



Twelve

## *Nobody's Funeral*

"We got two skulls today. Good ones. No one claimed the bodies at the morgue. Indians. Probably accident victims." Len absolutely beamed and the corners of his mouth turned up. "Don't worry about the mess. We're almost done."

Len pointed to the old kerosene cans on the stove. At the far side of the kitchen, I could see Mario, his thick shoulders and broad back directly in front of me. Like some ancient warlock stirring a cauldron, he leaned over the can and poked at the mess.

"My God," I said.

"You know we'd never get a skull in the States," Mario turned his head toward me. "Len sweet-talked the woman at the morgue into it yesterday. I picked up the skulls this morning. Hope you're not squeamish, Gail."

Len turned to his friend and pointed to the can. "Mario, yours looks clean. What a honey! You can put it out on the wall in the back. It can dry out there. With the sun as strong as it is, it'll be as white as paper in a week or so. Mine's not quite done."

Mario removed his skull with a sturdy stick. He surveyed it, walked out the kitchen door to the thick adobe wall that surrounded the pool of mud that was our tiny backyard. He reached

high, placed the skull on the top, and stepped back. "I'll call mine Louie, after Louie Prima. Do you remember, 'Sing Sing Sing?'"

"I sure do." Len hummed the Louie Prima standard and did a little dance step. "Great music. Maybe I should call mine Keely Smith in honor of his songbird." They both laughed.

Leaning forward over the bubbling can, Len waited until the last bits of flesh bubbled away into the stinky brine.

"A female, around thirty years old," Len said. "Hello, Keely."

I could imagine limpid brown eyes and coarse black hair, possibly in thick braids. Now all this bony, human composition would be a learning tool for two gringos so that they could grasp anatomy. I understood the logic. Still, something seemed wrong. It offended me to have human remains in my kitchen. It distorted the brightness of the morning.

"I'll take yours now," Mario said as Len stepped out of the way. "C'mon, Keely." Mario gently placed the second skull on the adobe wall next to its companion just as Paula walked through the door into the kitchen. She dropped the bags and stared. Fear flashed across her face. I met her gaze.

"*Madre de Dios, no se puede mirar. Esto es malo.*" She blessed herself. She looked at me, then at Len. She read my mind and said, "*¿Dónde está la niña?*"

I pointed to the bedroom and nodded. She immediately went in, and with the baby in her arms, hurried out the door to fresh air.

"Upset you a little, huh?" Len asked.

My voice went up a notch. "I'll say."

I didn't want to present obstacles, and yet an uncomfortable sensation of hostility came over me.

The wall blocked off almost the entire mountain behind, but what it left for a view had been spectacular. Now, heightened by the silhouettes of two skulls, it looked like some bizarre picture by Salvador Dali. Two soul-disturbing skulls huddled together, as if for warmth, against the scraps of clouds.

"Well, what do you think?" Len asked.

I drew back into myself. "I shall never forget this to the end of my life."

I looked out toward the top of the mountain from the window over the kitchen sink. Two skulls bleaching in the intense sun of early fall greeted me. I recalled the beautiful native that I had seen only an hour ago and his fine face.

The hollow, staring skulls challenged me as I stood at the sink. I wondered if I would ever be able to cook in the kitchen again, but I knew I had to, even though the idea repulsed me. I fought to overcome the nausea, which engulfed me in a sickening revulsion.

"It's hard for me to get my mind around this." I swallowed hard. I wanted to maintain a distance from the horrible sight, the terrible stench. I had trouble breathing. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't even think, except to wonder if even God knew how this came to be.

"Do you have any idea how lucky we are? We could never do this in the States. It would be impossible."

I could only stare.

"I'm going to annotate all the articulations in Indian ink, right on the skull."

"Annotate what?"

"All the articulations in the cranium! There must be dozens. I'll really learn 'em that way."

I had to say or do something. "Clean this up as soon as possible. I can't have a baby in this filth."

"I will," he muttered. His eyebrows knitted in a frown, puzzled at my lack of enthusiasm.

I retreated back toward the living room with fresh air and light. I found the baby in Paula's arms and took Jeanne from her, then went outside. All the while, Paula muttered under her breath. She dragged a chair from the living room and followed me outdoors to the verandah with it. I sat down. She handed me a blanket, which I wrapped around Jeanne. I sat outdoors in the frosty sunlight for some time. The slightest hint of wind blew.

As I sat there, it continued to blow, freshening the scene, spreading waves of clean, clear air. I stroked Jeanne's forehead with the tips of my fingers. At that moment, I had a vivid picture of my family and the house I grew up in. I wanted the same qualities in a home: cleanliness, cooperation, attention to food, the rearing of children. Home added up to security and safety.

Living with Len meant chaos. There was a casual lifting of normal rules. All this led to choices for some purpose—a higher purpose for him and for me. At least, that was how he presented it.

Higher purpose or no, I flinched whenever I recalled the gruesome sight in the kitchen. I was no coward. I had looked, even though it made me shudder. I also felt a sense of desecration for the horrible mutilation of those two human beings. For Len and Mario, there was only a satisfaction—a rare opportunity for learning.

Len and Mario got rid of the cans and the liquid. Paula and I were finally able to put the produce away. Still fresh and nicely colored, I hung the branch of bananas on a nail in the corner.

Paula went into her room and shut the door. That afternoon, she left for her weekend off. When she left, I knew she wouldn't return. She didn't.



In the days that followed, I contemplated the jarring, vacant-eyed skulls perched outside my window. An awareness began to roost in me, a new intimacy with death. How easily Louie and Keely caught my attention. I began to get used to them in a way that I supposed medical students get used to dealing with death very early in their careers. I never succeeded, however, in developing the sense of humor around the subject so typical of the students. Rather, I developed a darker awareness—one that fractured the optimistic outlook of my youth.

The skulls conveyed the fragile nature of life. They no longer appeared horrible. I became accustomed to their presence. Not

surprisingly, in their powerless state they began to exert a strange kind of power over me, and I felt an obligation to look at them, although they never sought my gaze.

On All Souls Day, I lit a candle and ate supper with Louie and Keely as is the custom in Mexico on the Day of the Dead. Who else was there, except me, to pay the last respects? I found a book of poems by T. S. Eliot at the library and selected a passage to read my friends.

*And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language  
of the living.  
Here the intersection of the timeless moment . . .*

— Four Quartets