



# **Wild Penance**





*Berkley Prime Crime titles by Sandi Ault*

WILD INDIGO

WILD INFERNO

WILD SORROW

WILD PENANCE





# Wild Penance



Sandi Ault



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*For my husband, Tracy  
my soulmate*



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## Author's Note

This is a work of fiction, and the characters, some of the organizations, many of the places, and most of the events herein are figments of my imagination.

No one outside their dwindling numbers knows much about Los Penitentes, save a few scholars, and a few old-timers who are willing to recount their experiences of a nearly extinct way of life in the remote rural communities of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. While I have featured Los Penitentes and some of their known practices in this book, I have also taken creative license in order to create a good story. I have featured some of what is known, some of what is written, some of what is rumored, some of what I have been told, a little of what I have seen, and a healthy dose of what I have imagined. As a result, this tale touches upon a real sect and some of their rituals, but does not pretend to be an accurate representation of Los Penitentes or of the Catholic Church. What is true about Los Penitentes is often stranger than fiction, and this yarn is spun from a bit of both. If you do not believe it, it could be true. If you believe it, it could be fiction. Who knows?

One thing that has been well documented is the fact that Los Penitentes practiced ritual crucifixion into the mid-1920s in some remote mountain villages. But that was back when they weren't as good at keeping their secrets.





# Preface

As the elders at Tanoah Pueblo say, this story unfolds *time before time*. If we watch the hoop of time spinning, we might perceive that it happened first—before all the other stories in the WILD Mystery Series.

But, as the Tanoah know, all time is now.





*Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*

—Job 42:6 †





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# Something Falling

It was too quiet, no shrieking. The figure soared downward in silence, the arms stretched out like wings, creating a pale white crucifix form easy to make out even in the frozen gray light of predawn. This jumper did not streamline into a perfect spear for speed like most of them did—rather, this was a swan dive that stretched for seconds before disappearing into the blackness of the chasm.

It was still dark when I'd gotten to the gorge that morning to go for a run on the rim before starting my duty shift. I work at the Bureau of Land Management out of the Taos Field Office as a resource protection agent. My name is Jamaica Wild. Most days, I run at sunset, but on this morning I had awakened early from fitful dreams and couldn't go back to sleep, so I figured I'd get up and get going. I knew every dip and twist of the trail that skirted along the rim of the jagged crack in the earth's crust cradling the Rio Grande—the



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wild torrent of water that gives life to the high desert. To the east, the sun would soon rise over the Sangre de Cristos, an arm of the Rockies that cupped the Taos Valley and sheltered its fragile beauty. And when the butter-colored light was just beginning to melt down the basalt walls of the gorge, I would be returning to my Jeep at the rest area on the west rim, my lungs full of sage-scented oxygen, my body invigorated, my senses satiated with the beauty around me. It seemed like a perfect plan to begin the day.

I had not gone far down the trail when I looked back toward Taos Mountain and noticed activity on the bridge. In the dim light, I saw a lone vehicle stopped in one of the two lanes, next to a small overlook area where pedestrians could step off the sidewalk onto a bumped-out balcony and gaze down into the rift in the earth at the slim silver river below. Two people scurried around, then centered on the back of the vehicle, where they began unloading something with great effort.

I stopped running and jogged in place, watching.

There had been a rash of base and bungee jumping from the bridge lately—extreme sports whose members thrived not only on the rush from the experience, but evidently on the fact that it was illegal to jump here as well. The scoundrels set up under cover of darkness when there was no traffic on the bridge, then waited for first light to take the plunge. The Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is the second-highest cantilever bridge in the United States; its depth of 650 feet to the river, remote location, and extremely light traffic made it a dream venue for this kind of thing.

They call it practice for suicide. Rip screaming off the tallest structure around into midair and let gravity take over while a tsunami of adrenaline surges through you, producing such a high that



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you are almost disappointed when the parachute opens or the elastic bungee cord stretches and slows your fall, then springs you back up by your ankle harness.

At first, this was what I thought I was seeing; but this was not what I saw.



Sometimes your senses perceive something so incredible that your mind intervenes and tries to cancel out the incoming information with logic, reason, or experience. When I saw the figure falling, so began a struggle between eyes and mind, between senses and sense, until the clash ignited a flash-bomb of recognition and a snapshot crystallized in my brain, the details etched so vividly that I will never forget them. Blue-white stars flowered the field of dark sky above me even as a penumbra of purple light began to quiver at the top of the mountain range more than ten miles away across the mesa, behind the unfolding scene. An icy draft whistled over the rim of the canyon and rustled the brush, the air dry and mean. The smell of sage and red dirt mixed with the lingering scent of shampoo in my hair. My feet pounded a tempo on the trail as I jogged in place, as if what I witnessed might merely be a temporary detour in my day's trajectory. There I was: out on the rim, too far away to do anything to change what was happening.

I saw a body on a cross. Falling into the Rio Grande Gorge. And it did not come back up.



  
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# Bridge to Nowhere



Over the next two hours, I observed while personnel from almost every agency in the area assembled to the east of the bridge in the dirt parking area normally used by tourists. The first to arrive, a patrolman in a black-and-white from the New Mexico State Police, closed the bridge. Sheriff's deputies set up roadblocks. A crew from the Taos Fire Department assisted, turning around tourists and through-traffic and sending everyone eleven miles south to Pilar, where they could cross the river and drive through the village to the highway. A Taos Pueblo police detective joined the task force because the east wall of the Rio Grande Gorge is Taos Pueblo land. County Search and Rescue dispatched a team.

Unfortunately, this was not an unfamiliar scenario for any of the agencies involved, as I was well aware. Beyond its allure for extreme sport jumpers, the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is a magnet for suicides.



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One, two, even three times a year, rescue agencies can count on a challenging rescue/retrieval incident here. In fact, in a recent seminar, the state emergency services director referred to the structure as “the Bridge to Nowhere” because dispirited souls came from all over the country to fling themselves over its sides.

Scientists calculated all the known and variable stats and estimated that a two-hundred-pound person would achieve a velocity of approximately 135 miles per hour and make the perilous drop in around six seconds. All this is to say that rescuers never bring a survivor out. Occasionally a jumper will miss the full ride to the bottom and splay herself on one of the basalt shelves along the cliff wall, but this is no less certain a means of demise than the descent to the river. One time, a newlywed couple joined hands just hours after giving their wedding vows and began their honeymoon by climbing onto the rail and diving over the side. The two landed on opposite shores of the rushing river, making double the work for the rescue teams.

Sometimes a jumper secretly makes the plunge and he is not discovered for days, until his bloated corpse surfaces downriver, caught in the eddies. Or a fresh suicide might land in the rapids and get swept along and be discovered soon, but miles from the jump point. I once had an encounter with one of these; but that seemed like a long time ago today, as I waited to give my account of what I had witnessed just hours before.

When the incident initiator and senior crime scene investigator, New Mexico State Police agent Lou Ebert, arrived, we walked onto the bridge together. “Show me where it happened,” he said.

I walked toward the center viewing balcony, pointing. “I think it was here.”



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We stepped up the high curb onto the narrow sidewalk. “Let’s stay off the viewing platform. Don’t touch anything. Forensics wants to do another sweep of the bridge.” He arched his upper body carefully so as not to touch the rail as he looked over the side. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “There’s your guy.”

I moved closer to the rail and looked down. Although the sun now illuminated a wide patch along the upper west rim, the gorge was so narrow and deep here that the remainder of the chasm lay steeped in shadow. From this distance, the scene below appeared in miniature, making it seem all the more unreal. On the bank of the river, a tiny figure lay crucified, his blue-white flesh as pale as the water. Ropes bound his ankles, wrists, and his torso under his arms to a large wooden cross. “Does he have a . . . what is . . . is something on his head?”

Agent Ebert raised his binoculars and peered through them. He handed them to me. “It looks like cloth, maybe a black bag of some kind. It appears to be tied at the neck.”

I looked through the field glasses. “A black cloth bag? Oh, no.” I focused in tight and swept the corpse from head to toe. “Well, that’s definitely a male.”

“Yep. I’m guessing that white cloth strung out to the side was probably tied or wrapped around his lower abdomen. It’s come completely off, all but that little bit tucked under his left buttock. Probably came undone from the velocity of the fall. We see that with suicides, too. Sometimes their clothes, even their shoes are ripped off. I’m surprised he didn’t come off that cross.”

“Well, this was no suicide.” I handed the binoculars back to Agent Ebert.

“No, definitely not.” He focused the glasses again on the figure

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below us. "This is going to be one hell of a retrieval," he said. "Have you ever been on one of these incidents?"

"Not like this. They don't usually call the BLM for things like this. Besides, I work in the high country. But when we had a river ranger go missing last year, I did work the search and rescue on that one, although we were mostly looking downriver."

"Well, this is a real tricky place. The gorge is too narrow here to get a chopper in. And besides, we don't have a winch on our state police helicopter so there has to be a place to set it down nearby, and there's no place like that for miles. Those cliff walls are so steep, they're almost straight up and down, and the rock face is too slick here to send a foot crew in or even have them rappel. It looks like our best bet is to send the medical investigator and a forensics team on a raft down the river. The water is high enough from snowmelt. They'll probably want to transport the body still tied to that cross if they possibly can."

"Really?"

"You bet. Potential evidence in the knots, for one thing. But also underneath the ropes, under the body next to the wood. Even in the wood."

"It's going to take some real river rats to navigate down through the Taos box with cargo like that. What is it? Five or six hours of whitewater from here to Pilar?"

"You're right. Plus it's almost two hours from where they put in upriver to here. So that's seven, eight hours just to raft the river, and that's with no time to document and photograph the body and collect evidence at the scene." He shook his head. "About the soonest I could get everybody up to the John Dunn Bridge to put in is maybe two hours. And even if the retrieval went amazingly quick, they could run

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out of daylight down in that canyon before they got to Pilar. Maybe it's better to have them start out first thing tomorrow morning." Lou Ebert used the mike clipped to the epaulet on his shirt to give the dispatcher detailed orders for the retrieval raft crew.

I looked down again at the body on the cross. The base of the wooden member, below the feet of the deceased, extended into the river. I thought I saw the cross move.

Agent Ebert released the transmit button on his radio mike and turned to me as I continued to study the scene below. "So you saw a light-colored vehicle? Have to be a pretty big one to get a guy on a cross in it. Unless they had him sticking out the back of a pickup bed or something."

I met Lou Ebert's eyes, then pointed across to the rim trail on the west side of the gorge. "I was clear over there past the trailhead, on the rim. It happened pretty fast. And it was still dark. It could have been a truck, maybe a cargo truck. It wasn't a flatbed. The back was covered. Like a camper shell or a van or whatever."

"That cross looks too wide and too long to fit in a van. I'll ask the raft crew to get some measurements on it. That will give us some idea what size vehicle at a minimum. You say you saw two people get out?"

"I didn't actually see them get out. By the time I noticed the vehicle on the bridge, it had already stopped, and there were two people outside of it, moving around."

"Moving around? How?"

"I think one of them might have looked over the rail. I'm not sure. But then they both went to the back and it took them a while to get the . . . the cross with the guy on it out and up to the rail."

"These two people—what were they wearing?"



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“Hooded coats. Something with hoods. Everything looked gray. It was dark.”

“Were they male? Female?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t tell.”

“Height? Weight? Build?”

“I don’t know. Nothing too extraordinary. I think I would have noticed, even from that distance.”

“And you didn’t hear anything?”

“No. I didn’t even hear the vehicle drive onto the bridge. I just looked back when I was running and saw it parked there.”

“Headed which direction?”

“East. Toward Taos.”

“And after they pushed the cross over the rail, then what?”

“I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I don’t even remember seeing the vehicle leave the bridge.”

He looked at me and narrowed his eyes. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.” I took another look down into the gorge. “Wait, did you see that? The water is starting to cause the cross to pitch a little.”

Agent Ebert looked over the rail again, careful not to touch the metal surface.

The cross lurched, spinning almost a quarter turn counterclockwise, the tip of the base shifting more downriver, from three o’clock to midnight. Again, the water surged against the base of the cross, stealing the tail of white fabric from beneath the body and pulling it into the flow, where it waved on the surface like a white flag of surrender on its way south. Within moments, the wooden form rocked again and then slowly separated from the slender stony banks and began to float downriver, bearing its naked cargo



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on top, spray rising around it as if it were a raft riding the wake of wild water.

The agent thumbed his radio mike. “Be advised, we have a package on the move. Raft retrieval is now raft search and rescue. Repeat, we are search and rescue again.”

I watched the strange craft as it floated farther and farther away, growing more minuscule with each second. “Just when I thought this day couldn’t get any stranger,” I said.

Agent Ebert brought a hand to his jaw and rubbed it, his fingers stroking the shadow of daily stubble as he studied my face. “Do you have any idea what this whole thing might be about?”

“Why would I know anything about this? I just happened to be running on the rim when it came down.”

“When I told you it looked like that was a black bag over his head, you said, ‘Oh, no,’ like that meant something to you.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, that . . . that does. I mean, not to me, but I know who . . . it couldn’t be them, but it looks like someone is trying to make this appear as if it was done by Penitentes.”

“Penitentes? The guys who whip themselves?”

I sighed. “That’s not all they do, but yes, Los Penitentes. They used to do ritual reenactment of the crucifixion, too, around this time of year, although the last confirmed one was decades ago. But some people say they still do it in the dark of night in some of the more remote mountain villages. When they did, the man playing Christ wore a breechcloth and they would put a black bag called a *venga* over his head before tying him to the cross.”

Ebert drew in a breath. “Wow. I had heard some stories, but I didn’t know all the particulars. I thought they were a secret sect. How do you know so much about them?”



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“I’ve sort of been studying Los Penitentes. I’ve been drawing some of their shrines—I see a lot of them in the high country where I work. After I had done a number of sketches, I wanted to know more about them. I started doing research and taking notes.”

The agent pursed his lips. “So you’re a resource protection agent? What got you interested in doing this sketchbook thing about the Penitentes?”

“It started last year when I saw a procession over by the Chama. I was really intrigued. But it’s hard to get any information about them, other than what’s written, and that’s not much.”

He nodded. “Well, good luck getting the facts about those guys. I hear they don’t talk too much about it.”

“That’s true, they don’t. It’s taken me months, but I’ve finally found a pretty good source. I just met with him last week. It’s the first breakthrough I’ve had in a while.”

“Okay, well, from what you know, maybe you can tell me a little something about it—like, why do they do this stuff? Why would anyone flagellate himself or volunteer to get crucified?”



“It’s penance. To emulate the suffering they believe Christ endured. Penance is the main sacrament of their faith.”

Agent Ebert raised his binoculars and looked down the gorge at the diminutive dark dot that was quickly disappearing into the rapids. “Man, if that’s what this is, it’s some wild penance.”



  
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# The Father



When I first talked to him several months ago, his voice on the other end of the phone had been barely more than a whisper. “Father Ignacio Medina,” he uttered so softly that it took me a moment to realize what he had said. His rolling Hispanic accent was as smooth and rich as Ibarra chocolate.

“Father Medina? My name is Jamaica Wild. I’ve been working on a sort of sketchbook about the Penitentes. I’ve been trying to learn more about them. I was wondering if I could come to see you for some information?”

“Who did you say you are?”

“My name is Jamaica Wild.”

“And who do you work for?”

“I work for the Bureau of Land Management, in the Taos region. But I wanted to talk with you about the sketchbook I’m doing.”



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“You work for the BLM?” He was still whispering. “What do they have to do with Los Penitentes?”

“No, the BLM doesn’t have anything to do with this. I’m doing these drawings on my own. I’ve done some research, made a few notes, and written a few things about what I’ve learned and seen. I would like to talk with you about it.”

“I am very sorry, I cannot help you. There is really nothing I could tell you.” He hung up.

A week later I tried again. And again and again. For months.

Father Ignacio Medina finally agreed to meet me one evening at a coffeehouse in Santa Fe. I was there early, sipping tea, sitting at a *banco*—an adobe shelf along the wall that was covered with cushions—in the back corner of the small room, near a fireplace exuding a comforting dry warmth and the spicy smell of piñon. I had opened my notebook on the table, and I was working with some colored pencils on a sketch of a shrine.

I recognized him by his collar when he came in. He scanned the few occupied tables. I held up a hand and waved. He looked at me and narrowed his eyes, his brow folding into furrows, then made his way through the narrow, irregular spaces between the chairs. “Miss Wild?” he asked.

I stood, extended my hand, and leaned across the table, looking directly into his stare. “Father Medina, I am so honored to meet you. I read your book *The Passion and the Light*. In fact, I practically know parts of it by heart. Thank you so much for giving me some of your valuable time.”

His grip was surprisingly fierce. He studied me carefully. “How could I resist? When I stopped taking your phone calls, you started



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sending me letters.” Then he looked down at the banco. “Do you mind if we change places?” he asked, pointing to the spot where I’d been sitting, watching for him to come in.

In fact, I did mind. I hate sitting with my back to a room.

He stood over me, unbuttoning his coat, waiting for me to move.

“Okay, I guess.” I closed my notebook and scooted it around to the other side. I took a seat in the chair opposite him.

He ordered black coffee. His gaze panned the room, came back to me, zoomed in. “I have studied all the things you sent to me. I will admit, I was very impressed. You have done some interesting drawings of some very old and little-known shrines, and you have apparently done a lot of research about them for this sketchbook of yours. It is good.” His eyes narrowed. “But when I look at you, I cannot help thinking—you will forgive me, I hope—that you are a very lovely young woman, Miss Wild. Why does a young lady like yourself have such an interest in Los Penitentes?”

“You mean an Anglo?”

He smiled. “Yes, that. And—well, perhaps I was expecting someone . . . older. Perhaps someone from an academic background. You don’t look like someone who spends all her spare time doing research, drawing, writing.”

“Well, you know what they say about judging a book by its cover.”

He laughed. “I know. I know. But when I saw the drawings and read the essay you sent to me, I guess I pictured you . . . well, it is different now that I see you. You seem to look at these things with a wisdom beyond your years.” He looked up abruptly and focused his attention on the door of the coffeehouse.

I turned and looked over my shoulder. A man had just come



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in. He stood at the counter, his back to the room, waiting to give his order. I turned back to Father Medina, who tasted his coffee, looked at the door, then at me, and within a moment, at the door again.

I took a drink from my cup and studied the old priest who sat before me. He was a small man with a beautiful, thick head of blue-black hair streaked near a prominent widow's peak with a wave of pure white. His caramel skin bore deep grooves across the forehead and at the corners of his dark eyes. He continued to look past me at the door.

"Are you expecting someone, Father?"

He smiled. "Perhaps." He pointed toward my notebook. "Is this beautiful book your manuscript?" His hand reached out.

I hesitated.

"May I see it?" His arm remained extended, his palm open.

I tapped my fingers on the book, tamping it down as I tried to diminish its appeal. "Well, it's not really a manuscript. I don't even know if it will become one. It's just all my notes and sketches and . . ."

His fingers wagged impatiently toward it.

I moved my arm over the top of the book, as if to protect it. I felt my pulse quicken as I tried to deflect his request. "I was just hoping to ask you a few questions. I really wasn't planning . . ."

The father's palm remained outstretched, but his face softened from a demand to a plea.

Moments passed, the two of us unmoving, my fingers lingering on the edge of the cover. Finally, I relented and handed him the book. I had never let anyone else look at it. It was a binder filled with pages of original drawings and essays. I had made a tan deerskin cover for it and used tight, perfect loops of chocolate deerskin thong to round-



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braid seams all around the outer edges. He held the book up carefully in his two hands. "I'm just going to look at it," he said. "I'm not going to hurt it."

I forced a smile.

He set the book down carefully on the table, not opening it. Instead, he looked at me. "Tell me what you do for the BLM."

"I'm a resource protection agent. A range rider. I mostly ride fence lines in the backcountry. In the winter months, I do a lot of odd jobs—handling grazing permits, maintaining gates onto public lands, wildlife rescues, things like that."

"So you're a cowgirl?"

I grinned. "I guess you might say that."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"In love with someone?"

"No."

"Then you live with your family."

"No, I don't have any family."

He was quiet a moment. "You live alone, then?"

"Yes."

Father Ignacio opened the book and began browsing through it. "Look! You have drawn maps and everything," he said approvingly. "It is obvious that you are in love with your subject." He studied one of my drawings. "I like the sketches you've done of the shrines. This one—it's in Agua Azuela, no?"

I nodded yes.

"I remember that one, I know it." He stopped to read a little of what I had written. Then he closed the book and placed it on the table between us. "But you have never answered my ques-



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tion. Why do you have such an interest in Los Hermanos? That is how Los Penitentes refer to themselves—the brothers, or La Hermandad—the brotherhood.” His eyes searched my face with intensity.

“I’ve never really thought about why I’m interested in them. I just am.” I looked away from the intimacy of his stare.

“I have a feeling you are afraid to tell me the truth, Miss Wild. What do you think will happen if you do?”

“I don’t know how to say it, exactly.”

We were both silent for a minute. He sipped his coffee. “Why don’t you try?” he suggested, setting his cup down.

“Well . . .” I thought a moment. I looked directly into his eyes. “If I’m drawn to something, it usually has some kind of lesson for me. That’s been true since I was a kid.”

“And what is the lesson you have gotten from your study of Los Penitentes?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He studied my face. “And you have had these kinds of experiences since you were a child?”

“Yes.”

“Give me an example.”

“You’re going to think this is crazy, but it started with a possum hand I found when I was a kid. It had been left behind by a predator. It was completely dried and perfect, all the hair on it, even the little fingernails. And the possum’s palm was lined, and there were even fingerprints—just like a person’s.”

His face sobered. He tilted his head to one side, regarding me carefully. He didn’t speak.

“I couldn’t help myself, I picked it up and took it home. It was—



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don't be offended by this, Father, please—but it was hideous. And fascinating. I finally sewed that paw on a little deerskin medicine bag I made. I still have it.”

Father Ignacio's eyes widened. “So Los Penitentes are like that for you? Just some kind of novelty? Some ‘hideous fascination,’ as you said?”

“No! Oh, I didn't think you'd understand it.”

He held up his open palm. “Well, then, enlighten me.”

I drew in a slow breath. “Maybe this won't make any sense to you at all. But I think sometimes you have to embrace the things you are most frightened of. I could tell, even when I was just a child, that the possum hand was some kind of powerful medicine for me. Just the strength of my reaction told me that.”

“And what was it that you learned from this ‘powerful medicine’ in the possum hand?”

I leaned over the table toward him. “I learned not to be afraid of it. I let the possum speak to me and I learned that there is a kind of genius in his nature. I learned that what may look strange or foreign to you at first can prove to be amazing when you get over your fear of it. But you have to get over your fear, or your revulsion, to get to the lesson it is trying to teach you.”

“And this is what you have found in Los Penitentes?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about that.”

“It started last year when I saw a procession of novices.”

“Yes,” he urged, leaning closer, his eyes drilling into me.

“They were performing penance. Whipping themselves as they marched. I thought it was terrible. But I couldn't take my eyes off of them.”



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“Yes, yes, go on!” He gestured with his hand for me to keep it rolling.

“I just wanted to know what made them want to do that. Is that faith?”

He looked directly at me, his eyes wide. “What kind of faith do you practice, Miss Wild?”

“I don’t . . . have any faith.”

“Ah!” He looked down at his coffee, picked up a spoon, and began to stir in it. There was a long silence punctuated only by the rhythmic, metallic ring of the utensil against his cup. He appeared to be considering what I had told him, but I worried that he might be thinking that I should be committed to a mental facility. I knew my story about the possum hand sounded foolish, even irrational. Finally, the priest spoke: “Miss Wild, you are not just trying to find a way to witness a Penitente crucifixion, are you?”

My mouth fell open. “Do they still do that?”

“Have you ever seen the rituals of Los Penitentes during Holy Week?”

“Well, only the public ones. I’m an outsider. I’m not Catholic. I only know enough Spanish to be dangerous. I’m looking at this from the point of view of a stranger in a strange land.”

“Yes. Now you have gotten to the heart of it, have you not? You are an outsider. Your home is somewhere else, no?”

“No. This is my home. Well, I mean, I was raised in Kansas, but my family is all gone. This is the only home I have.”

“Just the same, you see, you can never truly understand this faith. You have not grown up eating and sleeping and breathing these traditions, attending these rituals.” He looked over my shoulder at the door, then leaned over the table toward me, speaking as if in confi-



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dence, of something privileged: “I do not think you will be allowed to observe any of the old rituals. Only a few *moradas*—you know what *moradas* are?”

“Yes, the places where the brothers meet and worship or practice rituals or whatever . . .”

“That’s not what I mean. The word *morada* comes from the Spanish word for ‘dwelling,’ which comes from the verb *morar*, which means ‘to live’ or ‘to dwell.’ It is the home for the spirit, the dwelling place for the soul while it remains on this earth. Los Penitentes consider their *moradas* to be holy places.”

“I know the ones I’ve seen are usually off the beaten path. Not on a major road, some not even near a road, and never in an obvious place,” I said. “You really have to look for them to find them.”

“There are only a few *moradas* left which carry on the old practices, and they have been forced to become more and more covert. It is vital to the spirit of the ceremonies that the penitent ones be anonymous. These rituals are for them and for their community; they are not some circus sideshow for ignorant Anglos converging on the villages, hoping to see a religious spectacle, perhaps even a crucifixion. The attendance of uninitiated onlookers has only added fuel to the sensationalism surrounding the rituals, and that draws more onlookers. It was never meant to be that way.” He shook his head in frustration and took a drink of coffee. He checked the door, then looked back at me. “You know that Los Penitentes were once excommunicated by the Church?”

I nodded.

“You will find a tentative peace today between the Church and Los Hermanos de la Luz—that is another name for them, the Brothers of the Light. In some of the larger towns, there might be a



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procession, a pale imitation of what it once was. The activities will be centered around the church, although a ceremony may be held by the brotherhood in the morada, especially the Tinieblas—the ceremony held in darkness on Good Friday. But it will be nothing like . . .” His voice trailed off. He knitted his brows, making a chevron of grooves across his forehead. He peered at me through squinted lids. “Do you know what made me finally agree to our interview?”

“No. I wondered—I’ve been trying for months.”

“It was one of the pieces you sent me—the one you wrote about that procession you happened to witness near the Chama. When I read it, I was very moved, almost as I would have been if I had been there myself. Where did you learn to write like that?”

I thought a moment. “I don’t know. Maybe I inherited it from my mother. She wrote poetry.”

He glanced intently at me. “What you wrote about is an ancient tradition—making penance. But there are also the traditions of giving, of service to the community, of charity, of healing. All the traditions of Los Penitentes and their sister order, Las Carmelitas, have been tenderly taught from generation to generation in these tiny villages. And some believe that these lovingly maintained customs come from even before we came here.”

“Tell me about that, Father.”

He waited, tilted his head to one side to see the door. Then he began speaking almost in song. I was mesmerized by his voice as he told me the story of how Spain had sent Franciscan brothers to colonize the lands that early conquistadors had claimed for the king. Unable to reach all the outlying villages when a priest or brother was needed, they had cultivated a tertiary, or Third Order of lay leaders



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of the church, who called themselves Los Hermanos de la Luz. The practice of self-flagellation and excessive penance was common in medieval Spain, and some believed that the Franciscans may have introduced these practices here, hence the name Los Penitentes. When the Mexican Revolt cast the Spaniards out, the Franciscans were called home to Spain, leaving Los Hermanos to fend for themselves in religious matters. The unique and exotic practices which developed, including ritual crucifixion, were a result of the remote and isolated nature of the land itself.

“Of course there is yet another theory,” he said. “Some say that the practices and the brotherhood came up from Mexico in the late 1700s. Many scholars believe this is the more correct of the two. However, there are certain moradas that maintain they were given their original charter in the 1500s. So it is hard to say which is true.”

I propped my elbow on the table and rested my chin in my hand as I listened to him with fascination.

“I have a suggestion for your book.”

This roused me. I sat up at once and pulled the notebook to me, turned to a fresh page, and picked up a pencil.

“Do you know about El Instituto Religioso de la Santa Hermandad—the Religious Institution of the Holy Brotherhood?”

I wrote as quickly as I could, trying to keep up. “You mean the tract that was supposed to have been published by Padre Martínez sometime around the 1830s? The one defending the Penitentes when the Church was issuing decrees condemning them?”

“The very same.”

“I have read about that, but there are no known copies. It might even be just a legend.”



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“Oh, it is not just a legend, I assure you.” He looked beyond me toward the door. He nodded his head at someone there.

I turned and looked behind me at a large man in a long black coat. He nodded at me and the padre, then turned and left the coffeehouse. I twisted around again and looked at Father Ignacio.

He shrugged apologetically. “That is my driver. I have only a few more minutes. Then I must leave.”

“So about this tract . . .”

“Do you also know about a man named Pedro Antonio Fresquíiz of Las Truchas?”

“Wait—say that again?” I scribbled as Father Medina repeated the name for me.

He pointed to the *i* in Fresquíiz. “There is an acute accent there. Look him up. Bring the two things together.”

I looked at him, confused.

“Fresquíiz and the tract. They will come together. If you search hard enough.”

“Where would I find—”

“There is something going on right now. I cannot speak about it. It is not safe. But Los Penitentes are . . . someone is trying to steal their power. I can say no more.”

I gave him a puzzled look. “I don’t understand.”

“There are not so many members these days, fewer and fewer of Los Hermanos de la Luz,” he said. “There is also little interest in the true nature of their belief, their role in community life, their bond as brothers, their commitment to service. Instead, they are widely regarded by the general population, and even with some in the Catholic Church, as some sort of cult. Even I am being discouraged by my superiors in the Church from my work in this area.”





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Some of the holy icons have been stolen, others denounced as idols. Moradas have been broken into and vandalized. The sacred oaths of the brotherhood have been betrayed by traitors. And right now, no one trusts anyone.” He pointed his finger at me. “No one is going to trust you as you try to find answers to your questions. You must be very careful.”

He reached for his coat on the banco beside him and began to get up. But he stopped, sat back, and gave me a curious look, tilting his head slightly to one side, his lips pressed together in a tight, thin line. “I am satisfied that your intent is well-meaning, but I wonder if you are capable of finding the gentle, loving story of community and service in Los Penitentes.” He pondered a moment. “Or if you are merely attracted to their suffering.” He waited.

I didn’t speak.

“An enlightened person will come to realize that they are both the same. But you are young, Miss Wild. You are young, and you did not even grow up here, and also, you say that you have no faith. What do you know of penance?”

His words demanded a reply, but I had none. I held his gaze without flinching for what felt like an eternity. Finally I spoke. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s the thing I’m supposed to learn about.”

He was quiet a moment, never taking his eyes from my face. “Yes, perhaps that is so,” he said softly. He smiled tenderly at me, then stood and started to put on his coat.

I stood, too. “Father Ignacio—”

He held up his hand to stop me. “If I don’t see you again, señorita, please be careful. There is danger surrounding Los Penitentes right now. May God be with you.”

“But I have so many questions . . .”





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He reached out and took my hand and held it. “I think, Miss Wild, that you are very lonely.”

I gasped, his words stinging.

“Do not be so alone. Always remember, my child, *¡Ayuda a otros y Dios te ayudará!* Help others and God will help you. It is an old Penitente saying.”

