

ANTIGUA



W. SCHILDT

In 1956, when a famous early Renaissance masterpiece disappears from a museum, a worldly private detective and a naïve art historian join forces to recover the art. The trail leads them to a Nazi art collector in Central America.

Antigua

By W. Schildt

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Saint Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata

1430

Jan van Eyck

Chapter 1

The conference room air was thick with cigarette smoke. My eyes watered as I placed a cup and a saucer on the table for each person seated. The meeting was not on the calendar. I left the room without hearing any information. One of the museum guards, Maurice, who had befriended me six months earlier when I had taken the job, whispered yesterday that something was terribly wrong in the Early Renaissance galleries. I returned to the conference room with the coffee cart. Besides the top management of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the company heads that insured the artwork in the museum sat around the conference table.

“We are working to keep the information from the press. As you know, if this leaked out, our chances to acquire the Westfield Collection would be doomed,” explained John Abernathy, museum director. He had been museum director for eight years. His stated goal was to increase knowledge of the past through art and to encourage conversation for change for the better in the present and the future.

“We are so close to winning this collection. Only the museum on the West Coast is close and we, of course, are one of the most significant art museums in the States,” mused Edward Bond, museum secretary, a man of impeccable dress and manners.

The others nodded as I filled the coffee cups.

Mr. Miller, a balding, older gentleman who had winked at me when I offered to pour his coffee, said, “Our agents in the field have narrowed the search once again to that Nazi, Georg Strauss.”

Abernathy leaned forward in his chair and blew smoke. “Explain please.”

Miller waited until I poured milk into his coffee.

“Linda, please leave the room,” barked Abernathy.

I wanted to tell Dr. Abernathy that my name was Mary, but he glared so I left the coffee caddy and the room. It was almost five o’clock. I went downstairs to my desk in the basement where I catalogued slides if I wasn’t pouring coffee or filing papers. By the time I put away the boxes of slides, it would be time to punch my card into the time clock. I got my coat and wondered why I had spent six years in college to get a bachelor and a masters’ degree in art history, only to do menial tasks for my

esteemed colleagues who gave lectures on the subject that I loved, art history.

Maurice met me at the time clock. All the guards wore blue-gray suits with the museum crest on the jacket pocket, a white dress shirt and a black tie. "Mary, I think there is something wrong on the third floor. The entire Renaissance collection was blocked off this afternoon. What did you hear at the meeting?" he whispered.

"Abernathy told me to leave the room, or more like 'Linda leave the room', before I could hear anything."

"Linda? Well, at the least he sees you as a human being. He has no idea how many museum guards work here or our names. He probably calls all of us Amos or Andy under his breath." He shook his head. "I imagine he thinks that we all look the same and we are all as stupid or lazy as the two radio stars."

"Maurice, how long have you worked here?" I asked.

Maurice sighed. "So many years Mary...since before you were born. My wife tells me that I should ask for a raise, but what I make here is better than I could find anywhere else. After listening to so many docents day after day, month after month and year after year, whether

the lecture is about medieval or modern art, I feel like I could give the lecture myself.”

“I imagine how much fun the lecture would be if you gave it, Maurice. You always make me laugh. Remember last month when a sixth grade class waited for a docent? The students were sitting on the floor in front of Gilbert Stuart’s painting of George Washington. You told the children that they were all wearing something that George had never worn.”

“Ha! They guessed sneakers, Davy Crocket coonskin caps and Phillie sweatshirts.”

“When you said underpants because they hadn’t been invented, the kids’ faces turned red and they screamed with laughter.”

Maurice laughed. “Kids are fun. They will always remember that little lecture and maybe the name Stuart. After I showed them a one dollar bill and Gilbert Stuart’s painting of George printed on the money, they learned something about American History and the History of Costume.”

We clocked out and put on our winter coats. After we left by the employee door, we wished each other a good weekend and Maurice and I parted as he headed for the

bus stop and I walked to the Ben Franklin Parkway. I always peered up the many steps in front of the museum to admire its architecture. The museum had opened in 1928 and the architecture was based on a classical Greek temple with columns and bronze griffins on its roof pediments. My museum, as I liked to think of it, was one of the largest and most visited museums on earth. Even though it was a blustery February evening, I enjoyed the walk. We were still waiting for a snowstorm in the new year.

“Good evening, Miss Remington,” said the doorman as he pulled the front door open to the Remington Tower.

“Good evening, Jordon.” I smiled. My father said it was prudent to be polite to the doorman. He knew all the people in the building and more about each person’s private life than one would want.

“Why don’t you take a cab from the museum, miss? It is not a good idea to walk by yourself in the dark.”

“I sit most of the day. I enjoy the walk and there are so many people out after five o’clock it is almost like twelve o’clock noon.” Again, I smiled as he tipped his hat.

I took our private elevator to the penthouse on the eighth floor. I had lived there all my life except for the

two years I had spent at boarding school and during the summers when I escaped to the Poconos for sleep-away camp. That was part of the reason that I walked home every day. I loved the outdoors and the trees and plants even though most of them were hibernating through the long Philadelphia winter.

The buzzer sounded as the elevator doors opened, and I could hear our hi-fi cranking out Nat King Cole and his incandescent voice singing “Mona Lisa.”

“Why can’t we have a white singer? Even that Italian, Dean Martin, would be better than that Negro,” complained my father as he shouted across the room. He had no problem with our “colored” help, but he never rented apartments to nonwhite families. My mother changed the record to Dean Martin and “Memories are Made of This.”

My four nieces and nephews argued with one another as they fought over a game of Chutes and Ladders. The television set in the living room was black. Local news stories were of no interest to the children. Three years earlier much to my mother’s dismay, my father had bought the TV set. My mother worried we would become a family of non-readers with the addictive invention. My

brothers and their wives were socializing with other guests. I had forgotten that my parents were celebrating my imminent official engagement.

“Mary, you are finally home. How much longer are you going to stay at that dead-end job?” asked my brother Bill with a Manhattan in his hand. He had blonde hair and blue eyes like my mother.

“How many more times are you going to ask me that, brother? Help me off with my coat.”

“You could work for me or Jackie.”

“Just what I want, my two older brothers ordering me around all day. What job description would I have...coffee pourer or filing clerk? No thanks, I would rather have a dead-end job in the museum than listen to you and Dad fight with tenants.”

“Mother and Dad are really annoyed with you. You were expected to be home an hour ago. Walking by yourself in the city is below your station.”

“You are jealous that I am still free to do what I like.”

“Enjoy it while you can. Mr. and Mrs. Barlette and Chaz are here. Mother said that you two are announcing your wedding date tonight.”

“I haven’t agreed to a date.”

Arthur took my coat, hat and gloves and placed them in the hall closet. “Miss, can I get you a drink?” Our butler had worked for us since before I could remember. He was more of a father to me than Dad.

“No thanks, I am going to my room to freshen up. What time is supper?” Just then I saw Chaz making his way across the foyer. “Hello, Chaz.” He was three years my senior with slicked-back brown hair, brown eyes and almost six feet tall. Curiously he looked a lot like my father only a younger version. I had dragged him to the cotillion in my senior year and some of my friends thought that he was handsome. Lately I had decided that looks weren’t everything. Instead of securing a Mrs. in college, I had graduated Summa Cum Laude with a degree in Medieval and Renaissance Art. My mother approved of my major, but she had visions of me heading the volunteer society at the museum. She and my father, board members, often went to balls, galas or dinners before making donations to the museum.

“Mary, I told you to be here at five o’clock,” spit Chaz tapping his Patek Philippe. “I have other things to do tonight. Why aren’t you dressed? We need to make this official so I can leave.”

“Why didn’t you mail the ring? I could have put it on myself.”

“We have a photographer and the social editor here to write an engagement announcement for the *Evening Bulletin*. It will be in the papers on Sunday. You could have worn something more appropriate for the occasion than your boring brown tweed suit. And you know I hate all your college-girl headbands and take off those glasses. Let’s get this over with. I need a cigarette, but I hate this house’s stupid rule that limits smoking to the study.”

My mother came running to the foyer. Five years ago, my father had the penthouse redecorated in what he described as a more fitting style for the Remington’s. Louis the Fourteenth style ornate furniture replaced comfortable Traditional sofas and Duncan Phyfe chairs and tables. “Mary, quickly we must change your clothes.” She pushed me toward my bedroom. “I laid your Dior sheath on your bed. Varna, please help her.”

Varna, Arthur’s wife, had taken care of me all my life. She rarely gave her opinion, but rather told stories.

“I don’t like that dress. I look awful in pale yellow,” I complained.

“It’s so fashionable, but pale yellow is my color not yours,” agreed Varna. Her skin was a deep brown.

From my closet I grabbed a navy blue dress with a full skirt that I had bought at Wanamaker’s.

Varna checked the price tag still hanging on it. “You got yourself a real bargain, Mary.” She only addressed me as Miss Mary when my family was present.

“It was sized wrong. Anyone who wears a size 5 could not fit into it.” Sometimes Varna took me shopping when my mother was too busy. We always checked out Wanamaker’s Bargain Basement.

“Please help me with the zipper, Varna.”

“You look better in green. It accents your pale green eyes and complements your hair, but with a bargain like this, I would have bought the dress too. It fits you perfectly. I’ll get your navy blue suede pumps from the closet.”

“I’m going to wear my red kid pumps.”

“Your mother will not like that.”

“Neither will Chaz.” I smiled as I slid into the shoes and put a red headband onto my ginger-colored hair.

As I entered the living room, I held my cat’s eye gray eyeglasses in my hand. I stood next to Chaz on the raised

fireplace hearth so I would not appear short in the photo and he slipped a five-carat Cartier diamond onto my finger. I managed to smile although it certainly was not a sincere smile. My family and Chaz's family had decided our union would cement our families' grip on the real estate market in the city. Chaz's family, known as slumlords, owned buildings all over the city as did my father, but my father's real estate was high end.

Once the photographer and editor had finished and were excused, the dinner guests were guided to the dining room. Above the breakfront in the large room hung my mother's portrait painted by John Singer Sargent. My parents had commissioned the painting while they were on their Grand Tour of the Continent during their honeymoon. Painted in 1913 towards the end of his life, Singer Sargent had traded his tight brushstrokes for wide, flat splashes of color. The woman in the painting, seated on a red sofa, holding an open book, had a face with few details and it looked unfinished. She could have been anyone.

"Are you not staying for dinner, Chaz?" I asked.

"You know that on Friday nights my club meets. I do not plan to alter my activities for you. Your father is

giving us an apartment on the fifth floor as a wedding gift. I'll meet you on Tuesday morning and we can decide on the furnishings."

"I work on Tuesday."

"Take the day off." With that he got his coat and left.

The music of a Strauss waltz danced from the hi-fi in the living room. I imagined that my mother who regularly played Austrian waltzes would be more comfortable in the Gilded Age. My father spent most of his time at work and never took an interest in my brothers or me when we were children.

I adjusted my glasses as I sat next to my mother and an empty chair until one of the servers removed it and the place setting in front of it. No one seemed to care that Chaz was missing and I enjoyed the champagne with my family as they toasted my coming nuptials.

Later that night after the guests had left, my mother came into my pink bedroom. She closed the frilly curtains so the windows were covered although no one could possibly see into windows so far up from the street. "Let me get a good look at the ring." She took my hand and held it under the light on my dressing table. The five-carat emerald cut diamond with a halo of diamonds sparkled in

the light. "It is quite impressive. It is a copy of Princess Grace's engagement ring."

I took it off and put it in a shell on my dressing table. "I can't wear this to work. I am not a princess and this is too gaudy."

"Nonsense! Now that it is official, you and I will go to Madeleine's and she will measure you for a wedding gown. I made the appointment for tomorrow. As soon as we see a copy of Princess Grace's wedding gown, Madeleine can make a duplicate."

"I can't go tomorrow. I am going to Clearfield Avenue. We have rented the school gym for the day and all the neighborhood children will be there to play chess. It's the third year for our chess classic and now we have more than 76 children registered. My friends and I have been working on this project to give the children the idea that they can control their lives someday like they can plan and control the chess pieces. You decide on the silk and lace. I am sure it will be perfect."

My mother looked disappointed. "I know you are not thrilled at this union with Chaz, but in time you will learn to love him. He is pleasant looking and can be very charming. When he passes the bar and joins his father's

company as counsel, he will have an impressive title and salary. Once he has a wife, he will grow up and take things seriously.”

She helped me unzip my dress, still complaining that the yellow dress was more chic. As I put on my robe, I said, “Chaz and I have known each other for years and never once have I truly liked him. The only way he will pass the bar is for him to pay someone to take the test. He is lazy and we both know he is unfaithful. He flies to Havana every other week for fun as he calls it.”

She took my brush and pulled it through my shoulder length hair. “Mary, you are twenty-four years old. All your longtime friends are married and have at least one child. I don’t want you to become an old maid. A woman needs a husband and children. Every woman has the obligation to herself and her family to marry and to provide her country and her family with the next generation.”

My mother’s view of womanhood in my view was from the eighteenth century and her attempt to make me feel guilty was wasted. “I am quite happy as a single woman. Aunt Edna has never married and she has more fun and enjoys life more than anyone I know.”

“Edna is totally unconventional. Your father prefers that my sister not visit too often. The thought that you would become like her would put him into an early grave. The Remington family is esteemed throughout Philadelphia. We have an excellent reputation and you will not put a blemish on our name.” She finished with my hair. “I will never understand how you come to have such red hair or that you have failed to grow tall like the rest of us.”

“Aunt Edna said that your grandfather had red hair and he was not five feet tall.”

“Oh, what does she remember? I remember him as bald and dumpy.”

“She liked him especially when he would take out his false teeth and chase the two of you around the house with his teeth biting at your butts.”

My mother laughed at the memory. “He certainly enjoyed life. Tell me, what time will you return from North Philadelphia tomorrow? Maybe I can reschedule your appointment with the dressmaker.”

“I don’t want a white dress. My skin is so pale that I look like a ghost when I wear white.”

“You are impossible! You must wear white for your wedding. Any other color would suggest you are not...well...”

“I think the word you are looking for is virgin. Mother...why have you never mentioned sex? When are you planning to give me the wedding-night talk?”

“Mary, some things a lady does not mention.”

“Don’t worry. I got an “A” in biology and an “A” in health. My friends in college had porno magazines and we rated the pictures.”

“Mary, stop! This conversation is crude and only low class society would talk so.”

“Honestly Mother, one might think you are the virgin here.”

My mother stood and smoothed her robe. “Make sure that you are free by three o’clock. We will meet with Madeleine at Ira’s on Fabric Row for measurements and to check out the lace and silk for your wedding gown.”

After she closed my door, I sat before my dressing table. My reflection mirrored my thoughts. I remembered going to the movies with my friends to see “Cinderella.” We all agreed that if we had to marry, it would be for love. Now they were all housewives. I wondered if they were

still madly in love with their princes or after a few years, they had to accept even with love their lives were unfulfilling. It seemed to me that love and marriage in 1956 was more an obligation and a trap than happily ever after.

Chapter 2

Monday morning, after I had clocked in, Dr. Abernathy met me in the hall and the two of us climbed the steps to the executive conference room. Instead of serving coffee, I was to be part of the meeting. The conference room was beginning to be engulfed by smoke while most of the men puffed away as they drank their coffee.

Dr. Abernathy introduced me to the others in the room. Then to me he said, “Mary, we have been meeting all weekend. What I am about to tell you is confidential and you must agree not to talk about this with anyone outside this room.” After I nodded, he took a seat and motioned for me to do the same.

I looked at all the eyes staring at me. I preferred not to be the center of attention at any gathering.

“We have a situation here at the museum that is most upsetting. Do you remember the large groups of museum goers who visited us on Lincoln’s birthday and the week leading up February 12?”

“I remember that the museum was packed.”

He nodded and then he rested his head in his hands.

“Do you mind if I explain the problem, John?” At his nod, Edward Bond, museum secretary continued, “Once the tours were completed and all the visitors left for the day, we discovered a disaster.”

“Mary,” interrupted Abernathy, “I looked up your application to the museum. Am I correct that you have a master’s degree in art history?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, then you must be familiar with our glorious painting by Jan van Eyck, *Saint Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata*. It is one of the museum’s preeminent works.”

“Of course I know the painting. It was completed around 1430 and shows the famous incident from the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. The monk is shown kneeling by a rock as he received the stigmata of the crucified Christ on the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. Behind him rock formations are shown in great detail as well as a panoramic landscape. I have stood before the amazingly small painting many times and each time I see something new.”

“Yes, it is amazing that an artist could fit such detail into a painting five inches by six inches,” agreed Abernathy.

“The problem is that the painting has vanished from the Early Renaissance gallery. That is why we have cordoned off the whole area. Someone in the crowds leading up to February 12 must have slipped the painting from the wall and into his pocket and then carried the painting out of the museum. Last weekend the entire museum was cleaned and it is gone,” explained Harry Miller, president of the Miller International Insurance Agency. I had seen him often as he walked the halls of the museum.

I was shocked that anyone would remove a priceless work of art from the museum for personal gain, but what could these men want from me?

Next to him an athletic man much closer to my age sat and chain-smoked. “Mary, my name is Restin Hill. I am the private investigator for the insurance agency. I have been on the trail of Georg Strauss since 1949. He escaped Nazi Germany just before World War II ended. We think he took some of the paintings looted from European museums and private citizens, but we have no proof.”

“Strauss now lives in South America. Are you familiar with a self-portrait by Raphael, painted in 1500?” Dr. Abernathy asked.

“It is one of the best known paintings to have gone missing during World War II and Poland considers it to be the most important work of art taken from their country,” Mr. Hill explained.

I nodded and then smiled. “Raphael is one of my favorite High Renaissance artists. He developed an expansive style of composition which presented itself as a homogeneous and easily intelligible whole. He brought life to his subjects and the painting, to which you are referring, is a gift to the senses. Raphael’s humanizing touch gives us a beautiful, sculptured man with large eyes, a small mouth, long brown hair with a black beret on his head. Wearing a white shirt and a brown fur cape, he is seated in front of an open window with a landscape as beautiful as any da Vinci landscape.” I pushed the bridge of my glasses up on my nose.

The men in the room leaned forward in their seats as I talked. Restin Hill stopped smoking and smiled. “You certainly know Raphael’s self-portrait.”

I returned his smile, as I pushed on the bridge of my eyeglasses after they had slipped on my nose again. I realized I was perspiring.

“How do you know so much about Raphael?” asked Abernathy.

“I spent a term in Florence and Rome. My thesis was on Raphael. I fear he is overlooked because he had to share the limelight with Michelangelo and da Vinci.”

Abernathy held his chin in his hand. “Do you know anything about Memling?”

“His paintings are beautiful. The museum’s Memling, *The Virgin*, with her downcast eyes conveys such grace and delicacy. I compared one of Memling’s paintings with one of Raphael’s paintings in my thesis. As you know Memling was one of the two masters of the Low Countries. He is usually associated with Rogier van der Weyden with whom he apprenticed. Memling painted many altarpieces and set a precedent that art patrons sought. He became one of the richest people in the city of Bruges in 1480. Most of his works are religious and incorporate donor portraits. He also designed carpets, which he placed under the thrones of his Madonnas to

advertise them. His self-portrait has gone missing. Are the Nazis implicated in the theft of that painting? As I recall it was stolen sometime around 1944 from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.”

“Mary, I don’t know what to say?” Miller said. “Your knowledge of art is most amazing.”

The men smiled and asked Mr. Bond to have his secretary pour us more coffee.

Mr. Hill stubbed out his cigarette and said, “One of our agents managed to intercept a telegram from a known art thief. It was to be delivered to Gretchen Strauss, who lives with her mother on the Upper West Side in NYC. She is planning to visit her father.”

“Strauss lives in Guatemala, South America,” explained Mr. Bond.

“I believe that Guatemala is located in Central America which is actually part of North America, sir,” Mr. Hill corrected.

Bond frowned. “Wherever, they are all hellhole countries run by tin-pot dictators.”

“Anyway, Miss Strauss does not speak Spanish. Do you speak Spanish, Mary?” Dr. Abernathy asked.

“No, I speak French and a little Italian.”

“Good, we will enroll you in La Académia de Antigua. While you are conjugating verbs in your mission to learn Spanish, you will befriend Gretchen who has been enrolled in the school.”

The instructions were swirling around my head. “I am afraid I don’t understand. What do Spanish, Strauss and Guatemala have to do with me?” I asked.

“We believe the Memling and the Raphael are with Strauss and now our van Eyck is on its way to Strauss’ coffee plantation in Antigua, Guatemala. Mary, do you have a current passport?” asked Dr. Abernathy.

“We want you to gain access to Strauss’ mansion. He is known to be an ardent collector, not so much that he cares about art, but rather he likes to brag about his conquests,” explained Mr. Miller.

I was speechless. *Were they suggesting I spy?*

“We will take care of all the arrangements, your flights, the school, your accommodations, expenses and your spending money while you are in Antigua. Miss Strauss, like you, is from the social upper crust so you should have no trouble making friends with her,” stated Abernathy.

“You, Mr. Hill, will go along with Mary,” said Harry.
“You can keep an eye on her.”

“I’m not a babysitter.”

“Fine, then we will register you with the school and you will be another student. Do you remember your high school Spanish?”

“Do I look like a student?”

Harry hit his fist on the table. “You think up why it is you want to learn Spanish. You will make arrangements for yourself and Mary to leave in two weeks. This is our chance to finally catch that Nazi and get a big reward for the company.”

“You and Mary will work together on this project. You will be gone for at least two weeks or maybe two months. Everything is explained in this packet,” explained Abernathy.

With the meeting complete, I left the conference room and went along the corridor. My mind was spinning. I cracked open a hall window to breathe in fresh air with hopes it would blow away the acrid smoke smell. I was asthmatic and smoke made my breathing difficult. From the window I could see the buses lined up and unloading students waiting for their field trip to the museum.

§

I spent the day returning slides from the slide carousels to the alphabetical library. Docents used the slides in the lecture hall to explain line drawings versus the buildup of color of the Impressionist movement. Then I took the order forms and retrieved the slides that would be used the following day. Maurice ducked his head into my basement space in late afternoon.

“Did you find out what is going on?”

“Hi, Maurice, did you have a nice weekend?”

“I worked both days. I have Tuesday and Wednesday off this week.”

“Oh, yes. Well, other than pour coffee, I am not part of the conversation in the inner sanctum.”

“At least they didn’t cordon off the second floor. Visitors become quite indignant if they can’t view our Renoir collection or our Cézanne collection. They doubled the guards working in those galleries today.”

“You know that my favorite collections are in the Renaissance galleries,” I said.

“Those galleries are never as crowded as the Impressionist Galleries. It isn’t difficult to understand. Everyone is attracted to the beautiful colors and the pretty

people that Renoir and Mary Cassatt painted as opposed to the more unfamiliar darker, mostly religious paintings upstairs.”

“Maurice, I think it is closing time,” I said as I checked my watch.

“Good, my feet are killing me. I don’t know how much longer I can stand all day. See you on Thursday.”

I checked the seams in my stockings to make sure they were straight and then put on my coat, hat and gloves and grabbed my handbag before I picked up my manilla packet to head for the time clock.

Mr. Hill met me in the corridor. He had rather long, pale blonde hair that he combed to the side of his head with his hand and piercing blue eyes. “Mary, join me for a drink and we can talk about our assignment.”

“Can’t, Mr. Hill. My mother is giving a small party and I have to get home.” It was a lie, but I was hesitant with him. He was in his early thirties and I imagined he was as comfortable and maybe as manipulative with someone as young and inexperienced as me as with a lady as worldly as Marilyn Monroe.

“Please, call me Restin. We need to work on our stories as to why we want to learn Spanish. Come on, Mary. I am

willing to buy you a sumptuous supper and I am positively handsome.”

“Not to mention humble.”

He smirked. “For a redhead, you are too sensible. Okay, tomorrow we’ll go over the packet. Do you speak Spanish?”

“French and you?”

“I’m an American...English.” With that, he walked off. He was so self-assured. During the lunch hour, I worked the switchboard. All the messages I took for him were from women, that attested to the fact he was in demand. His clothing suggested he had plenty of money.

I walked several blocks along the parkway before I crossed the street and walked up the sidewalk to the Free Library of Philadelphia. It was open until 6:00. I needed to read up on Guatemala. I found two books, hoping the information was current. Even though it was February, the weather was mild so before I returned home, I sat on a bench in Rittenhouse Square. Though I had lived in the middle of Philadelphia all my life, I felt as if I was in the country when I sat in the Square. As a child, I had gone to camp every summer in the Poconos. I loved trees and the scent of the earth.

§

Later that evening curled up in bed, I opened the packet. On the cover page, a black and white photo of a sixteenth century Spanish colonial, cobblestone street looked harmless but for the cone of a volcano behind it in the distance. Like a bridge, El Arco de Santa Catalina, named in the report, connected each side of that street. Indian ladies with long braids and baskets on their heads walked in pairs. *Was the photo old?* I had studied architecture briefly to complete my art history degree. Santa Catalina intrigued me. It had a surface level charm, but what was its use? Did the residents of Guatemala, the Indian ladies, work there?

I turned to the next page which gave facts on Guatemala, a country the size of Ohio with the largest population in Central America. The Latin American City where we were to attend school, Antigua, more than 5,000 feet above sea level, was founded in 1543 as the seat of Spanish power in the region. Surrounded by three volcanos, Antigua had been leveled in 1773 by an earthquake. The city was abandoned until the mid-1800's when coffee brought new investment to the country. Many of the colonial buildings were rebuilt. With a mild

climate year-round, the city called itself, 'The land of eternal spring.' I wondered if anything else of interest had happened in Antigua.

A paragraph about the school indicated each student would have his own teacher. Classes would begin at eight o'clock and continue until noon when students would return to their host family for a two-hour siesta. At two o'clock, the second half of the day would begin and last until five o'clock. Biweekly field trips to places of interest were sponsored by the school.

I liked the idea of field trips. Conjugating verbs for hours would be deadly. A small map of Antigua was included. The city was laid out on a grid pattern with the school location circled. It was near something called the Mermaid Fountain.

The description continued. Students live with host families in the city. Host families typically do not speak English. Their houses are modest, but the families try to make their students comfortable. All meals may be taken with host families at the student's discretion.

The next page contained a photo of Gretchen Strauss. She looked to be my age, but she was a fair-haired beauty

with large blue eyes, curly blonde hair and full lips. Her age was listed as twenty.

My mother knocked on my open door. “May I come in?”

I shoved the papers back into the packet. “Of course.”

“We need to plan your engagement party and then the bridal shower.”

I groaned. “Why don’t I elope? It would be so much easier. You know I hate formal gatherings especially if I am the center of attention.”

“Mary, your future in-laws and husband thrive on social occasions. I have booked the Bellevue-Stratford for the engagement party. Also I have talked with Rev. Zimmer. He has agreed to perform the ceremony, but he is insistent that before the wedding you and Chaz meet with him for marital counseling.”

I groaned again. “I don’t like that man! He is an arrogant jerk. You will have to find another pastor.”

My mother shook her head. “Nonsense, he is our pastor.”

“I never go to church anymore because I can’t stand him.”

“Well, Chaz’s family includes a clergyman. Maybe he will be free in June to marry you.”

“Could I get married in our house and maybe a judge could marry us?”

“Of course not. Saturday, March twentieth, is the first day of spring. We will have the engagement party then. We can use pastel colors. What color will you have your bridesmaids wear?”

“I may be busy in March and April. You will have to wait until May for the party.” I wondered how long I could stall the mother-of-the-bride.

“Busy? With what?”

“I may have to go out-of-town on business.”

“What business?”

“Please don’t try to dissuade me. I have a plan and if I am successful, you will not have to be ashamed of my work.”

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