

# TODOS SANTOS

A NOVEL BY  
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To the people of Todos Santos, who gave me a home.

# 1.

**T**he engines cut, and two hundred tons of metal and plastic and human flesh began the long glide back to earth. Most passengers that afternoon, busy balancing their dinner trash on overcrowded trays, fidgeting with headsets or snapping their lolling heads away from strangers as they drowsed, never noticed the start of the descent. Catherine Barnes, sandwiched in a middle seat, did. She hated to leave the sky. Up here, untethered, free from the gravity of husbands and sons, she stared out the window and saw pure patterns of light, shifting and changing.

“Have you been to Guatemala before?” The clean-cut young man in the window seat broke into Catherine’s thoughts. She’d been imagining how she would mix the colors packed in her paint box in the overhead bin—cerulean blue, flake white, ivory black, a touch of sienna—colors for the clouds and sky. Annoyed that he had, after all these hours, intruded through the comfortable privacy that divided them, she answered that she had been to Guatemala several times,

but always before on vacation. And then, because she couldn't help herself, because the compulsion to be polite drove her to it, she asked the fresh-faced youth where he was headed.

"We have a mission on the coast. I'm taking the bus there tomorrow."

A missionary. She might have guessed from his white shirt and tie. "Oh, the coast," she said. "It's nasty in the lowlands. Hot. Unbelievably humid."

"So I've been told. A difficult place, full of disease and poverty. I figure we can really make a difference there, amongst indigenous people struggling for their daily bread."

Make that *tortilla*, Catherine wanted to snap. The missionary leaned toward her to speak.

"They have so little. They *need* God's love."

She managed a thin smile. "I'll keep that in mind when I get to Todos Santos." The name of the town meant *All Saints*, but she doubted that its citizens prayed to Mary, Peter, John, and Paul, the pale-faced holy ones of their Spanish conquerors. Surely they would favor older, darker gods. Just the missionary's presence irked her, his simple certitudes, the arrogance of those professing to know right from wrong. Better by far to listen to the silence emanating from her son, Isaac, fourteen, recently flunked out of eighth grade, asleep in the aisle seat.

Isaac shifted. Catherine glanced at her son's loose blond curls straying over his collar, the pale eyelashes against flushed cheeks, so vulnerable in sleep, so precious. Too bad the messy ponytail made him look like the kind of kid gringos are famous for, spoiled and poorly groomed.

Outside the plane window the light show continued. Billowing thunderheads framed the setting sun. The missionary talked on with unstoppable enthusiasm. "I can't wait to see Guatemala City in the sunset."

"You won't," Catherine said, with secret satisfaction.

“In Guatemala it’s dark by six thirty, year round. Welcome to the tropics.”

A half hour later, when the landing gear finally bumped the tarmac, she was happy to leave the righteous young man behind. She roused Isaac and stretched from the multi-legged flight, ready to be back on earth.

Guatemala City no longer greeted arrivals with mariachi bands and machine guns, the way it had on Catherine’s first visit years ago, but it still had the capacity to unnerve. They entered the terminal, shuffled through *Migración*, two foreigners surrounded by natives returning to their homeland. Past Customs, she looked up at the visitors’ gallery, searching for her sister-in-law. A teeming mass of short, black-haired people—decked out in everything from designer jeans and platform shoes to colorful indigenous costumes—peered down, waving, whistling, signaling to arriving passengers. Whole families, entire villages, about to be reunited it seemed, and overjoyed at the prospect. Catherine felt a pang of envy. Where was Zelda? She checked over her shoulder for Isaac, as though he might have disappeared in the turmoil at the baggage carousel. His silence made him difficult to track. “Are you okay with those bags?” she asked.

He carried a large duffel in each hand, so that she could handle her cumbersome French easel, the wooden paint box with legs that folded up for portability. Isaac grunted assent. They passed gleaming counters proclaiming hotel and tourist services, currency exchange and tours, all oddly unmanned in the empty room, as though Guatemala had planned on a thriving portal welcoming thousands at a time and the guests had never showed. Instead, the planes dribbled in, one flight at a time. Glass doors disgorged the arriving passengers into the mob, kept outside. People shoved through the human wall, porters shouted,

horns honked. Finally she spotted Zelda, tall among the Guatemaltecos, her red hair, wild and kinky, streaming to her waist, a welcome sight. Catherine waved, and then used her French easel to carve a way through the crowd. Isaac followed with the duffles. Zelda, her large body swathed in native cloth, hugged Catherine and got banged in the knee by the paint box.

“Shit, Catherine! What have you got in there?” Without waiting for an answer, she put her arm around Isaac’s shoulder and pulled him toward her in a forced embrace. “How are you, kid?”

When he remained silent, Zelda coached. “Say hi, Isaac.”

“Hi, Aunt Zelda.”

Zelda led the way around puddles in the street, turned iridescent by streetlights in the early night. The air was fresh from the recent rain, sharp from the altitude of five thousand feet, smoky from cooking fires and exhaust from cars and trucks and buses that had never seen emission controls, and tingling with mythology, with a past more exotic than covered wagons and Plymouth Rock. Catherine breathed it in, freed from the atmosphere she’d left behind in Iowa.

She was glad it wasn’t raining when they reached Zelda’s pickup truck.

“You have to ride in the back with the luggage, Isaac,” Zelda said. Without a word, Isaac sprang into the back of the pickup. He arranged the duffle bags and settled himself among them, as if they made a cozy banquette.

“See?” Zelda said, “Kids love riding in the back.”

Catherine climbed in front and searched, sticking a hand into the crack between the seat and the back.

“Don’t bother looking,” Zelda said. “There aren’t any seat belts.”

Catherine could see Isaac through the back window of the cab. “What if it rains?”

“He’ll get wet.” This was the woman to whom she planned to entrust her fourteen-year-old nihilist son, counting on her to set limits, read him the riot act, and guard him from danger while she went on her research trip. “He’ll be fine,” Zelda said.

Zelda negotiated the pickup through the freshly washed but still dirty streets of the capital, neon lights screaming from businesses along the strip: Car Wash La Cabaña, Campero Pollo to Go, Pizza Hut—Llámanos! The mangling of cultures exhilarated Catherine. That she could speak another language felt miraculous to her, like walking through a wall, taking her behind the looking glass. They swerved and screeched through lanes of traffic. Stopped at a light, Zelda shouted “Jesus fucking Christ!” threw open her door, and leapt from the cab.

Through the back window Catherine saw Isaac pulling on one handle of a duffle. Grasping the other with two hands was a wiry man in rags. Horrified, Catherine stared at the strange man, his face contorted in struggle, his mouth gaping in a snarl, like a wild snaggletoothed dog, threatening her son. She heard Zelda’s voice shrieking “*Policía! Socorro! Vaya-cabrón-chíngate-hijo-de-puta!*,” saw Zelda appear over the back of the pickup, and realized finally that the tug-of-war was a robbery attempt.

Catherine yanked open her door. Her feet hit the pavement. She saw the ragged man dive from the truckbed, dart through the line of stopped cars, and disappear into an alley. Shaking, she climbed into the back, pulled Isaac into her arms, and started to sob, her panic changing to relief. He hugged her back with unusual warmth. “Relax, Mom. He wasn’t even armed. He never stood a chance against Aunt Z’s charging rhino act.”

Catherine felt the beginning of a laugh even as she cried.

Their journey resumed. Isaac insisted on riding in the back, over his mother's objections. Catherine tried to believe Zelda's reassurances that the most dangerous part of the trip was over. The road rose out of the bowl of Guatemala City, snaking upward into the dark forested mountains. At least the Pan-American Highway here, though battered, was four lanes wide and well traveled at this hour.

"How's life in Iowa? What's my dear brother up to?" Zelda asked.

"He's in the studio until all hours every night, painting a metaphoric cycle on the life of Poe," Catherine answered.

"Don't you mean, on the sex lives of undergraduates?"

"Zelda, do you have to be so . . . blunt?" Catherine had been one of those undergraduates once, a painting major in love with the dashing young art professor.

When a friend had told her this spring what the whole campus had apparently been talking about for several years, she'd been stunned. She'd never doubted Elliot's devotion. She'd called her sister-in-law, distraught.

"What should I do?" she'd asked. Zelda always had an answer.

"Do you want to leave him?"

Life without Elliot was inconceivable. In that case, Zelda suggested, why not get away for a little while, get some distance. Guatemala would be the perfect setting for her next picture book. And here she was.

They left the Pan-American on a grandiose cloverleaf, passed stands of pine trees, and started down toward Antigua. Now theirs was the only vehicle on the lonely road. It began to rain. Catherine peered through the

window at Isaac in the back of the pickup, rain pelting him. She shivered. “He’ll be soaked,” she said.

“We’ll be there soon.”

Zelda slowed to a crawl. The road was steep, the curves were sharp, the mountainside plunged into a deep ravine. Forests of roadside crosses made Catherine think of those who’d gone over the edge and not come back. Rain beat on the roof of the truck as they got to the bottom of the hill and reached the outlying buildings of Antigua. Rain splashed on the cobblestones. They bounced through the streets into the former capital. Narrow sidewalks were bounded by old adobe walls painted in earth red, gold, soft white. At the tops of walls shards of pointed glass sparkled in the scattered glare of streetlights. Wrought-iron bars decorated windows. Hand-painted tiles were set over doorways. Occasional doors stood open, giving glimpses of courtyards into which people dashed from the street.

They stopped in front of Zelda’s house, her treasured piece of colonial Guatemala. Catherine got out, anxious to see how Isaac was doing. He stood up and shook his hair, now tamed by the wet, and picked up the duffles.

“Here, Aunt Z. All the inventory accounted for. No more shoplifters!”

He’d just sat in the back of that damned truck for an hour of bone-crunching road, and here he was cracking jokes—Catherine loved that about her son. Put him in a more comfortable setting, a bright and cheery classroom, say, ask him to participate in group discussions, and he’d turn sullen and hostile. Or he’d hide in the closet like a five-year-old and play class goofball. That’s why he’d flunked out. At least, that was one reason. He climbed out of the truck with one of the duffles while Zelda unlocked the wooden gate.

Later that night, after dinner, after Isaac had retired to read and sleep, the two women sat in the living room of

Zelda's house, drinking rum. Through the open door and window they could hear rain splashing in the courtyard and dripping off roses and bougainvillea. A cloud of blue smoke hung between them from Zelda's cigarette.

"I don't know if I did the right thing," Catherine said. "Isaac hates school. I didn't think another two months of it in summer was going to turn him into an achiever."

"Of course not," Zelda snorted. "He could flunk out of summer school just like he flunked out of eighth grade. Why second-guess yourself? He's much better off here with me. I'll put him to work." That was Zelda, always sure of herself. In a way, she was very much like her brother.

The phone rang.

"I'll bet that's our lonesome cowboy now," Zelda said, getting up to answer.

It was. Catherine listened to her shoot the breeze with Elliot. Her tough talk didn't fool Catherine, who knew the loyalty that lay beneath it, both to her brother and to her sister-in-law. The miracle was that Zelda wouldn't take sides; she would only listen and point out folly.

"Don't worry. I'm taking care of them. Just keep painting and stay out of trouble. Here's Catherine." Zelda held out the phone to her.

"Hey, babe. I'm reading news stories of murders and abductions in Guatemala. Be careful down there, won't you?" Elliot's voice in her ear sounded tender and wistful. "I miss you already. Ain't no sunshine when you're gone." He quoted the familiar song. It tugged at Catherine. She felt his body against her, dancing, his hips moving, her hand in his, the way it used to be.

"Did you find the pasta sauce I left in the fridge?" she asked. "I forgot to tell you, a notice came from the dealer yesterday. It's time to take the car in for a tune-up. And I left the ticket for the dry cleaning on the kitchen counter."

“You know I can’t deal with all that crap. Hurry back, sweetheart.”

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The first thing Isaac thought about when he woke up the next morning was his computer. How was he going to survive a month in this unconnected place? He’d tried to convince his mother he could learn responsibility and earn money by designing websites, but she’d said it was Guatemala or summer school. In the past, he’d never minded Guatemala. So he’d agreed to work in his aunt’s high-end handicrafts store, where cool stuff from all over the country went for good prices to discerning collectors, while his mother was off having adventures. Even though he knew the idea was some sort of tough-love boot camp. He would start on Monday. Today was Saturday, and his aunt Zelda left them right after breakfast to go to work, saying, “Pick up some bananas and oranges at the market.”

That gave his mother a mission. Not that she needed one. She would never be satisfied lying around the house all day doing nothing while Isaac read *Wired*, *Maximum PC*, and the Games Workshop catalogue from the library he’d brought with him to fend off boredom. They always had to do something. At home that meant weekend picnics and excursions to fossil beds and historical sites, as if there were anything of historical interest in Iowa. Here it meant going to the market.

Isaac had never liked the Latin American market scene. He wasn’t crazy about people in small numbers, much less by the hundreds. Much less people who didn’t say “Excuse me” and step around you the way they did back home. But his mother bribed him with a promise of ice cream and a visit to a cybercafé later on. They walked