

## Chapter 1 of “Pamela Goes Home”

Stunned by the heat, and the endless trip from Chicago to Mexico the day before, Pamela longed for their lovely, air-conditioned boutique hotel in the nearby big city. Instead, here she was sitting on a rickety wooden bench staring dully out at the courtyard of the dusty ruin of a property Carl had “bought her as a surprise”. He was talking to the architect in the excited way he did when he’d fallen in love with a new project, pointing at what used to be a fountain. Right now, though, she was so fed up with him she didn’t even want to be here, let alone hear all about his new pet project. Why had she even agreed to come here?

She was just starting to think about lunch and hopefully a cool glass of white wine when Carl grabbed his chest and staggered backwards.

Jumping up, she ran to him, slammed by the burning weight of the sun as soon as she stepped out of the shade.

Carl stumbled against her, scrabbling at his tie. He was pasty, sweat streaming down his face, confusion and fear creasing his forehead and pinching his eyes. The architect grabbed him under one arm, and gestured to Pamela to take the other, and together, they piloted him toward the tall arched hallway where Pamela had been sitting.

Once they’d half-dragged Carl up the steps into the shade, though, he suddenly crumpled. Startled by the unexpected weight, Pamela tried to hold him up but couldn’t. His other arm slithered from the architect’s grasp too and he collapsed in a heap.

The architect said something in rapid Spanish, but she mimed for him to slow down.

In accented but good English, he repeated, “I think he’s having a heart attack!”

Pamela shook her head, frantically shaking Carl’s arm. “He can’t be. He’s in perfect health!”

This was so manifestly not the case that Pamela felt a bizarre urge to giggle but then she felt her throat close in panic and tears start. Trying to pull herself together, Pamela looked at the architect, horrified.

Seeing Pamela freeze, he whipped out his cellphone and started speaking in very fast Spanish to someone.

“I called an ambulance,” the architect said, dropping to his knees.

“But the doctor said he was in peak condition at his last physical!” she exclaimed, squatting in the dust and squeezing Carl’s limp hand, watching helplessly as the architect pumped his chest. She tried to remember the signs of a heart attack, and what you were supposed to do if you suspected someone was having one. She pawed helplessly in her purse for aspirin, but knew she didn’t have anything, not even a tissue to wipe the sweat pouring down his chalky face.

Her thoughts raced. How could this be happening? Carl took such pride in being in great shape for a sixty-one-year-old. When he wasn’t working – or chasing his secretary around, apparently! – he was jogging along the lakefront, or riding his mountain bike with his cycling club. He was always in motion – since the last miscarriage, and the sexual harassment suit, it seemed like they were almost never really together. She had wondered if Carl’s impulsive invitation for this trip to Mexico would change that.

After what seemed like forever, an ambulance finally pulled in through the big main arch and drove into the courtyard. Two young paramedics leapt out and immediately started a fast-paced conversation with the architect that left Pamela’s third-year Spanish in the dust. Pamela tried to straighten Carl out and then fumbled with the buttons on his shirt as they dragged their equipment over to where he was lying.

Realizing she was in the way, she stepped back, and the architect gently guided her to the wooden bench she’d been sitting on earlier.

Watching dully as the paramedics pumped air into Carl and shocked his chest, she tried to shake her head free of the dense cloud of fear and heat and dust that was clogging her brain.

To avoid focusing on her husband, her mind skittered resentfully. Good heavens, why on earth had Carl bought this property, in Mexico of all places? She’d never been before, but wasn’t it filled with drug lords and cacti and huge bugs and spiders?

The drive from the airport had been different from what she'd expected, though. The taxi driver told them it was the dry season, but everything looked green. She'd seen coconut palms, and tons of fruit trees - mango, papaya, lime, tamarind, something the driver called guanabana. It was all surprisingly lovely, and Carl had been so excited, it was as though they were finally starting to re-connect.

She stared helplessly at Carl, who was just lying there, not doing anything, his body jolting like a rag doll with each shock. No matter how mad she'd been at him, she hadn't wanted this!

The architect cleared his throat. The poor man - he must be so worried, seeing his client lying on the dirty floor at his feet.

The paramedics, both carefully avoiding looking at Pamela, addressed rapid Spanish to the architect, shaking their heads as they packed up their equipment.

Pamela froze, her heart clenched in fear.

The architect turned to her, and in his pleasantly accented English said, "I'm so sorry, señora. They did everything they could, but it seems your husband has failed." Then he thought for a moment. "No, no, not failed. He is - dead. He - passed away. So sorry, sometimes my English..."

Absently, she tried to smile reassuringly. "Your English is fine, Señor..." What was his name again? Oh, why hadn't she paid more attention at their breakfast, when Carl had been going on and on about his "surprise"?

As the ambulance pulled out, Pamela sat there, stunned. Could this really be happening? One minute Carl was there, the next minute he was...not? How could her vibrant, infuriating husband be dead?

And were they just going to leave him on the floor like that? Didn't they have to take him someplace? Surely you couldn't just leave bodies lying around, even in Mexico?

She turned panicked eyes to the architect, her throat constricting as tears started to fall.

"If you will permit me, Señora..."

She nodded emphatically, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" asked the architect gently, pulling out his phone and sliding his finger through his list of contacts.

But before she could muster an answer, he started talking rapidly into his phone.

Sitting there with sweat trickling down her face, she tried to organize her thoughts, struggling to come to grips with what had just happened. Carl, her husband of forty years, even if they'd been growing more and more distant, was lying dead at her feet in a dusty ruin of a property he'd bought to surprise her. Who would she call to tell? His parents were both dead, but she knew she'd have to face Carl's sister Reese, who would start bossing everyone around. Her own parents were also both dead, but honestly, would she want her father coming in and yelling at everyone? Her beloved older brother Jonathan, also dead over forty years ago? Their unborn children that she could never carry to term? The friends she'd lost touch with because Carl didn't like them, or because they had children and she didn't?

Distractedly she swatted at a mosquito and wiped her forehead for the umpteenth time.

The architect brought his call to a close and looked over at her, his head tipped gently to one side, making her feel even sorrier for herself.

"This must be truly terrible for you, Señora Palmer. I can only imagine if my wife..." His voice trailed off as she watched thoughts of his wife's dying flit across his face.

But he pulled himself together. "We must be practical, now. Later on you can ..." he drifted off, waving his hands vaguely.

She smiled wanly. What, collapse? Cry hysterically? Try to process her feelings? Right now, fortunately, she just felt blank, totally blank.

"Do you know... I mean, what were your husband's wishes with respect to..." and he trailed off again. He cleared his throat and looked around, as though the ancient stone arches or the dead trees in the courtyard in front of them could somehow rescue him from this predicament.

She pulled herself together. It wasn't fair to this nice man to fall apart on him. She'd have to deal with her feelings later, somehow, but meanwhile she needed to re-start her brain, which seemed to have stopped when the two ambulance men packed up their equipment.

"His family has a cemetery plot, but he often said he wanted to be cremated," she said, then remembered she was in a Catholic country. Maybe they didn't do that here? They had all those strange above-ground cemeteries and exaggerated hoopla around the Day of the Dead, with skeletons dancing around. Oh god, would she have to fly his body back to the US? The thought made her heart race.

Fortunately, the architect nodded. "Direct cremation," he said. "Yes, that would be easier. Well, the funeraria people will be here shortly. We'll need to give them instructions.

They asked for his birth certificate – do you have that?"

She shook her head. She wasn't really sure where it was, probably in the safe Carl had installed in their bedroom in Chicago, behind the improbable copy of Giorgione's Sleeping Venus he'd insisted on buying as an "investment". Come to think of it, a giant picture of a naked woman in their bedroom should have been a sign. Well, too late now. "I think it's home somewhere. But his passport is at the hotel, if that would work?"

"We'll have to ask them, but ..." He wrinkled his forehead and lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Pamela twisted her pearls and bit her lip, pulling her pale green linen shift away from her body in a desperate bid to cool down.

Then he nodded resolutely. "Señora, I am going to ask my wife to come. Do you not have anyone at all you can call? I feel you should have family with you at this difficult time. Please, tell me, who can I advise?"

She shook her head. "No, that's alright. I'll call his sister when I get back to the hotel. And our lawyer, and..." She realized the list of things she'd have to do was growing longer and longer.

Her heart started to beat faster, and she could feel her breaths starting to come in little gasps. Oh god, was she having a heart attack too? But even in her numb, befuddled state, she could hear her psychiatrist's voice telling her to take deep breaths.

She did, closing her eyes, and feeling around in her handbag for her anti-anxiety medication. Discreetly, she took one out and swallowed it, her parched throat protesting. If only she'd carried aspirin too, maybe Carl wouldn't be lying dead now.