into the man's hands. The tallest blond says, "Thanks for the smoke. It helped pass the time."

As the surfers turn to leave, Christopher reads their red rimmed eyes. *These guys look like dirty pennies.*

He spent too many years fleeing gangs. Under the influence of drugs gangs used violence to intimidate, steal, and silence. Whatever the conflict drugs and violence was their solution. As a boy he watched his small neighborhood, collapse under the strain of thefts, drugs and violence.

In high school united with dojo buddies they formed a patrol. They freed the neighborhood shops and streets of drugs and violence.

Watching the surfers climb into their black van he glimpses through the open door *pale blue leather, flawless.*

Turning back to the counter, Christopher swallows hard. The owner is bordered in a grainy black haze. The man pounds his fist on the worktop. "Hey *gringo!* You have an appointment? *Dinero?*"

Christopher spots a skunk wrapping the man's neck. It has glossy black hair, two white stripes. Front paws have long, arching, dangerous nails.

"Um," Christopher's mouth goes dry. He feels too young, too vulnerable to decode the man's hostility. "Yes. I have an appointment. I wired a deposit."

The skunk's tail waves, Christopher smells skunk spray. Out of the corner of his eye a blue dragonfly darts at the door. Too much is happening. He doesn't feel safe. *Should I leave?*

Pounding the counter the owner's face darkens, "My *dinero!*" Christopher flinches. *Do I forfeit my deposit? Drive home?*

They are alone in the office. The surfers with their pale blue upholstery are gone, probably already at the border. A few blocks—but another world—away. Remembering the glimpse of blue leather, Christopher thinks *the upholstery was flawless.* Entangled in his dream, he visualizes his black and

white leather interior and hands over the remaining money.

The owner smiles, teeth stained dark with tobacco. "Leave your 'shiny car.' Come back in a couple of hours."

A lurch in his stomach and Christopher wants to be away from this man and his small office. But he will not leave his car. Through the window he watches. The Chevy is surrounded by a hive of men buzzing around the seats, material flying. Sitting at the sewing machine a woman folds black and white leather. It disappears between her fingers, reappearing as perfect rolls. Christopher sighs with relief.

The redeeming feature of the dirty office is a stack of hot rod magazines. Making eye contact with the owner he says, "I'll wait here until my car is done." Picking up a magazine, it remains unopened. His attention is riveted on his car as he studies the transformation of his Chevy's interior.

Out of the corner of his eye he senses movement. The owner is dangling a shrink wrapped bag of marijuana. Christopher is stunned. The man yells, "Hey *gringo!* Would you like to buy a kilo of dye-no-mite?"

*Is he crazy?* Golden tipped buds are visible across the room through the clear plastic. *A kilo!* Looking the skunk straight in the eye Christopher says, "No thanks, man." He pats empty pockets. "I only have money for gas."

Face flushing, the skunk tail waves perfuming the air. Replacing the kilo under the work table the owner calls out, "Your loss, *hombre.* It's sweet stuff."

A line of sweat trickles down Christopher's back. He feels the man's menace. As if he is the bull's eye of a target. The man's aggression is sticky and smelly. Christopher longs for a shower. If his car wasn't torn up he'd get in, right this minute. He'd drive down the hill back through the tourist market place. Crossing the border he'd never come back to Mexico. He's seen the true face of Mexico's poverty. He's seen their hatred for a *gringo* in their midst. He will never return. Sitting in the grimy office he waits for his car's interior installation to be complete. Every muscle in his body aches.

• • •

Christopher exhales pure relief. The installation of tuck and roll upholstery complete he slides behind the Chevy's wheel. Alternating white and black leather, he runs his hands over the seats. They are smooth to his touch. He sniffs the rich odor, elated. His relief settles in his gut now the errand is complete.

The Chevy responds eagerly as he maneuvers the car down the hill. Driving the bumpy road his thoughts track to his party. It will be crowded with relatives and friends. His Filipino dad will make *lumpia*. In a moment of reverie Christopher imagines wrapping the Filipino burrito, stuffed with pork, rice and sweet sauce. He loves the ritual of rolling the ingredients. Eating, the flavors and textures blend and the sweet sauce will spill out the corner of his mouth pooling at his chin until he wipes it off.

His mom will make challah. Dojo buddies will show up for the food! Shop owners serviced by Iron Fist Security will stop by. His excitement builds while hands beat a rhythm on the steering wheel. The soft leather interior, only one word describes the color and texture, *flawless*. Christopher's happiness soars.

At first glance he doesn't notice the faded Buick pulling up beside his Chevy. Lights flash. The driver presses a badge to the glass pane. Pointing to the side of the road, he gestures Christopher to pull over.

Squeezing the steering wheel, his anxiety surges, and Christopher mutters, "What the.....?"

When the Chevy and Buick are parked, a big bellied cop followed by his thin partner approach. Gauging his options, stalling for time, Christopher offers, "Do you need to see my passport?"

Standing just behind the driver door the officer peers in, and says, "Step outside *Senor*. Keep your hands visible."

Christopher cannot read the micro-indicators, the small muscles of eyes, covered by the man's mirrored sunglasses. He repeats, "Do you need to see my passport?"

Before he can say another word the car door flies open. The oversized cop grabs the front of his shirt and wrenches him out of the car. Christopher stumbles. The big bellied officer steps to the side. The thin cop blindsides him with a club, slamming him below his buttocks. Christopher looks over his shoulder. Theirs is a well-practiced step in the dance of detainment.

In a flash of neon blue the dragonfly appears. Within the dragonfly's light Christopher sees the vicious pleasure of a man who enjoys inflicting pain. Gravity catches up with him. The final third of his fall plunges him face first into the dusty road. His mouth fills with blood. He has bitten his lip. "What's going on here?" He croaks, spitting dirt and blood out of his mouth.

The first cop shoves his foot into the small of Christopher's back. "We have it on good authority you are smuggling drugs, *senor*...," flipping open Christopher's passport, "Marcos."

Christopher hears the terrible sound of leather ripping, followed by, "Found it Jesse. The fool *gringo* stored it in the passenger door."

Adrenalin pours through his veins, powering his muscles. As confusion tumbles into clarity Christopher jumps to his feet. "These drugs have been planted! You're working with that skunk, the upholstery man!"

Both men burst into laughter. White teeth flash at Christopher with vicious pleasure, "Stupid, *gringo*, we'll take you our hotel, the Tijuana jail. Jesse will confiscate your car for evidence... drugs are a serious crime in Mexico."

They shove Christopher into the back seat of the Buick, handcuffs attached to a metal bar. The seat is piled high with stacks of paper and empty beer cans. The car reeks of sweat and beer. While opening the driver's door of Christopher's Chevy the lean cop whistles his appreciation of the smooth leather. "Maria will love going to the movies in this car. I'll tell her 'no panties.' We need to break in the upholstery."

The oversized cop's belly jerks and bounces fueled by laughter. The sound infuriates Christopher. He grits his teeth in frustration before roaring, "I'm a United States citizen. I'll call the American Consulate and be out of jail before you can eat a *tortilla*." He prays this to be true. "And you better take care of my car!"

Ignoring him the two men continue strategizing. "With this Chevy, Tuck and roll has paid its dues. Weed and a car... We'll have to get rid of the *gringo*."

"Lose him on *Islas Tres Marias*. *El Jefe* will take him with no paperwork."

Rubbing his belly the cop nods. "Okay. He's young and strong. *El Jefe* will use his muscle. He'll owe us a favor and he can get rid of him."

Christopher hears a lighter, smells the cigarette, the Chevy's car door slams. The Glasspack Cherry Bomb mufflers rumble. Christopher feels the power vibrate in his gut. His Chevy pulls out. Christopher bends over in pain. The cop looks at him through the rear view mirror, "*Gringo*," he smiles.

The Buick pulls into traffic. The cop knows hijacking Christopher's car hurts more than the whack of his partner's baton. His laughter fills the air with black bubbles. Christopher strains to spot his car. Vanished.

Tijuana Jail stinks of hopelessness. Christopher is pushed and shoved down a narrow hallway. Hands reach through bars pulling on his clothes leaving grimy smudges. A cell door slides open. He's shoved inside. The force of the thrust so violent he crashes into the opposite wall. Rubbing his neck he yells, "I'm adding this to my list of complaints for the American Consulate."

His answer is the sound of the cell door sliding shut with a metal clank. Cell mates shuffle to the end furthest from Christopher. He drops to the floor heedless of the grime. Envisioning flashes of the party, he can see friends arriving and laughter building. The back yard brimming with hanging lights, the barbeque stoked and smoking. His Dad smiling, a beer in one hand while turning the sizzling meat. His Mom starting to look at the clock wonders when he will arrive. The scene crushes him. He hopes, he prays, they enjoy a good meal before worry of his whereabouts sets in.

Looking back he can see telling no one of his errand was a mistake. He'd been proud taking a trip over the border. Wanting to prove himself, he made a rookie error. Now his parents will pay the price for his choice.

Trying not to think what might be on the floor and walls he leans back against the bumpy surface. Grime layered with despair coats his skin and clothes. The stench clinging to his head blooms into a pounding headache.

He longs to run free pounding down the street. In the twilight he would sprint the endless blocks until he reached the beach. Tearing off clothes, rubbing himself with crusty sand, he'd rub and rub until every pore was purified. Only then would he enter the cool water, the ocean with its own wilderness, dangers and freedoms.

But he cannot flee. He's stuck in this smelly dungeon imagining his mother and father looking at

each other, scared out of their minds. Wondering, has their only son has disappeared on his eighteenth birthday? He closes his eyes, seared with the images.

Night in the Tijuana Jail is noisy with whispered confessions, mumbled prayers, shouts and threats, cries of pain. As the cell door slides open Christopher feels the reverberation in his gut. He knows they have come for him. He was never arrested. There is no record of charges against him or documentation taking him into custody. Too late he finds freedoms and due process in the United States do not exist in Mexico. There is no phone call allotted him. In the periphery of his sight, awash in florescent blue the little dragonfly darts around him. Fear has made his mouth dry as dust. His skin pulses with each beat of his heart. Four guards escort him, front back and sides.

Outside, hidden in shadows created by floodlights, a waiting van is parked. Not dawn yet. He guesses the time just before three in the morning. In a surge of vivid clarity, lodged between one heartbeat and the next, Christopher realizes trapped in the van he'll have no authority over his future. This is his moment to escape. He will never see his car again but he'll be alive, home.

Leveraging his body between captors on each side, he swings his feet off the ground pushing. He lands a solid kick to the back of the jailor leading the way. The man stumbles crashing into the exterior wall. The guards on each side of him tighten their grip. He breaks one with an upper cut followed by an elbow to the chin. Stomping on the foot of the second guard with his now free hands he pulls the guard toward him. Christopher crashes his knee into the man's groin.

The guard trailing behind races forward. Christopher steps aside and pushes. The man face plants landing on his belly skidding to a stop. A quick assessment before sprinting finds the first guard regaining his balance. Face a mask of contorted rage he slams a nightstick into Christopher's gut. A second strike crashes down on Christopher's head. The angle breaks open his eyebrow, cutting flesh to the bone. Blood pouring down his face obscures his vision.

Christopher falls to the ground. Curled tight against the kicks, inches from the ground, he sees the blue dragonfly spiraling down a faded version of its florescent self.

## CHAPTER TWO

### JUANITA

Rebellious, Juanita pushes back long strands of hair. Her father chugs into the Mazatlan harbor while she scrubs the boat's galley. Throwing the water overboard, exhaustion clouds her view. Auras of the *putas* preparing to disembark waver in front of her.

Not soon enough she will be back in the little room off the kitchen at the home of *La Currendera*. Since her mother's death she lives and apprentices to the local healer. Her childhood home is now darkened by her father's drunken binges.

Juanita ties the bow and stern lines to the dock. Jose carefully counts out the money due to each *puta*. Too young to be called woman they trudge toward the bus stop with weary steps, already tired of the world and its demands.

Jose loves his daughter, yet he lives the life of a reckless bachelor, late nights, crazy parties, morning hangovers. After his wife's passing Jose numbed his grief with alcohol and woman. Countless days and nights of drinking has become all he knows. A world twisted by grief, and soothed with distilled agave.

He cannot bear to reach out to his daughter. It could shatter him.

Last week Juanita came to him. Pale, twisting her fingers, she said, "Papa may I have Mama's gold cross? I feel so lonely. If I could wear Mama's cross it would help me feel closer to her and to you."

At the time he was annoyed. Glaring at her, his head hammering with the beat of his heart, the effect of his morning tequila had already faded. The pounding headache, cottonmouth and nausea fuel his words. He'd spoken more sharply than intended. He cringes remembering.

"No. It would not be proper for you to wear your mother's cross. The cross belongs to me. How can you be lonely when you live with *La Currendera*?"

His coldness takes Juanita's breath away.

She can remember years when her father's eyes sparkled like the sun over the ocean. Now his eyes are tinged with yellow. His voice burned dry by tequila, is a parched crackle. The years vibrant with happiness are a forgotten memory.

Juanita tries once more to reach across her loneliness. "Papa," she says "When I'm with you it feels like you are not here. Your spirit has gone wandering since Mama died. I do not see happiness in your eyes. I miss you. Come back to me Papa. I need you."

For Jose, buried in the ghosts of the past stained golden by tequila, his thoughts are murky and wet. He can only shake his head and ask, "How are your studies with *La Currendera*? When will you be able to charge for your services?"

Before she can answer he shakes his head doubtfully, "Will any man want you?" Still wagging his head he asks "Will they want you, after you are called *La Currendera*? Who will want to marry the

apprentice to the healer?”

For the first time in their conversation Jose lifts his eyes to Juanita’s face. He says, “A strange world you’ve chosen.”

Juanita wants to shout, “You talk about my strange world? Your world revolves around prostitution. You poison yourself with tequila. What would Mama say if she could see you now?”

Instead she turns away. Her father’s question lingers, “Will any man want you?”

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At *La Currandera’s* Juanita learns her belly is filled with miles of sensors. They are her antennae to truth. Her teacher explains, “The belly is the home of wisdom. In the gut lives your truth. To live an authentic life you must unite your mind and heart with your belly.”

She smiles at Juanita’s confusion. Shifting the conversation she says, “What are your dreams? What acts will pull your dreams from the invisible into visible reality?” She smiles and runs a warm hand across Juanita’s shoulders. She says, “My teacher had a saying. ‘If your dreams will not grow corn in everyday life then find a new dream.’ A quaint way of saying; when you marry dreams and acts, if they are not productive in the world, if they do not benefit you and others, you must re-evaluate your priorities and goals.”

Juanita is completely confused. They started talking about the belly, wisdom, connecting the belly with mind and heart. In the blink of an eye they are talking about dreams. She shakes her head. “How can you tell if your dreams are worthwhile?”

*La Currandera* shrugs. “What does it matter?”

Juanita’s eyes widen in distress. “Didn’t you just say dreams must grow corn?”

Stirring the pot on the stove *La Currandera* quietly chants a prayer. Finished she claps her hands. Looking at Juanita she inquires, “Have you finished chores?”

Juanita giggles. “Since I have come to live with you people ask me what you teach. They think my time filled with visions and magic. I tell them ‘no’ I clean the floor and find ways to make life run smoothly.”

“Yes,” *La Currandera* continues to stir the pot of herbs and water that will become a tonic for vitality. She says, “True power is your ability to create goodness, beauty in your life and for others. Go forward with faith in a greater goodness, Juanita. Dreams, acts, faith in goodness these are the words of power that will sculpt your life. In this way all dreams are variations of the one dream of wellness and beauty.”

Walking in the gardens Juanita repeats to herself, “Words of power: with words of power I shape my dreams.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “I dream of a life shared with a loving husband and children. I dream of becoming a healer. My acts, that match my dreams, will form my future.”

Beyond the flower garden where *La Currandera* sits with visitors Juanita stands among the vegetables and herbs. *Food as medicine filled with healing power.* Pulling weeds from soil wet with

the afternoon rain, she plants in her mind and heart, the one dream with infinite variations of beauty.

A small pile of weeds grows by her side. Juanita shifts her weight. Facing a new direction she continues pulling and shaking. The dirt flies free from the roots. She tosses the weed to the pile.

*La Currandera* does not approve of her father's demand Juanita crew his boat weekends. She cannot come between Juanita and her father's authority. Instead she teaches Juanita to cloak herself in prayers and power. Each time Juanita prepares to leave *La Currandera* she takes her on the journey to gather her power animal for added protection.

Tugging on a weed Juanita says "I rest in a greater good. My acts are the seeds of my dream. The seeds sprout. The Great Spirit decides the color of each flower. What does *La Currandera* call it? A greater good, united with the Great Spirit, known as Beneficence."

Later Juanita finishes the chores of the day. She sighs, "Beneficence. I love the word, Beneficence." Humming while mopping *La Currendera's* kitchen floor, the words play over and over; *dreams, acts, faith in Beneficence.*

As she works her words of power become a magical elixir. They flow down her throat, coating the miles of intestinal sensors. They soothe and strengthen her. She will no longer be defined by her father's rejection or her mother's death. She chants, *dreams, acts, Faith in Beneficence.*

## CHAPTER THREE

### ISLAS TRES MARIAS

Awakening in the van Christopher's head throbs. With each rattling breath he feels jagged edges of broken ribs grinding. *Where am I? Where is my car?* The questions circle over and over in a never ending loop. He has no idea how long he floats in this world of confusion and pain unable to hold onto reality. When the van bounces, jarring his injuries, pain drags his awareness into the rusty compartment separated from the drivers section by a metal wall. He breathes shallowly to minimize the pain. *How did I get here? Where is my car?*

The van bounces to a stop at a gas station. The driver helps Christopher to a toilet. Blood mixes in his urine. Slowly opening the bathroom door, through swollen eyes he watches the driver purchase two sodas. If he could breathe he'd make a dash for it. He swallows his frustration. Instead of handing the bottle that could be broken into a weapon the man maneuvers the glass to the side of Christopher's swollen mouth. He tips the liquid down Christopher's throat. The orange pop fizzes. Christopher greedily drinks. Back in the van, as his eyes adjust he makes out the shadow of a man huddled in the corner. They sit in silence, evaluating each other in the darkness. Christopher says, "*Habla English?*"

"Yes *amigo*," the voice heavy with weariness, "My name is Daniel." He coughs. "You are better now. You do not keep asking for your car."

"Where are we going Daniel?"

"They say only the worst go to *La Luna*," Daniel whispers. "But I know better. What did you do?"

"What do you mean? We're going to, *La Luna*, the moon?"

"*La Luna* is the name inmates have given to the federal prison *Islas Tres Marias*. But we might as well be going to the moon. I escaped for a few days. No one has ever really escaped to find freedom from *Islas Tres Marias*." Jangling his cuffs Daniel continues, "What did you do *mi amigo*? An American sent to *La Luna*, has never happened before. You'll be the only *gringo* on the island."

Christopher releases a shaky breath, "Did you say island?"

"Yes, *Islas Tres Marias* is fifty or sixty miles southwest of Mazatlan." Once again Daniel coughs. Christopher wants to do something, anything to quiet this racking cough. When he can, Daniel explains, "My cough comes from childhood. Worse with the beating... You have not answered my question. What did you do? What brings you to a Mexican Federal Prison?"

The question echoes thru him. Christopher feels wave after wave of burning indignation. Rage floods his body sweeping him into fury. Outrage scalds a swollen and bruised throat. "My car was stolen, by the police!"

"I'm falsely accused of drugs! Set up by the Tuck and Roll... skunk... I've been badly beaten... Someone needs to go to prison but it's not me."

In a voice rough with compassion Daniel says “I understand *amigo*.”

When Daniel’s cough quiets he confesses he shot a federal officer. “A man using his badge to molest my sister... he was beyond the law.” Daniel’s cuffs jangle when he waves his hands in the air. “Our confrontation ended in a struggle. His gun discharged twice.” Daniel is carried away in coughing. Bent over he tries to swallow. He cannot stop. He can’t breathe, and then mercifully the struggle passes.

Sitting upright Daniel continues, “The first bullet flew through pillows my sister had stacked on a leather bench. It traveled through the bathroom wall, exploding the ceramic bowl. That *hombre* carried a powerful gun, a Governor.

“The second bullet ripped through the cop. Guts spilled across the carpeted floor. My self-defense pleas were thrown out.”

In a quiet voice he explains, “Murder of a federal officer carries a mandatory life sentence.”

Daniel continues. Reaching for Christopher’s hand he says, “Remember no place or status can keep you safe on *La Luna*.” Daniel’s arm falls away. Christopher’s head leans against the truck panel. Eyes closed he falls into a restless sleep. Lost, irate, terrified, confused in his mind’s eye he sees Master Jojo. Sitting at attention, “You have everything you need to master each day Christopher.”

He curls tightly, arms casting his broken ribs, rolling to his side he pulls himself into the fetal position. He reviews events beginning with his drive across the border. He keeps each breath shallow to master the pain. He feels his parent’s terror. “You have everything you need to master each day, each challenge.”

When the van grinds to a stop at a dock in La Paz Christopher guesses the time around midnight. A flood light hangs on a tall light post encircled by hundreds of bugs and swiftly darting bats. From the boat a rough voice commands, “Do your business off the dock. We are many hours to Mazatlan and our stop for supplies. My guard will shoot you if you try to run or swim away.”

Hours later, huddled in a corner of the boat, Christopher agonizes over the fear his parents are suffering. The burden too much to bear he shuffles over to Daniel, “Please, tell me more about the island.”

Daniel moves to accommodate his bruises. He nods. “Okay *amigo*. Sixty miles southwest off the coast of Mexico, in the center of Hurricane Alley, are four small islands known as The Three Marias. First they were a hideout for pirates because the islands have artesian springs.”

“How did the islands become a prison?” asks Christopher.

“A deposit of salt discovered. Also discovered; an abundance of the agave plant used in producing *Tequila*. The government wanted cheap labor to harvest both salt and agave. The prison was set up in the 1930’s.”

Daniel coughs. Christopher can see the bruises of finger prints around his throat. They fall silent. He has fallen asleep when Daniel speaks again. Jerking awake, every bit of information is vital. “There are gangs who harvest the agave, others the salt, another gang does repair and maintenance. A

leader will come and meet you.

“I’ll be whipped or worse...”

Daniel’s voice falls away, his mind absorbed in the punishments awaiting him. Black circles under his eyes speak to Christopher of a raccoon. *A raccoon chews off his own foot for freedom.*

Just past dawn they chug into the Mazatlan harbor. The skipper parks next to a yacht King’s Run, San Diego, California. A woman lounges on the deck. Christopher guesses her age in her fifties. Trim and toned wearing a one piece bathing suit and matching sarong tied at her waist. Christopher inhales sharply. Is this an opportunity for help? The Captain and boat hands climb the dock to organize several pallets of supplies.

Christopher seizes the moment. Half yell, half whisper he calls, “Hey lady! I’m a United States citizen. I’m kidnapped, held hostage.” She doesn’t move. He cannot discern if she heard him. He calls out more loudly, “My name; Christopher Marcos.” Still no expression crosses her features. Christopher’s anxiety soars. His heart pounds, he’s running out of time. Boat hands have started loading supplies. “Call Rabbi Foxx the Wilshire Temple in Beverly Hills,” enunciating each word carefully he continues, “tell him to look for Christopher Marcos on *Islas Tres Marias!*”

Christopher is panting with the effort to yell without being overheard or exacerbating his injuries. Without glancing in his direction the woman pulls up her towel and leaves the deck for the stateroom. He looks at Daniel. “I think she heard me. I told her to call my mother’s rabbi.”

Daniel remains unseeing during their Mazatlan stop for supplies. He stares to the far horizon. Christopher worries. After a bout of coughing Daniel motions Christopher closer. He says, “Prisoners walk freely around the island. Don’t be fooled. The ocean provides the bars of this prison. A little town where administration lives encircled by high security fencing and guard towers. The towers are armed with machine guns and assault rifles. Surveillance cameras record entrances and exits. Guards in jeeps and on foot carry pistols and rifles. Few inmates are allowed past the gates.”

Daniel’s eyes close. His head drops. Christopher hopes he rests. In a burst of panic, he stares to make sure Daniel’s chest rises and falls. Christopher’s body slumps, chin to chest. His mouth twists. How will his family begin to search for him? Will they discover his car made a border crossing? And police will say he took a trip: Nothing to investigate. The *Tijuana* cops made no arrest. No paper trail of his transfer to *Islas Tres Marias* exists.

How many stories has he recently heard of young American men trapped in the Mexican penal system? The State Department makes only weak attempts to inquire. One man, a decorated veteran, was brought home when Fox News pulled strings behind the scenes and encouraged viewers to cancel their travel plans in Mexico. A potential crisis of their tourist economy at stake the veteran was released immediately.

Christopher happened to see an interview after the man returned home. One look at his face told the story of a broken man. He shivers at the memory, a decorated American veteran broken by Mexico’s prison.

What's the difference in Christopher's circumstance? That man kept chained to his bunk, beaten by other prisoners, did have a paper trail of his arrest. Family or friends could locate him. Lost in these endless thoughts Christopher floats, a downward spiral into hopelessness. Within the never ending horizon of the sea, time falls away. In this eternity Christopher is shattered.

The sun is high in the sky when dolphins break the surface, executing pirouettes. Even the crew shouts. Weaving in and out of the water, double flips in the air, the show continues for several minutes. Christopher listens to squeaks and grunts amidst their play. Their vibrancy, athleticism and gleaming health jolts Christopher free of despair. He's completely absorbed in the unexpected wonder. In that moment he makes a decision to search out and look for life's wonders. Watching the dolphins has provided him with a map. His first step for freedom he must to regain his health and athleticism. Within vibrancy and health he will pursue escape.

Leaning over the railing Christopher finds himself gazing into the eye of a Humpback whale. Grasping the railing he tunnels, falling, deeply into the mystery held within the whale's eye. Crazy, he's certain the whale understands his predicament. The giant surfaces spouting a spray of water and leaping forward. Taking a cleansing breath, Christopher feels liberated. *It's some kind of inexplicable spiritual magic.* In this instant he knows, *wherever beauty lives, so can I.* These wild creatures are a sign. They are a reminder of many freedoms.

Resolving to keep faith with the indecipherable bond that connects him with these animals he can hear Master Jojo's voice echo the corridors of his mind, "If you live in faith, through the bad times, you'll come out of the difficulties better than before. Practice, Christopher, is the key, in good times and bad."

"I'll live in faith."

Hard to imagine he can come out of this circumstance better than before but he pledges to stay true and keep faith with the goodness he saw reflected in the play of the dolphins. He'll trust in goodness to guide him. He has only one goal: reclaiming his freedom.

A second whale joins the first. Christopher intuitively knows they are mates. With a final flip of their enormous flukes they wave, *Hasta Luego*, diving deep.

Christopher's vow shudders through him. He will remember: *Just as whales can be hidden from sight in the depths of the sea; purpose, goodness, love can be concealed beneath the turmoil on life's surface.*

In this way he suddenly finds himself prepared for the obstacles to seizing his freedom. After eight hours of blistering sun, *Islas Tres Marias* looms in the mist.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *LA LUNA*

Hurricane Alley comes too soon for Daniel. Carved bluffs, white beaches, at first sight *Islas Tres Marias* reflects jagged cliffs, sparkling sand, a white church and a cluster of stucco buildings. In the background, beyond the church, a massive security perimeter protects the entrance to the town.

Cutting the engine, the boat drifts to the dock. A crew member climbs the ladder and catches bows and stern line securing the craft to the landing. Daniel stands, frozen. Tears run down his face. A handful of guards wait forming a straight line on the wooden pier.

In the center of the group a murky haze encircles a short man, standing legs wide and arms akimbo. Mirrored sunglasses reflect the light. His assault rifle casually loops over his shoulder. Christopher's eyes widen and fix on a coiled circle... *a bullwhip? What? Daniel meant he'd be punished with this bullwhip? It will rip him apart, leave scars, permanent scars.*

The charged moment fills Christopher's vision with chaotic shards of light. He sees sweat break out across Daniel's brow. Daniel trembles. The whip unfolds. Unanimated it lays heavy across the smooth boards of the wooden dock. Collectively the guards take an uneasy step backwards.

Watching the central man Christopher sees superimposed the thick bones, large feet, muscular neck and heavily muscled shoulders of the Spanish Fighting Bull. The gloom deepens around him. Muddled dusky streaks of aggression fly at Daniel. *The flying bolts a precursor to the whip?*

Christopher wonders, *are these men accountable? A prison isolated, in the middle of, what's it called? Hurricane Alley?*

The air transforms dense and coarse with domination. Thick strands of muddy red encircle the man. He licks his lips, savoring the impending violence. The bull leans forward, *Bien venido a casa, Daniel,* he bellows. *"Aqui ahora."*

Daniel pales beneath skin streaked red with sunburn. Circles blacken his eyes. Muscles bunched with dread, slowly he climbs the ladder. Christopher sees agile raccoon paws merging, hand over hand. "Please, *El Jefe!*" begs Daniel.

*El Jefe's* posture thickens. Like the bull, his bony head lowers. The whip arches. Meeting Daniel's chest, leather has become a blade. Cutting deep through muscle and skin Daniel's shirt falls away. Another crack and boom and the whip encircles Daniel's naked waist. Micro-bits of flesh and blood fly thru the air. Daniel buckles, falling to his knees. Christopher hears his muffled prayer, *"Dios mio! Dios mio..."*

Now laughing guards surround Daniel. The Spanish Bull grabs Daniel by the arm dragging him to a waiting jeep. "I have a special place in town for you serving the guards." The whip winds around Daniel's waist cutting, tearing muscle and skin while he stumbles forward.

Frozen with horror Christopher waits.

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