



Letter to the Dead

AFTER HER RUDENESS TO ANNIE, I PROMPTLY FORGOT about Melissa Berger. She was a lead I was not interested in pursuing. If Annie wanted to follow the witch doctor trail, she could knock herself out. I had plenty of reasonable things to keep myself busy with.

My apathy, however, was short-lived. The very next day, I received a packet in the mail from Lucy's lawyers. My aunt had apparently asked her attorneys to collect her mail for her, pay her bills, and forward any personal correspondences to me, for god's sake. I sorted through the pile, tossing the junk mail aside, until a peculiar postmark caught my eye.

"Well, guess what?" I said, waving an envelope at Annie. "A letter from Peru, with no return address, of course. Probably the witch doctor himself," I quipped. It was postmarked four weeks earlier. Whoever sent it had mailed it when we were in Canada. I opened it carefully. The light blue paper envelope was tissue thin. Inside was a single, fragile sheet of yellowed paper. On it was scrawled in pencil, only two sentences:

"Lucita," it began, "Please come immediately. If you are dead, send someone in your place. Eduardo."

I began laughing hysterically. "If you're dead, send someone else! This is the stupidest thing I've ever read! What kind of an idiot would send someone a letter like that?! What is this guy, a moron?" I tossed the letter to Annie, who was slicing apples at the kitchen counter.

She put the paring knife aside, wiped her hands on her

apron, and stared at the letter lying on the counter as if she had just seen a ghost. Then she slowly lifted a nervous finger and pointed at the scrawled lines on the yellowed paper. "That means you."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"He means you. He's referring to you. You have to go there. You have to see him."

"Don't be ridiculous. Only an idiot would take something like this seriously. The guy probably has the IQ of a chicken!"

"Sometimes you fit that description," Annie mumbled under her breath.

"What? What did you say?"

"Nothing, dear. I'm going to call this Berger lady in Montana back right now and tell her we just got a letter from her friend, Eduardo. Let's see if she hangs up on me *this* time." Annie went straight to the phone, dialed the number, and resolutely stood there waiting for the other end to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Melissa Berger?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Annie Jenkins. I talked to you yesterday. You hung up on me, remember?"

[Silence]

"But don't hang up on me now!" Annie blurted. "We received a letter from Eduardo today. From Peru. He wants someone to go down there to see him."

[Silence]

"Hello, are you there?"

"Yes. What did he say?"

"He said he wanted someone to go there."

"*Exactly* what did he say?"

Annie read from the letter. "He said, quote, Lucita, Please come immediately. If you are dead, send someone else. Eduardo. That's it. That's all he said."

"Oh my god."

"What?"

Melissa's voice was quite deep and matronly. She sounded older, maybe in her sixties. She had an urgent tone. "Someone must go. Lucille would have made arrangements for someone to go in her place. Death would not have been a barrier between her and don Eduardo."

"Yeah? Well, I think the person who Lucy arranged to take her place happens to be my husband."

"I am sure. You would not be calling me otherwise."

[Silence].

"Well, my husband doesn't know this Eduardo person. He doesn't know where he lives. Doesn't know his phone number. Can he email him? Or fax him for directions? Peru's a long way off, you know. Can't he just call him?"

"Don Eduardo doesn't have a phone. Or a mailing address. He can only be reached by boat, and by foot."

"Can you tell us how to get there? What if we go there and no one's home?"

"Give me your mailing address. I'll send you a map. Don Eduardo will be there when you arrive. That's for sure."

Annie gave our mailing address to the Berger woman over the phone. Then the woman said, "He must go as soon as possible. I will send the directions today." And she hung up. Just like that.

"Hello? Hello? *Damn!* That's irritating! I *hate* it when that happens!"

"Did she hang up on you again? The conehead. Call her back!"

"No, she's going to send us a map. I can wait."

"Map? What do you mean, a *map*?"

Annie didn't answer.

"What map, *dear*?"

"The map that will show *you* how to get to 'don' Eduardo's."

"Like *hell* it will! Are you crazy? Earth calling Annie, come in Annie! We're talking about *Peru* now, not Canada! This is *ridiculous*. Absolutely ridiculous! I can't believe you'd fall for this witch doctor crap!"

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