

## CHAPTER ONE – A TIME FOR GOODBYES

Taking one last scan around the parameters of her bedroom, Maria instinctively reached for the ceramic unicorn on the corner of her desk.

“I’m going to miss you, Jose,” she said, pressing the small creature her boyfriend had given her the previous Christmas against her heart, while a tear gently coursed down her cheek. “Mom said we’re going to be visiting Lisa for a year. But, what if she’s wrong? Things could change. What if something happens and Department of Immigrations won’t let us come back? Or even worse, what if while I’m gone, you find someone new?”

First wrapping the fragile ornament in of a pair of cotton socks, she quickly stashed it in a corner of her packed suitcase and proceeded to stare at the framed picture of her boyfriend on her wall.

*Could life even exist without Jose?* she mentally asked, as the thought that she might not ever see her eighteen-year-old companion again unexpectedly flashed before her. *We’ve been together every since middle school. And even yesterday – we spend the evening together, walking hand-in-hand along the edge of Arica’s moonlit beach.*

Maria then sighed.

*How loving, how caring the moment was. Yet, how sad when it came time to say goodbye. ... I know that you promised that you would wait for me. But when I do return ... will you really be there?*

A few moments later, Victoria peeked through the doorway into her daughter’s room. “Are you ready, little one? Your father is in the car, waiting.”

Giving her mother a small nod yes, she proceeded to check the latch of her suitcase. Upon entering the living room she automatically recalled the days when she was just a small child, sitting on her father’s lap – laughing at a translated version of the American TV show, Captain Kangaroo. Sitting just to the right of the TV on the third shelf of a built-in, wooden bookcase, an old black and white photo of some German soldiers in action stood next to her favorite

book of childhood nursery rhymes. Even a brief glance at of the partially faded photo had always made her smile.

*How handsome my Father used to be back then, she thought. It's no wonder that Mom fell head-over-heels in love with him.*

Now passing through the front door, Maria gazed toward the sidewalk, where her father had parked their black 1957 Chevrolet. A broad grin soon appeared across her face. *If there was one person in this world who could remain at attention, while in a sitting position ... it would have to be Rudolf.*

“So how long is the flight to Santiago?” Maria asked her mother as the two of them placed their cases inside the car's trunk. “And once there, how long will we have to wait before catching the connecting flight to Miami?”

Victoria chuckled. “Always full of questions, aren't you little one?” The twinkle in her dark brown eyes revealed the love she had for her youngest and how much she loved to tease her.

“Of course I have questions,” Maria replied, casually opening the rear passenger door. “How else can I learn?”

As Victoria was about to reply, an unshaven, middle-aged, street vendor suddenly appeared from around the street corner— pushing a large wooden cart. “Pescados,” he yelled in a voice so loud that it echoed off the nearby residences. “Come get your fresh pescados. They were caught this morning.”

Rudolf looked at him and snorted – then started the Chevrolet's 283 Super Turbo V8. Aeropuerto Chacalluta International was only a few miles away – down Ave. Tucapel.

“Well ... If you must know, Maria,” Victoria eventually said, after digging through her purse in an attempt to locate their airline tickets. “After boarding LAN Chile, the flight should only take about forty minutes. However, upon arriving at Aeropuerto International de Santiago, we'll probably face a long delay. Which may turn out to be a good thing – since Santiago's airport is much larger than Arica's, and we'll probably have a difficult time finding the boarding gate for Delta airlines.”

“You have never been there?” Maria asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Only once,” her mother replied. “And that was several years ago when your father and I were returning from our Paris honeymoon.”

She then focused her attention to the various documents inside her bag. Aeropuerto Chacalluta Internacional would soon be coming into view and the last thing she needed was for the two of them to travel all the way to Santiago, only to have Customs tell her that she didn't have all the required paperwork.

“I think everything is in order,” she proclaimed, soon after Rudolf brought their Chevrolet to a halt in front of the airport's entranceway. She then turned and gave her husband a rather lengthy affectionate hug and kiss. “Now I want you to be good while I'm gone, dear.”

“Hmmp. I'm always good,” Rudolf replied. “What else can a person be once they pass seventy?”

“What?” Victoria exclaimed, while purposely displaying an over-blown surprised appearance. “Are you trying to tell me that somewhere deep down inside, you're not a dirty old man?”

“Dirty?” Rudolf sternly replied. “I can't say anything about being a dirty old man. But I certainly can tell you how it feels to be an old man.”

Victoria just smiled and then lovingly, gave him another kiss. “I love you, dear, and am really going to miss you these next few months.”

“Yo, tambien,” Rudolf softly replied as he wrapped his arms around her and gave her one last hug. “Now be sure and call me as soon as you get to Ft. Lauderdale, okay? I don't want to be here not knowing if you two ever arrived or not. ... I also want to know if Lisa and Gaines have blessed us with any more grandkids.”

Victoria nodded.

Simultaneously closing their car doors a few seconds later, both she and Maria said their final goodbyes and proceeded toward the airport's automated glass doors. As they passed through, a gray and white seagull flew directly overhead.

Strangely enough, it appeared to be in search of something, but wasn't quite sure where to find it.