

The Closing
by Chava Hudson

Excerpt from Chapter 1

Stringy, Anne's mother had called her when she was a kid. Even now as she undressed for a bath, her breasts, the fullest part of her body, were the only curves on her otherwise angular frame. While the water ran, Anne unpacked her dirty laundry (folded in her suitcase as if clean), and placed the two bags of Costa-Rican coffee for Charlie (in case she ever saw him again) on her dresser. She slipped into the steamy tub, hoping to cure her sore neck. She slid deeper into the lavender-scented foam, her chestnut hair floating on the bubbles. She sighed as her muscles softened in the warmth – everything that is, but her neck, an epicenter of pain. *You're not supposed to return from a vacation feeling like a wreck*, she thought. Costa Rica had been beautiful, but not the slow, healing trip she'd needed. She should have known that traveling with Trudy would be a challenge, even with Denise there to referee. When the water cooled and her finger-tips resembled rosy little raisins, she emerged limp and dripping. Her damn neck was still a tension wire and the bath had dulled, but not cured, some vague emptiness inside. There was nothing left to do but arrange yet another massage. Chronic stress was getting expensive.

She'd be dying for a massage by the time she could get an appointment and someone's knowing fingers could tame her damn neck so that at least she could turn her head. Her neck muscles pulsed a flash of pain in response to that thought. In the meantime, she'd scheduled a day of meetings with Minnie Goldstein, and Louie Lasandra, both of whom she'd counted on for their house listings. It wasn't a good real estate market, and she had to get busy *if* she was going to be top seller again this year.

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Minnie's grand Victorian had one of those wrap-around porches, a symbol of a simpler, elegant time. Despite its faded peeling green paint and rotting underlying clapboards, Anne knew that if she could just get this plum of a listing, she could sell it in a week. It was in Newton after all, and this house would be bargain-priced in a pricey neighborhood. Okay, the yard was overrun by weeds, but in February, it was covered by a smooth white icing, with the unruly shrubs dolled up like fake Christmas decorations with clumps of snow.

Minnie answered the door in a long lavender velour robe with coffee stain dots, and eyed Anne suspiciously, her bird-like eyes narrowing. Her red wiry hair had faded to an alarming shade of orange, and had two inches of white roots.

"I'm Anne Martin, from Fredericks and Martin," said Anne, producing a card from her purse. The card read, *Specialists in real estate and transition planning*. "We had an appointment."

"Yes, of course," Minnie nodded, let her in, and led her into a dreary parlor, darkened from drawn yellowed shades and paneling. "I just thought it was this afternoon, or I would have cleaned up. Sit down dearie. Would you like some tea?"

"No thanks." It would have taken more than the morning to clean up the place. Anne moved a stack of magazines from the sofa to the floor and sat on the worn burgundy brocade. The fringe on the bottom ticked her ankles as she crossed her black pumps and tucked them together. She kept her black wool coat on, since the room felt chilly. Anne's extensive collection of black clothing was like a huge funeral wardrobe. "How did you hear about us?" she asked Minnie.

"I don't know, maybe when I was in rehab from a broken hip. People talk. I just don't want to get like some of those people there, catatonics who just eat and shit. I don't want to have anyone care of me. No, not me. I want to die with a little dignity. If I have any money left it's in this house, so I have to sell it, but what then? Go to a nursing home while my good-for-nothing son waits it out for whatever's left? No thanks. No, I heard you can help me."

"What would you like, Minnie?" Anne took a deep breath of the stale air, acrid from years of cigarette smoke. Ashtrays overflowed on every end table amid clutter of milk glass vases with dusty plastic flowers and an assortment of lamps that Anne wished had been turned on.

"I'll tell you what. You're going to sell this clap trap and everything in it. I've always wanted to go to Thailand and Japan, or maybe a cruise. Henry and I took cruises when he was alive. I'm going to go while I still can and spend every last penny and then you're going to help me. I'll just check out, nice and peaceful and clean. No wheel chairs or walkers for me, thank you. I'll leave enough for my son to bury me of course. Maybe I'll be cremated, though I haven't decided. I don't have to decide that now, do I?" She had a coughing fit that doubled her over to her knees, then she sat back in her chair and spit into a wadded tissue.

Anne recrossed her legs and felt a shooting pain in her neck as she turned her face towards Minnie. "Of course not. We'll give you a detailed contract that specifies everything. We'll design this just as you want it. There're lots of options."

Anne slowly let out her breath. This was going well. "Can you show me around?" she asked.

“Sure,” said Minnie. She rose with effort by pressing her hands into the arms of her wingback chair. “Follow me.”

It was a fixer-upper inside too. The kitchen, circa 1930, could be donated to a historical society, except a museum wouldn't be pleased by the linoleum, curling its edges like surly lips. The upstairs was worse.

“We'll send a cleaning service when you list the house,” said Anne. “Would you consider some fresh paint? It would help it sell,” she said looking at the bedrooms. Various faded garden wallpapers had brown stains from a leaky roof. Four of the five bedrooms looked like junk shops with a hodge-podge of furniture. The last bedroom was Minnie's, and had clothes dumped in a pile on her unmade bed. The bathroom had no door, just a piece of heavy fabric Minnie had tacked up to the top of the door frame and it was heavy with dust. Anne gasped at the floor, which was just raw plywood. She would get some carpeting installed. It was the least expensive option.

“No money. Why do you think I'm selling?”

“Minnie, you don't have to get rid of your house and your life. Maybe you can get a reverse mortgage that would pay you until you're ready.” What was she doing, talking her out of the listing? Was she crazy?

“No, I've got nothing to live for. I'm here all alone with nothing to do. Even my damn cat died. How do you do it, anyway?”

“Do what?”

“You know, help me end it? You do that, right? That's why I called you.”

Anne's breath caught in her throat. “Yes, we do, but we'll talk about that later.” Anne didn't know how she'd let Trudy, her business partner talk her into this. Okay, she'd practically been a bag lady, trying to survive selling her artwork. “It's a niche,” Trudy had said. “There's all these terminally sick old people and we can help them.” Trudy had been a nurse before she'd gone into real estate and had a way of persuading her, cajoling her, until what she said made sense. After listening to Trudy for so long, Anne didn't know what she really wanted any more. Maybe she needed to get away from Trudy, but they'd been friends since college and did everything together. In fact, they'd just taken their vacation in Costa Rica with their other college friend, Denise. If Trudy was like a trade wind, blowing them on a course, it was Denise who was their anchor.

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It was a blustery February day when they'd flown to paradise. Now, four days later, the house Anne approached might have been one of those open front, third-world specials, the kind with slats of wood haphazardly nailed together into a family-sized crate, complete with chickens running about in the dirt yard. But this Costa Rican cottage had a well-kept garden and a freshly-painted sign that clearly read, "Massage. English Spoken Here."

And she couldn't wait. She'd thrashed through the night in a lumpy motel bed. They'd traveled hours by a rented van up a dirt road to Monteverde, a mountaintop town, and checked into the economy motel Denise had reserved. Trudy had requested a tour of all the rooms and after she'd taken the largest one for herself, they'd left their bags and then hurried to the rain forest for a walk over the suspension bridges. It was the greenest thing Anne had ever seen – miles of lush vegetation, as far as she could see. Afterwards, back in town, they dined on rice and beans with martinis, and Anne exhausted, was grateful to fall into bed early. But the clanging of metal upon metal from the abutting body shop vibrated her bones, while a couple in the adjacent room banged their headboard into the wall screaming "oui!" Sleep was impossible, even with her toilet paper earplugs. With each of their screaming orgasms, a golf ball sized knot in her neck grew larger, until she imagined that it would overtake her entire body. Sometime in the middle of the night, she decided that while her friends rode the zip-line in the rain forest in the morning, flying over the treetops while harnessed and suspended from a cable, she would get what she really needed — a massage.

They'd probably give her a hard time about not going, especially Trudy, sky-diving, scuba diving, mountain climbing Trudy, who just didn't seem to get her at all. Trudy would accuse her of chickening out. Maybe she was, since it was true that she was knee-knockingly afraid of heights. No need to mention that. If she'd even hint at it, Trudy would be all over her. *Are you going to ruled by your fears*, she'd ask in that superior voice of hers. Yes, Anne thought. I am. And you know what? I don't care.

When the sun rose, she staggered into the bathroom for a shower. She couldn't wait to let the hot water beat on the golf ball, but when she turned the knobs, there was no water. She threw on her clothes. "God Dammit," she yelled and descended the stairs.

"Buenos," beamed Carlos, the owner, who was already in the office. He peeked over his newspaper. "*Como esta?*"

She wasn't feeling buena at all, but she replied, "*Bien,y usted?*"

He put the paper down. Carlos's smile dimpled his brown cheeks and revealed a big black gap in front where one of his incisors should have been. He spoke no English.

“*No tengo agua,*” she said, making twinkling motions with her fingers overhead.

Carlos nodded. “*Si,*” and then said a bunch of things in rapid Spanish that she didn’t understand, making wide circles with his arms. “*No hay agua dondequiera. No agua todas,*” he explained excitedly. Anne got that part and thought it peculiar that an entire town would be without water at six thirty A.M, suspecting that perhaps Carlos had turned it off to cut costs.

Anne nodded. “*Tambien, quiero una massage.*”

He nodded excitedly, quickly handing her a brochure, from a stack, conveniently placed on the end table next to him.

It was in English and said, *relaxation, neuromuscular massage.* She could use that. “*Nueve?*”

He dialed the old-style black phone, evidently knowing the number. Anne wondered if it was customary to call people at 6:30 A.M. in Costa Rica. Evidently it was. He hung up and announced with his toothless smile, “*Nueve son buenos.*”

Just then Trudy and Denise descended the wide wooden staircase and Anne met them in the hallway.

“There’s not a drop of water in this friggin’ place,” said Trudy, shaking her short blonde hair, dull-looking, thanks to the dust from yesterday’s dirt road. She slung her slate blue backpack, the same shade as her eyes, over her shoulder.

“Did you hear all that pounding?” asked Denise, “Jesus, my head is splitting.” She lifted a toned, tanned arm to her forehead.

“Yes, and speaking of that, I think I’m going to skip the zip-line thing and go for a massage. I didn’t sleep all night,” said Anne.

“That’s terrible,” said Denise. “Sure, I can understand. I don’t blame you. Still, I wish you’d come. I’ll miss you. Either way, we better get some breakfast because our taxi’s coming soon.” Trudy didn’t say a word, but brusquely pushed a lock of hair back from her eyes and turned her eyebrows into a vee. They angled to her pert little nose that she’d scrunched into wrinkles.

Carlos’s wife Maria had set places for them at one of the long wooden tables and brought them mugs of hot coffee. There was a plate of mixed tropical fruit waiting. Anne was happy for the coffee and took a giant gulp. From the kitchen, they could hear Carlos and Maria yelling at each other and the friends just made their eyes wide as they looked at each other, unable to translate the rapid Spanish.

“You know,” said Trudy in a thoughtful voice as she scooped the largest slice of mango onto her plate, “You can always get a massage back at the hotel in San Jose or when we get home.” Her eyebrows had returned to their normal high arch. She aggressively cut the mango and popped a forkful into her mouth. “God, this stuff is fantastic. Why would you want to miss this opportunity to do the zip-

line?” Trudy had her personal ten commandments, and seizing the moment was the very first one — her mantra. Trudy's carpe diem moments, her anonymous sex, cliff-hanging, nail-biting moments, had been making Anne queasy since college.

“Nooooo, thanks,” Anne replied, “a massage feels just like what I need. Anyway, we walked the bridges yesterday, and that feels like enough. You go and have fun,” she said. “I'd probably fall off the zip-line into the jungle and get swallowed by a boa constrictor.” Anne speared the second largest mango with her fork, feeling proud that she was sticking to what she needed. Trudy could make her feel cowardly, and okay, maybe it was true, but she was too out-of-sorts to care. She'd seize the moment, but it would just be her moment. According to Trudy, the best moments were the ones where you were hanging by a belt loop from a mountaintop. Couldn't moments also be lovely and safe when Anne seized them?

“If you're sure, then you should take care of yourself,” said Denise, slowly scooping a random fruit onto her plate. Denise was a therapist, and the one Anne went to when she needed someone to understand her. They were like a family and sometimes Anne thought of Denise as the mother, Trudy the wild brother, and unfortunately, herself as the child. Trudy had her good points, her straight-shooter, clear-thinking points. Anne had to admit that Trudy's sense of adventure pushed her into trying things. She'd never have tried sushi, her favorite food, if it weren't for Trudy.

“I don't know,” said Trudy, almost as if she'd been reading Anne's mind. “I think it's good to push yourself, to try new things.”

“I push myself,” said Anne. “I just do it differently. I do it in my creative life. Every painting is an adventure. I live the edge of a creative cliff.”

“I suppose that's how you explain your work then,” said Trudy, rolling her eyes.

They were served eggs and toast and ate them as they watched the French couple kissing over their coffee cups, darting and slopping tongues. “Disgusting,” said Trudy. “Maybe we should get them a room.”

“They already have one, and it's right next to mine,” said Anne. “Trust me, it was an interesting night. The walls here are like paper. No wonder I need a massage.”

“Maybe you just need to get laid,” said Trudy, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Shut up,” said Anne.

“Looks like I hit a nerve,” said Trudy, placing her fingers next to her temples and wiggling her nose.

“You're a fine one to talk, Trudy” said Denise. “Did you ever consider that your adventures are just misplaced sexuality?”

“Don't hit me with your psycho-babble, Ms. Therapist. I have to do *something* interesting in life. Besides, I haven't misplaced my sexuality. I know exactly where it is, but it's just been on a vacation since Mr. Not-so-wonderful took a hike.”

“Maybe he couldn't keep up with you,” said Anne.

“I just need a guy who can handle me, that's all. I just haven't met the right one,” said Trudy.

Carlos came in to announce that her friend's taxi was there. When they'd gone, Anne ate the remainder of the fruit and she practiced Spanish conjugations from a book until her taxi arrived too.

Now, that she'd paid the driver, and was walking the hydrangea-lined path the front door of the cottage, the masseuse burst out of the wooden door. “*Bienvenida*,” she said, sizing Anne up. “I'm Bernarda. Come inside.”

Bernarda was steel-haired and stout, and her muscular golden arms hung ready at her sides. Her smile was wide and her brown eyes glowed, maybe a little too much. She put a strong hand on Anne's arm and led her to the door. “Come.”

The inside of the house was smaller than it had looked from outside. There was a massage table set up in a room that was the kitchen, living room, and massage room all in one, and about the size of Ann's bedroom back home. “What's your name?” asked Bernarda.

“Anne.”

Bernarda began unknitting the sweater Anne had tied around her waist. Anne was horrified. Was she going to undress her? But no. “Take off your clothes,” Bernarda directed.

Anne quickly looked around for some privacy, but there was none. Bernarda shook her head impatiently, apparently expecting her to strip in the middle of the room. Not only didn't Anne like heights, but she wasn't fond of undressing in front of strangers either. Not that she was a prude, just private about her body, and God knows, it had been a while since she'd undressed in front of anyone.

“Leave your underpants on,” said Bernarda.

Anne nodded, relieved, as she slowly pulled off her black tank top and folded it, slowly, stalling the inevitable. Bernarda pointed to the chair next to the refrigerator and Anne set it there. Then, she took off her flowered shorts and piled them on. She stood in her white cotton bra and underpants and noticed a old folded towel on the message table. She reached for it and held it with her teeth so it draped in front of her as she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. Then she quickly rolled the towel around herself and threw the bra onto the pile. There.

“Okay, *listo*?” said Bernarda, patting the table. “Face up, *por favor*.”

Anne obeyed, and Bernarda took another towel and folded it, placing it over her breasts and then slipped the crucial towel that Anne was still gripping, down to the tops of her underpants. “Relax,”

she told Anne. Bernarda immediately drizzled her with oil, sliding her strong hands on on her chest and kneading the oil in with swift, experienced strokes. Anne imagined this was more the vigorous rub-down given to a prize-fighter after a match, not the slow, deep message that her body was craving, but still, she had to admit, it felt good. She closed her eyes.

“You have pain?” she asked Anne.

“Yes, right here in my neck.” Anne pointed to the golf ball lump.

“I’m a physical therapist too,” Bernarda told her. “I will do some things on it that might be a little unusual, okay?”

“Sure,” she murmured, wondering when Bernarda would get to the lump, but decided to just wait and see. She wondered what she was in for.

Bernarda pressed and rubbed, working her strong hands down her from Anne's pecs to her abdomen and then down Anne's legs. Bernarda seemed to find pockets of pain everywhere and dug deeper, attacking each sorry knot, one by one — everywhere it seems, but her neck. After some time, she had Anne flip to her belly. Desperate for Bernarda's attention, the throbbing was worse. Maybe Bernarda was saving it for the end. She walked her fingers down Anne's spine, and then took a hot wet towel and stuck it inside her underpants. God, she'd have soggy underwear all day, but it felt almost like a body next to hers, or at least in her vague recollection. The thought floated away in her groggy, half-asleep haze. Her muscles dissolved into pliable clay under the towel.

Bernarda pressed her thumbs down the back of Anne's legs and feet and back up again, finally to the good side of her neck. “Mmmm,” said Anne. She couldn't wait until Bernarda's fingers targeted her aching knot. Maybe she'd put a towel there too, but her fingers ran away, down her spine again. Anne's awareness was in the lump on her neck, that now felt like it was aching — longing for release, and she opened her eyes in alarm.

“It's the other side that hurts,” said Anne, pointing to the place with a hand that was so limp that it was an effort to pick it up. “Can you please rub here?” She was surprised at her own assertion.

“I'm going to do something else there, if that's okay.” Anne felt the message table wobble as Bernarda climbed up by her feet and straddled Anne, settling herself on the small of Anne's back and began to bounce like she was riding a bronco, pulling Anne's shoulders towards her. “Does this help?” she asked, as she rode.

Anne was too surprised to answer, as her stomach was bounced and smashed into the table. She waited a minute to see if maybe it was working. It was good to have an open mind, but she could only picture herself on a table in Bernarda's kitchen in Costa Rica with damp underpants, and with this stout woman riding her. She was pretty sure it wasn't helping. “No,” said Anne, “It's not.”

Bernarda sighed heavily, stopped and dismounted abruptly. "Okay, sit up."

Anne, a bit woozy, obeyed rag-doll fashion, and pulled the towel up around her breasts with the little muscular control she had left.

"Now I'm going to show you some exercises." Bernarda demonstrated, and rolling her shoulder around. "This is what you do. Raise a shoulder up to your ear, all the way around, and down."

Anne was losing patience. She didn't want to do stupid shoulder rolls. She just wanted the damn sore spot rubbed. Was this woman crazy? She just wanted Bernarda's strong thumbs to smash the pain right out of her, but she humored her by rolling few lazy shoulder circles front and back. She held the towel around her breasts with her other arm and then said, "Look, all I want is for you to rub my neck. That's why I came here. Could you *please* just do that?" She pointed again to where the knot was screaming for attention.

Bernarda shrugged. "Okay, lie down."

Anne fell back on the table as Bernarda began to press into her neck. "Haaaaaaah," Anne said. Finally!

"Pain?" asked Bernarda.

"Yes, but it's good pain." Anne felt the knot dissolving as Bernarda worked. Bernarda rubbed, but for a few minutes.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," said Anne, alarmed. Was she stopping so soon? She could have used another hour.

"Okay, get dressed."

"That's it?"

"Yes. Time's up."

At home, when she'd had massages, the therapists usually cradled her head at the end, softly whispering, "Okay, take your time getting up." Then they'd leave the room. But Bernarda just stood there with her arms crossed and watched her. This time Anne wrapped herself in a towel and took her clothes to dress in the bathroom. When she came out, Bernarda stood by the door, holding a large orange mango, her chubby cheeks rosy as the fruit, as she grinned rather slyly, Anne thought.

"Here, this is for you."

"Thanks," said Anne, accepting the mango, and Bernarda's now free arms flew around her into a bear hug.

"You're welcome," she said, holding Anne like she was a long, lost cousin.

Anne broke away and paid her, and although she had to admit that she felt better, she was anxious to leave. She didn't know what to expect next, and was glad when her taxi pulled up, right on time, crackling the gravel in Bernarda's driveway. Bernarda ran around closing the windows and then grabbed her handbag. "I'm taking the cab with you. I'm going over to your hotel," she announced.

"Oh," said Anne stupidly, not knowing what else to say. It would be ridiculous not to let her come, but it didn't feel quite right. Were they going to be friends now too? She hopped into the back seat next to Anne and the driver bumped them down the hill. Bernarda flashed her a big toothy smile, looking delighted as she pointed out horses and chickens. Anne, laughed to herself. The woman had no boundaries.

"You know, I lived in your country once," Bernarda said quietly, as she looked at Anne, and turning suddenly serious.

"Really? Where did you live?"

"In New York. I had a sister there, but she died. It was very hard."

"Did you practice massage there?"

"No, I didn't have the right license, so I worked as a waitress. It's hard to survive in New York. It was too expensive. When my sister died of cancer, I moved back here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Anne, not knowing what to say.

Bernarda folded her meaty arms around herself and looked out the window.

The taxi slowed and made a wide turn into the B & B's parking lot. As Anne paid the taxi driver, Bernarda waltzed into the office, where Anne could see her through the window, giving Carlos one of her big hugs, totally engulfing him. All she could see of him was his brown hands, and she watched as they slid down the curve of Bernarda's butt. She couldn't wait to tell Denise and Trudy, but now, all she wanted was a shower.