

The *Blindfold's* Eyes

My Journey from Torture to Truth

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with Patricia Davis

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Chapter One

THE DARK

THE MAN WITH THE RAMBO T-SHIRT and the gun and grenade in his jacket grabs my arm. The dark cloth the men tied over my eyes after putting me in the car has left me blind. But I know this man's grip, and as he sinks his fingers into my flesh, he starts to hum — the same song he hummed as he pushed me through the hole in the wall behind the convent and forced me to walk before him along the river. The air outside the car is cold, musty, and there's a tangy, metallic odor I can't identify. The floor when I step out feels like smooth concrete. The men's boots clap across it as we walk, then a door opens. Echoes of sounds I cannot make out shiver in the air. A moist palm grabs my wrist and guides my hand onto something cold. I jerk back. But the hand is on my fist again, prying my fingers open. A slender cylinder is beneath my fingers.

"Escaleras," says a voice. A staircase. My hand is around a banister.

I take a deep breath, and I reach out my foot. I'm descending.

At the bottom of the stairs, the men stop me. I hear the turn of a knob and feel a rush of air. The door shuts behind us.

"Where are you taking me?" I am asking for the third time, but still they are silent.

At the bottom of the stairs, the man releases his grip. The Guate-man, I name him — short for the Guatemala City man. On the sidewalk in Guatemala City a few months ago he took me by the arm, hard, and forced me to walk with him. "Are you a student or a teacher?" he asked. "We know who you are. We know where you live." He even knew my name.

He's speaking to the Policeman now. I can't understand what they're saying. They walk off together and I become aware of other voices. I hear men laughing. Then a man and a woman screaming.

By tilting my head up, I manage to glimpse from beneath my blindfold a pair of dirty, scuffed boots. They belong to the campesino — the dark-skinned man with the matted hair and a bad eye. I can hear him breathing beside me. The other two have left me with him. I can't help but feel a kinship with him, maybe because he's Mayan, like the children I've

been teaching in the mountain village of San Miguel, or maybe because, standing next to the Guate-man in the garden this morning, he looked young and slight. He wasn't the one pointing the gun at me and demanding that I go with them. He, too, seemed to be following the Guate-man's orders: he had to run ahead and flag down a bus when we came to the end of the path along the river. And I noticed he didn't have a gun. Alone with him I can pray. Please, God, let this be a dream.

THE CONCRETE FLOOR here is rough and footsteps scrape toward me and I know I'm awake. I hear the rasp of heavy breathing.

A HAND GRABS MY WRIST. The Policeman. I can see the stained blue cuff of his sleeve. He leads me, and we walk what seems a long way. The other men are with us. I can hear their boots echo. The screams are loud now and ricochet off the walls. The skin pulls taut on my face and my hands. Keys jangle, and a lock turns before me. "Welcome to your palace." The Policeman laughs.

I begin to lose control of my knees. "Please, if you let me go, it will be like this never happened. I won't tell anyone."

The Policeman shoves me across the threshold. Someone takes my arm and guides me to a chair. "Sit," he tells me. Through the crack between my face and the blindfold I see a brown hand with chewed nails on my wrist. I obey.

The Policeman's voice is behind me. "José," he says to the campesino. "You're her bodyguard."

The Policeman and the Guate-man leave, slamming the door behind them. The silence that follows shatters my ears. Even the screams have stopped. What seems an eternity passes.

Then I hear José's soft, country lilt beside me.

"Don't be afraid. You should rest. You have a long day ahead of you. I'm going to remove your blindfold. Keep your eyes closed, and don't turn around." I feel his knuckles against my head. "Now I am going to leave you for a while."

I want to beg him not to go, I want to throw myself at his feet. No, I will not let him know how scared I am. I have to think positively and seem to be strong and in control. But I beg. "Please don't turn off the light."

"I have been given orders to keep you in the dark."

And with that, night falls, the door scrapes shut, and locks. The room is pitch black and the silence is white. Panic builds inside me.

I become aware of a buzzing. A fly. It has come to comfort me. It sits on my leg, my head. It buzzes around my face and stays on my hand as I stand up and grope my way through the dark. I pad my palms along the damp stone wall. The stone changes to metal, and I feel a knob. I try to twist the knob both ways. It won't turn. I continue my walk. All is silent except for the fly, whose buzz is as steady as breath.

Drunk with blindness and the thick air, I wobble into the center of the room and collide with a metal desk. I tug the handles — two drawers, both locked. Exhausted, I feel for my chair and fall back into its arms.

A rescuer on a sturdy white horse gallops into the night before me. He leaps through the wall, a Mayan with a bad eye, and sweeps me off the hard chair. Would that be too much to ask, God, when I've devoted my life to you? Or simply a voice at my ear: "I'm sorry, Madre, we made a mistake. You are free to go." Or a holy spark of human mercy in the breast of one of these men. "Madre, you are so young. Whatever you did in San Miguel you did with good intentions. Remember us in your prayers." And then I would emerge into the light and go back to the garden with its scent of dewy grass and wet leaves.

A SCREAM hangs in the air.

"GOD, I DON'T WANT TO DIE," I tell the silence that follows. This morning, before going out to the garden, I prayed with Sister Darleen. I asked for guidance on whether to stay in Guatemala, in spite of the death threats I'd been getting. The military was on a rampage. Students, unionists, priests, nuns, teachers — anyone working for change was viewed as a threat and targeted for repression. I closed my eyes and let the Bible fall open where it would. Then I handed it to Darleen, who read: "Thereupon, Nebuzaradan and the officials and the nobles of Babylon had Jeremiah taken out of the quarters of the guard and entrusted to Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, to be brought home. And so he remained among the people."

From that last sentence, I made my decision. I would stay with the people of San Miguel, not cede to fear and flee because I had the passport and the means, luxuries the villagers would always lack. God's will had seemed clear. The Good Shepherd didn't lead his sheep into traps, but took them safely through the valley of death. I shouldn't be afraid.

Jesus didn't have that experience, though. In the Garden of Gethsemani, waiting for the soldiers, he prayed that the cup would be taken

from him. It wasn't, and as I start to remember all his followers who died horrible deaths, too, I remember that Jesus prayed a second time in the Garden: *If this cup cannot pass without my drinking from it, let Your will be done.* Chill bumps rise on my back.

I shouldn't be praying for my life. I should have faith in God's will, whatever that might be. I should be praying for the people screaming.

"Your will be done," I say aloud. Like a reward for adopting the right attitude, a hopeful thought strikes me. The people screaming must be Guatemalans. I'm an American.

FOOTSTEPS APPROACH and a key clinks in the door. "Keep your eyes closed. I am going to blindfold you again." It is José. If they were going to kill me, they wouldn't care if I saw their faces.

"MADRE DIANNA." José's voice is in front of me. A chair scrapes on the floor and then creaks with his weight. "Madre, I can save you. I have nothing against you." His voice is soft.

God has answered my prayers. I knew it would be José, the quiet campesino, who would save me.

"They tell me you are a nun. Is that true?" He continues before I can answer. "I go to church every Sunday and read the Holy Bible every day. Since you are a nun, surely you must know if God forgives people for the sins they have committed."

He sighs through my silence and raps on the metal chair. "I don't like my work. But I have a wife. I have children. You understand? Do you know what it's like to see your children go to bed hungry and hear them wake up, throwing up worms? Sometimes we live at the expense of others." He pauses.

"I am going to tell you a story about a village that used to be." He makes a harsh, forced sound he must mean as a laugh. "We were fighting the subversion, you know, up north in the Quiché. The colonel said a village was helping the guerrillas, supplying them with food and troops."

He draws his breath in. "So we gathered all the villagers together in the church. We told them we needed to have a meeting. They all came to the center of the town, and I ordered all the boys between seven and twelve years old to assemble on my right. I gave them each a can of gasoline. I told them to pour it over everything in the village."

The air seems thicker. I start to breathe through my mouth.

"A little boy held onto his mother's skirt and refused to move, and an old man came forward. He said, 'Let me take the boy's place. I'll do it.'

I was the commanding officer. I couldn't allow exceptions. I went over and slammed them both in the head with my rifle butt. The boy's head broke open like a ripe watermelon and his mother shrieked. I said, 'Get to it!' and no one dared disobey. The villagers watched as their sons and grandsons and brothers doused their homes and cornfields.

"'Cheer up!' I shouted at them. 'Like the sweet little priests, we are only sprinkling your homes and cornfields and animals with Holy Water!'" He laughs again, a hoarse, tight laugh that dies in his throat.

"We took the women to the chapel. I hate to tell you what we did to them."

Tears press against the insides of my eyelids.

"Old women, young girls, very young. Pregnant women." His chair creaks again and for a moment I feel that he is next to me, his breath hot on my skin.

But his voice resumes from its position a few feet away. "Then we brought everyone into the chapel, locked the door, bolted the windows, and set the church on fire. The blaze spread across the entire town."

He stops. Even the fly is quiet. Why is he telling me this?

"We burned the animals, even, the dogs and the donkeys. What I cannot forget are the screams. And the children. The children were crying, 'Mama!'"

I hear a sob. A second later his hands are on my thighs, clinging, his head is on my knees, I feel his tears seeping through my blue jeans. I stiffen against his weight.

"I can still smell it — their flesh burning. It was almost like the stench of burned rubber."

I can smell the charred bodies. I can hear the screams, just like the screams that have echoed through my cell. I feel, behind the dark of my blindfold, that I am in that village, watching.

"I did not want to do it. I have nothing against you, Madre. Can you forgive me? I am your friend. . . . You must forgive me!"

The sudden volume, the desperation, the authority in his voice — I start to shake all over.

"Don't you understand? I had no choice! Please." His voice is soft again, wheedling. "Forgive me, Madre. If you, a nun, can forgive me, maybe God, too, can forgive me."

He wants to buy my forgiveness. If I sell my forgiveness for my freedom . . . If I buy my freedom, forgiving him for what he did to others . . . I don't have the right to do that. He shouldn't be trying to buy it, and I'm not the right person to ask. He wants his actions condoned — his past actions

and maybe his current work, too. He will have to ask forgiveness from God and from the people who still writhe and scream in his soul.

I remain quiet. José rests on my knees for a moment, then drags himself up. I feel his stare.

“I am sorry, Madre. I could have saved you. If you had forgiven me, I could have saved you.” He scuffs across the concrete and the door slams shut.