

IN THE COOL, pine-forested foothills southeast of Mexico City lay Hacienda del Sol. The estate was austere and proper yet somehow hospitable, much like its owner, Maria Monteneras. Maria, a national institution, was a multi-media earth mother, author of books like *Fragrant Hospitality* and star of her own television series, "Entertaining with Mama Maria."

When Maria's beloved husband, Pepe, died, all Mexico grieved. It happened one night, after a small dinner party. A drunken Pepe Monteneras fell from a footbridge on the hacienda property and was dashed to death in the dry riverbed below. Rumors of suicide and murder circulated in the tabloid press, then quickly faded. A full year after Pepe's accident, Maria finally came out of her mournful seclusion.

Roberto Robles was Maria's agent and friend. He and his wife arrived Friday afternoon. They unpacked in one of the guest rooms, then strolled among the dusty olive trees. "How like Maria to mark her return to life with a weekend party," Inez Robles said in hushed admiration. Roberto grunted and frowned. "What's the matter with you?"

"Tomorrow's the Day of the Dead," Roberto said, referring to the Mexican observance of All Souls' Day. "It was exactly one year ago tomorrow that Pepe died. Why did she invite us?"

"She didn't want to be alone."

Roberto still frowned. "You, me, Hugo, Yolanda. We were all here last year, this same weekend. And now Maria invites us back, the same four who were here when Pepe died. I wonder..."

Hugo and Yolanda were sitting in the hacienda's homey kitchen also wondering. "I don't know why Maria took it all so hard," Hugo hissed a bit maliciously. "Everyone knew Pepe was philandering about. I'm surprised he died a natural death, what with jealous husbands, perhaps a mistress fed up with his promises..."

"Sh!" Yolanda warned her husband just in time. "Maria, dear. I can't believe you're entertaining a house full of guests



all by yourself.”

“Mama” Maria breezed into the kitchen. “As my publisher, you should know my methods, Yolanda.” She was at the counter, already beginning to chop garlic. “Inez is a vegetarian. Hugo eats fish at every dinner; no red meat. Roberto has a milk allergy. If you plan ahead, being a good hostess isn’t any more time-consuming or expensive. As for servants . . . Well, tomorrow is a holiday.” She paused, cleaver poised in midair. “A day to remember our loved ones.”

That evening, true to form, Maria served up a seemingly effortless feast. They were still laughing and talking long past midnight when Maria made the final toast. “To old friends, here and gone.” She drank. “And now I must marinate tomorrow’s dinner. Please enjoy yourselves.” And she vanished into the kitchen.

Of the four guests, Inez rose earliest on Saturday morning to find breakfast pastries and strong coffee already brewing. A note on the stove announced, “I’m working in the cottage this morning. You all know where to find what you need. Perhaps this afternoon we’ll go horseback riding. Maria.”

By noon everyone was up and wandering the grounds. By two, they were growing restless. “I told her she had to finish the new book,” Yolanda whined. “But I didn’t think she’d do it on a holiday.”

By three they were worried. Hugo and Roberto walked over to the work cottage. Even from a distance, through the pulled window curtain, they recognized the silhouette sitting at her writing table. “She’s been in that same position for hours,” Hugo said as he knocked. “Something’s wrong.” There was no answer.

Neither man knew what to expect when they broke down the cottage door. They certainly didn’t expect to find what they did, a room empty except for a mannequin. The store dummy wore one of Maria’s trademark wigs and was propped up in her chair.

The guests immediately set out to search, calling Maria’s name at the top of their lungs. Yolanda was crossing the foot-

bridge when she happened to remember Pepe’s accident a year earlier. Reflexively, she glanced down into the dry riverbed below, then screamed.

Maria’s lifeless, bloody body lay on the sun-bleached rocks. “Just like Pepe,” Yolanda muttered to herself. “The Day of the Dead.”

Whodunit? (1) Who killed Maria Monteneras? (2) What was the motive? (3) Maria accidentally left a clue pointing to her killer. What was it?