

Monday Morning

Sylvia Vasquez opened the back door and peeped out, though there was no need for caution. It was too early to worry about the neighbors seeing her in the ratty bathrobe and worn slippers, and the morning fog would provide cover for a quick run to the mailbox. The Señor would be upset if he knew she had not picked up the mail since Friday—he had warned her about mailbox thieves and instructed her to clear the box as soon as the mail carrier left. Sylvia shrugged. He and the Señora were out of town again and would be all week. She had been far too busy enjoying the weekend with her new man to think about her employers' mail.

Unlocking the steel security gate that led to the alley, she opened the flap on the mailbox and started to reach for the daily stack of catalogs and magazines, letters on top. It took a moment to comprehend that a mass of crumpled toilet tissue had been crammed into the box. Sylvia scowled. That boy across the street again, of course. *Tonto Adolescente!* With a sigh of vexation, she grabbed a handful of the tissue.

A sudden flash erupted from the mailbox. A bright tongue of flame ignited the paper, driving a blast of scorching heat at Sylvia's face. The mailbox exploded with a loud *crack-bang*, sending bits of black metal and masonry flying.

Sylvia staggered backwards, her nostrils filled with the acrid sting of gunpowder. The clamor of barking dogs sounded hollow and far away through her ringing ears. As she waved at the cloud of blue-black smoke, struggling to grasp what had happened, a warm wetness drew her eyes down to her right hand. Dazed and confused, Sylvia stared at the blood pulsing from the stumps where her index and middle fingers used to be. Where was her *abuela's* ruby ring?

She opened her mouth to scream for help, but no sound emerged. Unbearable pressure, like the coils of a giant python squeezing her rib cage, robbed her of air. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

Her galloping heart ceased beating and Sylvia Vasquez dropped to the ground.