

A chapter from *Mexico City Blues*, novel in progress

“You have gone completely nutso on this case,” said Crosby, over strong black coffee and a plate of sliced fruit arranged as if for a still life: red payaya cupping golden slices of pineapple, Cubist triangles of crimson watermelon, bananas to cool it down, and halved limes to squeeze over all. “You’ve lost any objectivity – which was minimal to begin with. I say we get on the next plane and head back to Minneapolis.”

We were eating breakfast on the rooftop patio of our Mexico City hotel, La Marquesa. Despite the fruit, it wasn’t exactly tropical. January nights in the Mexican capital dip into the 30-degree Fahrenheit range. We both wore sweaters and had grabbed the table closest to the tall steel mushroom that dispensed heat for the crazy gringos who insisted on eating outside. All the other guests took their breakfast in the dining room with the Tiffany glass ceiling. A chemically tinted red sun rose in the smoggy air scented with diesel fuel and fresh vegetation.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mr. Know-It-All,” I said. “And what kind of detective are you, anyway? Here we have a great lead and you just want to bail.”

“A great lead?” Crosby repeated. “A mysterious call to meet a human rights lawyer in her office, except the call might not be from her. Not to mention she’s made enough people mad at her she has to travel with a bodyguard, so we have no clue what we’re walking into.”

I would have leaned away from him, expect that the heat was focused right over the table. “It *was* from Valentina,” I snapped. “The connection was bad, but I

know her; I've been to her office before; and she was Benita's attorney. You don't understand Mexico. No one says anything on the phone – all the lines are tapped."

We were only four days into our trip to Mexico trailing Benita's killer, but it hadn't been going well.

Mexican Customs officials had spent over an hour searching our baggage, carry-ons and laptops. I demanded to see a supervisor, a short stocky man with a swagger and mean eyes. "If they don't stop, I'm calling the Embassy," I said. An empty threat at best. The US Embassy would have no time for me, a lowly public defender from Minnesota. But Crosby's law enforcement status might count for something. I had him open his shiny gold police badge, which the supervisor scrutinized.

"*Está bien.*" He motioned to his goons. "Just remember: we take care of our own problems in Mexico."

I'm sure you do, I thought, for a change keeping my smart mouth closed. I wasn't surprised that they were watching for us. I was convinced that whoever killed Benita had the blessing of people more powerful than he. Or she.

After that, we'd checked into the Marquesa – separate rooms, non-connecting, but on the same floor. The desk clerk raised his eyebrows. "*¿Su señor esposo en un cuarto separado?*"

"He's not my husband," I said.

Crosby shook his head, a bit too vigorously, but the clerk got the idea, even if he didn't understand it.

We'd had a visit with Benita's mother, who cried but could tell us very little, except about some threatening calls she'd received shortly before Benita died. Then they stopped. No one was following her; the neighborhood street vendors kept their eyes out for suspicious strangers.

Only one thing: a formal, black-edged mourning card slid under her door the day after Benita died. The day I found out. Inside, engraved in black calligraphy: *Nuestro más profundo pésame*. Our deepest sorrow. An abbreviated form of the standard Mexican sympathy message. No signature, no return address, nothing. We slipped it into a baggie and took it, but with no hope of learning anything significant from it.

I'd called Tina and left a message with someone I assumed was her secretary. She called me back. Except the connection was so scratchy I could barely make out her voice, only that it was female. "Come at 1:00," she'd said. "We can talk and then go out for lunch someplace."

Valentina Manrique – Tina to her friends – was a tenacious human rights attorney, daughter of Spanish Civil War refugees, red haired, freckled, slight build, looking like a slightly aging college girl, although I imagined she must be in her early 40s by now. Her office was in a rundown part of town near the Witches' Market, where you could buy potions, herbs, candles and advice on illness and love problems. The building was a three-story walkup she shared with three other

attorneys involved in the same work and rarely there, since they were always arguing to judges and trying to get prisoners out of jail.

I'd been there many years before. I still remembered the one bathroom in the building, the plugged toilet and the lack of water. The attorneys had offered me a bottle of Coke, a wooden chair and cheerful optimism about their cases, although I could see the fatigue and worry lines etched around their eyes. Protecting human rights in Mexico was a big job, and they clearly needed reinforcements. They'd invited me to stay and help, but I knew I wouldn't last. I needed certain comforts between tough cases: my cozy apartment, clean air to breathe, streets safe enough to walk, no threat of being beaten up by goons hostile to my clients and my efforts to absolve them.

"Why wouldn't she just meet us for lunch at some restaurant?" Crosby asked. He'd almost finished off the red papaya, my favorite.

"She probably has files to show us that she wouldn't dare take out of her office."

Crosby looked at me hard. "You really think she's gonna keep important files in her office when it keeps getting tossed? I may not know Mexico, but I'll bet you a— a breakfast at a nice American restaurant— that she's got them in a vault someplace."

I rolled my eyes.

At noon we set off for Tina's office on the Metro, Mexico City's jammed subway system. We were starting from one of the most crowded stations, at the nearby Zócalo, the City's main square with the National Cathedral, the Government Palace lined with Diego Rivera murals; vendors of cotton candy, used watches, orange juice and Marxist books; and demonstrators from the teachers' union in Oaxaca who had been camped out here for months demanding better salaries and working conditions.

"Grab my hand," I ordered Crosby as we approached the stairs down to the Metro, "And don't let go no matter what. I presume you're not carrying anything valuable on you?"

He shook his head and took my hand in his callused strong fingers. It made me feel more secure, and would help us not to get separated. We descended the dirty stairs into a swirl of people, the Hieronymus-Bosch-on-speed of the Mexico City Metro: vendors of sweets, gum and fruit; salesmen dressed in cheap suits – if they could afford better ones, they'd be in a taxi; women tottering on too-high heels; blind and crippled men singing off key while someone, usually a child, rattled a tin can; workers smeared with grease or cement dust or flour; university students in jeans carrying knapsacks of books; a few giggling young tourists. All of us moving as one, because that's the only way you could move, toward the platform. In contrast to the unruly lot of us, the metro floors shone like glass, cleaners in brown uniforms swabbing them continuously, and bright framed posters decorated the walls. The orange train pulled up, and we smashed into it, arm to arm, thigh to thigh.

“Stay near the door,” I said to Crosby. “It’s only five stops.”

I could feel the entire front of his body glued to mine, in turn pressed against a diminutive woman carrying grocery bags. Somehow we unpeeled ourselves at the stop near Tina’s office and expelled ourselves into the relief of cool air, albeit gray with smog.

Crosby straightened his shirt. “Well, wasn’t that fun.”

“It’s faster than a taxi,” I told him. It was 12:45. “Come on, we’ll walk. It’s just a few blocks.

Tina’s neighborhood was working class – shoe repair stores, small grocery stores stacked to the ceiling, vegetable stands. Lunchtime approached, and wrinkled women who could be anywhere from 50 to 75 slapped tortilla dough back and forth in their hands, stuffed it with meat and cheese and slid the finished rounds into bubbling oil. The smell was divine, even though I stopped eating street food years ago out of respect for my intestinal health.

“See?” I gestured to Crosby. “Does this look dangerous?”

We kept walking, passing the witches’ market, where the breeze sent us aroma of dried rosemary, and *gordolobo*, fat wolf herb, used for God knows what but always smelling of caramel.

Soon the street bustle quieted, and we stepped into a small cement plaza with a few squalid trees and the omnipresent red geraniums that seemed to thrive on the bad air. To one side a 16th century church lurched to one side, doors securely shut to keep out vandals. On the other, Tina’s office building.

Three stories of gray cement with a few windows and a guard dozing outside, a sports tabloid over his legs. He started as we approached and straightened up. "Who are you looking for?"

"The *licenciada* Manrique. Is she here?"

He waved a hand. "Third floor. But you'll have to take the stairs. *Se fue la luz.*"

"What'd he say?" Crosby nudged me hard in the ribs.

"The electricity's off. So no elevator."

"And obviously no light. How are we supposed to see?"

"There's a few windows," I said. "This is not a big deal. The electricity is always going off here. You just get used to it."

Mexico City's electric grid strained beneath the weight of its 22 million inhabitants. The miracle was that there weren't daily blackouts.

"You think I'm going in there, you are even crazier than I thought," Crosby said.

"Come on. It's daylight and just three stories. Besides, haven't you got a flashlight?"

He pulled it out of his jacket pocket, but didn't move.

"How is this different from going into a crack house in Minneapolis?"

"You mean aside from we're in Mexico, not Minnesota? Two things – no backup, no weapon."

"I'm going up," I told him. "You stay here if you want."

I went in the door to a dimly lit vestibule, spied the stairs and started up. Crosby caught up with me, cursing and muttering how he'd become as crazy as me, this was the stupidest thing he'd done in his life, he might as well turn in his badge and more I tuned out.

One flight. A little sunlight filtered through the grimy window on each floor. No sound except for a very loud bird outside. Two flights. We were both panting a little. "Altitude," I said. "We're 7,000 feet up." Still no noise. As if the snap of the lights going off had turned off the sound too. One more set of stairs. We were on the third floor.

"OK," I said. "Her office is up here."

We ventured onto the smooth floor, glimpsing some windows that half-illuminated offices with metal desks strewn with what looked to be files and papers.

"Not great housekeepers, are they?" Crosby said.

"They don't have time." I was angry. At him. At Mexico City for falling down around me. At these unpeopled offices. At myself.

Not a sound. Of course computers wouldn't clack like the old typewriters but still.

"Tina!" I yelled.

My voice echoed. I got even madder. Why would she make an appointment and not show? Of course there was the whole thing about Mexican time, but why was no one else in the building?

"Maybe they all went to a café where they could see what they were doing,"

“Yeah, right.”

“Let’s check the offices.”

Tina could get so absorbed in a task that she lost sense of time – and maybe the fact that her light had dramatically decreased. I listened for a voice on a phone but heard none.

Crosby turned on his flashlight, and we moved down the hall, shining it into each office. All deserted, all messy. I noticed empty Coke bottles, food containers. “At least they’ve been eating here,” I said.

Finally we were at Tina’s office, the only one with a nameplate. God knows she’d earned it after years of labor – much of it unpaid – death threats and getting shot at once.

The door was closed. I tried it. Locked. Now I was scared. I tried not to be, but cold flooded my stomach, even as I said, “She must have gone out. Of course she would have locked up.”

“Then let’s get out of here. Now. We’ll wait outside.”

The cold made my hands shake. I grabbed his arm. “What if she’s in there?”

“What if she is? What do you want me to do? Kick down the door?”

I nodded, then realized he probably couldn’t see me.

“Well?”

“Yes,” I said. ‘I’m worried.”

“*Now* you’re worried. Great.”

The silence was eerie, much worse than if we'd heard, say, approaching footsteps. And the same bird warbled outside where everything was apparently just dandy.

"Look, I'll even help."

"You get out of the way," Crosby said.

I could tell he was furious. I didn't blame him. I stepped to one side.

Crosby aimed his motorcycle boot at the door handle and landed a kick.

Wood cracked. He stood back, kicked again. The door sprung open.

I stepped inside to darkness. "Where's the window?" I asked, to myself more than to Crosby. My feet rustled papers ankle-deep on the floor. My hip banged into a desk. "Shit," I said. "Crosby, where the hell are you?"

"Right behind you, Nancy Drew," he said.

"We need that flashlight."

Then something crashed down on my head. The last thing I remember is the sound of tinkling glass.