



LOVE, LA LLORONA



Maxine was in love with Mexico City. Not the bone-deep, homesick kind of love she felt for New York City, the city that had spawned her and raised her, shaping the person she became far more so than those two long-ago teenagers whose drunken night of bad judgment had resulted in her birth. Maxine loved Mexico City with a dizzy, crush-like ferocity, the way she might fall for some complex, unknowable bad boy with dirt under his nails and an unshaven smirk. She loved Mexico City for its contradictions, the quirky madness of its haphazard streets and the way crumbling gothic splendor and gaudy modern atrocity coiled around each other, intimate as lovers. *Zorro* meets *Blade Runner*. Where else on earth could you find a 1000-year-old Aztec temple, a 500-year-old cathedral and the sheer glass spire of brand new office building, all in a single square mile?

Maxine threaded her way through the teaming chaos of the legendary *Zocalo*, hot and beating heart of Mexico City. The literal center of the Aztec universe, paved by Cortez with stones from the shattered ruins of sacred *Teocalli*, the *Zocalo* was a bustling plaza surrounded by regal, colonial buildings and jam packed with a rag tag circus of vendors and market stalls. She parted the jungle of dark heads and brown bodies around her like a platinum blonde machete. Tall and angular with icy green eyes and a kind of confident, sardonic charm that could almost be mistaken for beauty, Maxine turned heads everywhere she went. She ignored the catcalls and the open stares and instead concentrated on soaking up the flavor of the city.

The air stank of a thousand things, a kaleidoscopic miasma of odors both ghastly and divine. Exhaust billowing from the tailpipes of a thousand green Volkswagen Beetle taxis and the sharp, medicinal tang of copal, burnt by Aztec dancers more for the benefit of the gawking white tourists than the wild and ancient gods that lay cold and dreaming beneath the uneven pavement. Raw sewage and fresh baked *pan dulce*. Rotting fruit and knockoff perfume and the thick greasy smoke from carts selling mystery meat tacos or questionable hot dogs or roasted corn on the cob sprinkled with chile and lime. Vendors sang out rhythmic chants in their broad *Chilango* accents. Slat-ribbed dogs nosed through the garbage from overflowing trash barrels. Around Maxine, the fearful, befuddled tourists jostled each other like anxious cattle as they gawked over the clutter of makeshift stands selling cheap jewelry, herbal remedies for toe fungus and unlicensed Hello Kitty backpacks. Scrappy prepubescent punks, haggard faces stained blue and green from years of huffing paint, wove between the tourists like alley cats, picking pockets and hawking tiny packs of hard, nearly inedible gum.

Maxine broke through the flow of the crowd and placed her palms on the metal railing surrounding the sad, broken rubble and meaningless staircases to nothing that were all that remained of the legendary *Templo Mayor*. Hundreds of years ago on this very spot, over 20,000 captured warriors had their hearts ripped from their chests in a four-day orgy of sacred slaughter to appease the bloodthirsty god *Huizilopochtli*. Now it was just stones. She turned away, shaking off a spell of inexplicable vertigo.

As she slipped back into the crowd, a dark skinned *Meztiza* stepped into Maxine's path. The girl was very young, sixteen tops. Her traditional embroidered dress and shawl were not just dirty but also inexplicably wet, dripping onto the cracked sidewalk between her bare black feet, as if she had just stepped out of a muddy river. She stank like wet wool and low tide, like a drowned thing and her eyes seemed filmy and unfocused, looking off somewhere slightly to the left of Maxine's shoulder. The air around her seemed...dirty. Not just the usual yellow-brown Mexico City pollution, but smudged and greasy, filled with particulate matter like bad underwater photography. She moved with

an odd sort of crooked grace, tears rolling sluggishly down her wet brown cheeks.

"*Mis hijos...*" she whispered, her voice like traffic, like distant water, nearly lost in the exuberant clamor of the city.

That's when Maxine made the mistake of looking down at the two muddy bundles the girl thrust urgently towards her. She thought maybe the girl was trying to sell her babies. If that was her scam, she really needed to go make some fresh ones. Here was the source of the stench, the awful rotten oyster and river-mud stink that burrowed deep into Maxine's sinuses, making her gag.

The babies were dead. One was mostly covered by its damp swaddling shroud, nothing visible but a single, slack and heavy-lidded crescent of an eye, sticky and unseeing in a cradle of grayish, greasy flesh. But the other. The other was all too visible, its little blue monkey head horribly bloated and soft with a texture like those raw, ready-to-bake biscuits Maxine's grandma used to buy in a cardboard tube at the supermarket. The eyes were dirty slits and the fat, protruding tongue was flecked with thick, yellowish foam.

Maxine, who prided herself in unshakable urban nonchalance, let out a breathless, involuntary grunt and stepped back, hands up in a half-assed sort of defense and she stumbled, sprawling on her butt across some street vendor's blanket.

The old blind woman whose wares Maxine had scattered crouched at her side, asking in Spanish if Maxine was hurt. Maxine stood, blushing furiously and managed to stammer that she was all right. The wet girl and her dead babies were gone, dissolved back into the busy lunch hour crowd.

Maxine bent to help the woman straighten up her things and discovered that the items scattered by her undignified pratfall were bootleg DVDs. Intrigued, she held up a collection of five bound together with cheap masking tape. The word **TERROR** was handwritten across the tape in blue ink.

Maxine forgot all about the wet girl when she saw the lurid movie titles listed on the plastic cases. *El Vampiro Sangriento*, *El Baron Del Terror*, *La Momia Azteca*, *Muñecos Infernales* and *La Llorona*.

The boots cost Maxine 50 *pesos* — less than five bucks. She already knew what Simon would say. That she would be crazy to put those dubious disks into her laptop. Not that he would actually stop her from doing it anyway and of course if they did crash her machine, he'd buy her another one without so much as an I-told-you-so. He was really a good boy. Maxine sometimes wondered what she would do without him.

By the time she made it back to the gaudy gold glass and shameless 80's-era glitz of the Beverly Hotel, she was sweaty and winded, clutching her disks like small but critical pieces of treasure recovered from a deep and treacherous dive.

In their roomy, ostentatious suite, Simon was hunched over his laptop, working on something Maxine couldn't even begin to comprehend and looking lost inside his oversized *Tura Satana* t-shirt. He was quiet and fearfully smart, a math prodigy who had made his first million before his first legal beer, but he didn't throw it all away on toys like so many of his callow geek buddies. The only thing he ever spent money on was Maxine. She felt an almost painful twist of love for him in her belly as she slunk up behind him and kissed the top of his shaved head.

"Hello, Max," he said, long, skinny fingers still flying uninterrupted over the keys.

"Hey there, super genius!" She flopped down on the bed. "Why don't you leave that infernal machine and come over here." She unbuttoned her leather pants. "I think I need a quick upload."

Simon laughed gently and came into her outstretched arms. She skinned the big faded t-shirt off his scrawny frame and kissed his mouth, tasting the curious and lingering, tabasco-like flavor of the tamarind and chile candies he had become addicted to on this latest trip.

She pressed him down on his back on the bed and gripped his skinny wrists together in one hand, wrenching them above his head with a wicked grin. He arched against her, a soft, trapped sound resonating in his throat as he tipped his head back and closed his eyes. This compliant, submissive posture was fiercely arousing to Maxine and she found herself thinking of ancient warriors stretched out across blood-drenched stone, awaiting the

fatal downstroke of a gleaming obsidian blade.

Pulling a hank of red rope from her toybag, she quickly bound Simon's unresisting wrists to the headboard. In seconds she had his shorts peeled away and ankles bound as well and she stood, stepping back to admire her handiwork.

He looked delicious, hard-on straining towards her like a leashed dog and eyes filled with trust and desire. She smiled and began to undress.

Naked and aching, Maxine pulled her new switchblade from the pocket of her leather jacket. It was long and slender and had the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on the handle. She straddled Simon's bound body and clicked the switch, releasing six inches of shining steel an inch from his face. His eyes went huge and she felt his cock twitch against her belly as she caressed his cheek with the blade.

"Do you love me?" she asked, tracing the shape of his jugular vein with the knife's razor-sharp point.

"More than anything," he answered.

She slid the blade over his collar bone and down to the soft spot beneath his sternum, imagining she could feel the beat of his heart resonating up through the knife and into the bones of her fingers, echoing in the hot pulse between her legs.

"I love you," she told him as she simultaneously impaled herself on his cock and opened up a long gash down the center of his chest.

His body wrenched against his bonds and he let out a breathless gasp. She fucked him with harsh, brutal thrusts, pressing her mouth to the welling cut and sliding her tongue along its hot, coppery length. That raw, familiar taste and the elixir of his submission combined to make her crazy like a blood-drunk shark, driving her to fuck him harder and harder until she was struck by a sudden, near-painful orgasm. The switchblade tumbled from her hand and she gripped his narrow shoulders as she came, a gush of mad, irreverent laughter bubbling out of her. Seconds later he was coming too, sobbing and shuddering against her and he told her again and again that he loved her.

In the warm, dopey aftermath, she freed him from his bondage and gathered him into her arms. His familiar smell,

almonds and fresh sweat and fabric softener, coiled around her, filling her with cozy endorphins and contentment. A tiny piece of home in this foreign city.



Simon didn't say a word about the bootleg disks. He just looked over the titles and smiled indulgently.

"*La Llorona*?" Maxine said, turing the cloudy jewel case over in her long fingers. "What does that mean, 'Crying Woman'?"

Simon nodded. "60s. Black and white. It's the first Mexican monster movie about a totally Mexican character, the Crying Woman. A chick who did in her own kids and is doomed to walk the earth as a weeping spirit."

Maxine nodded and slid the unmarked disk into her laptop. Simon went back to work at his. Classic 21st century moment. The two-laptop couple. Maxine shook her head and hit play.

It was not what she expected.

After a minute of slightly-less-than-black black marred with choppy, jittering squares of digitized noise, a grainy color shot of dirty river water choked with refuse. A weak, oily tide lapped against tin cans, rusted car parts and a slick black lump that might have been a dead animal or maybe not. A really cheesy yellow video title came up.

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Maxine frowned. This was clearly not the classic film Simon had mentioned. She was even more surprised when the camera jerkily panned across the water to the slick brown stems of a woman's naked legs and then began a slow crawl up the length of her body.

"Holy shit," Maxine said as the camera lingered over the woman's thick black bush and slipped up her stomach to her small, pointed breasts. "This is porn!"

When the camera reached the woman's head, it stopped. She was turned almost totally away and all that was visible was a sliver of chin and cheek and the bright, glinting corner of an eye. She had a horrendous '80s perm sprayed up into a giant explosion of

amazing, heavy-metal-video-vixen proportion and the wind tossed it, teasing, threatening to uncover her face and then hiding it again. Her one sly black eye peered between the ratted strands and directly into the camera with a kind of fierce, defiant sexual hunger that burned right through the bad, swimmy quality and amateurish angles.

The woman beckoned to someone off-camera and there was an awkward jump-cut to an inexplicable series of unrelated images. A knife cutting something that looked like liver. A dog snarling, head moving in a sudden ferocious blur. A child's christening dress sinking into dark water. The *Virgen de Guadalupe*, crudely painted on the warped tin roof of a roadside stand. A piece of candy on the dirty sidewalk. A fly, busily cleaning its tiny, bulbous head with delicate forelegs. Then, a shot of a very young man standing shirtless on the bank of the river. Only the faintest shadow of a future mustache marred his near feminine beauty. The river ran through some awful urban slum and in the background were rows of crooked shanty-like houses, burning garbage and white wooden crosses decorated with wilted flowers. The boy stepped forward into the murky brown water as if drugged or sleepwalking.

The woman held one hand out to him, holding a breast in the other. She pulled the boy to her and placed her big brown nipple in his mouth. He looked up at her face, hovering just out of frame above him as he suckled. Long fuchsia nails caressed him and then wound into his hair, forcing his mouth down.

A weird kind of anticipation gripped Maxine as the boy began to burrow into the woman's thick black pubic hair with his eager tongue but it was not this simple act of cunnilingus that had Maxine all knotted up inside. It was the endless tease of the woman's face. The edge of the frame cut her off just below the lips but the camera was so shaky that it seemed as if at any moment, more of her features might be revealed. The camera twitched, revealing her surprisingly lipstick-free lower lip for a heartbeat and then lunging back down so only her neck was visible. The whole time the boy was slaving away at his task between the woman's legs, Maxine's gaze was riveted at the top of the frame, waiting breathlessly for a glimpse of the woman's face.