

River of Angels

by
Abbe Rolnick

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Cover Photos taken by Jim Wiggins

Design & Prepress by Kate Weisel, www.weiselcreative.com

Printed by Applied Digital Imaging, Bellingham, WA

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Rolnick, Abbe

River of Angels / Abbe Rolnick—1st edition

ISBN: 978-0-9845119-07

Front cover photo: Rio Camuy Caves: karstic cave entrance within a 200-foot sinkhole, leading down 170 feet to one of the largest underground river systems in the world.

Back cover photo: 400-year-old *ceiba* tree, Vieques Island.

*“From somewhere in the Universe
A connection has been made.”*

jrw

Dedication

To my family:

Morton J. Rolnick, a father with a heart
and a sense of humor that reached everyone.

Selma J. Rolnick, a mother
who continues to grow and give.

Harriet Rolnick, a sister
who stands by me with love and encouragement.

Mara, Will, & Elly, my children
who teach me to love and give more.

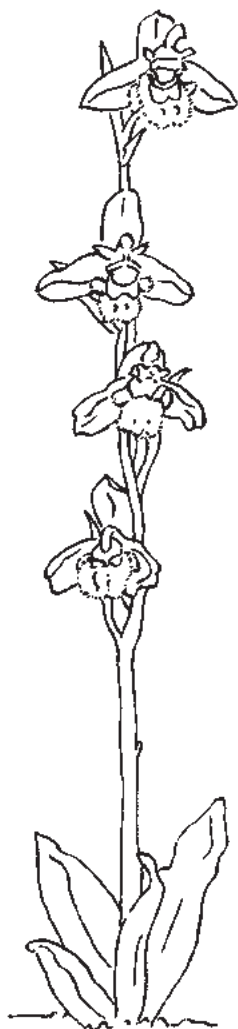
Jim Wiggins, my husband and partner in life,
who convinced me to move forward to that next level.

Acknowledgements

This book is a work that came from my various life experiences. I want to thank all of the people in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico for the rich life I lived there and teaching me to see beauty in another culture and to feel the pulse of passion. Garred Giles, you are not only a good friend but a great source of information.

I wrote this in the wee hours of the morning and night as I raised my children far from the island and 20 years removed. The Deming Library was invaluable in my search for information. Frances Barbagallo, my friend and Library Director, you have been a constant source of inspiration. My writing group, JoAnn Chavre, Barbara Defreytas, Iris Jones, and Mary Stone, thank you for reading all my works and being critical.

Jim Wiggins, I met you when this book was finished. Your push to read and re-read the manuscript and to return to Puerto Rico with me for photos of the caves and *ceiba* tree, gave me the impetus to follow my dream.



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PROTEST

THE DANK, SWEATY DARKNESS inside the bar contrasted with the cheering light of the sun-kissed tropical day. It was a contrast accepted by the patrons who came from the sugarcane fields and financial offices. The bright warmth of the sun was almost blinding and its heat a reminder of the emptiness of their hearts. Monica presented herself as a shining star, amongst a black sky. She chose her clothes well, a majestic blue silk dress cut low at the neck and tight around the hips. The red leaf flowers of the *pascua* plant appeared haphazardly interwoven into the silk with one red flame close to the heart and another along the hip. For Monica the flowers alluded to Christmas, happy times, when the plants were all abloom. Stateside they added color to the drab months of winter. Here on the island they were perpetually vibrant, but no less beautiful. Although Monica did not consider herself beautiful, she had a voluptuous body which promised physical gratification, delight in its softness. She was all things for those who fantasized in sexual exploits, offering strength for the abusive, and warmth for those seeking mothering.

Monica wove her way amongst the small round tables. Aisles were non-existent, a design that was purposeful and pushed her patrons in the way of her body. Slight touches, a pat, a pinch, a glance, all created an intimacy, a sense of familiarity cloaked in the forgiving darkness.

Senor Modesto, the owner of Banco De La Gente, left with one of Monica's younger helpers, heading up the backstairs for a private rendezvous. Monica noted his puppy dog behavior as did the other patrons in the bar.

One called out, "There goes Modesto. He is paying for his pleasure with my house payment."

For the most part everyone tolerated his self-indulgent behavior. A good tipper, and not too demanding, he'd be down for another drink in less than half an hour. Monica knew the bank's coffers would suffer accordingly. She speculated on who here would be the lucky recipient of a loan after his latest foray upstairs.

Of more concern to Monica were the two *borrachos* sitting in the corner. Payday brought in the men from the field, and the two she watched escalated their boasts the more they drank. Their insults became bolder, with the ultimate swearing words of *Como tu madre*, Monica sidled in closer. To talk of another's mother begged for a fight. Smoothly Monica slid her body between the two *jibaros* and signaled for the music to be turned up. She danced the salsa, undulating her body to the rhythm of the music, first facing one, then the other. When two, young, pretty dancers tapped the men on the shoulders, she made her exit. Monica could almost predict the future absence of one of these men. Based on years of hosting she knew that sooner or later the drinking and boasting would lead to irreconcilable differences over a bet, a woman, but most usually money. The outcome would be settled forcefully, with intimidating words, pressure from families or eventually brute force, but ultimately someone would be missing. Monica preferred to give them a chance with the natural rhythms of music and the warmth of a woman. She offered a sense of security, which she knew didn't exist outside her doors.

As Monica surveyed the room her eyes fell upon a young man seated in the farthest corner. Blond hair and light skin spoke of *gringo*, but the gestures of the hands and the rapid movement of the lips marked him as a Latino. He was an infrequent, but consistent customer at the bar. Today Carlos was all business. Two men she

didn't recognize sat with him. She watched as they shook hands and patted each other on the back. Clearly, a deal had just been sealed, but the men still appeared ill at ease. As they searched the room, only half listening to their companion, their gaudy suits and ties formally announced their stature as foreigners. Their roving eyes announced their impatience.

Normally the bar was where her customers dropped their pretenses, acted less formal and revealed themselves. She sensed something amiss and for this reason, Monica listened to their comments: "We can start on the condominium project as soon as you get the release papers signed, and then we can get access to the land."

Carlos nodded. "Not a problem, I'll have everything in order by the end of the week."

The two men barely acknowledged Carlos' assurances. After their handshake, they carefully scanned the entire bar again. Monica noted a short pause, their eyes transfixed on one of her ladies, Carmen, dancing. Carmen's steps faltered, missing slightly the *salsa* beat. Her face paled, becoming ashen and stricken with fear. Nervously she turned her partner looking for an escape, fixing her gaze on Jesus. Monica felt something awry, but Carlos seemed content, as his business associates made a hurried exit. Within minutes an old friend sat down at the table with him. By the looks of them, they were ending a day of work the easy way; drinking away bad decisions and delaying the return to their home life. At this point her services would not be needed. Their laughter and easy talk was enough to carry them through the night.

From the other side of the room came a familiar call, "Listen my sweetness. Come here."

Monica turned slowly and smiled. "*Mi amor*, take it easy. *No hay prisa*. No, she wasn't in any hurry to go to Jesus. All the girls called Jesus *el bruto* because his idea

of loving could kill. One was never sure when his roughness would turn to ugliness, or if he would be able to control his anger. Without the liquor, Jesus was a decent man. Based on the constant flow of girl friends that continued to encircle him, Monica suspected that his macho act was more a performance and behind his rough presence, he was a caring person. This wasn't the first time she had spotted Carmen, her newest worker eyeing him. All she really knew about him was that he worked on the *fincas de coco*, scaling the coconut trees and dropping the fruit.

"Jesus, *que pasa?* How goes the coconut business?"

"*Mal, mi hija, mal.* Come with me and help me forget it all."

"Why do you worry so, Jesus? You are the keeper of the land, if one season is bad, there is always another.

"You, my honorable Monica, know lots about men, but nothing about coconuts. Coconuts grow on sandy soil. Without sand there are no coconuts. Everybody wants cement, but you can't eat cement."

"The rumors are true? They sold the farm?"

"Monica, come help me forget."

Monica came up to Jesus and whispered in Spanish, "Look I can't, but Carmen wants to be with you. I tell you the truth. She has been trying to get your attention all night." Bending over just enough to reveal her breasts, she gently kissed Jesus on the top of the head. Content, Jesus smiled appreciatively and patted her buttocks.

Making her way towards the counter, Monica perused her potential customers. She couldn't afford to turn down any more clients. This was a business to her and she had her reputation to maintain. The men remembered refusals and gossiped. Gossip or as they called it here, *chismas*, was a way of life. Once a rumor spread, it was not easy to dispel. Looking for some amusement and enlightened fun, she sat down at her usual stool at

the counter, close to the table with the blond-haired man. Here she still retained a good view of the entrance to the bar, the stairs leading up to the secluded rooms, but she could relax out of the main fray. She noted Carmen's exit with Jesus. Arms entwined at the elbow, they walked out like brother and sister. Nursing a glass of water on the rocks, she remained attentive to her patrons, but hoped for some intellectual stimulus. Time crawled after the initial rush of early business and after a half hour or so she found her mind wandering. Careful not to appear as an eavesdropper, she listened to Carlos' conversation.

Their laughter had dissipated and their faces were more somber. Monica heard the man who had joined Carlos after the other two had left say, "Carlos, don't worry so much. She will return. She thinks too much about your business."

Studying his drink, Carlos slowly answered, "*Este es la problema*. She says I think more about making money than making love. Pedro, it is what I do."

For Monica, this was both a moment of opportunity and one of sadness. She could score with Carlos, but another woman was losing out on love. Being in the business had hardened her, yes, but deep down Monica was a romantic. Listening further, she realized with some surprise that Carlos and Pedro had switched to English. Perhaps they thought no one could understand them.

"My thoughts are consumed with work and when she asks me what I'm thinking I tell her, "Nothing." It is as if she is too smart. When I share my thoughts, she wants to discuss a business transaction as if it were not already a fact. Pedro, she has even questioned this last deal with the farm." Shaking his head, Carlos stared out looking both baffled and hurt.

"It is true, Carlos, she is a difficult woman. Buy her something with the money you make from the sale."

How silly these men were. Whoever this woman was,

she wanted to be treated like a person who counted. She was asking to be real. Monica became impatient. Abruptly she got up from the counter, appeared to slip and dumped her drink on Carlos' lap. "*Pardoname*. Excuse me for my clumsiness. Let me dry your pants." Briskly massaging his wet leg with a napkin, Monica looked up. She hadn't expected his eyes to be so blue, or that he would be surprised. Caught off guard, she started talking in English, "I am really sorry. I don't know what got into me. Can I get you something dry to wear?"

Before Carlos could answer, the doors to the bar burst open. The light from outdoors was blinding, but not so much as to block the horror that walked in. Carmen, Monica's friend, covered with blood, fell forward, knocking down a stool, and falling across Carlos' lap. Bending over her, Monica felt the silence of the bar, saw the slow movements to the door as patrons tried to leave. She noted with anger that Jesus' table was empty. From the looks of Carmen, Jesus had been gone long enough to savagely attack her friend. It was her fault, she knew, for not taking on Jesus herself instead and suggesting that Carmen wanted to be with him. In despair, Monica lifted Carmen's head and whispered, "Carmencita, I love you. I am guilty for this, I will make you better."

Carmen only moaned in response. Monica cringed at the sound. It was bad enough Carmen had been attacked, but even worse, they could not take her to the police or the hospital. They lived outside the law. It didn't exist for them. The officials of the town begged for her services but they refused to soil their hands with the immigrant women they favored or dirty their lives at home.

Cradling Carmen's head, Monica shook her own head in disgust. "Cowards, all of you. You are so afraid of showing compassion. Run back to your safe lives."

From the silence came a whisper, "I might be a coward, but I'm in no position to run, as your friend is bleeding

on my lap. It is none of my business, I don't know you, but you need help. I have a woman who might be persuaded to come to your aid."

Monica looked up. It was Carlos. "Who is it?"

Answering in English, Carlos raised his eyes and firmly stated, "My wife, she is different, a healer of sorts."

"She won't turn us into the police? Carmen is here without paperwork. She is my responsibility and I can't afford to let her or the other women down."

"You will be able to trust my wife."

"*Vamonous*, I have no time to question your motives. Please hurry."

Carlos and Pedro carefully wrapped Carmen in a tablecloth and carried her outside into the back alley, where Carlos's truck was parked.

Pedro hissed, "What are you doing? *Estas loco*. You haven't seen your wife in weeks and you are bringing her this? She is a great healer, but how can you be so sure that she'll do this for you?"

Carlos ignored the questions as he helped Monica into the back with Carmen. He swallowed hard, almost gulping the air around him. He was as breathless as if his own life were being squeezed out of him. For some reason the blood of a woman made him sick. Once Monica and Carmen were settled, he turned and whispered to Pedro, "This is beyond my experience. Women should be at home, not on the streets, not getting hurt. Rosie will know what to do."

The truck crept along the slow and bumpy roads. It was clear that where they were going was *en los campos*, up in the hills where they say the roads were made following the cows' paths. Monica felt each twist of the road, and every one of the ruts. Still breathing, Carmen had only opened her eyes once. The blood around her mouth was dry and Monica used her own skirt to soak up the blood oozing from below her dress. Whatever

possessed her to come with Carlos, or for that matter for Carlos to come to their rescue, was beyond her. She listened to the song of the *coquis*. It was already evening and the tiny, heard-but-not-seen, frogs' gentle chorus, *co qui co qui*, echoed through the hills. The answering calls calmed her by their resonating sound. Please let us arrive soon, she prayed.

Within minutes they rounded a steep hill and Carlos abruptly stopped the truck. Looking out, Monica saw a small cabin perched on the hillside. Even in the darkness the freshness of the cool breeze, the smell of banana trees, and the lone light from the cabin encouraged her. Carlos quickly ran to the door. Hesitating for a moment, he knocked, opened the door, quickly slipped in, and disappeared.



Rosie stood small behind the kitchen counter; a tea kettle steaming in the background, guava skin and fibers piled up alongside a pitcher of juice. Turning her head towards the front door, she called out, “Carlos, I’m in the kitchen making one of my healing potions. I expected you earlier.”

Already Carlos felt his heart accelerate, his face get red. It infuriated him how she knew things. He had had no intention of visiting Rosie tonight. To talk with Rosie he’d rather be on neutral territory, some place where they both would be comfortable. He wasn’t sure that place existed anymore. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples trying to obliterate a vision of Rosie tinkering with her medicinal herbs and juices, Rosie seeing the invisible and just knowing. Despite his resolve to be calm, Carlos headed as an accuser for the kitchen. “Rosie, you couldn’t have expected me. If you know so much, why am I here?”

Wiping her hands on a dish towel, Rosie turned to

face Carlos. She studied the fierceness in his eyes, his tight jaw, and his hunched shoulders. Ignoring his question she softly asked, "Who is hurt?"

"A woman from the bar. Your friend Jesus attacked her. I told you he was dangerous. Now look what he has done."

Keeping her eyes fixed on Carlos, she repeated her question. "How bad is she hurt?"

"She is moaning and bleeding. She couldn't talk. I told her friend that you could help."

Rosie walked towards Carlos and took his arm. "Come with me to make a bed ready. Tell me the names of the woman and her friend."

Carlos had to follow Rosie, as he was lost in her cabin. He was only an occasional visitor, displaced by Rosie's hobbies. They walked silently through a hallway into a small room off the back of the cabin. Rosie handed him a pillow and blankets. As she tucked the sheets into a mat, she gently prodded. "Did you hear my question Carlos? Do you know their names?"

Carlos thought for a moment, "Wait, I'm trying to remember. I know that Monica is her friend. She is the hostess at the bar, and I think the other ones name is Carina or Carmen, but I'm not sure. Her name doesn't matter. You'll still help her even without a name, won't you?"

"Everything matters Carlos, even a grain of sand. Can't you see that? Bring them in. You know that I will always help someone who is hurt. You never wanted my help or advice, but I am always here to help. You can count on me at least for that."

"You should stick to being a wife. I know about business and what is good for the island. I know that you should trust me about Jesus."

Rosie saw the stubborn wall surrounding Carlos. No matter how she tried she couldn't get past his blindness.

“Carlos, you never could see the deeper values. With all your education you have lost something precious. Never mind. They must be anxious, waiting outside. We can talk later.”



As Monica waited, she could feel Carmen stir and begin to moan. The wait seemed to stretch on and with it, so did Monica's apprehension.

Monica called out, “Pedro, what is taking so long? Is this going to work out or did your friend misjudge his wife?”

In answer Pedro walked to the back of the truck, peered in and said, “Carlos may have misjudged you, but not his wife.”

The door to the cabin opened again. This time it swung out wider revealing to Monica the silhouette of a small woman. The silhouette spoke with command, “Pedro, help Carlos lift the woman and bring her inside. We have made a bed ready. Monica, please come quickly, I am going to need your help.”

Surprised at having her name called out, Monica felt something shift. An energy force surrounded this small woman. From its center kindness, warmth, and strength floated towards her. Used to being in command, she was out of her element here. Somehow this aura penetrated her shield; her normal armor of toughness, and left her without protection. She obeyed. Quickly jumping down from the truck, she followed Carlos and Pedro into the house. They took Carmen into a small room, empty except for a thick mat, which had been hastily made into a bed. It lay on the floor and beside it was a figurine in the shape of an old man. It held a lit candle, which created shadows on the wall. Elongated and whimsical, the shadows resembled the tall, thin *caballero*, Don Quixote. Orchids hung from baskets and formed a canopy over the

mat. Catching her own reflection, she jumped. Inside a greenhouse, glass walls surrounded the room, mirroring back her image and encasing them in a jungle of plants.

Without a word, Carlos and Pedro gently placed Carmen on the bed. Carlos turned and said, “Monica, *este es mi esposa*, Rosie. She understands and will help you.”

Before Monica could say anything, Rosie stepped forward. Arms outstretched she took Monica’s hand and held it between her own hands. Turning her head to look at Carlos, she held his gaze and said, “Carlos, do you understand?”

Expecting the jealous wife to finally explode, Monica held her breath waiting for the fall out. Instead she heard Rosie whisper, “*La tierra*, the earth, is more than your precious cement, your important business deals. Everything has its place. You tell me that Jesus has raped this woman. I have my doubts, but I know that your planned projects are raping his world. Go, Carlos; go to your business. Think about tonight. If Monica and I need anything we’ll let you know.” Letting go of Monica’s hands, Rosie held out her arms and hugged a stiff Carlos. There were tears in her eyes as she turned back to face Monica.

“Well, Monica, welcome. Let’s get to work on helping your friend to heal. I am not a doctor or nurse, but between us I think we can manage. I have some clean cloths and disinfectants by the side of the mat.”

The two worked quietly. Monica washed Carmen’s face, cleaning the blood and applying ice to bruised, swollen cheeks. Rosie cut away Carmen’s dress, exposing minor knife wounds on her forearms and chest, where she had held up her arms as protection. These wounds had already begun to close, yet centered near the vagina, a mass of blood clots continued to ooze. Rosie looked up and asked, “Monica, could your friend have been pregnant? I think after her beating she miscarried.”

“If she was, I didn’t know about it. We talked, but not about the present. Carmen always told me stories of her homeland. She loved the place. I’m not sure, but I think they forced her to leave. I never knew why.” Monica shook her head, regretting the significant conversations she had missed with her companion. Fearing the answer, she asked, “Do you think she’ll survive?”

Rosie flashed a smile at Monica, “Don’t be so frightened. Carmen is young and healthy like you. The wounds aren’t too deep and the blood is already clotting. We’ll bring her some tea mixed with guava juice to keep her from dehydrating. With some rest and care we’ll get her strength up. Please go into the kitchen. The tea and juice are on the table.”

When Monica returned, she stood quietly at the door just watching Rosie. Her first impression of Rosie had been that of a centered, impenetrable woman. Rosie was short. Probably not measuring five feet, but her height was deceptive. Emanating strength, Rosie seemed twice her size. With an olive complexion, her face narrowed from high cheekbones to a somewhat pointed chin. Thick, shiny black hair cascaded down to Rosie’s shoulders. Her real power, however, came from the eyes. Large, dark, expressive eyebrows moved to punctuate Rosie’s thoughts.

Rosie sat by Carmen’s head, with her legs straddling Carmen. Placing her hands under Carmen’s shoulder blades, Rosie rearranged Carmen’s body. Monica heard Rosie whispering to Carmen, but could not make out what she said. She listened to Carmen’s breathing, at first quick, short gasps, but gradually the rhythm smoothed out. As Rosie progressed, softly touching the shoulders, arms, hips, legs, and finally the feet, Carmen’s body dropped all tension and her breath came in full and strong. Monica had never seen a body transform almost magically into calmness.

Tentatively Monica walked in with the drinks. She felt confused. She couldn't explain the intimacy between Rosie and Carmen. She'd never witnessed anything like it before. This intimacy was different from the one she experienced with her sexual partners, different from anything she shared with her family. Rosie's eyes and hands seemed to sense people from the inside. Monica's experience had taught her never to get that close, not even with herself. She both longed to be Carmen, receiving the magical touches, and envied Rosie her gift. Yet, to succumb so totally, threatened her independence. Monica feared letting go, losing control, but she feared most of all that she would never experience this soulful, unselfish intimacy.

As she approached, Rosie looked up. "*Gracias*, Monica. Carmen seems to be doing... What's wrong? Your face looks like you have seen a ghost! Does what I am doing scare you? Because I am different, because I take the time to see who you and your friend are? Do I scare you because you are afraid to see yourself and the world?"

Sighing, Rosie shook her head and laughed a deep guttural laugh. "I should fear you, blood-stained lady of the streets! Set the drinks down and go into my bedroom. I have some clothes somewhere in my closet that might fit you. Take a shower and change. We'll leave Carmen to rest and I'll fix us something to eat."