

A Woman of Endurance (novel excerpt)

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Chapter Ten—Back to the field

The mosquitos buzzed and occasionally landed on a perfumed cheek. Doña Filomena and her ladies stirred their afternoon coffee with tiny spoons and spoke of inconsequential things. Shadows of faceless *negras* wove around them in their silent service. Don Tomás and his gentlemen sipped sweet rum and sat back to puff on their *puros* after a long day of buying and selling other men's labor. Far beyond the house, the cane fields of *Las Mercedes* fanned out like a rippling sea of wave after wave of creamy plumes, the *guajanas*, gently swaying, their leaves whispering into the night.

Once the flowers fell and the ground was covered in their withering petals, the *jornaleros* would make their way down from the hills while it was still dark. Desperate for work, the poor white migrant workers, left the mountain and their emaciated families to work for a few *centavos* a day side by side with *los negros* who made nothing. They carried their empty lunch tins and their lanterns held out on long sticks. From the *hacienda*, they looked like long strings of pearls advancing down the mountainside.

By the time they reached the valley, the sun was just up over the hills. They could see the cane fields of *Las Mercedes* in the early morning breeze. Soon, they joined the line of *negros* hacking away at the stalks. Anonymous arms swung, dislodged, rose and then swung again. The slashing blades flashed under the sun, broken hat brims quivered with each stroke. Bowed backs followed, gathering stalks and swinging the bundles onto the waiting ox-cart beds. Men, women and beast strained, pulled and dripped sweat. The stench of brute labor hung in the air.

Romero sat high above, blocking the light, his shadow leaving behind trails of cigar smoke. His silhouette clearly showed his bony shoulders, cloak and tilted hat--a huge vulture, poised and awaiting his prey. The oxen stood ready, scratching at the vermin underfoot and drooling as their cargo got heavier and heavier. And under it all, the sticky, cane juice, attracting hungry insects and rodents. The quick slithering snakes crisscrossed the field.

There was no wasted effort on a plantation. The same oxcart that collected the morning's cut cane and took it to the train yard, delivered fresh water and the noontime meal. If any one of these elements were out of place, it meant wasted time and energy and someone would have to pay the price of discipline. So there were very few mistakes made.

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Pastora prepared the noon meal and sent Pola out to the fields to deliver it. It was the first time she had been in the fields since she got here. She hated the household women with their airs of superiority but she hated the fields more. The scorching sun got familiar with her back and shoulders as soon as she climbed into the oxcart. It burned through the thin cloth of her blouse and

heated the crown of her head, even through the man's straw hat that flopped on either side of her face. As the wagon pulled out of the *batey* and into the first section of cane, Pola remembered the feel of insects crawling on her skin, the cloying sweetness of the cane juice, the constant stinging of the mosquitos drawn by the sweat glazing arms and legs. The men at least had their ragged pants to protect their legs, the women had to endure ants and spiders crawling up their skirts and clinging to the hair on their private parts. She shivered even under the noonday sun.

Flaco, the cart driver, had dropped her off at the edge of the field. She brought six barrels of assorted yams—*ñames*, *yautías*, *batatas*—and four of still steaming pinto beans. She held on to her bamboo pole, her only aid in hoisting the heavy containers. The driver was busy with the four barrels of rain water that were to replace the four empty ones near the workers. So she slipped the ropes of the first two buckets on either end of the pole and made her way into the food shed that stood at the edge of the field. The line of workers was not far ahead but, she knew, no one could stop to help. They were to keep swinging those machetes and sweeping away the cut stalks until the very last minute. Romero and two of his men, whips at the ready, sat under a nearby tree, making sure the line didn't break one second sooner than necessary.

She stopped once to readjust her load and wipe away the sweat that had sprouted under her hat. As she looked out at the field, she saw the line of men and women; step, swing, chop, throw back, the rhythm of the cutting never wavered and didn't vary from one plantation to the next. She watched the workers, midnight black, earthen brown, cinnamon red—skin hues she had found wanting up at the house in the *mulatas* with their loose curls and diluted complexions. It was good to see her own skin reflected in the people before her.

But their stooped shoulders and ragged clothes reminded her also of the pain of the life she had left behind. She was of them but not with them. She had grown used to the softer ways of life on the hill. On hot and sticky days, she appreciated the shaded trees of the upper *batey* and the slower pace of the women at Las Agujas where there was no ever-present whip or raised voices cutting into the air as soon as work slowed for a moment of rest. She shook these thoughts out of her head, hoisted the bamboo pole and headed for the food shed. As she made her way to the appointed site, she noticed the glares from some of the women who were loading the cut stalks onto the now empty wagon.

The overseers came first and got their individually packed *fiambreras*. The stacked and covered tin containers kept their meals separate and warm. Pastora herself packed them and no one else was allowed to touch the meals. One of the overseers came over and grabbed the stack with not a glance at the woman who held them out. He then returned to the rest of them, now seated around a table in the covered shack that protected them from the fierce sun. The bottle of moonshine was already being passed around.

Next came the cane working men. The *macheteros* came first, big boned and reeking of sweat. In turn, each pulled off his cracked straw sombreros and accepted the *dita* she handed them—*viandas* dripping in bean sauce. Pola scooped and served without comment. She had too much work and too little interest in the men that lined up before her. One man held out his hands and waited. Even after she had doled out his portion, he stood his ground.

“*Bueno, ya!*” Annoyed at his holding up the line, she looked up into a familiar face.

“It doesn’t hurt so much anymore.” It was the one they call Simón, the one from the cabin. Pola felt her face flash warm as she remembered the taste of his blood on that day months before.

“My hand...it’s much better now. Rufina did a good job...on both of us, don’t you think?”

For once, she didn’t have a ready response. She was sorry about the biting but she had been taken aback by his sudden appearance.

“*Simón, coño, hombre, hace hambre!*” Impatient for their food, the gatherers who collected the cut cane and loaded the wagons, grumbled irritably and pushed him on before she had a chance to say anything. The men all took their meals with their dirty, calloused hands and dropped to the ground under a nearby tree. They sat cross-legged, quickly digging into the meal with hooked fingers.

Next came the women. The first in line took her portion, thanked Pola and went off to sit by herself. The next few women accepted the offered meal in silence, too tired to even acknowledge Pola’s outstretched hands. As Pola dipped the ladle into the bucket and scooped another portion loud voices came from further down the line.

A woman in a dirty green head wrap spoke loud enough to make sure Pola could hear. “*Míra, Micaela, what we have here? Una cocola, passing for a mulata.*” Conspiratorial laughter from the other women.

Pola paused for a moment, pushed the laughter away and kept dipping and serving.

“*¿Quién se cree que es?*” the same taunting voice over the others.

“She no better than us.”

“Be careful, Leticia, she might hear you. I hear she has a temper.”

“*¡Qué se joda!* Let her hear. She needs to stop walking around here like she’s better than us.”

If what they wanted was Pola’s attention, they now had it. They were clearly discussing her and their conversation was meant for her to overhear. As soon as she realized they were talking about her, Pola’s attention was riveted on the speaker and the group of three or four other women who crowded around enjoying her performance. As Pola went on with her work, she felt her ears getting hot and the muscles in her neck tensing.

The men under the tree had finished their meals and were enjoying their respite after a whole morning of back-breaking labor under the sun. All too soon they would have to pick up their machetes and return to their labor. In the meantime, somebody pulled a *clave* out of his back pocket and began tapping out a complex beat. One man began clapping, others stomping their feet, adding to the syncopated rhythm and soon the rest joined in.

“Look at her. With that nappy head, flat nose and fat ass, she should be out here sweating it out just like the rest of us. She no better.” The jeering was getting closer to the front of the line.

The chorus of female voices supported the taunting. Their heads snaked closer together, becoming one beast with many heads and multiple arms but a unified voice.

“¡Presumida!”

“Getting all snooty ‘cause she’s sitting up there with the house girls who think because they got lighter skin and looser hair they don’t smell the same shit the rest of us do.”

“Well, they don’t, do they?” Laughter.

“Putting on airs!” The more they spoke, the more scornful the woman’s tone. “She ain’t nowhere near pretty enough or ...”

“She must be forgetting just how black she really is.”

“¡Presentá!” The woman in green almost spit out the word.

“She ain’t no finer than the rest of us.”

The hair on the nape of Pola’s neck bristled. Sweat was now dripping down her forehead. She heard the jeering as she made her way from the serving table back to the wagon to replenish the empty buckets. She dropped the empties and positioned the full buckets, weighed down and dipping dangerously at either end of the pole. If she dropped the food, she’d have to go back and return on foot to replace the spillage. Or worse, the field hands would just have to work all day without food. She remembered what that felt like, the clawing feeling in the pit of the stomach, the dizziness and all the while, the overseer’s whip at the ready if you slowed the line down. Once, she fell and the sting of the lash on her legs got her up again. The cane juice on her open slash burned and drew even more insects. She wouldn’t wish that torment on anyone. No, she wouldn’t spill one drop. So she tried to ignore the taunts, tried to move beyond their words and their resentment. But they followed her and began taking root somewhere deep inside.

The overseers had finished one jug of moonshine and were working on the next. Some were already snoring, others leaning on the table, full and satisfied after their meal, their drink and the heat that reached into their hut and made them heavy with sleep.

“What you think she got down there that we don’t?”

“I bet she’s spreading them for the *patrón* every night.”

“All those weeks holed up in Rufina’s cabin, maybe she got herself some powerful pussy powder to make master happy and keep her up there where she got no business being.”

“Now, wait a minute, Leticia,” another voice interrupted. “We none of us got to do nothing to get the *blancos* to be looking under our skirts, or don’t you remember? They just take whatever they want, ain’t no magic about it.”

“Oh, *mira pa’* ‘ya, Magdalena’s grown a tongue.” The sarcasm dripped from the words. And then, the threat implied, “Who asked *you*?”

In a quieter tone, “You getting carried away, that’s all. Why don’t you leave the woman alone?”

“Who the hell are you to tell me, tell us, what to do?” Leticia looked around, getting visual support from the nods and grins of her friends. “Mind your damn business or you just might get hurt.” Laughter.

The other woman backed down, “I’m just saying...”

Pola continued scooping up food into every *dita* until finally, the skinny, bow-legged woman in a torn green head rag, the one they called Leticia, strutted up to the table, her sneer inescapable as she stuck out her bowl.

Having worked herself up into confrontation, Leticia called Pola out. “*Oye, negra colá.* What are *you* doing up at the house, living like you some white woman or some white man’s bastard? With a face like that and hair that...”

Pola could feel the words curling up in the pit of her stomach taking more defined shape. She looked at the woman straight in her eyes, “I’d be *real* careful if I was you.” She scooped up a hefty ladleful and dumped it, hard, into Leticia’s bowl. Half the contents splattered onto the woman’s skirt as she tried to steady her hand.

“*¡Coño! ¡Ten cuidado!* What the hell is wrong with you?”

Pola’s smile was laced with scorn. “*Lenguilarga*, maybe if you would pay more attention to what you’re supposed to be doing instead of running your mouth, you just might be able to hang on to your food. Next!”

All at once, there was silence on the line. No one ever challenged Leticia, La Loca. She was not a woman to be tested. The other women backed away.

Leticia was about to reach over the table at Pola’s face when Romero’s voice cut through the air, “*¡Mira, Loca! Muévete.*” He prodded the woman with the whip handle, sending the rest of her meal onto the ground, “you’re holding up the line.”

“What about my food?”

“You had your portion, now move on!”

The woman spit on the ground and glared at Pola as she sauntered away. “*Me debes una y me la vas a pagar.*” The threat was tightly coiled in her last words and she looked back menacingly as she was forced to leave the line.

“I’m not going anywhere. You want to see me, here I am.” Pola turned from Leticia to the next person on line, but her hands were itching. When the last woman had walked away with her lunch, Pola began gathering her things, trying to set aside her agitation. She would not risk losing her job on the hill because of this woman’s foul mouth. She wouldn’t let Leticia’s malice make her a field hand again.

Romero had made it a point to glare at Pola before going back to his cohort, all of whom were in some stage of slumber by now. She remembered his sneering and his expectation of having her under his control. She would not risk it.

Romero joined the other overseers as they passed around the jug. He passed it on, not taking his share. Instead his eyes roamed the clearing. The lunch break was almost over and they had to get these slaves back to work if they were to meet their daily quota. But, as he leaned back against the overseer's shed, he too dozed off in the afternoon sun.

Los negros resting under the tree, stretched out to relax before they were called back for the afternoon *faena*.

Pola had stowed most of her items back in the wagon. She was about to load on the last of the serving utensils when she felt someone come up behind her. Leticia stood there, a mocking look on her face, surrounded by her small knot of friends who apparently didn't want to miss the excitement.

Pola had tried to focus on her work but now, something long held and dangerous stirred within her. "You want something with me."

"You cost me my food," Leticia nearly spit out her words.

"Your mouth cost you your food."

"You know god damned well what I said about you is right." Leticia stepped so close Pola could smell her fetid breath.

"You need to be real careful what comes out of the smelly hole you call a mouth. Now get out of my way." With that, Pola pushed the woman aside and was about to climb into the wagon.

"*Bembona, molleta, cocola del diablo*. What's an ugly, knocked kneed, tar black bitch like you doing sitting up there by the big house?"

Pola stopped. She turned to the woman, still gripping the ladle she had used to serve the meal. She felt the fissure inside widen, followed by a strange combination of vigilance and extreme calm. Every fiber of her body was on alert. She hadn't felt this sensation in years, but remembered it well, recognized its face. Pola knew it was way beyond the time when she could avoid what was coming, regardless of consequences. Her hands began to quiver again.

"What you got to offer, sitting up there like you somebody? Unless you got some other hidden talent," this pointing to Pola's groin, "that you can offer the *patrón*. But that can't be because he can get black ass anywhere, so what special talent you got up under there? Or maybe you got some special jungle juice to tie him up and make him think you something."

"You finished now? I want to make sure you done because once I finish with you, you won't be saying much else for a while." Pola's voice was steady, quiet, controlled.

"What you going to do?" Leticia made sure her challenge was loud enough for all to hear.

Pola tried to control the heat that was ballooning behind her eyes. Her ears were already on fire and her muscles on alert. The effort of controlling her rising anger manifested as a trembling lower lip.

“What have we here? A scared rabbit? Going to run back to the big house to complain to...?” Leticia’s swagger was cut short.

Before anyone could react, Pola’s ladle arched up and over and made contact. Teeth and blood went flying. Leticia instinctively covered her mouth as she felt the blood spurting from her face and onto her hands. She was startled at first but quick enough to block the second blow. It missed her face, but the ladle landed on the side of her head sending the green head wrap flying. Her hair stood out all over her head.

Now enraged, Leticia forgot about protecting herself and grabbed for Pola’s hair. The two women went down, landing on the remains of the meal. The half-full *ditas* splintered into jagged pieces under their weight. They rolled, all tangled skirts, bare legs and flying arms. Leticia went for Pola’s eyes. Pola protected her face but Leticia once again went for the hair. She pushed her away and screamed as Leticia came away clutching clumps of her hair. Growling now, Pola raked her nails across Leticia’s face, adding more blood to her already soaked bodice. There was a jumble of limbs and then, bare-breasted and loose-legged, they tore at each other as they rolled on the ground. Exposed legs and thighs were soon encrusted with food, blood and mud.

Leticia’s friends cheered her on, enjoying the spectacle. They didn’t call her Leticia La Loca for no reason. Other women hung back, waiting for the men to act. The men nearby enjoyed the entertainment too much to try to contain it, taking in the exhibition of the women’s privates as they rolled on the ground.

The overseers were too lulled by their midday drink and too indifferent to some black bitches that would get theirs later. As long as the women got back to work on time and didn’t hold up the line, the *majordomos* didn’t much care what was going on.

Simón, who had been half asleep, heard the commotion and jumped up. He ran to the circle surrounding the entangled pair and interposed his body between the two still-fighting women. He pushed Leticia away and caught Pola from behind. He wrapped his powerful arms around her, pinning hers down to her sides. He turned his back to Leticia whose blows fell on his shoulders rather than landing on her target.

Sensing their fun was about to end, a few men stepped up to hold Leticia back. When she couldn’t reach Pola with her body, Leticia flung words, curses and insults in her direction. Even as the men pulled the women apart, their legs continued to swing, not fully aware that the fight was now over.

The men pulled Leticia La Loca back to her friends and stood around to make sure there wouldn’t be a resurgence of the conflict. Meanwhile, Simón hoisted Pola off her feet and carried her away, still pinning her arms from behind, taking great strides to get her as far away from the other women as possible. It was the first time he had gotten close enough to touch her and he was unwilling to let her go. He carried her like that, all the way to the serving table. He approached the working space backwards, and lowered himself on to the edge, still restraining the woman who was struggling to be released. At least now she wasn’t kicking and screaming anymore. He sat and held her like that until her breathing slowed and the tension in her body began to ebb.

When she ran out of energy, Pola finally relaxed into his body. He loosened his hold only to feel her redouble her defenses. So he tightened his grip again. She made herself limp and as

heavy as she could so that she could renew her struggle as soon as he relented. It was then she noticed the sounds coming from his throat. She didn't know if it had been there all along but now that she was finally still, she heard the humming and felt the vibrations of his chest against her back. She couldn't place it, but those round sounds whispered near her ear took her to some distant memory that temporarily distracted her. Where had she heard this before?

Sensing the fight ooze out of her, Simón released her so that she could stand on her own. She pulled away, staring at him in confusion.

"Let me help you." She recovered, brushing aside the fleeting memory. Standing at a distance from him now, she slowly gathered up the remnants of her shapeless dress, pulled at the tattered ends and brushed away as much dirt and debris as she could. Still keeping an eye on him, she went on to rearrange her disheveled hair.

Simon picked up the cloth she had used as a cushion for her pole and tore off a piece. Dipping it in what was left of the clean water; he approached and reached out to wipe the blood from her face. She pushed his hand away, unwilling to let him come near her again. He gave up, stepped back; arms folded before him, and watched her, not with a leer or with amusement like the others, openly examining her movements.

"Are you all right now?"

She ignored him.

"*Mujer*," he raised his voice, refusing to let it go, "are you all right now?"

"Scratches. That's all."

"Oh. So you can be civil?"

She glared at him, searching his face for veiled meaning. She found none.

"Come, I'll help you with these things."

"Don't need no help. I can handle myself."

"I see that."

Again, she studied him, not knowing how to take his words.

He bent down and began to pack her things. Pola watched him in silence. She found the image of his bent back and his working muscles disturbing. No one, no one, had ever helped her carry her load. This man, what did he want? Why was he always there? She nearly jumped as the clanging bell cut through the stillness; time for the cutters to get back to their lines. Simón hurried to place the rest of her things in the wagon. Then he nodded and turned to go on his way.

"*Señor*," she could barely get the word out.

He stopped, surprised at her voice, "*Simón*," he corrected her.

“*Simón. Gracias.*” She didn’t remember the last time she had expressed gratitude to anyone, not even Rufina, and the word felt uncomfortable in her mouth.

“*Por nada, Pola. Buen día,*” and then he was gone.

In the distance, she heard the sound of the approaching railroad cars. Flaco, the driver, had to deliver the morning load and prepare for the second trip. With great difficulty, Pola hoisted herself up to the edge of the now cane-laden wagon. Her head was splitting but the bleeding had stopped. She gingerly touched the bald spots on her scalp. She looked down at her ruined dress, the one she had taken such care to keep neat and clean. It was shapeless and ugly but it was the only one she owned.

Pola remembered the faces of the women. The image of Leticia La Loca, with her broken teeth and swollen head, stayed with her as the driver climbed onto the seat. Why all that hatred from a woman Pola had never seen before? She thought about all the other women too, the ones who held back but were equally angry at her.

Her years in the field hadn’t been so long ago that she had forgotten. She had been one of them once. She knew that, but for some unexplained mystery, she would have been one of them now. She might still be sent out into the fields if she wasn’t careful. Wouldn’t she be just as angry had she been spending her days toiling in the cane and fighting off the men who seemed never tired of taking advantage of the one person on the plantation that was worth even less than they? She remembered the brutal sun on her arms and the hot skirts over the layers of tied rags that protected her legs from the scorpions that infested the fields. The cane juice saturated her clothing and made it stick to her in the blazing afternoons. The mosquitoes feasted on her flesh and the rats scurried around her feet. Her hat offered the only protection but even that yielded rivulets of sweat that stung and blinded her as she made her way behind the line of cutters. She now watched the line of workers as they resumed their work and was thankful that she wasn’t one of them. And that too was a new sensation. She had had so little to be thankful about. She would have to savor it, take in its dimensions, as it seemed, she might have cause to use it again.

She fell back against the loaded cane stalks, too exhausted to move or even think anymore. The events of the morning weighed her down. Her aching legs dangled off the back of the wagon bed, her empty barrels and carrying pole jostled around her with the movement of the oxcart. Looking out over the field, she was barely conscious of her eyes seeking out the now familiar figure of the tall man who had held her just a little while ago.

Then she noticed the two little boys, running naked in and out of the cane stalks. Why were these children here, now? One long swipe of a blade and they would be gone. No one noticed their proximity. She was about to shout a warning when the boys disappeared into the cane. With a lurch, the wagon turned left at the lane and made its way back to the plantation house.

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Tía Josefa watched Pola from across the *batey*. She stood in Las Agujas and noted the disheveled woman who got down from the wagon; the bruises, the blood stains, the torn garments and the halting step. She didn’t know what had happened in the field, but seeing Pola’s attire, she

could imagine. She said nothing, turned back to the embroidery *choza* and closed the door. Pola returned the utensils to the kitchen and went to clean up at the water barrel. Then she sat behind the cooking cabin to repair her torn dress.

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The women in the cane field had good reason to resent the women in *Las Agujas*. Women of the embroiderers' workshop were some of the best dressed *negras* in the area. Their skill with the needle made their work prized by the wealthy women in town and throughout the island and gave them access to the best materials. Every week, bolt after bolt of the most luxurious fabrics available came into their workroom. The seamstresses and embroiderers in *Las Agujas* worked sometimes all day and into the night, to meet deadlines for elegant *fiestas* or to produce luxury items, bed and table linen, for the households of the very rich. Men in the capital prized the fine workmanship on their *guayaberas* and fine ruffled dress shirts.

One of the benefits of their work was the fact that they could keep the remnants of their sewing, insignificant scraps left on the cutting room floor, by-products of the fashionable garments favored by the county gentry. These leavings weren't missed by the white women who were so overjoyed with their orders that they never even noticed the remainders. The black women who created the fashionable gowns used these bits and pieces to create their own clothes. These *retazos* weren't enough to create whole garments (that would have been too noticeable) but they made for impressive trim or yoke for the dresses of the *negras* who worked the cloth. Compared to the shapeless, bleached fabric of the average slave's clothing, their dresses were of superior quality fabrics and were well-tailored, sporting pleats, ruffles and ribbons and other embellishments.

After the field incident, Pastora sent another woman to deliver the midday meal. Pola was kept busy with cooking, herb gathering and tasks in *Las Agujas*. A few days after the fight, Pastora sent Pola in to see Tía. The women were at their usual work table under the mango tree. As Pola approached, Tía interrupted her work for just a moment. She took one good look at Pola and said, "*Mujer*, you look terrible in that shapeless piece of nothing dress. It's time you changed into something else."

Had the old woman lost her mind? "You know good and well I don't have anything else."

"You do now. Go on in and change. And throw out that nastiness you call mended."

Confused, Pola did as she was told and went in to her cot. There lay two complete outfits side by side. The clothes and colors seduced her. She had never worn anything but the colorless, formless sacks provided for a woman who meant nothing, who should have nothing. Colors were for white people—a luxury not granted to field slaves. But here were skirts, blouses, wraps for her—in colors.

Pola sank to the floor and ran her hand over the garments nearest her. There was a blue skirt, a little faded and soft, from many washings, but much nicer than anything she ever dreamed of. The blouse with it was made of sturdy white cloth with shorter sleeves meant for ease of work, simple except for a bit of lace at the neck. The apron was long and functional, in a flower print that had seen better days with large practical pockets and a strong waistband.

She reached out a shaky hand, looking around to make sure this was her cot, that these things were intended for her. The clothes laid out on the right, were much grander. There was another skirt, a deep blue broadcloth with a fitted waistband ending in long strips of the same fabric. Just above it, sat a pale yellow, high collared blouse with pleats running down the front and tiny white buttons down the back. Each sleeve ended in gathers at the cuff. There was a new striped head cloth, blue and yellow stripes to match the rest—all brand new. And all by itself was a strikingly white apron, its deep pockets bordered in bits of lace, the hem embroidered in tiny. Someone had worked on this for hours. Except for this last, these were the clothes of a *señorita*, never worn before, she could tell. Pola sat back and stared, open-mouthed. Before coming to Las Mercedes, she had never so much as touched such clothes. In fact, she had only seen such finery from a distance, since the white women who wore them didn't so much as acknowledge the existence of breeding women.

On the floor, by her knees, sat a pair of tied shoes. They looked hard and punishing. These couldn't be for her. Pola had never worn a pair of shoes in her life and judging by these, she counted herself lucky that she had never had to. She pushed them further under the cot where they could be overlooked. Perhaps no one would notice.

She sat back again and stared at it all. The blue fabric reminded her too much of the ocean waters she had turned away from. The blouse, like those she had now seen on the *señoritas* who visited Doña Filo, seemed alien to her. She looked away from the fancy clothes she guessed were meant for Sunday service and put on the plainer versions, slipping on the skirt and having some difficulty maneuvering the buttons on the blouse. The clothes felt soft and foreign against her skin, like an unexpected caress. She slipped on the rough cloth to counteract the luxury of the other garments and reminded herself not to get too comfortable in this world of privilege that could be snatched away at any moment. Still, she delighted in the feel of the cloth brushing her legs as she left the cabin.

As she headed for the worktable, she caught sight of Tia Josefa standing under the mango tree. The woman was fiddling with her keys. Why would this old woman arrange all of this for her? Pola was surprised to find pressure building behind her eyes. When was the last time she was moved to tears of affection for anyone? What was she supposed to do now? She would have to think about this. She ducked away before the old woman could see her. It was too much. Too much was happening too fast and she felt almost dizzy with all the conflicting emotions.

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As Simón raised and lowered his machete, he remembered Pola's fury as she defended herself in the cane field. He remembered what it felt like to put his arms around her and carry her out of danger's way. The feel of her body brought to mind another woman. His Amina, black as a warrior's blade, floated up from the past and still haunted him after all these many years. She too had worlds living behind her eyes. She too was a fighter, facing her attackers, dagger in hand, head cloth fallen and forgotten, modesty ignored in her need to protect. Restrained in chains, he couldn't take his eyes away from the horror before him. He had cursed, yelled, raged and then, begged, pleaded for her release.

The first blow came as she stood protectively, facing her attackers, her back to him. He heard the crack as her head caved in on the side and the blood flowed. She hit the ground just feet from him. Stunned into silence, he watched the puddle of blood pooling around her head in slow motion. Fury distorting their features, the men fell on her. Not far away, he struggled helplessly, the iron spokes of his shackles biting into his flesh with every move. But he continued struggling against his chains, rubbing away his skin and eventually cutting deep welts into his body and cutting into sinew. He felt no pain, only hatred and futility. Infuriated by his helplessness he sat, tears blurring what was happening but hearing everything. His prayer to Allah was that He would make Amina mercifully unaware of the rest. She died with her hands instinctively shielding her swollen belly.

When they tired of ravaging her body, they stood over what was left of her, raised rifles over her rounded belly and struck over and over again until she lay a broken and bloody mound. He cursed the men, the sky, Allah himself. He had come to be thankful for the blow that finally knocked him out. But he would never forget the sounds, the dull pummeling punctuated by the men's grunts as they finished their work. Every time he heard the thud of a pounded calabash his heart would break once more for that woman who stood such little chance of saving their future.

And now this woman, Pola of the black skin and silent pain, brought to mind that other girl woman. Pola's anger had been simmering for many years. She had learned to stoke that fire, keep it burning. But under it all, behind the defensive wall, he knew she was as tender as the young warrior-woman with the calabash belly. He could see Pola's spark of life even if she couldn't.

He had deprived himself of a woman for many years. There would never be another child. He had made that vow long ago. They would never take that away from him again. But maybe after all this time, there might be a chance for another kind of future. A man and a woman, simply that. He had stopped asking much of this world. He had just survived. But now, feelings that he had kept in check for years were beginning to stir like awakened spirits. Maybe it wasn't too late after all.