

Five Wishes

Excerpt 1

A shot fell, followed by silence. *A rifle*, she thought. Maria Elena sat still and listened. Nothing. She knew the gangs roamed the hills. But she had not seen them up here at the boulder in the clearing.

She loved sitting on the boulder. She called it her rock. Here she could think. And relax. At the top of this hill, it was just the rock, the sky, and her.

The rock was hard and reliable, though she was not sure if she liked reliable. It could be good and bad. Reliable was static. Maria Elena liked movement, growth.

She wanted to get away. That's what she wanted more than anything. To be free, independent. To be safe. To learn. To be smart. Sophisticated.

Living in the barrio, one learned to walk without making a sound, like a tiger, and run as fast as a gazelle, if need be, or go into hiding at a moment's notice, quick as a meerkat. Maria Elena knew all the hiding spots in the hills.

Another thing she had learned was that one did not want to call attention to oneself in the barrio, with gang activities rampant and drug deals occurring weekly, if not daily. One learned to have ears and eyes in the back, front, and on the sides of one's head.

"You know everything about me," she whispered to the boulder in a half-loud voice, "everything. Josefina knows about my dreams, but nobody knows about my secret. Only you."

And she was not going to tell. She had kept it for years now, her secret, ever since he had held a knife to her throat. She had tried to tell Ma once or twice or three times, but Ma did not want to hear secrets. Ma did not want to listen much, not to Maria Elena.

Maria Elena had friends but not one to confide in all the way, not with this. Her friends were the casual kind of friends—the ones she sat by in school, the ones she enjoyed her lunch with, the ones who liked to go window-shopping. Josefina and she had grown up together as neighbors, sharing the same destiny. Most of her friends seemed happy with their lives, content with where they lived, and unconcerned with their predestined futures.

Maria Elena was not.

"I'm gonna go to LA," she said, still speaking to the rock. "Someday."

She patted the rock as one would pat a friend's shoulder, while she was overlooking the widely spread-out city of Comayagüela in the far distance below the picturesque hills. The rolling hills and wooded areas of the highlands were beautiful but unsafe, violent, and scary. She imagined LA being much different.

Maria Elena had developed her urge to get away, far, far away, after the episode on her tenth birthday when she was beckoned into the darkness for the first time.

The memory of it brought up the familiar prickle in her spine that crept all the way up her neck and into her skull, leaving her slightly dizzy and her breathing shallow. Her stomach muscles cringed on the inside, roping in her gut, tighter and tighter until it felt like a cement block, an internal barrier that seemed more to hurt than help. She would have to find a way to stop it somehow.

Excerpt 2

Tío was a man of a certain reputation.

He was a local, having grown up in the Zona Centro, with two brothers who hired onboard a ship to go to sea as soon as they had turned fifteen, leaving him, the youngest, behind. His father had been a local fisherman. He had taken out his youngest, Tío, on fishing trips in a small vessel, whose rocking motion made the lad deathly sick.

This earned him teasing and mocking from his father, who called him sissy and paleface and kicked him around like a dog, with the reminder that “you’ll never amount to anything,” much to the amusement of the father’s friends.

Tío had been a promising young boy, a little shy but smart. His father’s unkind treatment had pushed him on a different path.

To prove his worth, he began to deal with drugs at fifteen, and although he had been on the police’s wanted list for years, he was smart enough to stay in the shadows and let others do the dirty work for him. Nonetheless, one thing was certain—he had proven his father and his father’s old fishermen friends wrong. Tío had become one of the richest men of Comayagüela.

He had influence. He demanded respect.

Tío owned a hotel downtown in a neighborhood that once belonged to the rich, but that was now history. The paint had chipped and faded over the decades; heavy rains left traces

along its facade, that made it look as though the building had gone through severe crying spells during a long bout of depression.

The curtains behind the windows had turned from white to yellowish gray and were always drawn shut, ashamed of revealing the activities that took place in the rooms at night and during all hours of the day. The old carved oak doors, which had once stood broadly and proudly like royal ancestors, had dried and cracked like the skin of an old man with visible scars traced by repetitive knocks and kicks and the occasional knife, unkindly marking and stabbing it when patrons had not received the royal reception they desired.

Upon entrance, an old oak floor spread like a carpet, the planks forming the symbol of a star, now squeaking under the weight of each footstep, no matter how light, of the patrons walking toward the majestic reception desk made of black marble. Upon it stood two lavishly molded golden lamps, each in the shape of a full-breasted woman hugging a bottle of wine, with a golden ashtray right next to each lamp, and a wooden box, adorned with thick red velvet inside it, containing a generous number of original Cuban cigars.

Over the star-shaped entryway hung a golden chandelier with twelve arms and dimmed lights that nonetheless reflected in the top of the black marble reception desk and golden lamps. The chandelier also shed its light onto the thick oak-framed oil paintings on opposite sides of the hallway. One depicted a naked woman draped in a see-through gown. The other painting portrayed a naked woman draped in a life-size snake. Straight ahead, behind the reception desk, sat a shapely young brunette whose plump breasts generously filled her blouse. She greeted the patrons with her large brown eyes, framed in lush black eyeliner, creating the impression of the eyes of a wildcat, and glittery purple eye shadow, covering her eyelids all the way to the brows, which were perfectly shaped in the form of upward arrows toward the outer edges of her eyes. Her pumped-up lips were heavily covered with the brightest red lipstick and extra-red lip gloss that reflected the light of the chandelier.

On the wall behind her was a wooden board filled with faded numbers from one to twelve, each with a golden peg, holding a golden key on a long chain. Underneath, an old oak shelf held an elegant selection of expensive bottles of foreign and domestic wines and champagnes.

The brunette greeted the patrons with a smile and a discreet voice—not asking for names—only asking which wine or champagne and which room, taking the cash or credit card with two fingers, whose nails were painted in the same bright, glossy red as her lips. Then,

discreetly taking the chosen golden key from its peg, she handed it not to the patron but instead to a colleague, dressed in black fishnet stockings, black or red heels, and a laced halter top. The colleague would then either refer the patron, upon his wish, to a coworker or show the patron into the desired room herself, walking in front of him with slow and deliberate moves, all the way up the stairs and through the hallway, until they reached the chosen room, opened the door, and then gently closed it from the inside.

This was Tío's place. It gave him nice profits and connections to important people who could not be dismissed when one needed a favor here and there. He had connections to trucking fleets, foreign shipyards, cruise ships, and those staffing the trucking fleets and cruise ships. He also knew immigration executives, politicians, and cops. Tío was known in many circles and knew what his patrons liked, whom to greet in person, and whom to keep incognito. He was, so to speak, a man of great discretion, whom others appreciated, honored, and often generously compensated.

Tío, of course, also had desires and needs that had to be met. He had his men and used his connections when he needed a job done. There was a give and take in his circles; Tío gave when he could give and took when he could take. He was a slick man, and proud of what he had built and achieved.

And he wanted more.

Excerpt 3

In the darkness, there was only fear—the fear she breathed in and the fear she breathed out. Quietly it filled the room, and while it could not be seen, it was nonetheless present, squeezing her with an invisible force until her life force was almost depleted entirely, and only a glimmer of her was still present.

With tightened, aching muscles, immovably she sat, as the ship rocked back and forth crests of rolling ocean waves, following a primal earthly rhythm, accompanied by slashing orchestral percussion sounds. Nausea lapped slowly between navel and throat, back and forth like the liquid trapped in an unsteady measuring rod.

Maria Elena was at the point of no return, dressed all in black, as Tío had demanded, her head pressed against the cold iron-cast rod, her knees pulled tightly against her chest,

where imperceptible breaths kept her body alive, her lips silent, and her mind wandering, as she listened to the darkness.

The ship's engine pulsed regularly like the heartbeat of an old, worn-out, dying dragon, moving steadily but slowly through the darkness of the ocean. That dull metal pulsation had begun to dominate her own heartbeat after a day or two, as she sat quietly, as though inside a large creature that had eaten her alive; sitting in its belly, frozen in fear, only to remember from time to time, that she was still alive. The constant, rhythmic heartbeat of this metal creature drew her into a deep hypnotic state, and her thoughts drifted.

She thought of Don Francisco and their last morning together on the boulder, sharing a meal, sharing their thoughts, their beliefs, their dreams. She touched his Saint Christopher necklace and felt as though he was there with her, making the darkness more bearable. He believed in her and her dreams. He believed in star angels, just like her.

A tap on her arm awoke her from her stupor as Lolita touched her arm. Maria Elena stretched out the inside of her right forearm to be used as a writing tablet.

I feel sick, was the message Lolita etched onto her skin with her right index finger. Lolita's forearm landed on Maria Elena's lap for a response.

Breathe through your mouth. She spelled out each letter slowly and meticulously.

Lolita pulled Maria Elena's arm toward her.

Trying, she wrote back.

They squeezed hands. It was good to have a friend.

Maria Elena opened her eyes and squinted, trying to adjust her sight to the darkness of the room. She heard a moan to her left. As she stretched out her legs, cautiously and slowly in these tight quarters, the shortened, cramped tendons in the back of her knees hurt as if she had been sitting in a meditation pose for a month.

Lolita coughed twice, pressing her hand tightly against her mouth.

Maria Elena put her hand on Lolita's back between her shoulder blades and rubbed her gently. They must be quiet at all times, they had been told. *Silencia. No se habla. No conversaciones.* If only they could talk.

Last night had been awful. The sea had become rough, and several women had been heaving. Some, despite great restraint and utmost discipline, had thrown up. There was not much to throw up if one lived on two cups of rice and beans a day, but the stench of gas, mixed with vomit, lingered.