



# Rebel Island

Rick Riordan



# REBEL ISLAND

RICK RIORDAN

BANTAM BOOKS

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# 1

**We got married in a thunderstorm. That should've been my first warning.**

The Southwest Craft Center courtyard was festooned with white crepe paper. The tables were laden with fresh tamales, chips and salsa. Cases of Shiner Bock sweated on ice in tin buckets. The margarita machine was humming. The San Antonio River flowed past the old limestone walls.

Maia looked beautiful in her cream bridal dress. Her black hair was curled in ringlets and her coppery skin glowed with health.

The guests had arrived: my mother, fresh from a tour of Guatemala; my brother, Garrett, not-so-fresh from our long bachelor party in Austin; and a hundred other relatives, cops, thugs, ex-cons, lawyers—all the people who had made my life so interesting the past few decades.

Then the clouds came. Lightning sparked off a mesquite tree. The sky opened up, and our outdoor wedding became

a footrace to the chapel with the retired Baptist minister and the Buddhist monk leading the pack.

Larry Cho, the monk, had a commanding early lead, but Reverend Buckner Fanning held steady around the tamale table while Larry the Buddhist had to swerve to avoid a beer keg and got blocked out by a couple of bail bondsmen. Buckner was long retired, but he sure stayed fit. He won the race to the chapel and held the door for the others as we came pouring in.

I was last, helping Maia, since she couldn't move very quickly. Partly that was because of the wedding dress. Mostly it was because she was eight and a half months pregnant. I held a plastic bag over our heads as we plodded through the rain.

"This was *not* in the forecast," she protested.

"No," I agreed. "I'm thinking God owes us a refund."

Inside, the chapel was dark and smelled of musty limestone. The cedar floorboards creaked under our feet. The crowd milled around, watching out the windows as our party decorations were barraged into mush. Rain drummed off the grass so hard it made a layer of haze three feet high. The crepe paper melted and watery salsa overflowed off the edge of the tables.



“Well,” Buckner said, beaming as if God had made this glorious moment just for us. “We still have a holy matrimony to perform.”



**Actually, I was raised Catholic, which is why the wedding** was half-Buddhist, half-Baptist. Maia had not been a practicing Buddhist since she was a little girl in China, but she liked Larry the Buddhist, and the incense and beads made her feel nostalgic.

Buckner Fanning was the most respected Baptist minister in San Antonio. He also knew my mom from way back. When the Catholic priest had been reluctant to perform the ceremony (something about Maia being pregnant out of wedlock; go figure), my mom had recruited Buckner.

For his part, Buckner had talked to me in advance about doing the right thing by getting married, how he hoped we would raise our child to know God. I told him we hadn't actually talked to God about the matter yet, but we were playing phone tag. Buckner, fortunately, had a sense of humor. He agreed to marry us.



**We were a pretty bedraggled crew when we reassembled in** the old chapel. Rain poured down the stained-glass windows and hammered on the roof. I glanced over at Ana DeLeon, our homicide detective friend, who was toweling off her daughter Lucia's hair. Ana smiled at me. I gave her a wink, but it was painful to hold her eyes too long. It was hard not to think about her husband, who should have been standing at her side.

Larry the Buddhist rang his gong and lit some incense. He chanted a sutra. Then Buckner began talking about the marriage covenant.

My eyes met Maia's. She was studying me quizzically. Maybe she was wondering why she'd agreed to hook up with a guy like me. Then she smiled, and I remembered how we'd met in a bar in Berkeley fifteen years ago. Every time she smiled like that, she sent an electric charge straight down my back.

I'm afraid I missed most of what Buckner had to say. But I heard the "I do" part. I said the vow without hesitation.



**Afterward, we waded through the well-wishers: my old** girlfriend, Lillian Cambridge; Madeleine White, the mafia princess; Larry Drapiewski, the retired deputy; Milo Chavez, the music agent from Nashville; Messieurs Terrence and Goldman, Maia's old bosses from the law firm in San Francisco; my mom and her newest boyfriend, a millionaire named Jack Mariner. All sorts of dangerous rain-soaked people.

We ate soggy wedding cake and drank champagne and waited for the storm to pass. As Maia talked with some of her former colleagues, Garrett cornered me at the bar.

My brother was wearing what passed for wedding garb: a worn tuxedo jacket over his tie-dyed T-shirt. His scraggly beard and poorly combed hair looked like a wheat field after a hailstorm. His tuxedo pants were pinned up (since he didn't have legs) and he'd woven carnations through the spokes of his wheelchair.

"Grats, little bro." He lifted his plate of tamales in salute. "Good eats."

"You congratulating me on the tamales or the marriage?"

“Depends.” He belched into his fist, which was for him pretty darned discreet. “What you got planned for the honeymoon?”

Right then, my internal alarms should’ve been ringing. I should’ve backed away, told him to get another plate of tamales and saved myself a lot of trouble.

Instead, I said, “Nothing, really. Maia’s pregnant, you may have noticed.”

Garrett waved his hand dismissively. “Doing nothing for your honeymoon don’t cut it, little bro. Listen, I got a proposition.”

Maybe it was the joyous occasion, or the fact that I was surrounded by friends. Maybe it was just the fact that it was raining too hard to leave. But I was in the mood to think well of my brother.

I would have plenty of time to regret that later. But that afternoon, with the rain coming down, I listened as Garrett told me his idea.

## 2

**He got to the cemetery at sunset, drove around it twice to** make sure there was no surveillance. He doubted there would be, but he'd learned to be paranoid.

The sky was blood red. Corpus Christi Bay glowed like metal on the forge. The old cemetery had iron gates and limestone markers, the oldest worn smooth by storms and Gulf winds.

He found the graves with no effort: one large, two small, lined up cozily on a knoll, enjoying the million-dollar view. Like they come to watch fireworks, he thought.

He knelt and ran his hands along the names, as if that would erase them.

The top of the smallest tombstone was lined with seashells: a cockle, an Easter oyster, a blood ark. He'd spent years collecting shells like these along the Texas coast. He'd dug them out of the sand, let the ocean wash them clean, held them up to the sunlight and admired the

pattern of their veins.

Had the child liked seashells? He didn't know.

He'd never even met them.

The mother's obituary picture had run in the newspaper. Her smile had seemed so familiar, the dates of her birth and death. Cold had gripped him as he realized what he'd done.

He'd caused this. And now there was no way to bring them back.

The only thing he could do was make amends. *If* he had the courage.

He took something from his pocket: a tiny sugar skull, grinning and blind. He crushed the skull and dropped it on the mother's grave.

Never again.

A flash from the bay caught his eye—a rich man's yacht coming in for the night. The afternoon had been beautiful, as unexpected as yesterday's storm. Forecasters were optimistic about a nice weekend. The bad weather was supposed to skirt around them. But he knew better. A bigger storm was on the way.

He watched the yacht disappear behind the fishing piers. The Texas coast had always protected him. However far he roamed, he always came back here, putting his feet in the water, hoping it would wash away his travels and his mistakes the way it washed sand off shells.

But maybe not this time.

Sunset. He had to catch the evening ferry.

He took one last look at the tombstones, lined up so peacefully, long evening shadows pointed toward the sea. Then he turned to leave. The island was waiting.

### 3

**For a guy who was rumored to have killed six men in cold** blood, Jesse Longoria looked downright pleasant.

He stood on the dock of Rebel Island as if he'd been expecting us. A jovially plump Latino in his mid-fifties. Smile lines crinkled around his eyes. He wore a gold A&M college ring, a navy blue summerweight suit with his U.S. Marshal's badge pinned to the lapel and a satisfied expression as if he'd just enjoyed a stroll with a beautiful woman.

"Tres Navarre," he said. "If I were you, I'd get back on that boat. Now."

Wind buffeted the dock. Maia was supervising the hotel manager taking our bags off the ferry. Garrett was setting up his wheelchair. We'd just endured a twenty-minute ride from Aransas Pass through choppy seas and I was tempted to throw up on the marshal's shoes.

"What brings you here, Longoria?" I asked. "Collecting



seashells?”

“I don’t need your interference, son. Not this time.”

Thunder crackled over the Gulf. Storm clouds were piling up, turning the air to a wet stew of salt and electricity.

The hotel manager lumbered over with our bags. He stopped when he saw Longoria’s hand resting on his sidearm. “Uh, problem, gentlemen?”

“There was,” I said. “Two years ago. Never found the body, did they, Longoria?”

The marshal’s eyes glinted. “I heard you quit detective work.”

“Sure. Didn’t you get an invitation to the retirement party?”

He stepped so close I could smell the lemon starch sweating out of his clothes. “Who hired you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Longoria. I’m here on my honeymoon.”

I pointed behind me. Maia and Garrett were just coming up the dock—Maia eight and a half months pregnant, Garrett a bilateral amputee.

Funny, Longoria didn't look too convinced by my honeymoon story.

"Hey, Marshal," the hotel manager said. I tried to remember his name. Chris Something-or-other. He was a former pro surfer, tan and well-built, but I doubted he'd dealt with many conflicts worse than deciding what kind of beer to buy on the mainland. "Mr. Navarre isn't—I mean, they have a reservation, sir. They're friends with the owner."

Longoria seemed to weigh his options. The ferry was already pulling out for Aransas Pass. The next boat wouldn't come until tomorrow afternoon. That meant he could shoot me, throw me off the dock or leave me alone. I'm sure the first two options had their appeal.

"Bad storm coming," he told me. "I'd make it a one-night honeymoon and get off this island."

Then he turned and headed toward the hotel, the first few splatters of rain making buckshot patterns on the boards at his feet.



**"Old friend?" Maia asked.**

“Something like that.” I looked at Garrett accusingly.

“Hey, little bro, you can’t blame me for *that*. Is there any place in Texas where you *don’t* stumble across some cop you’ve pissed off?”

He had a point. Besides, there were plenty of other things I *could* blame my brother for.

We followed the hotel manager up the clamshell path toward a place I had sworn never to revisit.



**Rebel Island was a mile long. Most of that was a thin strip** of beach and cordgrass that stretched north like a comet’s tail. The southern end was half a mile wide—just big enough for the lighthouse and the rambling old hotel that had once been home to the island’s most infamous owner.

My father used to relish the island’s history. Every summer when we came here, he’d tell me the stories. To my horror, as I got older, I actually found myself interested in them.

Inconveniently placed near the mouth of Aransas Bay, the island had needled its way into local history like a sticker burr. In the early 1800s, Jean Laffitte had used its treacherous sandbars to lure Spanish ships into the shallows, where they floundered and became easy prey. Laffitte had supposedly buried a treasure here, too, in a grove of live oaks, but if there had ever been live oaks on the island, hurricanes had scoured them away long ago. The only trees now were a dozen palmettos, which according to legend had been planted by Colonel Duncan Bray.

Bray had fought at the final land battle of the Civil War—Palmito Ranch, two hundred miles south. The last irony in a war filled with ironies, Palmito Ranch had been a Confederate victory. Bray considered it the definitive word on the war's outcome. He planted palmetto saplings from the battlefield on his family's island, refused to speak of Lee's surrender or Juneteenth or any of the other new realities. He shot at federal troops who attempted to talk to him about repairing his lighthouse, and he lived the rest of his life in voluntary exile on what he considered the last patch of Confederate soil. The island got its name from him. He wasn't the last crazy rebel to own the place.



**Bray's house, now the Rebel Island Hotel, was a three-story** French Second Empire. It had a mansard roof like reptile skin and cedar-slatted walls painted an odd color that mirrored the sea—sometimes blue, sometimes green or gray. The oldest wooden structure in Aransas County, it had weathered half a dozen hurricanes.

*Good karma*, our friend Alex had told me, right before he bought the place. At the time, I'd felt like I was watching somebody buy my childhood—nightmares and all.

The lobby smelled of sandalwood and straw mats. Seashells in nets decorated the walls. In one corner, a Latina maid was trying to calm down a guest—a middle-aged blond woman whose eyes were red from crying. Chris the manager excused himself to go help. The blonde was saying something about a gun and her ex-husband. I really didn't want to know.

A college-aged guy in a UT football jersey came stomping down the staircase with a bottle of José Cuervo and a fistful of limes. He asked an older gentleman reading a newspaper on the sofa if the ferry had already left. The old man said he thought it had. The kid cursed and bounded back upstairs.

Outside, thunder rumbled. The whole building rattled.

“Remind me again,” I told Garrett. “A quiet honeymoon? Way too early for hurricane season?”

“What, little bro, now global warming is my fault?”

“I think the building is charming,” Maia said.

“See?” Garrett said. “Alex! Yo!”

Alex Huff grinned crookedly as he came around the front desk. The hotel owner gave Garrett a bear hug, lifting him out of his wheelchair before setting him back down again. The whole sight was pretty disturbing.

“Damn, Garrett!” Alex said. “Have you gotten taller?”

“Eat me, Huff. You remember Tres. And this is Maia, his better half.”

Alex and I shook hands. He had a grip like a pecan cracker. He hadn’t gotten any prettier in the past few years. His face was scarred from acne. His wiry blond hair and the wild light in his eyes always made me wonder if he slept with his finger in a light socket.

“Yeah, Tres,” he said, pulling me closer. “Need to ask you a favor later, all right?”

That immediately made me wary, but before I could say anything—like *hell, no*, for instance—Alex’s attention

moved on. He gave Maia a hug, admired her third-trimester belly. “Honeymoon, huh? Not a moment too soon.”

“They weren’t gonna take a honeymoon at all.” Garrett wagged a finger at me. “I told Tres, ‘That’s no way to treat a lady. I’ll set the whole thing up for you.’”

“Yeah,” I grumbled. “And then he said, ‘By the way, I’m coming along.’”

Alex and Garrett both laughed like this was a good joke. I wished it was.

Maia squeezed my hand.

“Well, I guess you lovebirds want to see your room.” Alex winked at me. “Garrett’s right next door. I hope that’s okay.”

He ran up the stairs before I could hit him. Garrett cackled and slid out of his chair, then followed Alex, climbing on his hands.



**Maia and I got the Colonel’s Suite, a second-floor corner** bedroom with a parlor and a bay window looking

out at the lighthouse.

The octagonal brick tower was seventy feet tall, so no matter what floor of the hotel you were on, the lighthouse loomed overhead. It dated from the 1850s. It hadn't worked in fifty years. As a kid, looking up at the glassed-in top, I'd imagined that the beacon light would mysteriously flicker on. It never happened. But I never got tired of watching for it.

"Ow." Maia dropped the shirt she was unpacking. She sat down on the canopied bed.

I was at her side in about a millisecond. "What is it?"

"Just my back." She managed a smile. "Relax."

"Relax," I said. "I remember that word...like, eight months ago."

I put my hand on her belly. The baby wasn't kicking.

"He's fine," she said. "Don't obsess."

"Coming here was a bad idea."

"Will you stop? We needed to get away."

Thunder boomed.



*Get away...* Right. A sunny vacation. One last holiday before the baby arrived.

Maia scooted up on the bed and tried to get comfortable. Even eight and a half months pregnant, she'd never been more beautiful. Her black hair was thick and glossy. Her eyes seemed to trap the light like amber. "So are you going to tell me about the marshal?"

"Jesse Longoria. Just somebody I've run across a few times."

"And?"

"And nothing to worry about."

"Nothing you want to talk about, you mean."

Outside, rain was coming down in sheets instead of sprinkles. It probably wasn't sundown yet, but it looked like midnight. On the bedstand, the cranberry glass lamp flickered.

"You know," Maia said, "if you wanted to revisit your retirement decision—"

"Okay, now who's obsessing?"

"It's been what—six months?"

“Six and a half.”

“But who’s counting?”

“That’s entrapment, counselor.”

She smiled. “Unpack for me? Then I could *really* use a foot massage.”



**We didn't see Garrett, but we heard him next door. As the** storm got louder, he cranked up Jimmy Buffett on his boom box. *Songs You Know by Heart* vibrated so hard against the wall it might've been *Songs You Know by Braille*. There was another sound, too—a blender, I think. Leave it to my brother to pack his own tropical drink factory.

Maia couldn't take a shower because of the storm, but she spent a long time in the bathroom freshening up. Warm water always made her feel better. Being pregnant, she missed her daily steamy hot bubble baths. She said she would take up that grievance with our kid once he was an adult.

As the storm got louder, so did our neighbors. Some

college kids were right above us, stomping and whooping. One of them yelled, "Hurricane party!" Down the hall, a hammer was banging. Maybe Alex and his staff had decided to board up the windows.

I wondered what Alex wanted to ask me. Probably an investigative favor. An employee problem. A cheating girlfriend. Private investigators got everything, which was why I'd quit being one. Well...that was one reason, anyway.

I tried to convince myself Jesse Longoria's presence on the island was a total coincidence. Nothing to worry about, just like the storm.

If I closed my eyes and concentrated on the music coming through the walls, I could almost ignore the hammering and the rain.



**The last time I'd seen Jesse Longoria had been the week of** my best friend's funeral.

January in San Antonio. The grass was crunchy with ice. Frozen cactuses turned to mush in the tiny gravel lawns of the South Side. At San Fernando Cemetery, the sky was

the same color as the tombstones.

I'd come to lay fresh flowers on Ralph's grave. I found Jesse Longoria standing on it, reading the headstone. He wore a black wool overcoat and his customary pleasant smile, as if he could imagine no place he'd rather be on a bitter cold day.

"I missed the funeral," he told me. "I wanted to make sure he was dead."

"Get off."

I expected a fight. I probably wanted one.

Longoria chose not to humor me. He stepped off the grave. "I never got to hunt Ralph Arguello. Shame. I would've enjoyed that."

"You need to leave."

"Going to blame yourself for his death, too, Navarre? You never had any sense about criminals."

I was crushing the stems of the marigolds I'd brought. "I don't murder fugitives in my custody. That what you mean?"

Longoria's laugh turned to mist in the cold air. "You're not honest with yourself, son. You knew exactly what would happen to that client of yours, sooner or later. He was no

different from your friend here.” He gestured at Ralph’s headstone.

“Where’d you dump the body, Longoria?”

His smile didn’t waver. “If you can’t stop feeling guilty, son, maybe you should find a different line of work. Nobody’s ever stopped me from doing what was necessary. Nobody ever will.”

He strolled away down the line of tombstones. As he passed a child’s grave, he flicked a multicolored pinwheel and set it spinning.



**I turned on the nightstand radio. All I could get was a** garbled AM news station from Corpus Christi. Tropical Storm Aidan, which forecasters had dismissed as dying, was regaining hurricane strength. Despite Garrett’s assurances that it would veer north—that no hurricane had ever hit the Texas coast so early in the season—Aidan was bearing down on top of us. Ferry service to most locations had been suspended. Power was down in several communities. Evacuation routes were jammed.

“What’s the news?” Maia came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair.

I turned off the radio. “Nothing much.”

Thunder shook the windows. The power blinked out then came back on. Somebody upstairs yelled, “*Yeah, baby!*”

I stared at the clock flashing 12:01. I was just thinking how useless that would be if I were trying to time the occurrence of a crime, when I heard the shot.

Maia and I locked eyes.

“A board cracking,” I said. “Something slammed into the building.”

“Tres, that was a gun.”

I looked at the bay window, which I’d closed with the storm shutters. I tried to believe the noise had come from somewhere out there, but I knew better. The shot had come from inside the hotel.

Garrett’s music was still playing next door. The college kids were still stomping around upstairs. I’d heard enough gunshots in my life. Maybe if I just let this one go, let a few more bars of “Cheeseburger in Paradise” play through...

“Tres,” Maia said, “we need to check it out.”

"We're on vacation. They have a staff here. Alex can handle it."

"Fine," Maia said. "I'll go."

"No, you won't."

"Hand me my dress."

"All right," I relented. "I'll go. Just...stay put."

There was a knock on our door. Garrett yelled, "Y'all arguing in there? Thought I heard a gunshot."



**Maia did not stay put. Neither did Garrett.**

They followed me down the hall as if I knew where I was going. Garrett was in a wheelchair I'd never seen before. Apparently he kept a spare on the second floor, which told me he'd been visiting the hotel a lot more than I'd known.

On the stairs we ran into the older gentleman I'd seen in the lobby. He was taller than I'd realized, almost seven feet. With his shock-white hair and his black linen undertaker's

suit he was a bit disconcerting to meet in a dark stairwell. That, and the fact he was armed with a .45 Colt Defender.

"I heard a shot," he explained.

I wasn't sure what bothered me more—the gun, or the way his hand shook as he held it. He must've seen the way I was looking at him, because he slipped the gun into his pocket. "I thought the sound came from upstairs."

"I was thinking downstairs," I said.

"I'll follow you, then."

*Great*, I thought.

We trooped into the lobby and I got plowed into by the blond woman I'd seen crying earlier.

"Whoa," I said. "Where are you going?"

She pushed past me and raced up the stairs.

Chris the manager came out of the office in hot pursuit. He stopped short when he saw us. "Hi, uh..."

His ears were red. He was breathing heavy.

"We heard something," I told him. "Sounded like a shot."

"A shot? No, couldn't have been a shot."



“Did you hear it?”

“No. I mean...no. Who would have a gun?”

I thought about that. The old gentleman had one. So did Maia. She never left home without her Lamaze pillow and her. 357. Who else?

“The marshal,” Maia said, following my thoughts. “What room is he in?”

Chris paled. “Oh...uh...”

“Come on, man!” Garrett growled. “I got margaritas melting upstairs!”

You don’t argue with a no-legged man who wants a margarita.

“Room 112,” Chris said. “End of the hall on the left. Now if you’ll excuse me, I, uh—” He ran after the blond lady.

“Busy place,” Maia said.

She started to lead the way down the hall, but I put my arm out to stop her. “Pregnant women do not take point.”

“Pooh,” she said.

We found room 112. The door was ajar. I knocked anyway. "Longoria?"

No answer.

Maia and I exchanged looks.

"Go ahead, point man," she told me.

Trespassing in Longoria's room didn't sound like the safest idea. On the other hand, I had Maia, Garrett and an old guy with a .45 for backup.

I opened the door.

The first thing I noticed was the broken window. Glass was strewn all over the room. Rain blew in, soaking the carpet, the dresser and the open suitcase.

Jesse Longoria was sprawled at the foot of the bed, half wrapped in the blanket he'd clawed off as he fell. He was staring at the ceiling, a pained expression on his face, as if embarrassed that he had not managed to cover the bullet hole in his chest.

# 4

**Chris ran down the hall. The wind shook the walls.** The storm had taken him by surprise. After surfing the Gulf Coast waters so long, he thought he knew the weather. But he'd anticipated nothing like this. It wasn't natural the way the hurricane had turned toward them, bearing down on Rebel Island with a malicious will.

If he'd known, he never would've arranged things the way he had.

When he caught up with Lane, she was in his bedroom, looking through his dresser.

"Stop it!" he said.

She looked up, her eyes still red. Her blond hair was stringy and wet from the shower.

"What have you done?" she demanded.

Chris balled his fists. He stared at the picture on his

dresser mirror: a photo of the beach at Waikiki. Thinking of Hawaii usually calmed him down, but now his dream of moving there seemed childish. Had he really believed he'd be able to get away from here?

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"Chris, I know you better than that."

"I would never...I'd never hurt you, Lane."

She looked down at the drawers she'd pillaged and sobbed in frustration.

Chris wanted to hold her. He wanted to apologize for bringing her here, but he'd needed to see her so badly. And she needed protection. He knew that better than anyone.

"I'll make it all right," he promised.

She shook her head miserably. The bruises on her face had faded weeks ago, but he could still imagine their shadows around her eyes.

"How many more people are going to die, Chris? You've been saying it's all right. You're going to fix it, but—"

"I will. Right now."

He held Lane's gaze, trying to make her believe him.

Whenever he had trouble sleeping—and that was often—he would imagine her eyes, the way they shone when she was happy. He would remember the times he'd made her laugh when they were younger, in high school, before everything went wrong. Since then, he had messed up over and over. His plans had failed. But tonight it had to end.

“Stay here,” he told Lane. “I’ll be back.”

Without waiting for her answer, he headed down the hallway. He knew where he needed to go. How many more needed to die?

*One*, he thought. *Only one*.

## 5

**At least Jesse Longoria was having a worse vacation than I was.**

He'd been shot once at close range. There was no visible murder weapon in the room. Longoria's holster was empty.

"I need to get out of here," Maia murmured.

I nodded. Pregnancy had made her queasy about things that had never bothered her before—strawberries, hamburger meat, corpses.

"Garrett," I said, "take her back to the room, please."

"Jesus," he said. "That's like a dead cop."

"Very much like one." I looked at the old gentleman in the black suit. "Sir, would you go find the owner, please? Alex Huff. Tell him to call the police."

After they were gone, I debated the wisdom of walking farther into the room. Glass shards were everywhere. Blood and rain spattered the bed and the carpet. Whatever crime scene integrity there had been, the storm was rapidly blowing it to hell.

I stepped inside. Two beds. There was an outside door. It was closed. I couldn't tell if it was locked. As I recalled, few rooms in the hotel had private exits. On the second bed were an open suitcase and something else—a small curl of red like a ribbon. I stepped closer. It was a set of plastic handcuffs. They'd been cut.

A cold feeling started in the pit of my stomach.

Alex Huff ran into me from behind. "I heard...Oh, crap."

He looked only slightly better than the corpse. He had a bruise under his left eye, and superficial cuts on his arms, like he'd been sprayed with glass. His clothes were soaking wet.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

He tore his eyes away from the dead marshal. "The—the windows in the dining room blew out. I was boarding them up, but...*Jesus*. What happened to him?"

"You mean aside from getting shot dead? I'm not sure. Any idea what he was doing on the island?"

"No, I mean..." He faltered, apparently considering something he didn't like. "Chris checked him in."

"When?"

"Yesterday? It's been so crazy with the storm and..."

"And what?"

"Nothing. Just...*Damn* it. Why did he have to go and die in *my* hotel?"

I studied Alex's battered face and wondered what he wasn't telling me. "Call the police. Who's got jurisdiction here? Aransas Sheriff's Department?"

"I—I can't call the police."

"Why not?"

"The phone lines are down."

"Cell phone?"

"We've never had mobile service out here."

"Email? Smoke signals? Message in a bottle? What do you use for emergencies?"

Alex's eyes got unfocused, like he was going into shock.



I wanted to slap him. He needed to take charge. This was his problem, not mine.

“I don’t...Wait. The radio. It’s in the lighthouse. I was just out there checking the backup generator. I didn’t even think about it—”

“We’re on backup generator?” I interrupted.

“Yeah. Regular power is down. But it’s cool. We got enough juice to get through the night, assuming the house stays in one piece.”

As if on cue, a piece of driftwood flew in the window and slammed against the wall.

“We need to get out of here,” I told Alex. “Radio first. Then we’ll try to seal that window.”

He nodded hazily. I steered him out of the room and made sure he locked the door behind us.

In the hallway, the older gentleman was talking to three college guys, trying to convince them to go away.

“Dude!” one of them said to me. “Is it true?”

He had a mop of red hair, yellow shorts and a white T-shirt, so he was the same colors as a candy corn. His shirt said OU SUCKS, a little diplomatic statement from the

University of Texas football department.

Thunder rattled the building.

"You all need to get to the center of the hotel," I said. "Alex, safest place for storm shelter?"

"Parlor," he said. "Right in the middle of the building, no windows."

I looked at the old man, who seemed pretty calm. "You are—"

"Benjamin Lindy," he told me. "From Kingsville."

"All right, Mr. Lindy from Kingsville. Would you mind rounding everyone up, getting them into the parlor? We need to make sure everyone is safe. Then we need to have a group talk."

He nodded.

"Dude!" the redheaded kid said. "A guy got shot? That is freaking awesome!"

Mr. Lindy turned on him and the college guys all took a step back. The old man's expression was hard and cold as a blue norther.

"I hope," Lindy said calmly, "that you are using the word

'awesome' in some fashion I do not understand. I would hate to think you were treating a man's murder as entertainment. Now, why don't you all help me notify the other guests?"

He held out his arms, and without touching the college guys, swept them toward the parlor.

I watched Lindy walk away and wondered what he would've been like forty years ago, before his hair turned white and his hands began to shake. I imagined he rarely needed his Colt .45 to make his point.

"Lighthouse," I told Alex. "Let's go."

In the lobby, the tearful blond lady was standing by the sofa, looking lost. As soon as she saw us, she slipped out of the room.

"Who's *La Llorona*?" I asked Alex.

He stared at me blankly.

"That lady," I said. "She looks like the weeping ghost in the legend...the one who drowned her kids."

Alex looked like he was about to cry himself. "She drowned her kids? I got a guest who drowned her kids?"

"Never mind."

We got to the front door and I made the mistake of opening it. That's when I realized we were going to die before we ever reached the radio.



**The lighthouse door was only fifty feet from the hotel** entrance, but it might as well have been a mile. The air was a blender of sand and rain and swirling flotsam—oyster shells and chunks of wood that looked suspiciously like planks from the island's boat dock.

I swung back to Alex and yelled “Forget it!” but he must've thought I said something else because he forged ahead into the storm. Like a fool, I decided I'd better follow.

We skittered around like a silent movie comedy, my feet slipping on the wet path. I should've fallen several times, but the wind kept pushing me upright and propelling me forward, like I was being shoved through a mob of linebackers. Sand needled my exposed skin, but by some miracle I didn't get smashed by anything larger.

Alex shouldered open the lighthouse door. We collapsed inside, soaking wet, and Alex forced the door shut.

“Christ,” he gasped. “Feel like I just ran a marathon.”

He rummaged through his coat pockets, found a flashlight and clicked it on.

His face, already cut up and bruised, was now plastered with wet cordgrass. He had twigs sticking out of his curly hair. He looked like a scarecrow that had just gotten mugged. I doubted I looked much better.

Alex swept his flashlight around the room. We were at the bottom of a hexagonal well of unpainted limestone. Just as I remembered, metal stairs spiraled around the walls toward the lantern gallery far above. I’d only been inside the tower once before. My memories of the place were not good.

Here, the roar of the storm was muted, but there was another sound—a grinding in the walls, as if the limestone blocks were moving.

I reminded myself that the tower had stood for over a century. No way would it pick this moment to collapse. The chances were better of getting struck by lightning.

Thunder boomed outside.

Okay. Bad comparison.

“Where’s the radio?” I asked Alex.

He pointed to the platform seven stories above us.

Great.

I knew the beacon hadn't worked in decades. I wasn't sure why Alex would keep the radio up there, but I didn't ask.

We began to climb.



**The first time I'd ventured inside this lighthouse, I'd been trespassing.**

I was twelve years old and running from my dad.

I thought I'd escape to the northern end of the island. That's where I usually went to be alone. But as I passed the lighthouse, I remembered my dad's stern warning that the place was much too dangerous. I should never go in there.

What angry twelve-year-old boy could resist a challenge like that?

I ran to the door and was surprised that it creaked open

easily. Inside, the air was cool and damp. I shut the door and put my back against it.

I tried to steady my breathing. I wanted to forget the scene I'd just witnessed in our hotel room. I probably would've started sobbing, but a faint noise from above made me freeze.

*Scrape. Scrape. Scrape*, like an animal clawing at wood—a *large* animal.

At the top of the stairs, in a crescent of daylight, a shadow rippled, as if someone or something was up there.

My instincts told me to leave, but then I heard my father's voice outside.

"Tres!" he yelled. "Come on, now. I'm sorry, goddamn it! Where are you?"

He sounded as if he was coming toward the door. I decided to take my chances with the giant animal upstairs.

I took the metal steps as quietly as I could, but my own heartbeat sounded like a bass drum. The limestone blocks were carved with graffiti. One said, *W. Daves, 1898*.

I smelled sweet, acrid smoke and the scent of fresh-cut wood. I didn't realize the scratching sounds had stopped until I reached the top of the stairs and found a knife pointed

at my nose.

A seventeen-year-old Alex Huff glared at me. "What the hell are you doing here, runt?"

I was too scared to speak. I was already terrified of Alex, a delinquent who hung out with Garrett every time we came to Rebel Island. I knew that Alex lived on the island. He made amazing fireworks displays every Fourth of July. I was vaguely aware that his dad worked for the owner, though I'd rarely seen his dad. I knew Alex hated me for some inexplicable reason, and Garrett treated me worse whenever Alex was around.

Behind him, the floor of the lantern gallery was covered in wood shavings. There was a two-foot-tall figurine standing on a stool, a half-carved woman. A hand-rolled cigarette was smoldering in an ashtray on the windowsill.

"You're smoking pot," I said stupidly.

Alex sneered. "Yeah, and if you tell anyone, I'll gut you. Now what are you—" He tensed as if he'd heard something.

Somewhere below us, outside the tower, my father's voice, heavy with anger and remorse, rang out: "Tres! Tres, goddamn it!"

Alex and I waited, still as death. My father called again,



but this time he sounded farther away.

Alex locked eyes with me. “You’re hiding from him?”

I nodded. I was determined not to let Alex see me cry.

Alex didn’t speak for a full minute. He studied me, as if deciding how to kill me.

“You can’t hide on this island, runt.” He said it bitterly. “Come on. The boathouse is out back.”

“Where are we going?” The last time Alex and Garrett had taken me out on a boat, Alex had threatened to pour cement in my shoes and drop me overboard.

But for once, Alex’s expression didn’t look mean. His eyes were filled with something else—pity, perhaps?

“We’re going fishing,” he said, as if fishing were something grim, possibly fatal. “Trust me.”



**Now, twenty-five years later, Alex and I climbed back up** those steps together. The tower groaned in the storm. In

the yellow beam of Alex's flashlight, the limestone walls glistened with moisture.

At last we reached the lantern room—a circular platform surrounding the huge golden chrysalis that was the Fresnel lens. There were no wood shavings on the floor this time, nothing but a couple of crushed beer cans. The gallery's outer walls were storm-proof glass, but I could see nothing through them. With the rain slamming against them, they looked more like marble.

The radio sat on the table in front of us.

I knew almost nothing about shortwave radios, but I did know how to tell when one had been smashed to pieces. This one had been.



**I started to say, “Don’t touch—”**

But Alex picked up the ball-peen hammer. “How...what the hell—”

“Who else knew about this radio, Alex?”

“Nobody! I mean, just me and the staff.”

I thought about that. I thought about fingerprints. Whoever had shattered the radio had left the hammer behind, which meant he was either sloppy and rushed or unconcerned about being identified. Either way, I didn't like it.

“Alex, when Longoria arrived on the island, did he come alone?”

“I—I don't know. I told you, Chris checked him in.”

“It's your hotel. A small hotel. But you don't know?”

Alex stared at the window. Outside the storm was a blur of gray and black, like ink coming to a boil. “Look... Longoria wanted a first-floor room, away from the other guests. He wanted a private exit. That's what Chris said.”

“There were handcuffs on the bed.”

“Tres—”

“Longoria was a U.S. Marshal. Was he, by chance, transporting a fugitive?”

Alex stared miserably at the radio. It was hard to believe he was the same person I used to be afraid of as a kid—the same Alex Huff who had pointed a knife at my face.

“Longoria came in late last night,” he said. “A charter boat brought him in from Rockport. Chris arranged it. I had nothing to do with it.”

“And?”

“And I didn’t see him come in. I don’t know if he was alone, Tres. I didn’t want to know.”

Lightning gilded the windows silver. The whole tower seemed to sway beneath me.

“We need to find Chris,” I said. “We’ll talk in the parlor.”

“You’re not going to tell the other guests?” Alex looked horrified.

“That we might be stuck on this island with a fugitive who just murdered a U.S. Marshal? Yeah, Alex, I kind of think they need to know that.”

## 6

**To get away from the old man, Chase pulled his friends into** an unused bedroom.

“Well?” he said. “What the hell do we do now?”

Markie rubbed his chin. He was a big guy, usually good in bad situations, but even he looked shaken. “That was a cop. Did you know he was a cop?”

“How was I supposed to know?”

“We’ve got to get out of here.” Ty’s face was pasty. He seemed to be having trouble swallowing.

“Nobody’s going anywhere,” Chase told him.

“Listen to the storm, man,” Ty insisted. “There’s no way we can do this.”

“We will,” Chase said. “We’ve got no choice.”

Markie and Ty said nothing. They knew damn well he was right.

Chase had done his best to pretend the murder didn't bother him. It was critical that the other guests believe the three of them were just stupid college guys. But he couldn't shake the image of the bullet hole in the marshal's chest. He couldn't help thinking it was a warning. If this weekend didn't go right, he could end up just like that.

He studied Markie's face, trying to gauge his loyalty. They'd been friends, if you could call it that, for almost three years now. But what they would have to do this weekend... things like that could strain loyalties, make business relationships unravel. Chase would have to watch his back. And Ty—shit, the guy was a basket case. Chase shouldn't have brought him along, but he didn't trust Ty to stay quiet otherwise. He wanted the bastard where he could keep an eye on him.

Chase had worked his way up from nothing. He'd gotten himself into college. He supported his whole fucking family back home. He'd learned how to make a lot of money and deal with hard people. He wasn't going to let anyone mess up his plans.

"All right, look," he said, trying to sound calm. "It's got to happen tonight. I don't give a crap about the storm. We've got no choice."

Markie looked like he wanted to say something, but then changed his mind. He nodded.

“Come on, Chase,” Ty pleaded. “You know I can’t—I can’t stand this much longer. You know how I get.”

“You’re *gonna* stand it.” Chase pointed a finger at Ty’s face like the barrel of a gun. “You’re gonna help us. Or you’re gonna end up like the cop in there.”

Ty shuddered. “All right, I’m just saying—”

The old man, Benjamin Lindy, appeared at the end of the corridor. “You gentlemen coming or not?”

The old man gave Chase the creeps, but he tried for a light tone. “Yeah...uh, sir. We’re on the way.”

Mr. Lindy scowled, but he started down the hall.

“We’ve got to play along,” Chase said. “And for Christ’s sake, Ty, stop looking like you’re going to throw up.”

“I feel like that.”

“Well, don’t. Nobody else here knows shit about what’s going on. I want to keep it that way.”

“What about the dead cop?” Markie asked. “And Chris Stowall?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Chase said. “Believe me. Stowall is *not* going to fuck with me again.”

He led his friends to the parlor. Anger made red spots dance in front of his eyes. He’d been played for a fool. This whole setup sucked. But he was going to make the best of it. He would come out of this weekend in one piece, even if he was the only one who did.



# 7

**Even when I was a child, the hotel's parlor was decorated** in dead fish. A five-foot-long marlin curved over the fireplace. Redfish and bass lined the walls. Their frozen eyes and gasping mouths used to scare the hell out of me—almost as much as the hotel's owner.

Every time we arrived at the hotel, my parents would make me sit with them in the parlor while they “caught up” with Mr. Eli. Garrett was excused from this ritual, theoretically because he was helping Alex Huff with the luggage, which I resented to no end.

Mr. Eli had bought the hotel at public auction after federal agents seized it from its previous owner, a Thirties bootlegger who had been South Texas's answer to Al Capone.

Eli was eccentric in a different way. He was an old bachelor who never wore anything but pajamas and a Turkish bathrobe and slippers. He smelled faintly of lilacs.

His skin was milky, his hair as black as an oil slick, and he had a strange mustache shaped like a seagull's wings on his upper lip. Years later, I realized that he must've been gay—one of those men who choose, for whatever reason, to live in a climate as hospitable to them as the Arctic is to a tropical plant. That wasn't what scared me. It was the fact that he seemed able to read minds. He would look at me with his watery green eyes and say "I believe young Tres is thirsty for lemonade," or "I see you had a hard year at school," or "Don't worry about Alex. He means well." Whatever happened to be troubling me at the moment.

In all, Mr. Eli seemed like the sort of man my father would detest, but my father always showed him the greatest deference.

On our last visit to Rebel Island as a family, Mr. Eli greeted my father in his usual manner. "Sheriff Navarre, shot anyone lately?"

"Not lately, sir," my father replied. Whether it was true or not, I didn't know.

We sat in the parlor with all the glassy-eyed fish staring down at us. My mother told Mr. Eli he was looking well. In truth the old man looked paler and thinner every summer, but he accepted the compliment with a nod. My father and Mr. Eli talked about the weather and fishing conditions. Mr. Eli seemed to know everything about the sea, though as far

as I could tell he never set foot outside the hotel.

After a while, Mr. Eli asked what we would like to drink, and my father requested whiskey.

“Jack,” my mother chided. “Remember?”

I didn’t know what she was talking about, but apparently my father did. His face flushed. He could be a scary man, my father. His huge girth was intimidating enough, and when he got angry his eyes were as bright as a hawk’s.

“I’ll have a drink with our host,” he told my mother.

“Jack, you promised.”

My father rose from his chair. The air in the room was as sharp as broken glass. He turned to Mr. Eli and said, “If you’ll excuse me, sir.”

Once he left, my mother muttered a quick apology to Mr. Eli. “I’d better go, ah, talk to him. Tres, stay here, will you?”

That was the last thing I wanted—but my mother left me alone with Mr. Eli.

The old man smiled so his seagull mustache seemed to spread its wings. “Let’s get you a soda.”

He called for the maid, an elderly African American

woman named Delilah. She brought me a Coke over ice with a maraschino cherry. Delilah had scars on the inside of her wrists, crisscrossed swollen pink lines like Chinese words. I'd asked my father about those scars once, and he'd told me that Mr. Eli had saved Delilah's life. He wouldn't explain how.

I sat on the sofa, drinking my soda and trying not to look at Mr. Eli. I wanted to leave, but my mother had ordered me to stay here. For once, I hoped Mr. Eli would read my mind: take pity on me and tell me to go away.

"Alex fixed the fishing boat," he said. "Perhaps he can take you out."

"Maybe," I said halfheartedly.

"You don't like Alex," Mr. Eli said. "But you must be patient with him."

"Why?"

Mr. Eli nodded. "Fair question. Alex and his father have had a hard life, Tres. A lot of tragedy. But they're good people. Loyal and compassionate."

I couldn't believe Mr. Eli was talking about the same kid who stuck bottle rockets in my shorts.

Mr. Eli smoothed a fold in his bathrobe. "Tres, I take in all

kinds—all sorts of wounded souls. Enough time on this island can heal most scars eventually. Alex, as far as I know, is the only person who's ever been born here. That makes him special, in my opinion. I have a feeling someday Alex is going to pay me back many times over."

"Pay you back for what?" I asked.

Mr. Eli smiled benignly. "I think it's safe to go to your room now, Tres. 102, as usual, but I'd knock first."

And so I left Mr. Eli in the parlor. Years afterward, I wondered if he'd been including the Navarre family among the wounded souls he'd invited to Rebel Island. I decided he probably had.



**Now, so many years later, the same marlin hung over the** mantel. The trophies were a little dustier, but they had the same glassy eyes and surprised expressions, not too different from the half-dozen guests who were milling around the room.

I looked at Alex. "Where's Chris?"

He chewed his thumbnail. "I'm not sure. Jose, the cook, said he was helping move the body—"

"*They* moved *the* body?"

Alex blinked. "Hey, I didn't—they just—"

"Whose brilliant idea was that?"

Next to me, Garrett tugged on my sleeve. "Yo, little bro. Come here a sec. Alex, man, go get yourself a drink or something."

Garrett wheeled himself into the hallway and waited for me to follow. "Back off Alex, okay? He's having a tough time."

"He's being evasive," I said. "And he's being stupid. His staff just ruined a crime scene."

"You never liked him, did you?"

"Garrett, that is *not* the point."

He wheeled his chair back and forth, digging tracks in the carpet. "Little bro, Alex is having some trouble. I mean, even before tonight. I didn't ask you down here just for the honeymoon."

"My brother had a selfish ulterior motive? What a

surprise.”

“Yeah, well. The truth is—”

Maia came up behind him and placed her hands on Garrett’s shoulders. She looked better after lying down. The color had returned to her face.

“I hate to interrupt,” she said, glancing inside the parlor, “but it looks like your audience is ready.”



**If they were my audience, I needed a warm-up act.**

The upset blond lady sat in an armchair. She was wearing pink silk pajamas and hugging a pillow like she was afraid I’d hit her. The three college kids stood at the wet bar, browsing the labels on liquor bottles. There was the redheaded guy, a big bald dude and a skinny Latino kid with nervous eyes and shaggy black hair. Two staff members—the cook and the maid—were casting me worried glances from the steps by the pool table. The only person who seemed at ease was the old man, Benjamin Lindy, immaculate in his charcoal suit, sitting cross-legged on the sofa next to Alex, and even Lindy was looking at me

warily, as if I might try to sell him something.

Then there was the storm, which was an audience member as much as any of the people. It resonated in the timbers of the house, making the walls creak and the floor vibrate. There were no outside windows in the room, but I could feel the storm grinding, like a surgeon's saw cutting into bone.

"So," I said. "My name is Tres Navarre. I, uh—"

"You a cop?" the redheaded college kid asked.

"No."

"Then why the hell are you in charge?"

"Nobody said I was in charge."

"Because he's a private investigator," Alex offered.

"*Was* a private investigator," I corrected.

"And he knows a lot more than any of us about what to do when there's a murder."

The storm kept sawing into the timbers.

The cook raised his hand. "Señor, it was for sure, then, *homicidio*?"



His accent was borderland Spanish—Laredo, maybe, or Juárez.

“You’re Jose?” I asked. “The one who moved the body?”

He glanced at the maid, then nodded. Something about the way the two of them sat together, leaning toward each other as if for protection, told me they were married. As mad as I was about Jose moving the body, I decided I’d better not berate him too badly in front of his wife.

“All right, Jose,” I said. “You noticed the gunshot wound in Mr. Longoria’s chest?”

“*Claro, señor.*”

“Did you happen to find a gun when you were in the room?”

“No, señor.”

“Then we can be pretty sure it was murder. A person who commits suicide doesn’t normally hide the weapon after he shoots himself. Besides, Longoria was a U.S. Marshal. He’d rented a room with two beds. There was a pair of cut handcuffs on one bed.”

“A prisoner?” the blond lady asked. “You think he was escorting a prisoner?”

Her tone surprised me. I expected hysterics, but she sounded calm and alert.

“That’s possible,” I admitted.

“But...” She looked around, like she was afraid to say more. “That can’t be it.”

“The young lady is right,” Mr. Lindy said. “It doesn’t make sense. Why would a marshal escort a prisoner here? Rebel Island isn’t on the way to anywhere.”

“I’d like to understand that, too,” I said. “Did any of you see the marshal when he arrived? Was he with anyone?”

No one answered.

Jose and the maid shook their heads.

The redheaded college kid cleared his throat. “So let me get this straight. You’re telling us there’s, like, an escaped fugitive on the island.”

Alex was silently pleading with me to tone it down, to avoid further panic in his hotel.

“That,” I said, “is a distinct possibility. At any rate, whoever shot Longoria is stuck on this island until the storm passes, and we have no way to contact the mainland.”

"That's whacked," declared the college kid, which I thought covered the situation pretty well.

"Has anyone seen Chris?" I asked. "Chris—What's his last name?"

"Stowall," Alex answered miserably. "Chris Stowall."

"The manager?" Mr. Lindy asked.

"Yeah," the college guy said. "That freak who told us to turn down our music."

"We need to find him," I said. "He checked Longoria in. He may have some answers. Who saw him last?"

The blond lady developed a sudden interest in her pillowcase.

"We'll find him," the college guy said. "Beats sitting here."

"Don't go anywhere alone," I said. "And don't try to go outside."

"Yes, mother." The guy nodded to his friends and they headed off. The shaggy-haired Latino kid looked a little nervous about it, but the big bald dude put a hand on his back and kept him moving.



**Mr. Lindy spread his arms across the couch. “So, Mr. Navarre. What do you suggest we do now?”**

“Stay in here, together, as much as possible. If anyone has to go somewhere, go with someone else.”

“Hell, little bro, we don’t need bathroom buddies,” Garrett grumbled. “We’re grown-ups.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard my brother claim to be a grown-up, which in itself was pretty disturbing.

“The killer has no place to go,” I told him. “At least not until the storm passes. Cornered people tend to be desperate.”

The maid raised her hand. “Señor, where could this man hide? It is a big house, but—”

“We could search it,” Alex suggested, a glimmer of new hope in his eyes. “Me and the staff. I bet we won’t find anybody. Then we can all rest easier.”

I thought about that. I didn’t like the idea of more people roaming around the hotel. Then again, I didn’t like the idea

of spending the night in the parlor, either.

“All right,” I told Alex. “Why don’t you and your staff, Jose and—”

“Imelda,” the maid provided.

“Imelda,” I said. “Why don’t the three of you search. Alex, you have any kind of weapon?”

“Here,” Lindy said, and offered his .45.

Alex didn’t look too happy about it, but he took the gun.

“You know how to use that, son?” Lindy asked.

Alex nodded. “I was in the army, but...”

Whatever he was thinking, he didn’t say it. He nodded at Jose and Imelda, who followed him out.

“Well, ain’t this cozy?” Garrett winked at the blond lady. “You mind being my bathroom buddy, darling?”

The blond lady squeezed her eyes shut, like she was hoping we’d all disappear. When we didn’t, she grabbed her pillow and ran out of the room.

Garrett’s smile dissolved. “Aw, hell, I didn’t mean—”

“I’ll go after her,” Maia said.

“No,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Maia raised her eyebrows.

“Please,” I said. “Just...I’d rather you and Garrett stay where it’s safe.”

Maia muttered something in Chinese, probably a curse on her overprotective husband. “Fine. If I start labor, I’ll just have Garrett help me out.”

“Now wait a minute, sister,” Garrett protested.

I was about to go search for the blond lady when Mr. Lindy said, “Mr. Navarre?”

“Sir?” The *sir* came automatically—South Texas breeding. Something about the old man brought it out in me.

“You failed to mention the most obvious place for this murderer to hide,” he said. His eyes were frosty blue. “Right here. As one of the guests. How do we know it’s not one of us?”



**The blond lady was sitting in the empty dining room.**

A row of five tables with white linen cloths ran down the middle of the room. In the dark, they reminded me of gurneys in a morgue. Damaged windows were covered with tarps and hastily hammered boards, but rain leaked in the edges, soaking the carpet. The floor was strewn with silverware and overturned flower vases.

I sat down across from the lady.

“Tough night,” I said.

She brushed a carnation off the table. “Tough year.”

“What’s your name?”

“Lane.”

“That your first or last name?”

“First. Lane S—” She pursed her lips. “Lane Sanford.”

She was younger than I’d first thought: in her late twenties, pretty the way a sun-bleached cotton dress is pretty—comfortably worn, slightly faded. The roots of her hair were ginger brown.

“Okay, Lane. The thing is, we should be sticking together. I’m a little worried about you.”

She hugged her arms. “A little worried...”

“You’re staying alone at the hotel?”

“I *thought* I was alone.”

“I heard you talking to Chris and the maid this afternoon. Something about your ex?”

“I tried to warn them. Bobby will do anything. He’s been tracking me and...” She started breathing shallowly. “And that marshal who was shot—”

“Lane, I want you to take a deep breath and hold it.”

She gave me a desperate watery look, but she tried to hold her breath.

“Good,” I said. “Now let it out slowly, and tell me about your ex.”

She exhaled. “You don’t understand. You don’t know him.”

“Do you have any evidence your ex is here? Have you seen him?”



"I...No, but—"

"Was there some reason he would've targeted Longoria?"

"Longoria?"

"The marshal who got shot."

"I don't...I don't know. I *told* Chris I shouldn't have come."

"So the hotel manager, Chris...you know him personally?"

She stared at the boarded-up windows. "I told him I couldn't run anymore. I'm so tired of hiding from what happened."

"What do you mean?"

Before she could answer, the college guys came tromping into the room. "Yo, Navarro," the redheaded guy said.

"Navarre," I corrected.

"Whatever," he said, but he wasn't pulling off his angry-young-man routine very well. His face was ashen. His two friends looked queasy. "We, um, found something maybe you should see."



**In the back of the kitchen was a triple-wide stainless-steel** refrigerator. The college kids—who strangely enough possessed names: Chase, Markie and Ty—had decided to raid it looking for snacks. They'd lost their appetites when they saw what was on the floor.

"You were all together?" I asked.

Chase, the redhead, glanced at his friends. "Well, we were kind of...not." He nodded at the sickly-looking Latino kid. "Ty was throwing up."

"Too much information," I said. "And you two?"

"Markie was getting glasses from the cabinet over there," Chase said. "I was gonna get the food. Then I saw *that*."

"It's blood, isn't it?" Lane Sanford's voice trembled.

"Chase," I said, "you and your friends take Miss Sanford back to the parlor, please. Tell my wife..." My voice faltered.

I was used to relying on Maia's opinion, but she already

felt queasy. I couldn't ask Maia to look at this. "On second thought, ask Mr. Lindy to come in here."

I finally convinced Lane to go with the college guys, which left me alone, staring at the skid mark of red on the white tiles.

I didn't hear Mr. Lindy come up behind me until he spoke. "Blood, all right," he said. "Someone slipped in it. Partial shoeprint, there."

I looked at the old man. "Are you retired law enforcement, Mr. Lindy?"

"Criminal lawyer. Thirty-seven years. I've seen my share of blood."

His voice was as dry as a South Texas creek bed.

"Maybe this is from when they were moving Longoria's body," I said hopefully.

Lindy shook his head. "I stumbled across Chris Stowall and the cook, Jose, while they were doing that. I tried to convince them it, ah, wasn't a good idea...but Mr. Stowall was not entirely rational. He insisted he couldn't let the guests see the body. At any rate, the cellar where they took the body is around the corner there. They didn't come through this way, and no one tracked blood as far as I could see. They used a plastic tarp."

I crouched next to the red smear. Sure enough, the edge of a shoeprint was visible—a man's shoe, I thought. Smooth sole, about a size 11. There were no other red prints on the floor, though, as if the man had slipped in blood, then taken his shoe off to avoid leaving a trail. But if that was the case, why had he left this stain?

"I don't want to think this is someone else's blood," I said. "I mean, besides Longoria's."

Lindy's eyes glinted. "Mr. Huff said you'd retired from private investigations. I take it you've dealt with murders before?"

*Had I dealt with murders?* Under different circumstances, I might've laughed. "Yes, sir. A few."

"And you knew Marshal Longoria?"

I wondered if Lindy was grilling me. I suspected he was the kind of lawyer who could set his victims at ease, then work out a confession before they realized what had happened.

"I knew him," I admitted. "And I don't want anything to do with solving his murder. You've got more experience than I do."

The old man shook his head. "Until the police can be

called, you do what you think is best, son. I'll back you up. The others looked to you naturally, you know. There was no doubt that you would be in charge."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "And now we have a bloodstain along with a dead body. How am I doing so far?"

Lindy patted my shoulder. "You go find that wife of yours, try to relax a little. Lock your bedroom door. I'll call you if anything else happens."

"We should all stay together."

Lindy smiled. "Too late for that, son. These people are not the types that stay together well. Now, go salvage what you can of the first night of your honeymoon. I'll get my gun back from Alex Huff. I'm increasingly beginning to wonder if I will need it."

## 8

**Imelda watched nervously as Señor Huff ransacked the** building. He muttered to himself, throwing open doors and clutching his borrowed gun. She had seen him in many moods, but never like this before.

“Where is he?” Señor Huff growled. He pulled sheets out of the linen closet and dumped them at Jose’s feet, then moved to the next guest room and kicked open the door. “Where is the bastard?”

“Señor—”

“No.” Huff stuck his finger in her face. “You don’t talk to me. Neither of you.”

Jose cleared his throat. “But, Señor Huff—”

“Get back downstairs,” he ordered. “Make the guests some food. I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to hear you.”

He stormed down the hallway and left them alone.

Imelda looked at her husband. "What do we do?"

She was used to Jose having answers. Usually, no matter how bad the situation, he would give her a reassuring smile. She loved the way the edges of his eyes crinkled, his gaze warm and brown. He was a handsome man when he smiled.

Now his expression was grim. He knelt and gathered up the fallen linens. "We make the guests food."

"Jose...please. It's killing him."

He folded up the sheets clumsily and stuffed them back into the closet. He was never good with linens. That was her job, folding the corners perfectly, smoothing out wrinkles.

"Señor Huff will survive this," he promised. "We all will."

"We owe him—"

"I know what we owe him," Jose said. She heard the steel edge in his voice and knew better than to argue.

"We'll go downstairs," Jose insisted. "And do our jobs."

He trudged off, not waiting to see if she would follow.

Imelda hesitated, staring into the empty guest room. It was room 207. It hadn't been used in weeks. Every day,

Imelda would go in anyway to dust and fluff the pillows. She would open the window to let in fresh sea air. She loved empty rooms. They were clean and full of promise. They had no past. Unlike their own room. Terrible memories could not be smoothed out. They couldn't be neatly folded and tucked away.

It had all started to go wrong last fall, when the visitor arrived from the mainland. That day, she had known their lives would be shattered yet again. Their hopes of finding peace would be dashed.

She gathered her strength. She could not give up now. The young man, Señor Navarre, might be a new opportunity. She would know, soon enough.

She closed the door of room 207 and followed after her husband.



## 9

**I should've followed Lindy's advice and gone straight to my** honeymoon, but I couldn't stop thinking about Jesse Longoria's body in the cellar.

In the hall, I ran into Garrett, who was hand-walking down to check on me.

"Got worried," he told me. "Lane said something about a bloodstain."

"Is Maia all right?"

Garrett shrugged. "She's calming Lane down. Rather have that job than looking for you, little bro. Lane's a lot hotter."

"Don't even think about it."

He gave me the innocent eyes—a look Garrett doesn't do very well. "Can't a guy want to comfort a young lady without people getting ideas?"

“No. Now come on.”

“Where we going?”

“To visit a dead man.”



**It was rare for a house on the Texas coast to have a basement**, but the first owner, Colonel Bray, had insisted on it. The walls were original 1880s shellcrete—a cementlike mixture of sand and ground oyster shells. The floor was damp. The air smelled of mildew and fish.

When I was a kid, Garrett and Alex used to spend a lot of time in that cellar. Some of their time, no doubt, was spent doing drugs, talking about girls, planning great teenage adventures. I wasn't included in any of that. But most important, Alex made his fireworks there.

As July fourth got near, he would spend every spare moment with his beloved project. He got so preoccupied he forgot to pick on me. He didn't care if I sneaked downstairs to watch, as long as I touched nothing. He even ignored Garrett, which pleased me more than anything.

The cellar would fill up with plastic tubes, coils of fuse, rolls of aluminum foil and boxes of caps, plugs and Mexican fireworks. Alex would save money all year, then clean out the local roadside stands and cannibalize their chemicals to make his huge mortar displays.

Our last summer, a few weeks before my fateful trip to the lighthouse, I crept down the cellar stairs and watched as Alex rigged up his row of plastic tubes. Garrett sat on a folding chair nearby, drinking tequila from a Coke can and looking bored.

It's hard for me to remember the way Garrett used to look before he had a wheelchair, but this was long before the accident that took his legs. He was getting ready to graduate from high school. He was just starting to grow his beard. He'd been accepted to MIT (my mother's idea) but turned them down because he said he would never be a "damn sellout." He had plans to drive around the country, maybe go to Europe. He was trying to convince Alex that this was an excellent idea.

Normally, Alex would've been encouraging. No matter how crazy Garrett's schemes got, Alex was always his number one cheerleader, almost as if Alex wanted to see how far he could push Garrett to go. That was the main reason Garrett liked Alex so much. But today, on a fireworks day, Alex was a tougher sell.

"Come on, man," Garrett said. "You want to stay on this island your whole life?"

Alex looked up briefly from twisting his fuses. "I don't know."

"You got no ambition, man. Whole world's out there. You want to turn into Mr. Eli, sitting up there in a bathrobe all day?"

"Mr. Eli's not so bad. He helped my folks out."

"Whatever, man. You ask me, it wasn't much help."

Alex didn't answer. He covered a mortar with aluminum foil and began unwrapping a case of Roman candles.

"Sorry," Garrett muttered. "I didn't mean anything."

Alex took out a box cutter and sliced a Roman candle, splitting it open like a bean pod. "You think it'll be easier meeting the right girl, if you go on this trip?"

Garrett's face flushed. He'd broken up with a girl named Tracy a few weeks before. I guess he had told Alex about it. She'd hung around our house for maybe a month, and when she finally broke up with Garrett, his moods turned even blacker than usual. At night, he listened to Led Zeppelin and ripped pages out of his yearbook. During the day, he'd take his air gun into the backyard and shoot at soda cans

for hours.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Garrett demanded. “You think I won’t meet someone?”

Alex uncoiled a length of wire, measured it against a yardstick. Even at seventeen, his hands were scarred from knife cuts, fishing hooks, rope burns. He was always busy, always creating something.

“Thing about fireworks,” he said, “it’s all in the timing. You got to measure the fuse just right or the ignition is no good. You burn everything up too fast, or it doesn’t go off at all.”

“I don’t get you, man,” Garrett said. “You’re gonna sit on this island your whole life, waiting like your dad? You think love is gonna come to you?”

The cellar was silent except for water dripping from a busted pipe in the corner. A moth batted at the single bare lightbulb above, casting enormous shadows across the shellcrete walls.

“Get out,” Alex said finally. “I’m working.”

Garrett looked like he wanted to argue, but then he thought better of it. He cursed and got up to leave. He glowered at me as he passed me on the stairs.

I didn’t move. Alex glanced at me without emotion. I

might've been another fuse or plastic tube—not something he needed right now, but not something he was going to bother throwing away, either. He went back to work, and I watched in silence as he fused together a row of pipes like a church organ, loading it with chemicals and measuring his fuses to just the right length.



**There were no fireworks in the cellar now. Jesse Longoria's** body had been laid out on a butcher-block table.

A single bare lightbulb flickered dimly above us, but we relied mostly on a flashlight, which cast long shadows across Longoria's face. He didn't look like a man at peace, even if one ignored the bullet hole in his chest. He looked like a man who needed to use the restroom.

"I hate dead bodies," Garrett mumbled.

I couldn't tell if my brother was really pale and sweaty, or if it was just the light. His color wasn't much better than Longoria's. Of course, Garrett was at a height disadvantage. He'd had to hand-walk his way down into the cellar. Now, sitting in a metal chair, he was eye level with

the gunshot wound.

“Hold up the flashlight,” I told him.

The body was wrapped in a plastic tarp. The inside of the tarp was spattered with blood, but there was none that I could see on the outside, or on the floor, or the steps into the cellar. Jose and Chris may have ruined a crime scene, but they seemed to have done it without making a mess. It seemed unlikely that the blood smeared in the kitchen had come from this corpse.

I checked through Longoria’s pockets. I came up with a wallet, car keys, an Aransas Pass ferry schedule and thirty-six cents. In Longoria’s wallet were his badge, sixty-five dollars in cash and the usual credit cards.

“So you knew this guy?” Garrett asked.

“He killed a client of mine.”

“Before or after the client paid you?”

“You’re just Mr. Sensitive, aren’t you?” I put Longoria’s wallet back in his coat pocket. “Longoria had a reputation in the South Texas Marshal’s Office. He apprehended something like fifty fugitives in twelve years. Once in a while, as he was bringing them back, the fugitives would, ah, try to escape.”

“And this dude would use force.”

“Deadly force. Every time, Longoria was cleared of wrong-doing, but—”

“I gotcha,” he grumbled. “Fucking cops.”

“Dad was a cop.”

“What’s your point?”

He had me there.

I scanned the room. Chris or Jose or somebody had set the dead man’s suitcase in the corner. I hauled the brown Tourister to the table and opened it at the dead man’s feet.

Garrett shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “So this client of yours...he was a fugitive?”

“Charged with arson. He had a felony record. He panicked and skipped town before his trial. The wife paid me to find him and convince him to turn himself in. I didn’t have time. Longoria found him first and killed him.”

“You know that for sure?”

“The body was never found. My guy’s officially still listed as a fugitive. But I asked around. The guy had had a run-in with one of Longoria’s SAPD buddies the year before.



Longoria took matters into his own hands. Settled the score.”

Garrett looked down at the dead man’s face. “See, asshole? This is what we call karma. Now can we get out of here, little bro?”

I rummaged through the marshal’s suitcase. I found two changes of clothes. No paperwork, no files from the Marshal’s Office. Nothing interesting, until I checked one of those easy-to-miss side pockets that I’d trained myself not to miss. Stuck inside were a crumbling candy skull wrapped in plastic and a business card that read:

Chris Stowall  
Manager  
**Rebel Island Hotel**  
510-822-9901

Handwritten on the back was a date.

“June fifth,” I read.

“That’s today,” Garrett said.

“Yeah.”

“So what’s important about it?”

“Good question.” I slipped the card in my pocket and examined the candy skull. There was nothing special about it. Any Mexican candy store would sell them.

“That’s one of those Day of the Dead candies,” Garrett said. “Your friend here have a sweet tooth?”

“Maybe,” I said.

But something about the skull bothered me. It reminded me of something I’d read, or heard on the news...

Above us, the lightbulb flickered and went out completely, leaving us with nothing but the flashlight beam shining on the dead marshal’s face.

Garrett took a shaky breath. “Okay. *Now* can we get out of here?”



**Maia had lit candles in the Colonel’s Suite.**

Against my better judgment, Garrett took charge of Lane

Sanford and led her away. He said they'd go find Alex, maybe drop in on the college guys, who'd resumed their hurricane party above us. Garrett would teach them how to make a good margarita. They could listen to Jimmy Buffett until the batteries in Garrett's boom box wore out. It would cheer Lane right up.

Once they were gone, I lay down on the bed next to Maia and listened to the rain pounding the walls. There was a leak in the corner of the roof. Maia had put a silver cup under it. The drops sounded like tiny bells.

"Are we having a romantic getaway yet?" I asked.

Maia nudged my foot. "With a homicide magnet like you? A girl can't help but have a good time."

She snuggled next to me, wincing as she changed positions.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just my back."

"You sure?"

"Of course. Stop worrying. Tell me what you found."

I got the feeling she was just trying to change the subject, but I told her about the bloodstain in the kitchen, and the

business card and candy skull in Longoria's briefcase.

"Bad," she said.

"That was my expert opinion, too." I nodded toward the AM radio on the dresser. "Any news come through before the generator went out?"

"Couple of garbled alerts. Power's been knocked out in Corpus Christi. Some smaller coastal towns are underwater. The rainfall is setting records."

"So the earliest we could expect the ferry—"

"Twenty-four hours at least. We'll have to hope the phone lines get reconnected sooner than that. Or maybe a Coast Guard patrol will come by."

"Damn, I would love that."

She touched the space between my eyebrows—her way of telling me I was scowling too much. "You did the right thing, taking charge."

"I didn't take charge."

"They need you to, Tres. I know you want to switch off that ability—"

"What ability?"

Instead of answering, Maia rested her head on my chest.

The wind outside battered the hotel. I could almost feel the storm pushing us toward the mainland, carving new channels out of the coastline.

“Who do you think killed the marshal?” Maia asked.

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“But you can’t help it.”

I hated that she was right.

“Chris Stowall’s business card was in Longoria’s suitcase,” I said. “And now Chris has disappeared.”

Maia picked at a button on my shirt. “Chris Stowall doesn’t strike me as much of a killer.”

“And yet he’s missing.”

“Whoever the killer is, he’s still in the hotel.”

“Are you sure it’s a he?”

“Unless you think Lane or Imelda did it. Or me.”

“Hmm. Probably not Lane or Imelda.”

She elbowed me. "Lane was telling me some disturbing things about her ex-husband. She made him sound abusive. And relentless."

"Homicidal?"

"Possibly."

"I doubt there's a connection," I said. "Lane admitted she hasn't seen her ex here. With this storm, he couldn't be outside. He'd have been blown all the way to Kingsville by now. And why would he target Longoria?"

"One of the other guests, then? Or the staff? Your friend Alex?"

*My friend Alex.*

I thought about the time Alex pushed me against a window on the third floor when I was around ten years old. I think I'd asked him what his parents did—some stupid, innocent question like that. He held me so far out my shoulders cleared the windowsill, his fingers digging into my forearms. *None of your goddamn business, mama's boy*, he'd told me. *Nobody asked you to come here! You got that?*

Still, it was difficult to imagine Alex Huff shooting a law enforcement officer at point-blank range. As far as I knew, his only flirtation with guns had been his time in the military,

which from his own account had been undistinguished—something about serving breakfast in Kuwaiti mess halls. Since then, his most dangerous hobbies had been his amateur fireworks, buying questionable real estate and hanging out with my brother.

“I don’t know about Alex,” I said halfheartedly. “He got scuffed up pretty bad somehow, and he’s acting nervous. I don’t trust him.”

“Because he’s capable of murder, or because he’s Garrett’s friend?”

“Whose side are you on, anyway?”

She kissed me. She was pretty convincing. “What about the old lawyer, Mr. Lindy? He had a gun. He was in the hallway.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t understand what he’s doing here. On the other hand, he’s a lawyer. He’s got to be close to eighty. He could barely hold that .45. Did that look like a .45 wound in Longoria’s chest?”

Maia shook her head. She looked a little green.

“Sorry,” I said. “Forgot you were feeling squeamish.”

“It’s okay. But that doesn’t leave many people. At least... people we know of.”

"If the killer wants to get off the island, there aren't many options."

"None," Maia agreed. "It doesn't make sense that Longoria would bring a fugitive here. This island's a dead end."

I closed my eyes and listened to the storm.

The sound was familiar. Then I realized the storm sounded just like a freight train—the way the Kansas-Texas used to roar past the Arguello family house, back in high school. I wished it didn't sound like that.

"I don't want to solve this problem," I said. "I'm an English teacher."

"You're thinking about Ralph."

The image never went away—Ralph lying on the shoulder of Mission Road, staring into the sky. He'd taken a gunshot to protect Maia. He'd died and left a wife and kid behind. No matter how many times I replayed it, trying to convince myself there was nothing I could've done...PI work had brought me nothing but pain. It had never been just a job. It had seeped into every part of my life, endangered everyone I was close to.

"Ralph wouldn't want you to quit," Maia told me. "That



wouldn't make him feel better."

"Nothing can happen to you or the baby."

"Tres, you can't control everything. You can't stop things from happening."

The storm roared. There was a draft somewhere. The candles flickered and guttered.

Maia propped herself up on one elbow. "Did you hear that?"

"What, the wind?"

She listened, looking around the room until her eyes fixed on the door. "Someone's outside."

I didn't ask how she knew. I got out of bed.

"Tres." Maia pointed to her luggage.

I retrieved the .357 from her suitcase and I went to the door.

I threw it open, but there was no one there. The hallway was dark and silent. I realized I was making a great silhouette if anybody wanted to take aim at me. The candlelight behind me was the only illumination.

As I stepped back inside, paper crumpled under my foot.

“What is it?” Maia asked.

I picked up the envelope. Hotel stationery, cream with brown lettering: REBEL ISLAND HOTEL. It was unsealed with the flap folded in, the contents too thick for a single letter.

I should’ve been more careful. It might’ve been a letter bomb for all I knew.

But I opened it and looked inside. Newspaper clippings. I unfolded them—articles from the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* and the *San Antonio Express-News*, a few pieces printed from the national wire services. I scanned the headlines. Among the articles was a white card with a note handwritten in pencil, carefully anonymous block letters.

“Well?” Maia asked.

I showed her the note. Two simple words:

***FIND HIM***

“A warning,” I said. “About our killer.”

# 10

**Alex crouched in the attic. He hammered the last support** beam in place, but he had no illusions that it would help. The ribs of the building were trembling. Leaks were sprouting in so many places he felt like he was in the hull of the *Titanic*.

The attic was crammed with Mr. Eli's old leather suitcases. They smelled of lilacs. The old man had once been a traveler. He'd crossed Europe on trains and sailed a steamer to China. He'd visited Istanbul and Cairo. And then for reasons he never explained, Mr. Eli settled on Rebel Island, stowed his luggage, his clothes and his mementos in the attic. He threw away all his shoes except his slippers and vowed never to leave.

Above Alex's head, there was a ripping sound, more of the mansard roof getting scoured away. Soon Mr. Eli's things would be exposed to the wind, swept off to Refugio County.

*Let them get ruined, the old man would've said. A man's better off without his baggage.*

Alex climbed down the ladder and closed the trapdoor. He stood in the hallway, his wet clothes dripping on the carpet. He should've run away from this place months ago. What the hell was he still doing here, pretending he could make things right?

He stared at the doorway of Jose and Imelda's room. It had always been the servants' room, probably as far back as Colonel Bray's time. Once, Alex's parents had lived there. His mother had been bedridden during her final years. Alex would leave the window open so she could hear the sea. The room would be filled with light, the sounds of gulls and the smell of salt. On days when his father took out the fishing boat, she would close her eyes and listen to the sound of his engine as it receded into the Gulf.

Years later, when Alex had finally gotten up the courage to leave the island, his father hadn't understood. Why join the army? Why leave the coast? Even Mr. Eli had told him it was a mistake.

*There's nothing out there for you, Alex.*

But they'd let him go, and it didn't take him long to realize they were right. Eventually he had come straggling home. He'd reconnected with his old friends. He'd tried to help

them, the way Mr. Eli would've wanted him to.

And in exchange, he'd been deceived, betrayed, used. His fists tightened.

Alex *had* to stop trusting people. He'd thought Tres could help, but who was he kidding? He should have left this island when he first suspected the truth. Yet here he was, paralyzed. All he could do was go on fixing leaks, hoping the hotel didn't collapse around him.

He wanted to tell the Navarres the truth, at least. He owed them that much. Yet whenever he tried, the words stuck in his throat.

From the attic came an ominous creaking—wood being strained to the breaking point. But instead of going up again, Alex went downstairs.

There was one thing left he could do: one more leak he needed to fix.

# 11

## **I'd heard of Calavera and his big mistake.**

No single article told the whole story. Journalistic etiquette, such as it was, prevented reporters from telling the most grisly details. But I pieced them together, inferring some things, remembering others that I'd heard from various cops.



**Six months ago, Corpus Christi District Attorney Peter** Brazos had been in the middle of a career-making case. He was prosecuting five members of a South Texas drug cartel for trafficking, kidnapping, accessory to murder. He had everything he needed for a conviction. If things went his way, Brazos would gain national attention. He could write his own ticket—a job with the state attorney's office.

Maybe even a federal appointment.

On New Year's Eve, two weeks before the trial, Brazos sequestered himself at his weekend house in Port Aransas to prepare his case and collect his thoughts. This was his habit. He was well known for going on such retreats. The fact that it was New Year's Eve meant nothing to Brazos. He did not celebrate such things. He had no time for anything except his work and—as time allowed—his family.

Brazos's weekend house was in a bayside community of million-dollar homes with a boating channel between every block. There was no security. No gate, no surveillance. Island mentality. Most of the residents didn't even lock their front doors. Brazos left his retreat only twice that day, once for a jog on the beach, once for groceries in the afternoon. During one of those times, the assassin must have set his trap.

Around sunset, Peter Brazos was cooking a quiet supper for himself when he was surprised by his wife, Rachel, and their two daughters, ages nine and seven. A spur-of-the-moment decision. Daddy should not spend New Year's Eve alone. Brazos was irritated at first. Rachel knew better than to interrupt him while he was on retreat. But he couldn't stay mad at her or the girls, so he set aside work. Plans were changed. They shared a dinner of shrimp and filet mignon, chicken strips and sparkling cider for the girls. The clock ticked toward midnight. The girls tried to stay up for the

television broadcast from Times Square, but they fell asleep in the master bedroom, curled between their parents. Peter Brazos kissed his wife and asked her if it would be all right if he snuck away to study his case notes one more time.

Rachel Brazos smiled. She knew her husband too well to argue. She wished him a happy New Year, and Brazos took his laptop out to the back deck.

The winter air was cool and pleasant. Across the channel, a few of the neighbors' houses were lit up for parties. That didn't bother Peter Brazos. He read through his notes and thought about how much better South Texas would be when the men he was prosecuting were finally put behind bars.

He was proud that he hadn't bowed to the pressure from nervous politicians, reluctant police, death threats from the mob. So what if these drug barons were well connected? Brazos knew the cartel had several rural sheriff's departments on their payroll, possibly a few Corpus Christi cops and city council members, too. That didn't matter. Brazos was doing the right thing.

He was relishing the idea of a conviction when the fireworks started down at the beach.

In the flickering of red and blue starbursts, something



caught Peter Brazos's eye. At the edge of his dock was a small white lump that looked like an ice cube.

He wasn't sure why, but he set down his computer and went to see what the thing was. A tiny skull made from rock candy—a *calavera*, like children got for treats on the Day of the Dead. Brazos picked it up and stared at it, baffled by what it was doing on his dock.

Then something began nagging at the back of his mind—stories he'd heard. A hired killer. A calling card at the scene of a crime. But those kinds of hits happened to Mafia informants, people on the other side of the law...

Later, he would blame himself for those precious seconds he wasted, paralyzed by disbelief, before he ran toward his house and shouted his wife's name.

As his house erupted in flames.



**By the next afternoon the overwhelmed Port Aransas Police Department had turned the arson investigation over to the FBI.**

Lab techs found evidence of six incendiary devices in the house. The wiring was consistent with the type of device used by the most notorious hired assassin in South Texas—a man known only as Calavera. High-grade materials, completely un-traceable, timed to explode precisely at midnight. The work of a craftsman. Only this time, the craftsman had missed his mark.

The agent in charge's comments to the press were cryptic, but she couldn't help revealing some of her rage. The explosion was needlessly elaborate. The assassin was an incompetent show-off. Now a mother and two children were dead.

But Peter Brazos didn't believe this assassin was incompetent. The explosion should've worked. The assassin had studied Brazos, knew exactly where he would be. The only thing Calavera hadn't counted on was Rachel and the girls' spur-of-the-moment visit, an act of love.

The murder method had been superbly chosen. It had been meant to send a message to other prosecutors in a way that a simple bullet through the eyes wouldn't do: *Try to touch us, and we will burn you to the ground.*

Brazos did not quit his drug cartel case. His grief enraged him. His rage made him determined. He prosecuted the South Texas Mafia leaders with redoubled vigor because he knew they would blame the assassin for

not doing his job. They hadn't gotten what they paid for.

Calavera, who had acted with impunity for years and carried out dozens of hits, had finally screwed up.



**I passed the articles to Maia.**

While she read them, I looked again at the handwritten note:

***FIND HIM.***

I wanted to open our door and yell down the hallway, *Find him your own damn self!*

But I doubted that strategy would work.

Maia looked up. "You've heard of this Calavera?"

"Some. Just stories."

“Two little girls. Nine and seven.”

“Yeah.” I suddenly wished I hadn’t shown Maia the articles. Her eyes had that steely glint they got whenever she wanted to beat up someone—like me, for instance.

“Tres, if this is the guy Marshal Longoria was after, and if he’s in the hotel—”

“What the hell would he be doing here? And who slipped me this note?”

Maia was about to say something when there was a knock on our door.

I picked up Maia’s .357 again and moved to the side of the door. “Yeah?”

“Mr. Navarro?” One of the college kids. Chase, the leader.

I opened the door. Chase didn’t look good. His skin was blanched and his eyes were so bloodshot they were the same color as his hair. He had that consternated expression that comes from trying to solve problems while drunk.

“What’s up?” I asked him.

“I just wanted...” He saw Maia. “Oh, hi.”

“Hello,” Maia said.

“Damn,” Chase said, “you *are* pregnant.”

“Chase,” I said, “is there something we can do for you?”

He scratched his ear. “Um, yeah. It’s my friend Ty.”

“Latino kid?” I said. “Shaggy hair, looks like he’s going to throw up most of the time?”

“That’s him. He’s not doing so well. With the killing and the blood and all...there’s something I thought you should —”

The building groaned like a sailing vessel listing in a storm. There was a crashing sound. The floor shuddered.

“What the hell was that?” Chase asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but we’d better go see. This night just keeps getting better.”



**As it turned out, there was nothing to worry about.**

**Part of** the second story had caved in, collapsing onto a ground-floor bedroom on the west side of the house, but no one had been staying there. Maia, Chase and I found Alex Huff busily sealing the door to the destroyed room with extra lumber and plastic tarp.

“Hated that room anyway,” Alex grumbled.

“Damn,” Chase said. “A whole room collapsed? Damn!”

“We’re gonna have dinner,” Alex said, wiping the grime off his forehead. “In the dining room. You know...everybody. A nice, late dinner. Jose figured out the food.”

The wild look in his eyes bothered me.

“Chase,” I said, “why don’t you go get your buddies and we’ll meet you in the dining room.”

“But, um—”

“It’s all right,” Maia assured him. She gave him her I’m-practicing-to-be-a-mother smile. “We’ll talk later. Go get your friends.”

Chase nodded with reluctance. “All right. But that guy Garrett’s up there teaching Markie to slam tequila. Not sure I can tear them away.”



**“We need to talk,” I told Alex.**

“I don’t have time, Tres. I’ve got this demolished room, no electricity, and the guests—”

“Alex.” Maia used her best calm, lawyerly voice. “We have a problem.”

“A problem?” He laughed in a brittle way. “You don’t say.”

Maia showed him the envelope with the newspaper clippings. I explained to him about the attempt on Peter Brazos’s life, the murder of his wife and children.

Alex looked at us like we were explaining a technical diagram in Japanese. “What does that have to do—”

“The assassin is called Calavera,” I said. “He leaves a candy skull at the scene of every hit.”

“An assassin. Candy. Did Garrett put you up to this?”

“Look, Alex, Calavera is real. He’s done dozens of hits. All of them explosions. Mostly he works for the drug lords, silencing informants. Knocking off the competition. He took down the leader of a Juárez cartel about a year ago. Then

he tried to kill Peter Brazos. You sure you haven't heard about this?"

Alex shook his head, but I could tell his mind was going a million miles an hour.

"The explosion was in Port Aransas," Maia said. "It must've been big local news. Surely you heard about it."

"Maybe—maybe I've heard the name Brazos or something. But an assassin? Why would someone give those articles to you? What does it have to do with anything?"

"Someone apparently thinks Calavera is here," Maia said.

"That's nuts."

"Jesse Longoria came here for a reason," I said. "We found Chris's business card and a candy skull in Longoria's suitcase. I think Chris tipped him off that Calavera would be here. Today. June fifth."

"Look, Tres. I can't..." Alex ran his hands through his hair. His fingers were trembling. "I can't handle this right now, okay? The hotel is falling apart around my ears."

"You haven't found Chris?"



“Not a sign. The guy’s disappeared.”

“Then I’m glad you arranged a dinner,” I said. “We need to warn the others. They need to know.”

“You’re going to scare the hell out of everyone because someone slipped an envelope under your door?”

“Alex, if this guy Calavera *is* trapped on the island, he’s got no way off until the ferry tomorrow night.”

“Well, I guess, unless—”

“He can’t afford to have anybody get in the way of his escape.”

“What are you saying? He’s going to kill us all?”

“That’s what I would do,” Maia said.

Alex and I both stared at her.

“If I were a cornered assassin,” she amended.

Alex shook his head miserably. “A nice dinner. All I wanted was a nice dinner to take everyone’s mind off things.”

He ripped off another piece of duct tape, slapped it across the doorway like a bandage, then trudged off down

the hall.



**“He’s hiding something,” I told Maia.**

“Maybe you just don’t like him.”

“Yeah, I don’t like him. But he’s also hiding something. He used to make fireworks when he was a teenager. Fuses. Timers.”

“Tres, a hit man using explosives and a kid playing with fireworks are two very different things. Something *is* a little fractured about Alex. I’ll give you that. But he doesn’t seem dangerous.”

“I don’t believe he’s never heard of Calavera.”

“What if he’s the one who gave you the articles?”

“That doesn’t make sense either,” I said. “I don’t think Alex reads.”

Maia rolled her eyes. “You really *don’t* like him.”

The plastic and boards and duct tape billowed and

creaked against the ruined door, like some kind of artificial lung. I wondered if it was my imagination, or if the wind sounded like it was lessening a bit.

“If Calavera is here,” Maia said, “he’ll need to leave. And if he knows that we know he’s here—”

“Somebody knows.” I tapped the envelope in her hand. “And Longoria was shot. We have to assume Calavera is already desperate.”

“He can’t have us raising the alarm. He can’t risk getting quarantined on this island.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re in serious danger. All of us.”

“Pretty much.”

She took my hand. “Want to go to dinner?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Dinner sounds good.”

# 12

## **Benjamin Lindy pointed his gun at the mirror.**

How had he gotten so old? He recognized his eyes, sharp as ever, but his hair was thin and ghostly white. His face looked like the moon's surface, all scars and craters. The year he'd met his wife, 1963, seemed like yesterday. So did his daughter's birth. How had he allowed so many years to pass? To get this old and have nothing to show for it...Nothing but desolation, the loneliness of having outlived everyone he'd ever cared about.

The gun shook in his hand. He swung it to the left, then the right. He found that if he did this, he could swing the barrel back to center and find his mark. He'd practiced on the ranch, just to be sure.

Thunder shook the mirror and his reflection rippled. He lowered his hand. He hadn't realized how tight his finger had been on the trigger.

The photo album lay open in front of him. All the happy

moments were there. He tried to concentrate on them, but what he saw were other scenes: faces from photographs he'd burned. He saw his wife the day she left. The sun caught her hair and turned it from brown to gold. She wore a white cotton dress that showed off the freckles on her shoulders.

The baby was crying in the house, but Benjamin ran out the front door, after his wife. She didn't turn when he called to her, but he caught her in the driveway and tried to grab the suitcase—the same brown leather case she'd taken to Italy on their honeymoon. It spilled open and her few possessions tumbled out—a few extra dresses, some lingerie he'd never seen. The only thing he recognized: a photograph taken of her on vacation, standing in front of the Bray Mansion on Rebel Island.

“Goodbye, Ben,” she said.

He was too stunned to stop her as she got in the car, leaving her things behind on the front lawn. Afterward, what stuck in his mind were her earrings: silver seashells. She never wore the jewelry he gave her. But she was wearing those, a gift from another man.

*I told you not to trust her,* Jesse Longoria's voice spoke in his head.

Longoria thirty years ago, sitting in his San Antonio

office, cigarette smoke swirling through the hot light slanting through the window. He looked smug and confident in his caramel suit, his eyes black as a crocodile's. Longoria had counseled revenge.

*You let her walk out on you...You're going to live with the fact that she's laughing at you every day, sharing another man's bed, raising his children instead of yours?*

Benjamin had refused, but the words irritated him for years, like a grain of sand at the core of a pearl. And this spring, he had called Longoria again.

*This time, Longoria said, we do it my way.*

Benjamin remembered the hotel staff dragging Longoria's body through the kitchen on a plastic tarp. Longoria's eyes had still glittered darkly, as if being alive or dead made absolutely no difference to him. The gunshot wound was right where a tie clip should have been.

So much for doing it Longoria's way.

Benjamin heard footsteps in the hallway outside his room. "Mr. Lindy?"

It was one of the college boys: the burly one, Markie. The boy seemed like the calmest of the three, the most polite, but there was a cruel light in his eyes that Benjamin didn't trust. Markie reminded him strongly of a young Jesse

Longoria.

“You lose your way, son? The liquor cabinet is in the parlor.”

Markie’s eyes registered the gun. “Dinnertime, sir. You want me to say you’re not coming?”

“I’m coming,” Benjamin said.

He set down the gun. He closed the photo album, still seeing the picture that he’d burned long ago: his wife smiling in front of the Rebel Island Hotel, smiling for another man.

# 13

**I had to give Jose and Imelda credit. It's difficult to set an** elegant dinner with the dining room windows boarded up and the floor littered with broken glass, but they'd done their best.

Most of the furniture had been scooted aside, leaving one large table with clean white linen and settings for ten. Apparently Jose and Imelda would not be sitting with us, which I thought a bit formal for a natural disaster. On the other hand, two more chairs would've brought our number to twelve, like the disciples, and I wasn't anxious for this meal to resemble the Last Supper.

No electricity, so the food was nothing fancy—bean tacos, Vienna sausage and crackers, apples and cheese, still-cold beer, wine, bottled water.

As Maia and I took our places, Mr. Lindy was in deep conversation with one of the college guys—the big bald one, Markie, who looked like a bodyguard version of



Humpty Dumpty. Lindy was drawing on a napkin, showing him something like a football diagram. Garrett was telling Lane Sanford a joke, and Lane was actually trying to smile. Alex Huff was pouring Chase a glass of wine, explaining the difference between merlot and pinot noir, and Chase was looking very confused. Imelda and Jose bustled around setting out plates and trying to keep candles lit, since the flames kept sputtering and dipping. There was no dinner music, but the storm against the plywood provided a rhythm track of pops and thuds and atonal moans.

There were two empty seats. One for our missing manager Chris Stowall, I guessed, and the other...Ty, the third college guy, was also not here. Maybe I shouldn't have put off Chase when he wanted to talk about his friend.

Once everyone was served sausage and fruit and wine, Alex got to his feet and tapped his glass with a fork.

He'd taken a few minutes to wash up. He'd bandaged his cuts, so his face now looked like it had been properly barricaded for the storm. "Well, here's to...making the best of it."

"And the body in the basement," Markie added.

Alex winced.

"Hey, c'mon," Garrett said. "Everybody relax. Listen outside. The storm's lightening up."

“That is the eye coming ashore, señor,” Jose said as he refilled Garrett’s glass.

Everybody looked at him.

“I have been in hurricanes before,” Jose explained uncomfortably. “That is the eye.”

“Well, whatever it is,” Alex said, “we can use the break. We need a little time to just relax and forget about...you know.”

He glanced at me, silently pleading. Being the heartless guy I am, I said, “We shouldn’t relax.”

Now everybody looked over at me. I had a general idea how a cancer doctor must feel coming into a waiting room. Nobody wanted to hear what I had to say.

“Somebody slipped this under my door.” I set the envelope on the table. “It would be helpful to know who.”

Facial expressions are important. In those first few seconds, I tried to register everyone’s. Alex I’d already tested, and unless I had completely misread him, the envelope was a total mystery to him.

Chase looked confused and uneasy, but he’d looked that way before. His friend Markie glared at me, holding his fork

like a dagger. Benjamin Lindy narrowed his eyes. He barely glanced at the envelope, and seemed much more interested in what I might be thinking. Lane Sanford looked terrified, as if her ex-husband might leap out of the envelope at any moment. And Jose and Imelda...they stood in the background, trying to be inconspicuous, but I saw them glance at each other. I wasn't sure what they were communicating.

"A death threat?" Garrett asked me. "The killer wrote to you?"

"This isn't from the killer," I said. "This is *about* the killer, a man called Calavera."

Again I checked everyone's reaction. I couldn't tell much.

Jose cleared his throat. "Señor, this is the ...*hit man* they talk about?"

"Who's they?"

"Everyone, señor. The newspapers, sometimes."

"I know who you're talking about," Mr. Lindy told me. "Calavera the assassin. He kills with explosives."

"Did you ever work on a case that involved him, sir?"

Lindy shook his head. "I retired long before he started.

But I know the name. I know he's murdered many innocent people. You believe he's here?"

I felt the weight of everyone's eyes on me. I knew how badly they wanted me to say no.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "But someone...probably someone at this table, gave me this information for a reason."

I told them about the newspaper articles and showed them the message: *FIND HIM*.

"That's *my* hotel stationery." Alex looked offended.

"Wait a second," Garrett said. "So now we're looking for two people. We got a killer. And we got somebody who wants to find the killer."

I nodded. As reluctant as I was to admit my brother was capable of logical thinking, he'd pretty much nailed it.

"So we got two empty chairs," Garrett said. "Where's the Mexican kid? What's his name?"

"Hey, Ty ain't no killer," Markie growled. "That's bullshit."

"Well, what about that Chris guy?" As soon as Garrett said that, Lane stiffened next to him. "He ran the hell away as soon as the marshal was shot. Hasn't been back yet."

How much you know about this guy, anyway, Alex?"

"He's a local," Alex said. "I've known him since he was like six. There's no way he could kill anybody."

Garrett scratched his beard. "Well, then, where the hell is he? And where's the other dude? Ty?"

Chase shifted uncomfortably. "I tried to say something *privately* to Navarre. That didn't work."

"It's all right, Chase," Maia said. "What did you want to say?" She did a better job sounding soothing than I would have.

Chase scowled. "Ty's claustrophobic."

Garrett snorted.

"This ain't a joke, man," Markie piped up. "We brought him here thinking he could get over it, you know? It's been a nightmare. He's been drinking for two days just to keep from flipping out. Being on a damn island was bad enough, but now with the boarded-up windows, the storm, being trapped inside...he's really starting to crack."

"Where is he?" Alex asked. He sounded stunned that anybody could be unhappy staying on his island.

"He ran out of the room about half an hour ago," Chase

said. "I thought maybe he just needed to walk the halls or something, get some air. I didn't want to embarrass him by making a big deal about it, but..."

"But?" I prompted.

"He wants off this island bad," Chase said. "Bad enough to do something crazy."

"There's no way off," Maia said.

Jose and Alex exchanged jittery looks.

"What?" I asked.

"There is the fishing boat," Jose said. "In the boathouse behind the hotel."

I stared at Alex. "That's still there? Why didn't you mention this before?"

"Ah, hell, Tres. It's just a little charter fishing boat. It ain't no good in choppy surf. It hasn't even got a full tank of gas."

"But, señor," Jose said, "if a man were desperate—"

I cursed, then asked Jose to cover my sausage and bean tacos for later.

"Come on," I told Chase and Markie. "We've got some

hiking to do.”



**Outside, the wind and rain had died to almost nothing.** The air smelled so clean and charged with electricity it hurt to breathe. The night was unnaturally black—no city glow, no stars. But I could feel the presence of storm all around us, like the walls of a well.

Chase, Markie and I all had flashlights. We wore attractive black plastic garbage bags as rain ponchos. As we trudged around the side of the hotel, the beams of our flashlight snagged weird images—dead shrimp sprinkled in the sea grass, a child’s orange life vest half buried in the sand, an uprooted palmetto, an outboard motor wedged upside down in the dunes, its propeller spinning lazily.

And footprints—fresh footprints sunk deep in the wet sand.

They led toward the west shore of the island, where a covered boathouse extended on pylons over the water.

A faint light flickered in the window.

“Does Ty know how to drive a boat?” I asked.

Chase shook his head. “But that wouldn’t stop him. I mean, the poor guy was freaking.”

“We gotta yell before we go in,” Markie warned, “so he doesn’t shoot us.”

“Whoa,” I said. “He has a gun?”

Chase nodded. “A marksman’s pistol. He’s a shooter on the college team. Didn’t I mention that?”



## **Ty wasn't making much progress with the boat.**

He'd partially wrestled off the tarp, which now hung from the prow like a deflated hot air balloon. He stood in the boat, trying to start the engine, despite the fact that it still sat on rails, five feet above the water.

“Yo, Ty,” Chase said. “Come on down, dude.”

Ty's expression wasn't much different from the many bail jumpers I'd nabbed over the years—cornered, desperate,



more than a little dangerous.

"Help me with this," he pleaded. "I gotta get out of here."

"Ty," I said. "You can't. You'll die out there."

"The storm's calming down! I can make it easy. I *have* to get out of this place."

Markie belched, which I guess was meant to be a gesture of sympathy. "Dude. Ty, c'mon. The eye's passing over us, is all. You'll never make it. Look at the fricking water under you."

Sure enough, in the launching slip, green water was sloshing around, splashing everywhere. The boathouse floor was slick. The supplies strewn about the boathouse were soaked. On a nearby worktable was a red canvas duffel bag.

"I tell you what, Ty," I said, "come back into the house for fifteen minutes. Just fifteen minutes. We can sit and talk. If the storm is still dying down when we're finished, you can come back down here and I'll help you launch the boat. If the storm gets worse, you'll stay until the morning. And then we'll see."

Ty's left eye twitched. I tried to picture him on a firing range, shooting in a competition. It was a troubling image.

"I can't breathe in there," he said. "I can't go back in that house."

"Just fifteen minutes," Markie said. "Come on, dude. That's fair. I'll get you a drink."

"I'll need a bottle," Ty said. His face was beaded with sweat.

"Sure," Chase agreed. "You can't start that boat by yourself, anyway. You're a screwup with engines."

Ty took a shaky breath. He started climbing down.

"You can take him inside?" I asked Markie. "I want to look around for a second."

"No problem." Absolute confidence. I started wondering if maybe there was more to Markie than the ability to belch.

Ty got out of the boat. "Only fifteen minutes," he reminded me. "Start counting."

"I will," I promised. "And, Ty, if you've got your gun..."

He blinked. "My gun? Not with me. It's...back in my room?"

I didn't like the way he made it into a question. I looked at Markie. "Find it."

“Yeah, sure.”

“And don’t touch it. Put it in a bag or something. Bring it to me for safekeeping.”

Markie raised an eyebrow, but then he nodded and led Ty away.



**“Hold up,” I told Chase.**

I walked him over to the worktable and showed him the canvas bag. “Is this Ty’s?”

“Never seen it before. Why?”

A new red duffel bag in the middle of grimy bait buckets and tackle boxes and mildewed coils of rope. It was packed full, and what bothered me most were the shapes pressed against the canvas, like the bag was filled with bricks.

I unzipped the top. Cash—twenties and fifties, all neatly bundled.

"Whoa," Chase breathed. "How much—"

"Quick estimate? About twenty thousand."

"Dude. What's it doing sitting out here?"

"Good question." I fingered the old airline tag on the shoulder strap. It was an address different from Rebel Island, someplace in Corpus Christi. But I recognized the name. "Christopher Stowall," I said.

Chase swore. "That little turd. Stowall stashed this cash here? How the hell—"

"I don't know," I said. "But twenty thousand...It's time I searched his room. I should've done that before."

"Yeah," Chase said. "If there's more money in there we can, like, split it fifty-fifty."

I stared at him.

"What?" he said defensively.

I turned and studied the fishing boat—the only way off the island. In the choppy water, the reflection from my flashlight beam looked like a fire. Like flames in the window of a burning house.

"Chase," I said, already regretting what I was about to do.

“I need your help with one more thing.”

**Lane could still feel the impression of her wedding band, a** month after she had thrown it into the sea. She massaged her fingers, trying to get rid of the cold and tightness.

Garrett placed his hand on hers. “Hey, it’s gonna be all right.”

She studied his face. He was unlike any man she’d ever known, and not just because he was an amputee. She’d gotten over that, because he seemed so completely comfortable without legs. He sat in his wheelchair like it was a throne—a source of power. He wasn’t attractive in any conventional way. His teeth were crooked and his gray-brown hair was a rat’s nest. He had a potbelly and didn’t seem to care much whether or not his Jimmy Buffett T-shirt had margarita stains on it. But he had nice eyes—surf green, full of humor and warmth. He smelled like patchouli and wood smoke. She liked the roughness of his hands and his gravelly voice.

“Things haven’t been all right for me for a long time,” she said.

“Hell, you don’t know my brother,” Garrett told her. “He’s gotten me out of worse shit than this. I’m telling you, if there’s a killer here, Tres’ll find him.”

*If there’s a killer here.*

A wave of guilt surged through her. She kept thinking the burden would get easier, but every day, month after month, it just got worse. She couldn’t close her eyes without seeing the dead man’s face. He had smiled as she served him lunch. She remembered the knife, freshly sharpened for cutting apples...

“You know what you need?” Garrett asked.

Lane forced herself back to the present. “What?”

“A tropical vacation in my room.”

In spite of herself, she smiled. “I’m not sure I know you that well.”

“Trust me,” Garrett said. “You’ll find out plenty.”



**His room was strangely personal for a hotel room. The walls** were decorated with posters of the Caribbean and the Florida Keys. They reminded Lane of Chris and how much he loved beaches, but she kept that to herself. On the dresser, Garrett had set up a full bar—rum, tequila and triple sec, glasses, a blender, a bucket of ice. He'd hung different-colored Hawaiian shirts on the shuttered windows. Music played from a little battery-operated stereo: Jamaican steel drums and guitar. A dozen votive candles flickered on Fiestaware saucers.

"It looks like you live here," she noticed.

"My favorite room. I come here a few times a year. Alex lets me keep it the way I like."

He mixed tequila and lime juice and triple sec over ice in a carafe, stirred it and poured. "Margarita of the gods. No salt. Cuervo white. Mexican triple sec. My brother disagrees with me about every ingredient. Thinks I'm a damn cretin."

"You sound proud."

"Of pissing off my brother? Hell, yes. *Salud!*"



The warmth of the alcohol knit into Lane's limbs. She sat in a wicker chair, facing Garrett. She listened to the Caribbean music and the rain outside.

"Earlier you were talking like you admire your brother," she said.

Garrett sipped his drink. A droplet of margarita gleamed in his beard. "Sure, I admire him. I still like to irritate him. You got siblings?"

Lane shook her head.

"Then you wouldn't understand, but that's cool. I want you to take a vacation."

"Garrett—"

He held up a finger. "No problems. No hang-ups. Imagine those windows are open. You're looking out at clear blue sky and a calm sea. Listen to the music. Drink your drink and relax."

Lane tried. She liked the feeling of Garrett sitting near her, confident and calm. Then she remembered the night in the woods, her right eye swollen shut where Bobby had hit her. Her whole body ached. They dragged their burden into the woods wrapped in stained blue sheets.

"You're crying," Garrett said.

“I’m sorry.”

Garrett’s eyebrows furrowed. “What did that bastard husband do to you?”

Before she could answer, she heard voices in the hall.

“—can’t believe you did that,” Markie was complaining.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Chase protested. “I’m telling you, Navarre forced me. He’s a damn—”

“Shut up,” Markie hissed as they passed the room, probably noticing that the door was open. The sound of their footsteps faded down the hall.

Garrett drained his margarita. “My brother must be back. I’d better check on him.”

“Why?” Suddenly Lane didn’t want to leave the room. She didn’t want to go out there and face the others.

“Tres is always where the trouble is,” Garrett said. “And I want to find out what’s happening.”

He put down his glass and held out his hand.

Tentatively, she took it. He gave her fingers a squeeze.

“We’ll continue the vacation later,” he promised. “For now, let’s go see what crap my little brother has gotten himself into.”

# 15

**I was standing at Chris Stowall's dresser, going through his** underwear drawer, when Garrett and Lane Sanford came in. I was about halfway through searching. So far I'd come up with nothing except underwear, and I was kind of wishing I'd worn latex gloves.

When I told Garrett what had happened at the boathouse, he arched his eyebrows. "You did *what?*"

"I scuttled the boat."

"Hold up, hold up." Garrett looked at Lane for moral support, then back at me. "You sank Alex's fishing boat. Forty thousand dollars' worth of fishing boat. And you just —"

"Opened the bilge valve and sank it," I agreed. "Now, are you going to help me search or not?"

Garrett shoved the underwear drawer closed so fast I almost lost my fingers. "ARE YOU NUTS?"

I counted to ten, trying to contain the impulse to tip him out of his wheelchair.

To my surprise, Lane interceded. "Garrett, Tres is right."

Garrett scowled at her. "Say what?"

She put her hand on his shoulder. "We can't let the killer off the island. He'll hurt more people. Right now he's trapped here. We have to keep it that way until we can contact the police." She glanced up at me. "That is why you did it...yes?"

"Yes," I said. I decided it was time to revise my estimation of Lane Sanford.

"Whatever, little bro," Garrett grumbled. "You're gonna be in deep crap with Alex." He nodded grudgingly toward the dresser. "What the hell are you looking for, anyway?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Something to explain the cash in the duffel bag."

"What cash?"

I told him about the twenty grand, which was now locked in the hotel's office, thanks to Jose and Imelda. I couldn't tell whether the news surprised Lane or not.

“Damn,” Garrett said. “Find one more bag like that, and you can pay Alex back for his boat.”

I decided to ignore him. Being his brother, I’d had lots of practice.

“Lane,” I said, “is there anything you can tell me about Chris? Anything that would help?”

“I’ve known Chris since high school. He’s a good person. He’s not a killer.”

“But?”

She twisted the silver ring on her finger. “It isn’t like him to disappear like this. He wouldn’t do that. Something is wrong.”

“He invited you here for the weekend, to get away from \_\_\_\_\_”

“Yes.” Her tone was clear: now was not the time to bring up her ex-husband.

“Chris didn’t mention Marshal Longoria?” I asked. “Didn’t make any comment to you about why he was here?”

She shook her head, but she was holding back. I could feel it as clearly as the storm outside. I glanced at Garrett, hoping he would help me out.

He took her hand protectively. “Come on, Lane. It’s getting late. And, little bro, if you find anything else valuable—like more money or the keys to a Porsche or something—you might want to give me dibs on it before you destroy it, okay?”



**I turned Chris’s room inside out. I didn’t learn much.**

**His** stuff smelled of salt water and suntan lotion. He wore size 32 jeans. He liked extra-large cotton T-shirts. He had a picture of Waikiki Beach taped on his dresser mirror. There was a surfboard behind his closet door. Next to his bed was a guitar case—nothing inside but a Yamaha acoustic and the lyrics to an old Nirvana song on a piece of crumpled notebook paper.

No weapons. No duffel bags full of money. I found no evidence that he’d been packing. The closet was full of clothes. His toiletries were all there.

In all, it seemed to be the room of a fairly simple guy who liked to surf and had taken a job that allowed him the time to do it.

Too simple. Almost always, there was something interesting to be found in anyone's personal space...I called it the jalapeño factor. You had to have that little slice of spice on the nacho.

I sat on Chris's bed and pondered that. Outside, the storm intensified. Wind battered the walls. The plywood on the window bowed in and out with a hollow popping noise.

Had I checked the bed?

I knelt down and I slipped my hand between the mattress and the box springs. My fingers brushed against a book, and I brought out Chris Stowall's diary.



**I was about midway through reading it—far enough to** realize I had trouble on my hands—when the college guys burst into the bedroom, Ty followed by Chase and Markie.

The good news was that Ty had found his gun. The bad news was he was pointing it at me.

“You bastard,” he said. “You wrecked the boat?”



“Ty, put the gun down.”

Now that his friends had caught up with him, they didn't seem to know what to do. They had their hands out, crouching like they were about to catch a ball.

“Dude,” Chase said, “I tried to explain—”

“Shut up!” Ty said. “You *helped* him. You told me I could leave in fifteen minutes!”

“Ty, listen to the storm,” I said. “You couldn't have gone anywhere. The wind's already too strong.”

I didn't try to stand. I didn't look at the gun. I kept my eyes on Ty's, because I knew that was the best way to keep him from firing at me. Not a great way, mind you, but the best.

“You sank the boat.” Ty's voice trembled. “You trapped me in this place with...with a goddamn killer. I'm gonna—”

That's when Markie hit him on the back of the head. Ty crumpled and Chase tried to catch him without much luck. Ty landed facedown on the carpet between the dresser and the bed. Markie pounced on the pistol. I checked Ty's head. He'd been hit in just the right spot to knock him out—directly behind the ear.

I looked up at Markie. “Sap your friends often?”

He opened his fist and showed it to me. "Sorry, dude. No choice."

"You always carry a roll of quarters?"

"Pretty much," he said. "You never know."

Ty moaned.

"Find him a place to lie down," I told them. "Not in here. And get him some ice."

"Guess I messed up," Chase murmured, "telling him about the boat."

Markie snorted. "You guys are whacked, wrecking the only way off the island."

"The killer may have been planning to use the boat," I said. "I don't want him to have options."

Markie studied me. "Dude, you ever hear about cornering wild animals?"



**Once the guys had dragged Ty away, I finished**

**reading** Chris Stowall's journal. He wasn't a prolific diarist. The entries were sometimes six months apart. Then he would write daily for a week. Then he'd lose interest again. He wrote about wave conditions. He made plans to move to Hawaii, where he'd apparently been once before on spring break. He had dreams of taking some girl named Amy there. They'd start a surf shop. At the bottom of the entry, he wrote: *I wish it was Lane.*

No explanation.

He made some vague references to a brother, whom he affectionately called "the psycho." He drew pictures of seagulls and guitars. He wrote lines that might've been song lyrics. They were pretty bad.

He also talked a lot about Alex Huff, and how much they hated each other. According to Chris, Alex went on drinking binges about once a month. If there were guests on the island, Chris would have to scramble to keep Alex out of sight. Sometimes Alex left the island for days at a time and wouldn't tell anyone where he was going. When he was drunk, he'd get paranoid. He'd accuse Chris of snooping around his room, embezzling the hotel's money.

*I'd quit, Chris wrote, except I owe the bastard. I'm scared what he might do if I left. Maybe one more time, and I'll have enough to get out of here.*

I read that last line several times. I didn't like it.

The final entry seemed to contradict the earlier one. It was dated last April. It read: *He wants to sell the hotel. He thinks he can just walk away. He can't do this to me.*

In the middle of the diary, stuck between two pages, was a folded printout of an email. The date was May 5, exactly one month ago. The sender was a U.S. Marshal named Berry. I knew him vaguely. He was a higher-up in the West Texas District, based in San Antonio. Roughly speaking, he was Jesse Longoria's boss. The only time I'd met Berry, we'd discussed a deal to get a client of mine into the witness protection program.

The printout read:

We can talk, but it has to be in person. Specify a time and place.

Below that, apparently clipped from the email to which Berry was responding:

At least twelve names. Payments. Instructions. Enough to put my employers in jail for a long time. But I need **ABSOLUTE** assurance. Any leak, broken promise or

hint of betrayal, and I vanish.

I was still sitting on Chris's bed, staring at his picture of Waikiki Beach, when Alex came in and yelled, "You did WHAT to my boat?"



**I didn't so much placate him as wear him down. He was too** drunk and tired to do much more than yell and complain and throw Chris's clothing around.

"Damn it," he muttered at last. He sank on the bed and buried his head in his hands. "That's it. That's just about everything gone now."

I felt no satisfaction at his misery. As much as I'd begrudged him buying Rebel Island, I knew he'd be facing hundreds of thousands in repairs, assuming we weathered the storm at all. He had his life savings tied up in this hotel.

I thought about Chris Stowall's diary, his descriptions of Alex's drunken paranoia. *I'm afraid what he might do if I left.*

"Alex, when we first got here you wanted to ask a favor. What was it?"

He laughed—a broken, unhappy sound. "Doesn't matter now. I was going to ask you to help me convince Garrett."

"Of what?"

"I'm selling the island. Or I *was*, before this storm."

"Selling the island? You've wanted to own this island since—"

"I know." He stared at the boarded-up window. "I used to believe in this place. Now...I don't know, Tres. It's falling apart. This was my last weekend for guests. I have a couple of potential buyers. Thing is...I'd rather you and Garrett have it."

"What? The island?"

He nodded. "I thought Eli would've liked that. The idea of you guys keeping it running. You could do better than I did."

It seemed unnecessary to point out just how crazy that idea was. How could Alex think we'd have the money? How could he think I'd want Rebel Island? Still, I couldn't help feeling a little honored.

I remembered all the summers I'd come here before my

parents got a divorce, in that small window of years when my childhood had seemed somewhat normal, before the day Alex took me out in that boat.

“Neither of us has the money,” I told him. “Even if I did... there’s too much history here for me. This is a goodbye visit.”

I hadn’t thought about it until I said it, but it was true. I’d come here to bury a lot of things—my memories of Dad, my PI work, my years as a bachelor. The whole idea of possessing this island made me feel kind of like Ty—like the walls were closing in.

A cracking noise echoed through the house. Alex closed his eyes, as if he were trying to sense where the damage was. “I’d better go check that.”

“Tell me about Chris,” I said. “Were you two getting along?”

He hesitated. “I told you, we’ve known each other forever.”

I waited, but Alex didn’t add anything.

“Did Chris have a personal computer?”

“He used the office computer,” Alex said. “That’s it, I think.”

“Do you have one?”

“A computer? Hell, no. I hate the things. Chris did most of my spreadsheets and stuff.”

“I need to check the office.”

“The power’s out. Computer won’t work.”

“I still want to look around. Maybe sift through paperwork, any printouts Chris might have made.”

“You’re not thinking Chris murdered that marshal.”

“I don’t know.” I held his eyes. I didn’t mention the cash in the duffel bag. If Alex had heard about it, he didn’t mention it either.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll get Jose to show you. He helped Chris sometimes. Knows more about computer stuff than I do, anyway.”

He took a deep breath, like he was preparing for another round of battle. “Now I gotta get upstairs. I think the damn roof just blew away.”



# 16

**Maia hated the staircase. It seemed to get steeper every** time she climbed it. She wasn't sure why Imelda decided to escort her, but she welcomed the help. Imelda held her arm, steadying her, encouraging her when she was out of breath.

"I feel like an invalid," Maia said.

"You are doing well, señora. Someday you will tell your child about this weekend."

"He's never going to hear the end of it."

"It is a boy?"

Maia stopped for a breath. "Imelda, I don't know. I just started calling him 'him.' I think so."

"My *abuela* used to dream the gender of babies before they were born. She told me—" Imelda stopped herself. "She was never wrong."

“About your own children?” Maia asked.

Imelda nodded reluctantly. “We are almost to the top, señora. A few more steps.”

They took the rest of the climb in silence. Maia imagined she was back at the house in Southtown, just going upstairs to the bedroom. No storm. No killers.

Her doctor had thought she was crazy for agreeing to this trip. Tres didn’t understand either.

“It’s just Garrett,” Tres had told her. “We can say no. Hell, we *should* say no.”

But Maia had convinced him to accept. The last few months she’d felt stifled. Not by the house or by her marriage or even by her decision to put her legal career on hold. She felt claustrophobic within her own skin. Just her and the baby, stuck in here for so many months, waiting.

The idea of going somewhere new, seeing a place that was part of Tres’s past, had intrigued her. Especially since it was a place Tres had never mentioned before. Not even once.

“You spent every summer here?” she’d asked.

He nodded reluctantly.

“And...did what?”

“You know. The usual stuff kids do at the beach.”

Maia imagined things from movies and books, or things she'd witnessed at the beach when she was an adult. Her childhood had had no beaches. No family vacations. Her only escape as a child had been climbing the mulberry tree to get away from the misery in her family's one-room shack, her father's depression and her brother's illness.

“I want to see Rebel Island,” she'd decided.

“No,” Tres said. “You really don't.”

But the more he tried to dissuade her, the more curious and determined she'd become. With Tres, she always felt as if she were fighting to keep hold, always competing with his roots here in Texas, a place she had never understood. She was determined to weave herself into his territory, to be part of his landscape.

Even after all that had happened this weekend, Maia did not regret her choice. She just wished she understood why Tres disliked this old hotel and Alex Huff so much.

Imelda helped her into the suite. She turned down the bed, but Maia didn't feel like lying down. She walked a slow circuit around the room, steadying her breathing. Water dripped from the ceiling, falling into the cup she'd placed on

the dresser. The candle sputtered on the nightstand.

“Señora, do you need anything?”

“Probably many things,” Maia admitted. “Can you tell me how you came here?”

Imelda blinked. “To the hotel, señora? We used to live in Nuevo Laredo. It became too dangerous. We came north to Corpus Christi because I had a cousin there. We were very lucky to find Señor Huff.”

Maia didn't ask if Imelda and Jose were in the country illegally. In South Texas, she'd learned, that was like asking someone what denomination of Christian they were. It hardly mattered.

“And how did you find Alex Huff?”

Imelda smoothed out the comforter, trying to make the corners perfect. “By chance. Jose had been working construction, but work was slow. We went to the fireworks, for the Fourth of July, to cheer him up. They have fireworks at the beach in Corpus Christi. Señor Huff was there, next to us, and he began telling Jose how the fireworks were made. Jose...he liked Señor Huff immediately. They both liked the fireworks. By the end of the night, Señor Huff had offered us jobs at the hotel.”

From the little Maia had seen of Alex, she could believe

he'd do something impulsive like that. Chris Stowall, the manager, had struck her as a similar hardship case Alex had taken in. Still, something about Imelda's story seemed incomplete.

"Imelda," Maia said. "Your grandmother—your *abuela*. What did she dream about your children?"

The maid's face darkened. "Señora, I should go. The other guests..."

She closed the door behind her so carefully the latch didn't even click.

Maia stood at the dresser. She looked at the old photo hanging on the wall. It was black-and-white, in a frame made from pieces of driftwood. Tres hadn't said a word about the photograph, and so at first Maia had paid it no attention. She assumed it was just another rustic decoration, no different than the stuffed fish or the nets with seashells. But when she studied it, she realized the photo was much more.

It showed three men standing at the docks, the mansion looming behind them on a gray morning. The man in the middle had white hair and milky skin. He wore a dark robe over what looked like pajamas, as if he'd just been dragged out of bed. He squinted in the light and his posture was stiff. The man on the left was a little younger, mid-

forties perhaps, with a weathered face and sad eyes. He wore a Greek fisherman's cap and a plaid shirt and faded jeans, and he held a boat line in his hand. He had Alex Huff's crooked smile and beak nose. Alex's father, Maia guessed. The third man dominated the picture. He was a large man in a crisp white shirt and dark slacks, eyes as black as gun barrels. He smiled, but there was no kindness in it. His face was flushed from drinking. A lawman—Maia could see that just from his posture, the expression of power. He was used to people getting out of his way. He had Tres's face—but so different. It was Tres without his sense of humor, his self-doubt or his kindness. Maia had known Tres for years, and this was only the second or third time she'd ever seen a picture of his dead father, Sheriff Jackson Navarre.

Maia wondered why Tres hadn't even commented on the photo, or tried to remove it from the wall. She doubted it was an accident the picture was hanging here. Perhaps Alex had put it here as a reminder: *Our families are tied together*. Or maybe something less charitable. Maybe the message was more: *You owe me*.

**Before heading to the hotel office, I reread Chris Stowall's** journal. One entry caught my attention, because it was one of the few written in detail. It described how Lane Sanford had convinced Chris to take the job as Rebel Island hotel manager.

Lane Sanford had just gotten engaged. Chris was cryptic about the details, but he clearly wasn't happy.

They were walking together at the seawall in Corpus Christi. Chris didn't record the time or the weather, but he wrote very specifically about what Lane was wearing. Her sleeveless dress was pastel blue. Her sandals were decorated with cowry shells. Her hair hadn't been dyed blond yet. It was ginger brown, braided down her back.

Chris was trying to convince her that marrying Bobby was a terrible idea.

"You don't believe people can change?" Lane asked him.

“No. Look at me. I can’t.”

It must have been chilly, because Lane hugged her arms. Her fingernails were pink, which Chris found disturbing. She never painted her nails. She must’ve done it for Bobby.

“Chris, you’ve got to stop,” Lane told him. “You can’t keep doing what you’re doing.”

“I gave it up,” he told her. But he could tell she didn’t believe him.

“I know where you could get a job,” Lane said. “Alex would take you in. He bought the hotel, you know.”

Chris protested. Alex was an old friend, but they hadn’t seen each other in years. Not since Alex had joined the army. Besides, Alex had gotten a little weird ever since his old man died. How the hell could he afford to buy Rebel Island, anyway?

“His father had some money,” Lane said. “He never spent anything. And I think Mr. Eli wanted him to have the place. He sold it really cheap.”

Chris didn’t think much of Mr. Eli. The man had been creepy. Alex living on that island so long with just his dad and that old guy in the bathrobe—it seemed pretty damn strange.



"I've got no experience," Chris said. "Nobody would hire me."

"Alex would," Lane insisted. "He believes in giving people a chance. He's got big plans for the hotel."

She took out a business card and pressed it into Chris's hands. He paid a lot more attention to the warmth of her fingers than he did to the card.

"Just call him for me?" she asked.

Chris gazed at the waves, thinking about surfing, how he would like to be out there riding the crests. Things were simpler in the water. The waves came to you. You just needed patience and balance. You didn't need to think too much, or prove anything. You didn't get in trouble just because you wanted to make some money.

"I'll call him," Chris promised.

A week later, Chris wrote: *I took the job. It'll only be for a while. Besides, I've got an idea. I could have enough money for Hawaii in a few months.*



**The hotel office looked like a hurricane had blown through,** though it was one of the few rooms where the hurricane hadn't.

Paperwork was strewn everywhere. Notes and old photographs overflowed the bulletin board. There were a wall calendar and two desk calendars, and as far as I could tell none of them was for this year.

"Here, señor." Jose handed me the phone bill from last month.

"Please," I said, "just call me Tres."

Jose had a quick, natural smile that would've gotten him labeled impertinent in school or the military. He probably didn't find anything particularly funny. His mouth was just shaped that way. He was built like a wrestler, low and thick and solid, with hands that could've crushed rocks. But his smile and the gleam in his eyes made him look nonthreatening. Almost cuddly.

I decided not to share that observation with him.

I scanned the list of calls from the hotel's land line. Most were to Port Aransas or Aransas Pass. Some to Corpus, Kingsville, San Antonio, Brownsville. All the closest metropolitan areas. The places you might expect.

"Can you tell which room dialed which number?" I asked.

Jose looked at the phone bill. "No, señor."

"How about cell phones? Does Chris have one?"

"I think, yes. But mobile phones do not work on the island."

"Don't suppose you have any idea where his might be?"

Jose shook his head. "*Lo siento*, señor."

I stared at the dark computer screen. No way to access the thing. I found some printed-out emails, but nothing interesting. Confirmed bookings. Catering invoices. Responses to creditors and guests. It looked like Chris had written most of the hotel's correspondence. There was nothing that matched the printout from U.S. Marshal Berry.

"Jose, how long have you worked here?"

"Two years, señor, in July."

"You like it?"

"The work is good. I enjoy preparing the brunches on Sunday. Usually, I make better than Vienna sausages."

I went back to the phone numbers. Something about

them nagged me but I couldn't pinpoint what.

"Did Chris hire you?" I asked.

"No, señor." A hint of distaste in his voice. "Mr. Huff hired me. Mr. Stowall came later."

It seemed weird for Jose to be calling a young twerp like Chris "Mr. Stowall."

"They treat you okay?" I asked. "Chris and Alex?"

"Yes, señor. They have been most kind to me and Imelda."

Something in his voice—as if it were difficult to say Imelda's name. "You *are* married, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

I noted the shift from *señor* to *sir*. His tone had become guarded, maybe a little obstinate.

I decided not to press him further. For one thing, I wasn't sure it would do any good. Also, I wasn't sure it would be wise. Despite the smile, there was an undercurrent to Jose that I didn't quite understand.

I looked back at the phone numbers. Corpus Christi, Kingsville, San Antonio.

“Jose, do you have the registration cards for this weekend’s guests?”

“At the front desk, sir.” He looked relieved to have an excuse to go. “I will get them.”



**While I waited, I stared at one of the photos on the bulletin** board: Alex Huff as a teen, squatting at the dock with a rope curled in his hands. The boat in the photo wasn’t anything like the forty-thousand-dollar one I’d just scuttled. It was a simple twenty-footer—the same boat Alex had once taken me fishing in. Despite all the time that had passed, the sight of it still unsettled me.

That afternoon, twenty-five years ago, the sky had been clear and bright. We took the boat out so far Rebel Island seemed to sink into the sea. The water was green as chlorophyll, hot with the smell of salt and fish. In the distance, a shrimp boat trailed its nets, a mob of seagulls circling above the wake.

“Bait your hook,” Alex told me.

He’d brought a bucket of live shrimp—translucent gray

things that snapped and jumped in the lukewarm water.

I hated the way they felt—like slimy fingernails. My twelve-year-old mind couldn't comprehend why adults would ever want to eat these things. I pinched one between my fingers and proceeded, grimly, to impale it on the hook, its crescent body just the right shape.

*Put the point through the brain*, my father would've advised me. *That little black dot. Don't worry. It can't feel anything.*

I had trained myself to bait a hook without flinching. But whenever I did so, I felt like I was deadening my own brain—forcing myself not to feel. It was just a stupid shrimp. Its entire nervous system consisted of a gray line and a black dot in a colorless body. Why should I care?

Alex cast his line. "Old man giving you a hard time?"

He sounded almost sympathetic, but I didn't trust him. I was pretty sure this was some kind of setup, a prank that Alex and Garrett would laugh about later. Yet I didn't want to go back to the island. I didn't want to see my parents.

"Didn't they tell you?" Alex asked.

"Tell me what?"

He studied me. "Not my place. Ask Garrett."

He might as well have told me to ask God. I figured I'd be more likely to get an answer.

We fished until the sun began to slant into my eyes. Alex hadn't brought any bobbers, so I couldn't tell if I got any bites. He said he didn't believe in bobbers. He could feel a tug on the line just fine. Couldn't I?

The ocean toyed with me, plucking my line like a guitar string. Every swell was a false alarm. I reeled in and found my shrimp still impaled on the hook.

I had just recast when something scraped against the hull. At first I thought we'd run into a sandbar. Then I looked off the port side and saw the beige tip of a fin going underwater.

"Shark," Alex told me calmly.

I dropped my fishing pole as if it had become an electrical line. I scrambled away from it, trying to get to the dead center of the boat.

"What are you doing?" Alex demanded.

"Shark," I repeated.

"Jesus." Alex leaned over and saved my fishing rod from getting dragged into the water. "We're in a fishing channel.

Lots of blood and guts from the big boats. Of course there are sharks. Take your rod."

I just stared at the water. It was calm and green, no sign of anything stirring underneath. "I want to go back."

"Suit yourself." Alex reeled in my line. My shrimp had been nibbled into a fluffy gray mass. "Your parents are getting a divorce."

"What?"

"Your parents. They're getting a divorce."

"No, they're not."

Alex didn't argue. He could probably see the impact his words were having on me. For months, I'd known something was wrong: my dad's angry outbursts, my mom's evasiveness and tears. Then there'd been the scene in the hotel room.

"He's been screwing around," Alex said. "Nothing new. Garrett's known about it for years. Your dad's a drunk. A dirty old man."

"That's not true." Which was a stupid thing to say.

Alex laughed. "Whatever, Tres."



Anger built up in my throat. I'd heard Alex brush me off too many times before, whenever he and Garrett played a cruel joke on me because they were bored.

"My dad's better than *you*," I said, my voice cracking.

"Yeah?"

"I saw in the lighthouse."

I should've known from the steely light in Alex's eyes that I was entering dangerous territory. I needed to stop. "You get high and carve girls out of wood," I said. "Who were you making up there, anyway? Your girlfriend?"

Alex grabbed me by the shirt collar and pitched me headfirst into the water.

I came up spluttering. Salt water burned in my nose and my eyes stung. I dog-paddled frantically, clawing for the side of the boat. My shoes weighed a thousand pounds. I knew the shark must be close, already crazed from the smell of fish blood.

Alex looked down at me. His face was cold and harsh. "Don't ever, *ever* mention that again. You can swim home. Do you want to swim home?"

I couldn't answer. I couldn't even beg. I tried to grab the side of the boat but my hands wouldn't work.

Alex swore in disgust. He grabbed my shirt and hauled me soaked and trembling into the boat. When we got back to Rebel Island, Garrett was waiting for us on the dock, scowling as I trudged ashore dripping wet.

“What the hell happened?” he asked.

I was too ashamed to speak. When Alex explained, I expected Garrett to bust out laughing, like he’d done many times before, but this time Alex seemed to have gone too far even for Garrett.

“You fed my little brother to the sharks?” he demanded. “What the hell for?”

He and Alex began to argue. Under different circumstances, this would’ve pleased me. Garrett was actually standing up for me. At least he didn’t think I quite deserved to be shark bait. But watching him and Alex yell at each other, all I could think of was my parents—the way they’d been at each other’s throats the past few weeks, the idea that their marriage was over.

“Stop!” I yelled. “It was my fault.”

I didn’t wait for a reply. I ran, and I didn’t stop until I reached the northern tip of the island.

Alex and Garrett stayed mad at each other the rest of the

weekend. I refused to speak to either of them. I never explained to Garrett why Alex had pushed me overboard.

Neither Garrett nor Alex ever mentioned the incident again. As for me, I did not develop a lifelong fear of sharks or deep water. But I never forgot the shock of asking the wrong question of the wrong person and getting pitched headfirst into the warm sea with the blood and the sharks. For my last ten years as a private investigator, every time I interviewed someone or prodded for information, part of me was that twelve-year-old boy, and I imagined myself holding tight to the edge of the boat so I could not get surprised again.



**“Señor?”**

Jose was back, smiling blandly, holding the registration cards I’d asked him for. “You are fine, señor?”

“Yeah,” I managed. “Great.”

I took the cards and began flipping through them.

The first was in my handwriting: *Mr. & Mrs. Navarre*. I

stared at it, marveling at the weirdness of there being a Mrs. Navarre.

I flipped through the other cards, went back to one of them, checked it against the phone records.

“Here,” I said.

“Señor?”

“Three calls to this number from the hotel. All in the last two weeks.”

“Is that bad, sir?”

“I don’t know.” I held up the registration card with a name, a Kingsville address and a phone number, all written in neat block letters. “But I think I should ask Benjamin Lindy.”

**Garrett found Alex in the parlor, staring at the marlin above the fireplace.**

“Yo, Huff.”

Alex’s shirt had a tear in the back, like it had snagged on a nail. Plaster and dust speckled his curly hair. “You sure you don’t want to buy this place?” he muttered. “Price is getting cheaper by the minute.”

His tone reminded Garrett of another friend—a fellow programmer who’d climbed out onto the tenth-story ledge of his Bee Cave Road office in Austin after the high-tech bubble burst. The guy’s voice had sounded just like that—fragile as glass—right before he jumped.

“You’re gonna get through this, man,” Garrett promised.

Alex turned. He was holding his old whittling knife—the knife his dad had given him for his thirteenth birthday. The blade was folded against the handle, but it still made

Garrett uneasy.

"I was wrong to bring you all down here," Alex said.

"You said you needed help. I'm telling you, man. Tres can help."

"It's too late. I've screwed up too much."

Garrett remembered the body in the basement. A shiver ran up his back. Even so many years after he'd lost his legs, there were times he missed being able to run away. Down in the basement had been one of those moments. The way Tres had calmly shone a light over the dead man's face, gone through his pockets and completely ignored the dried blood and the gunshot wound in the chest—how did little Tres, the annoying kid who used to complain to Mom whenever Garrett so much as touched him, grow up being able to examine dead bodies?

"Alex, if there's something you ain't told me—"

"Shit, Garrett. You couldn't even start to guess."

"That stuff about Calavera. If you had anything to do with that—I mean, you would tell me, right?"

Alex's expression was hard to read—fear, maybe even shame. "You remember Mr. Eli's funeral?"

Garrett nodded. It wasn't one of the days he liked to remember. He'd come down to Corpus for the memorial, mostly to console Alex. There hadn't been many people there, which had surprised Garrett. After all the people old Mr. Eli had helped, all the good things people said about him, Garrett figured there would be a mob scene. But it was just Garrett, Alex and a couple of ladies from the local Presbyterian church who seemed to have nothing better to do.

Afterward, Alex and he had gotten blind drunk at the Water Street Oyster Bar.

"You promised you'd be there at my funeral," Alex reminded him.

"I was drunk, man. And you're really starting to freak me out."

Alex put the knife back in his pocket. "I'm going to get a drink."

"Don't think you need one, man."

"This coming from you? Sorry, Garrett. I need a drink."

"Alex," Garrett called after him. "You didn't kill anybody. You couldn't do that, right?"

Alex's eyes were as dead as the fish on the walls. "I'm

sorry I got you here, Garrett. It's gonna be just like Mr. Eli's funeral. Nobody's even gonna remember I did anything right."

After he was gone, Garrett picked up a pillow and threw it at the wall. That didn't make him feel better.

He thought about how long Alex and he had been friends. Seemed like forever. They'd gone to concerts together, howled at the moon from the roof of this old hotel. When Garrett had lost his legs, Alex was the first one to come find him in the hospital—one of the few friends that stuck with him and never made him feel like a freak. Garrett didn't like what he was seeing tonight. He wanted Alex back the way he used to be—a pain in the ass sometimes, but fun. Admirable, even. Alex was the guy who always knew the right thing to do. Hearing him talking now about screwing up—no. That was Garrett's job. Alex was supposed to be the smart one.

Suddenly Garrett wondered where Lane had gone.

They'd been apart like five minutes, and already he missed her. Alex, in the old days, would've had something to say about that. He would've warned Garrett against falling too hard. Garrett probably needed somebody to remind him of that. He had trouble thinking straight when it came to Lane.



“Hell with it,” he muttered. Maybe he didn’t know Alex as well as he thought. And if you couldn’t know somebody after thirty damn years, who’s to say you couldn’t get to know somebody just as well in one day?

He wheeled himself out of the parlor and went to find Lane.

**I finally located Mr. Lindy in a room I never knew existed**—a small library on the third floor. Judging from the limestone fireplace, the place was directly above the parlor. The shelves were lined with tattered hardcover bestsellers from twenty or thirty years ago. Ludlum. Trevanian. Guy books.

Lindy sat in a leather recliner facing the door—a good defensive position. He still wore his dark suit, though he'd loosened his tie. His demeanor was so formal that even this small concession to comfort seemed like a shocking breach of decorum. He was flipping through a copy of *Field & Stream*, but I got the feeling he wasn't paying it much attention. His cologne filled the air with a faint amber scent.

"Mr. Navarre," he said.

"Mr. Lindy. We need to talk."

"Then you might as well sit down."

I sat across from him on the arm of the sofa. It was the only way I could have a height advantage.

Lindy set aside his magazine. That's when I noticed his .45 in his lap.

"If the gun bothers you," he said, "I can put it away."

He sounded courteous, but I wondered if there was a veiled warning in the offer. As if: *The gun is the least of your problems.*

"What's your interest in Calavera?" I asked.

"Aside from the fact that he may be a direct threat to our lives?"

"Aside from that."

Lindy glanced at the ceiling. Even here, in the middle of the house, I could hear the storm blowing strong. Footsteps creaked above us. I wondered if Alex was up in the attic again, blocking off some section of the roof that had been torn away.

"I'm curious," Lindy said. "What makes you believe I have a personal interest in this killer?"

"There it is again."

“What?”

“The way you said *personal*. I didn’t say your interest was personal. Earlier, you said you’d retired before Calavera started murdering innocent people. *Innocent people*. Most of Calavera’s hits were Mafia men. Only his last hit, his big mistake, killed innocent people. You’ve got some personal stake in the Peter Brazos case, the murder of Brazos’s wife and daughters. You slipped that envelope under my door.”

Lindy studied me, his eyes as bright as broken glass. “If you were right, would it matter?”

“What do you mean?”

“We have a murderer in this hotel. If he’s allowed to leave the island, he will disappear. Now that you know who he is, you must agree he has to be caught. Given our circumstances, you may be the only one who can do that. Does it matter who gave you the information?”

His tone was calm and reasonable, but he said the word *murderer* with an intimate loathing, the way a preacher might say *Satan*.

“Why are you here?” I asked. “Why did someone at the hotel call you three times over the last week?”

“I came to fish.” Lindy pointed to the *Field & Stream*.

“For Calavera?”

“I’m an old man, Mr. Navarre. I’m in no shape to track down a murderer.”

Which, I noticed, was not exactly a denial. “Did you know Marshal Longoria?”

“Not well.”

“Which means you did.”

Lindy’s gaze wobbled, as if he were looking back through decades. “I once asked his advice on a personal matter. He counseled me as best he could. That was many years ago. I wouldn’t say we were friends.”

“What was the personal matter?”

“I don’t see that it is relevant.”

“Your family?”

The muscles in his jaw tightened. “My wife.”

I waited, but Lindy was not about to draw water from that well.

“You knew Longoria would be here this weekend,” I said. “He had reason to think Calavera would be on the island.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Chris Stowall’s business card and a candy skull were in Longoria’s suitcase. There was a note written on the back: *June 5.*”

“That seems slim evidence.”

“I also found an email stuck in Chris Stowall’s diary. Part of a correspondence between Calavera and a U.S. Marshal named Berry, Longoria’s boss.”

I couldn’t tell if that surprised Lindy or not, but he seemed to be composing his thoughts before he spoke again. “What was the nature of this correspondence?”

“I think Calavera was negotiating surrender. He wanted to offer testimony against his employers, probably in exchange for a new identity and federal protection.”

“And why would he make such a deal?”

“The Brazos hit at New Year’s might’ve shaken him up, made him remorseful.”

Lindy shook his head. “Mr. Navarre, an assassin like Calavera has no remorse. More likely his cartel employers were unhappy with his failure to kill Peter. Calavera was bargaining information to save his own worthless—”

“Peter,” I noticed. “First name.”

Lindy stared at me. Slowly he nodded with grudging appreciation. “You missed your calling, sir. You should have been a trial lawyer.”

“I married one,” I said. “That’s good enough.”

“If you think Calavera could be shaken up, if you think he had any conscience at all, you clearly haven’t read enough.” He picked up a yellowing newspaper from the table and handed it to me. It was a copy of the *Kingsville Record*, Lindy’s hometown newspaper, dated almost three years ago.

Before I could ask Lindy what this happened to be doing here, there was a tentative knock on the door: the maid, Imelda, stepped into the library, looking frazzled. “Excuse me, Señor Navarre. It’s your wife. I think you should come.”



**Maia was lying on her side, a pillow between her legs, two** under her head, one hugged against her chest. She looked uncomfortable and a little pale.

"Too much excitement," she said. "That's all."

"She is having mild contractions," Imelda said. "Pre-labor."

I tried to keep my panic from showing. "Are you sure, Imelda?"

"I've had children, señor," she said, like it was a subject she preferred not to talk about. "The señora needs to rest and be very still."

"Or?"

"She might deliver."

*Be calm, I told myself. Keep it upbeat.*

"You can't deliver on Rebel Island," I told Maia. "I want our child to have U.S. citizenship."

Imelda looked confused. "But, señor, this is—"

"He's teasing, Imelda," Maia said. "Tres, the baby is fine. I'll be fine."

"We're all fine," I agreed. "Sure."

Maia sighed. "Imelda, could you find some more pillows for my husband? I think he's going into labor."



Imelda looked more confused. “But—”

“She’s teasing,” I said.

“Ay, too much teasing,” Imelda scolded. “You should rest, señora. Perhaps some red-raspberry-leaf tea?”

“That sounds wonderful. Can you do that?”

“We have some in the kitchen, señora. And a portable heater for the water.” She fussed with Maia’s pillows a little more, then trudged off to get the tea.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I told Maia.

I followed Imelda and stopped her in the hallway.

“Hey,” I said, keeping my voice down, “if it came down to...you know—”

“Delivering the child, señor?”

“Yeah. Could you help?”

She tugged nervously on her wedding ring, which I didn’t figure was a good sign. “I would try, señor. But this is the señora’s first child. She is older. There could be complications.”

“How many children do you have?”

“I...two.”

“Grown?”

“...No.”

“Oh.”

Imelda twisted the cords of her apron. She had brown hair streaked with gold and white, like marbled fudge. If her husband's face was fashioned for smiling, Imelda's was made for stoic suffering. She had the pinched expression and weathered skin of someone who might have spent her life toiling in the fields, squinting against a hot sun.

“I will help if I can,” she told me. “I have done it before back in...back in Mexico. I think I could. I remember.”

“Thank you.”

“I will get the tea.” And she shuffled off like the hot fields were waiting, just at the bottom of the stairs.



**I sat on the bed and massaged Maia's feet. Her ankles**

looked swollen. I tried to remember what that meant. A normal thing? A danger sign? Maia and I had agreed on one thing about the childbirth process: the standard “how-to” advice and facts about what happened when stayed with us about as well as Japanese VCR instructions.

Early on, Maia had decided to listen to her body and just go with that. What the doctors had to say was too scary, anyway. She’d refused amniocentesis. Too risky. There was nothing it would tell her that she really wanted to hear.

The baby was at high risk for muscular dystrophy. We both knew that. Maia carried the genes. Fifty-fifty chance our child would have it. The possibility of MD was like the loaded gun Maia kept in her underwear drawer, or the blackmail file she kept on her enemies. We both knew it was there. We knew it might come into play someday. But there was no use talking or worrying about it, so we didn’t.

At least that was the theory.

“Take my mind off the cramps,” Maia said. “Tell me what’s happening.”

A murderer running loose in the hotel was the last thing I wanted to talk to Maia about, but I could tell she needed distraction. Her conversational tone was forced. I’d never seen her look quite so worried, or rather try so hard not to look worried.

I kept massaging her feet as I told her about my trip to the boathouse, the bag of money, then finding Chris's diary and the email to the U.S. Marshals Service. I told her about my conversations with Jose and Benjamin Lindy.

Maia focused on my words the way she did in Lamaze class, as if this were another breathing exercise. "You really think Chris is the killer?"

"I don't know what to think. You met Chris. Does he strike you as a bomber?"

*"Bombed,* perhaps. Not a bomber."

"Exactly."

Maia pressed her toes against my hand. "But it certainly looks like Chris was talking with the marshals. And the money makes it look like he was planning an escape if things went wrong."

"If Chris brought Longoria here, why would he kill him?"

"Perhaps Longoria reneged on the deal."

"Doesn't make sense," I said. "I know this other marshal, Berry. If I were him, trying to negotiate a delicate surrender, Longoria is the last person I would send. Longoria would never let this guy Calavera skate. He'd kill him first. Berry certainly wouldn't send him alone."

“And yet Longoria came here. Alone.”

I nodded. It made about as much sense to me as childbirth manuals. Or maybe I was just too tired to think. As I sat on a comfortable bed with Maia, my body was reminding me just how long it had been since I slept. I had no idea what time it was. Close to midnight, probably.

“What’s in the newspaper?” Maia asked.

I looked at the copy of the *Kingsville Record* that I’d set at the foot of the bed. I’d completely forgotten about it.

“Old news from Mr. Lindy,” I said. “We don’t want to know.”

“Sure we do,” she said. “Go on.”

And so reluctantly I picked up the paper. The story Mr. Lindy had wanted me to read was easy enough to find. It had been front-page news in Kingsville, three years ago.



**The meeting was held in a closed club called Gatsby's on** the north side of Kingsville. Someone,

perhaps to prove they'd actually read the Fitzgerald book in high school, had duplicated the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg on a billboard outside. The parking lot was marbled with weeds. The front doors were elegant mahogany with beveled glass, which did not at all fit the plain white building that might have been anything—a warehouse, a beer barn, a pawnshop.

Three cars arrived within fifteen minutes of each other. Two new Mercedes sedans, each with Coahuila license plates, and a red Ford F-350 that belonged to Papa Stoner, one of South Texas's most notorious middlemen in the heroin trade.

Stoner was sixty-two. Thirty-three of those years had been spent in prison. He was called Papa Stoner because he had a son, Eduardo, "Stoner, Jr.," who had gone on to an illustrious career as a gang leader on the South Side of San Antonio. Eduardo had been murdered by rivals shortly before his twenty-fifth birthday, but Papa was still proud of him. He'd avenged himself ruthlessly on his son's killers, and still wore Eduardo's name tattooed on his arm, encircled in snakes and flames.

Papa Stoner came to the meeting alone, unlike his guests. Mr. Orosco and Mr. Valenzuela each brought two guards. Traveling with any less would have been suicide for such important men.

They met in the restaurant's bar, which still smelled of stale beer and cigarettes and lemon furniture polish. Papa Stoner had personally inspected the place that morning. He'd found no traps, no wires. He'd taken care of bribing the right cops to make sure their meeting would not be disturbed. When you're entertaining guests from across the border, after all, you want to show them hospitality.

Orosco was the nervous one. His operation was still small. This was a bold play for him, going behind the backs of the major cartels. He dressed too well for the meeting—an Armani suit, leather shoes, a new Patek Philippe watch. His hair was parted in the middle, well oiled, so he looked a bit too much like a *maître d'*.

Valenzuela was older, more confident. He wore beige slacks and a white guayabera as he did every day. He was a large, messy man with unkempt hair. Everything about him suggested disorganization, but he ran one of the tightest drug operations in Central America. Not a kilo escaped his notice, and he never forgot a name or an insult.

The men talked for almost an hour. They agreed that the border war between the cartels was a major opportunity for smaller players. They could form a new pipeline, quadruple their profits within the year. With the cartels at each other's throats, the border could become a free trade area, a NAFTA for drugs.

Stoner just about had Orosco and Valenzuela convinced. Everything would be fine. They didn't need to fear reprisals. Orosco started to relax.

Lunch arrived, specially catered from Stoner's favorite Kingsville deli. The four guards took the meal boxes from the delivery boy at the door. Valenzuela and Stoner were breaking out the cold beer when Orosco's phone rang.

No one knew where he was. Only a select group of people had his mobile number. He answered the phone.

A man's voice said, "Go to the bathroom."

The line went dead.

Orosco hesitated only briefly. He'd been in the drug trade most of his life. He knew that some things went beyond logic. Most people would ignore something like a random phone call, but Orosco's gut instincts had saved him dozens of times. He excused himself from his colleagues and went to the restroom.

He was standing at the urinal when the restaurant exploded. The restroom door blew off its hinges and smoke billowed into the room. Orosco dropped to the tiles and curled into a ball. He was shivering like a child when he stood up.



He looked into the dining room, which was now in flames. Papa Stoner, Valenzuela, the bodyguards—all sprawled motionless on the floor, their clothes smoldering and peppered with holes. The walls bubbled with fire.

Orosco ran for the exit, tripping over bodies. His eyes stung with acrid smoke. He made it outside and ripped off his smoldering jacket. Thank god he had his own car keys.

He opened the door of his Mercedes and found a note on his seat, next to a sugar-candy skull.

The note said, *They are watching. Never again.*

Orosco was whimpering. His hands couldn't work the keys. He heard sirens getting closer. He had to get away. He got in the car and slammed the door. He didn't know why he'd been spared. Perhaps he was too insignificant to the cartels. Perhaps they wanted him on their side, so they had let him keep his life.

He turned the ignition, and the steering wheel blasted apart.

He was still alive when the paramedics found him. The police could identify him from his license plates and the ID in his wallet, which was fortunate. His face was hardly human.

Later, the police described with grudging admiration how

the bomber had rigged the airbag system, turning it into a bomb that delivered high-speed metal filament shrapnel rather than air.

Orosco lived for three days, long enough to tell the police what had happened. He served the purpose the assassin required. He spread a warning to anyone else contemplating a break with his cartel employers.

The assassin left no trace, aside from several other candy skulls strewn around the perimeter of the restaurant. The police were never able to find the man who delivered lunch. Orosco could not give a description. Orosco's mobile phone gave no information about where the call had been placed.

It was this incident that led the media to give the assassin a name: Calavera, the skull. Some were horrified by the assassin's efficiency. Some decided that criminals killing criminals was none of their concern. But everyone agreed: Calavera had earned his pay. He had as much capacity for mercy as the candy skulls he left in the Gatsby's parking lot, grinning up at the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg like some kind of challenge.



**When I was done relaying the story to Maia, we were both** quiet, listening to the storm outside. There wasn't much to say about Calavera. The story spoke for itself.

"You scuttled the boat," Maia said. "Why?"

"I don't want Calavera to get away."

"Why not?"

I didn't answer.

She was right. It would've been easier to leave the killer an out, let him brave the storm, hopefully sink to hell if he tried. Why would I want to cross a man like Calavera?

"You want to control the situation," Maia said. "It's not so much about the killer, is it? It's about Ralph again."

"It's always Ralph with you, isn't it?"

Maia dug her toes into my ribs. "I've got guilt, too. But I handle it differently. I wouldn't try to stop my career. If I wasn't pregnant, I mean."

"Convenient excuse."

"Oh, yeah." She winced as she rearranged her legs. "So convenient. The point is, Ralph's death made you feel

powerless. You don't want anything else to get out of your control. You tried leaving investigation completely, but now that you've got a killer on your hands, you can't stand the idea of him getting away from you. You're maybe not so different from Jesse Longoria."

"All right, that was low."

"I'm wrong, then?"

"Completely. Well...mostly."

"Ralph, I think, would have something to say about now."

"Yeah?"

Maia nodded. "You're full of shit, *vato*."

Her imitation was so good it made my heart sore. "That's irreverent."

"Ralph was irreverent. He was also right about a lot of things."

I pulled myself up next to Maia as best I could without jostling her. I kissed her forehead. If I didn't look down, I could almost imagine that she wasn't pregnant. Like old times—before everything changed.

Ralph's death and my decision to marry Maia were not

as simple as cause and effect. But they were connected emotionally. We both knew that. They resonated from the same terrible winter week.

“I miss him,” I said.

Maia’s breath was sweet and warm. Our forearms touched. The storm outside wailed steadily. I felt my eyes closing.

“Try to sleep,” Maia told me. “You need the rest.”

“Wake me up in an hour?”

“I will.”

I drifted off, imagining Ralph Arguello grinning above me, telling me I was a pretty sorry piece of work.



**In my dream, I was sitting on the back deck of Peter Brazos’s house in Port Aransas. It was nighttime, New Year’s Eve. Lights from the houses across the channel reflected like oil fire on the black water. On the edge of Brazos’s dock, a little candy skull glittered.**

Peter had his computer in his lap, a vodka Collins in his hand. He was talking to me casually, telling me about his case against the drug cartel.

I wanted to warn him. I knew his house would explode any minute, but my dream self felt it would be rude to interrupt.

"It's all about emotional leverage," he told me. "What do they fear worse than their bosses? What makes them crumble inside? Find that, and they'll tell you what you want. They'll testify to anything."

Peter had dark glittering eyes like the little skull on his dock. His skin was pale in the moonlight.

When he lifted his glass to his lips, I said, "Shouldn't you get your family out of the house?"

He glanced behind him. "Too late," he said sadly. "You can't control everything."

Then I noticed the building behind us wasn't Brazos's house. It was the Rebel Island Hotel. And as the windows flared red, I realized that it wasn't Brazos's family in there. It was Garrett and Maia.

"Here's to leverage." Peter Brazos lifted his glass to the flames. "Happy New Year, Tres."



**“Tres.” Maia was shaking my shoulder. “Tres, I can’t get up. You need to get it.”**

Someone was banging on the door. “Navarro!”

I had no idea how long I’d been out. My eyes still burned from the fire in my dream. I stumbled out of bed and opened the door.

Chase was standing there, looking like the ghost of keg parties past. “We went for ice.”

I blinked. “Chase, as direly important as that information is, why did you wake me up?”

“We found him.” His voice cracked with emotion. “I think you’d better come see.”

**Jose heard yelling from the floor below.**

“It’s in the kitchen,” Imelda said.

“Yes,” he said. “We will stay here.”

She bolted for the door, but he caught her arm. “It can wait, Imelda. We have enough trouble.”

She slumped down miserably on a stack of folded sheets. The linen closet was almost the size of a guest room. In the illumination of his flashlight, the shelves of folded sheets and towels reminded Jose of mummies—small bodies wrapped in white. He’d seen things like that in Mayan villages, long ago, in the Mexican army. He didn’t like the memory coming back now.

“Señora Navarre asked for tea,” Imelda murmured. “I told her I would bring her some.”

“Will she give birth here?”



"I don't know." Imelda shivered. The twenty years they had been married, they had lived in only hot places, but Imelda was always cold. Jose told her it was because her heart was so warm. Back home in Nuevo Laredo, she once cared for a dove with a broken leg for a month before it finally died. She would cup moths in her hand and release them outdoors rather than kill them. And the children...the last day they had gone to school, she had buttoned their shirts and fussed with their hair and slipped iced oatmeal cookies into their lunch bags.

"Jose," she said quietly. "We can't—"

"Don't say it," he warned. "It's your own fault."

A tear traced her cheek. He didn't like being harsh with her, but the truth was the truth. Imelda had brought them so much trouble. Her warm heart again. She would never understand that some broken birds would not heal. They would die whether you cared for them or not. It was no mercy to prolong the pain.

He knelt beside her and took her hands. "We will survive this, *mi amor*. The storm will pass over."

She met his eyes, but he couldn't tell if she believed him. It seemed cruel to him, that she had suffered with a husband like him. He was not worthy of her. He had known that since the day they first met, at the dance at Señor

Guerrero's ranch. They had talked under the orange trees and watched the stars. She had been beautiful in her white dress. She had seemed to him like an empty cup, waiting to be filled with his stories. She found him fascinating, rough, perhaps a bit scary. She thought she could change him, make him into a good man. She had never given up on that idea. And he had married her anyway, knowing he would only bring her pain.

But he just kept promising things would be better. And she kept believing.

More noises came from the kitchen—distressed voices, the sounds of an argument.

"We should go down," she said.

"No," he told her. "Let them do what they will. They are like the storm, *mi amor*. Their sounds mean nothing."

And they stayed in the linen room, holding hands, Jose kneeling before her as he had under the orange trees, telling her stories she chose to believe.

# 21

**Never underestimate the resourcefulness of a college guy** searching for booze.

After ransacking the refrigerator looking for ice for Ty's head (and, more important, beer), Chase and Markie found a storage room in the back of the kitchen with an industrial freezer. They decided to open the freezer on the theory that any self-respecting hotel would have vodka on ice.

They were right. The vodka was wedged right between the corpse's feet.

Chris Stowall lay curled in the fetal position, frost on his eyebrows. His skin was the same color as the ice-crusts on the sides of the freezer.

Next to me, Benjamin Lindy muttered a curse that was probably shocking back in the 1940s. Apparently the old lawyer had gotten some sleep since I last saw him. His shirt was wrinkled and his gray hair was mussed, but he still managed to look like the most dignified person present.

He turned to Chase. "Son, did you touch the body?"

"N-no, sir." But when Chase looked at me, I got the distinct impression he wanted to say something more. The bad boy attitude had drained out of his eyes. He looked like a kid who'd just been chased by the neighborhood pit bull. I noticed for the first time how he and Markie were dressed. The cutoffs and T-shirts and flip-flops were gone. Now they both wore jeans, hiking boots, dark long-sleeve shirts. Markie had a flashlight clipped to his belt. At Chase's feet, as if it had dropped there in a moment of panic, was a little hand shovel like a gardening trowel.

"Where were you two going?" I asked him.

Markie stepped between us. "You've got a freaking dead man in the cooler, and you're asking stupid questions? Ty's already going nuts upstairs. If he hears about this—"

"I'm not upstairs." Ty was leaning against the cutting board, his hand a little too close to the butcher knives for comfort. His face was seasick green.

"Happy now, Navarre?" he demanded. His words were slurred. "We're stuck here and this...this Calavera guy's gonna kill us all."

"C'mon, man," Markie said. "That ain't gonna—"

“Shut up! Try to knock me out with those...those pills.”

“Sedatives,” Chase said defensively.

Ty snorted. “Told you we shouldn’t have come. Told you something would go wrong. Couldn’t get out, could you?”

“You gotta rest the head, dude.” Markie’s voice was cold. “Let me get you upstairs.”

“Screw that.” Ty grabbed a knife, but he was too messed up to be dangerous to anyone but himself. Chase and Markie wrestled the cleaver away from him. They dragged him out of the kitchen, Ty still yelling that we were all going to die.

I looked at Benjamin Lindy, who sighed.

“I believe those boys had one good idea.” Mr. Lindy pulled the chilled vodka out from between Chris Stowall’s feet. “May I buy you a drink?”



**Lindy leaned into the freezer, putting his face nearer to Chris Stowall’s than I would’ve done. The old man’s**

breath turned to mist.

"Contusion on the back of the head," he decided. "That slick of blood you found earlier on the kitchen floor."

"I didn't find it." This seemed a trivial point to argue, but I was running out of ways to distance myself.

Lindy straightened. "What would you say happened here?"

"He was killed in the kitchen, not long after Longoria was shot. Hit from behind. No struggle. Either someone sneaked up on him, or the killer was someone Chris knew. Someone he didn't fear turning his back to."

"Someone reasonably strong," Lindy added. "Strong enough to drag a grown man into this freezer."

"Why go to the trouble of hiding the body and not clean the blood splatter on the kitchen floor?"

"No time. Perhaps the killer was interrupted. Or perhaps he simply overlooked the blood."

I thought about that. A bloodstain in the middle of a white floor seemed impossible to overlook, but I'd heard of crazier things. Convicted murderers will tell you that killing someone puts you in a daze. You might cover your tracks perfectly except for something obvious...your wallet on the

kitchen counter, your coat across the arm of the victim's couch.

"The kitchen is a staff area," I said. "The only people in here would be Chris, Alex, Jose and Imelda."

"And thirsty college students, apparently."

I nodded. I didn't like the way Chase and Markie had been dressed, or the fact that they'd tried to drug their friend. "The service entrance is right down the hall," I said. "They were planning on sneaking out the back door."

"That would be insane," Lindy said, "unless they had a very compelling reason. Like moving a dead body."

I shook my head. "If that was the plan, why would Chase run up and get me?"

"I don't know," Lindy admitted. "But if they were sneaking out for some other reason, what would make them check the freezer?"

I didn't have a good answer. Nothing logical. But, somehow, that was the part of Chase's story I had no trouble believing. They really *were* looking for vodka, possibly to steel their nerves before...whatever they were going to do.

I looked down at Chris's cold face. I thought about the

little seagulls he'd drawn in his diary, the picture of Waikiki Beach hanging on his dresser mirror.

"Chris wasn't the guy you're looking for," I said. "But he got tangled up with the killer somehow."

"I'll find him." Lindy's hand trembled as he held his glass of vodka.

"Your plan was to kill Calavera," I guessed. "You were helping Longoria set some sort of trap for him."

Mr. Lindy raised his eyebrows. "You understand that I'll have to deny that."

"Chris Stowall and Longoria are both dead. Do you even care?"

"Of course I care. I don't want any more death. Not for anyone innocent, at least."

I wanted to ask who, if anyone, Benjamin Lindy considered innocent, but I was interrupted by the sound of a woman's scream.





**“He’s in there!” Lane shouted.**

She was on the floor behind Garrett’s overturned wheelchair, pointing at her closet. Garrett was sprawled next to her, rubbing his head and looking disgruntled. In her panic, Lane had apparently tripped over him and toppled him out of his chair.

Mr. Lindy and I shone our flashlights on the closet. The door was ajar, but there was no sign of movement. No noise.

“*Who’s* in there?” I asked Lane.

Her eyes were frantic and unfocused. “Bobby. My ex. I saw him. We came in and he was *right there* in my closet!”

I looked at Garrett.

“I don’t know, little bro,” he grumbled. “I didn’t see much. Lane backed into me. Next thing I knew we were both on the floor. But there was movement in the room. Somebody was in here.”

Mr. Lindy produced his .45 Colt Defender.

Footsteps came tromping down the hall, and Alex Huff appeared in the doorway. “What is it now?”

I shushed him then followed Lindy toward the closet. The

old man threw open the door.

"There's no one in here," he said.

"There was!" Lane looked at us like we were about to give her medication. "I saw him!"

"Okay," I said. "I believe you."

"Son..." Lindy said uneasily.

"Check the bathroom," I suggested.

Lindy did. He shook his head. No prowler in the room.

"All right," I said. "Whoever he was, he's gone now."

"Who?" Alex demanded.

I looked at Mr. Lindy and gestured toward the door, hoping he'd get the hint. I figured the fewer men around Lane Sanford, the better.

"Come on, Mr. Huff," Lindy said. "There's something you need to see in the kitchen."

"Oh, that doesn't sound good," Alex said miserably, but he allowed Mr. Lindy to lead him down the hall.

I turned to Lane Sanford. "Why don't you sit down? I mean...on the bed."

Garrett helped her up. He righted his wheelchair and climbed back into it, still looking disgruntled. For him, getting tipped out of his chair was about as bad as getting mugged—a complete violation of his dignity, such as it was.

“Lane.” I tried to sound soothing. “Tell me exactly what you saw.”

“My husband.”

“Back up. You and Garrett were coming down the hall...”

She nodded.

“Were you making much noise?” I asked.

“Just talking,” Garrett said, catching my meaning. “Nothing somebody inside the room could’ve heard over the storm.”

“Was the room locked?”

“Yes,” Lane said. “I used my key.”

I thought about that. A key didn’t make much noise compared to a hurricane. If there had been someone in the room, he wouldn’t necessarily have heard anything until Lane turned the handle.

“Okay,” I said. “So you opened the door and—”

“He was looking through my closet,” Lane said. “The closet door was open.”

“It was dark in the room?”

“Yes. I just had a flashlight. I shone it on him—”

“You saw his face?”

“Well...no.”

“What *did* you see of him?”

“A shape. But it was a man.”

“Clothing? Skin color?”

She shook her head hesitantly. “Dark shirt? Maybe that was just the shadows. I—I backed up into Garrett and dropped the flashlight...”

“Little bro, there was somebody in here,” Garrett insisted.

“Is there any way he could’ve gotten past you, out the door?”

“I don’t see how,” Garrett said.

I checked the closet. A garment bag hung on the rod. A pair of ladies' slip-on shoes. Empty coat hangers. An ironing board on metal hooks. An extra pillow on the upper shelf. I checked the bathroom. Nobody was hiding behind the shower curtain. No one had dug an escape tunnel through the floor tiles. Back in the bedroom: nobody was hiding under the bed. The window was boarded over with plywood.

"Well, he vanished," I said. "He went up in smoke."

"Secret passage?" Garrett asked.

I stared at him.

"I'm serious, little bro! This was a damn bootlegger's mansion during Prohibition. Ask Alex. They used to bring up cases of tequila from Mexico."

"You want to check for secret passages, be my guest."

Garrett huffed indignantly, rolled over to the closet and started banging on the walls.

I sat down next to Lane. "From what you tell me, you didn't actually see your ex-husband."

She took a shaky breath. "No one believes me."

"I believe your ex is a dangerous guy. But you couldn't tell

if this person...whoever it was...was him."

"I—I suppose it could've been someone else. Another man. But..."

"Let's get you out of this room," I said. "For peace of mind."

Garrett wheeled himself over, having unsuccessfully banged inside the closet looking for a way to China. "For once, my little bro has a good idea. Come on, Lane. I'll take you—"

"Downstairs," I interrupted. "We should try to get everyone together. I'll call the boys."

Garrett glared at me. "Why? What else is wrong?"

"The kitchen," Lane remembered. "Mr. Lindy was taking Alex to the kitchen."

Even in the dim illumination of my flashlight, I could tell her face had gone paler. "It's Chris, isn't it?" she said. "You found him."

I didn't know any easy way to break the news, so I simply told her.

Lane twisted the sheets in her hands. "I want to see him."

“Not a good idea.”

“No,” Garrett agreed. “Lane, you don’t need that.”

“Chris didn’t do anything,” she said. “I got him killed. He tried to help me and—”

“Hey, stop that,” Garrett said. “Come here.”

She slipped off the bed and into his lap, pressing her head against his. She let out a sob, and I lowered the flashlight. In the dark, they made a strange silhouette—like one large, misshapen person.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Garrett told her. “What happened to Chris isn’t your fault. Neither is your bastard ex-husband. You did the right thing. You saw an out and you took it.”

“I thought...I thought it was an out.”

The shadows closed around us. The wind battered the window. I didn’t believe in ghosts, but this was a good room for them. If I’d been the first one through the door, I wondered what personal boogie man I might’ve seen vanishing into the closet.

“Come on,” I told Garrett and Lane. “Let’s get out of here.”

## 22

**Ty missed his gun. Markie pushed him onto the bed and** said, “Stay,” like he was a dog. Ty wanted to shoot him.

Chase glared down at him. “You’re worthless, man. Fucking worthless.”

Ty’s head still ached from where Markie had sapped him. His vision was blurry and he wasn’t sure exactly what drugs they’d given him. His claustrophobia was still smothering him—hot and heavy like an extra skin—but it was muted now. His nerves felt deadened.

“I’m sorry,” he lied, trying to save himself another beating.

Markie cursed. “You belong in the freezer with Chris, dude.”

“Don’t say that. I panicked, is all.”

“Enough,” Chase said. “This isn’t helping.”



Chase was still dressed in his dark clothes—his *night run* clothes. He paced at the foot of the bed, rubbing his knuckles.

Ty wished he had his target pistol, and not just because he wanted to shoot them. The gun calmed him down. He only felt truly at peace at the firing range, standing behind the cinder-block partition on a cold winter morning, pistol in his hands. When he fired at targets, he had no anxiety. His hands didn't shake and his skin didn't feel too heavy. He didn't need pills. His fear and anger were compressed into the barrel of the gun and fired right out of him, at least for a while.

If he could just live on the firing range, life would be okay. But he always had to return to the narrow hallways and the cramped dorm rooms of Jester Hall. The crowds pressed in on him. Even the auditorium classes were too small. He couldn't concentrate on lessons. He watched the ceiling, sure it was going to cave in and bury him alive. He would long for home—the ranch back in Del Rio, where he'd never had any problem with small places and crowds. But he couldn't go back home. His father would never allow it. And so he'd found other ways to cope. And that had led him to Chase and Markie.

“What do we do now?” Markie asked.

Chase picked up an empty tequila bottle from the

dresser. "We try again."

"Gonna be hard," Markie said.

"We've got no choice. Unless you want to end up like Chris."

Markie's face paled. "Bastard deserved it, after the shit he tried to pull."

On that, at least, Ty agreed. Chris was better off dead. It was his fault they might not make it off the island alive. God, Ty wished he had taken the boat. He should've been faster. He shouldn't have listened to Navarre.

"We'll stay low for a while," Chase decided. "But be ready. We see an opportunity, we go."

Ty's stomach churned. He resented Navarre for keeping him here. He wanted to kill the guy. But at the same time... he seemed smart. He wasn't afraid of Markie or Chase. If there was a way to stop them, or make it so Ty didn't have to share their fate, Navarre might know how.

"I'm gonna be sick," Ty muttered.

Chase looked at him with disgust. "Not in *my* room, you're not."

"I got my medicine next door," Ty said meekly. "I'll go

throw up there.”

“Not now,” Chase insisted. “We’re going downstairs. The fucking detective wants another group meeting. And *you* are gonna behave yourself.”

Ty nodded miserably. He slid off the bed and hobbled toward the door. He would have to wait. He would be looking for an opportunity, but not the kind Chase meant.

Out in the hallway, he took a deep breath, trying to gather his courage. The walls closed in on him, but he concentrated. He could make it down the hall. It was just like the barrel of a gun. He was aiming at his target. And his target was to get free of Chase and Markie, to get off this island in one piece. If other people died, that wasn’t his problem.

He took a tentative step, then another. Chase and Markie walked on either side of him, but Ty promised himself he’d be rid of them by tomorrow, one way or another.

**On my way downstairs, I thought about Alex. I wondered** how he would react to Chris Stowall's death. The booming and groaning of the storm outside made me think of the last fireworks display I'd ever seen Alex do.

It had not exactly been a celebration.

That July fourth, my mother had asked Garrett to watch me, which was never a good sign. She wasn't feeling well. She couldn't handle the company of others that night. At sunset, Garrett took me down to the beach, where Alex was setting up his display.

His tubes and wires looked like a miniature power plant. He'd set everything up on a length of wooden flats and was busy running around, checking his fuses one more time.

The other hotel guests—there were never that many—brought picnic blankets and barbecue prepared by Alex's dad. Even Delilah, the old maid, had come down to watch the show. Alex's fireworks displays were some of the only

times I ever saw her smile.

My brother was in an unusually good mood that night. New guests had arrived the day before, and they had a teenage daughter. Garrett had big plans to get to know her tonight. He'd combed his unruly hair, which made him look even geekier than usual, and put on fresh jeans and his Pat McGee's Surf Shop T-shirt.

"You help Alex out, okay?" Garrett told me. "I'm just gonna, you know, get a soda or something."

He went off in search of the new girl. I suppose I should've been relieved that he was preoccupied and happy, but I knew it just meant he'd be in a foul mood tomorrow or the next day—whenever his romantic prospects fell apart, as they inevitably would.

Alex was too busy working to pay attention to me. The sky was turning purple and the guests were starting to cheer and call for the show. Behind us, the hotel at sunset looked like a perfect haunted house.

I didn't hear Mr. Eli come up behind us until he spoke. "Are you ready, Alex?"

It was the first time I'd ever seen Mr. Eli outside. He wore his maroon bathrobe as always. The cuffs of his pajama pants were neatly folded up to keep them out of the sand.

His feet were bare, so pale they were almost luminous in the dusk. I wondered if the old man was a vampire, coming out only after dark, but I suspected that a real vampire wouldn't look so sickly and weak.

Alex brushed his hands on his pants and stood up. "Ready, sir. About ten minutes until full dark."

"Wonderful." Mr. Eli smiled. "Your mother would be proud, you know. She loved fireworks."

Alex looked down at the mortars. The aluminum foil had been peeled away. Shreds of it blew across the sand, glinting in the last light like pieces of metallic eggshell.

"You all better get clear, okay?" Alex said. "Show's gonna start."

I watched from the sand dunes. I suppose, compared to professional shows, Alex's display was pretty paltry, but I thought it was fabulous. Maybe that's because I'd watched him put the whole thing together. Maybe I was just amazed that something so loud, bright and colorful could come from a dour kid like Alex Huff. The fact that I didn't like Alex, that I feared him, in fact, made the show all the more fascinating.

The wind was warm blowing through the sea grass. Sand fleas started a seven-course meal on my legs, but I didn't want to move. The smoke was almost as interesting as the starbursts and fireballs. It made ghostly faces in the night

sky, swiftly stretched by the breeze and blown to shreds.

"He gets better every year," a voice said at my shoulder.

I jumped in surprise. It was Mr. Eli, but he wasn't talking to me. He stood in the dunes with another man. Both of them were only shadowy silhouettes, the tops of their heads illuminated by bursts of fireworks.

"Know what he told me today?" the other man asked. It was Alex's father. His voice sounded deep and sad. "He said he wants to join the army."

Mr. Eli was silent as a triple burst of silver lit up the water over the boat dock.

"He wants to get away from here," Mr. Huff said. "I can't blame him. Nothing but bad memories."

"Do you really believe that?" Mr. Eli asked.

Alex's father sniffed. I couldn't see his face, but I could almost feel the grieving radiating from him, like the heat of a sun lamp.

"I don't know, sir. I don't mean to sound ungrateful."

"It's all right," Mr. Eli said. "Let him go, if he wants to. He's got his mother's spirit. Hard to tie that down."

“Yes.” Mr. Huff’s voice sounded ragged. “Suppose it is.”

Down at the beach, I caught a glimpse of Garrett and his new potential girlfriend. Garrett’s crooked smile lit up blue in a burst of copper chloride light. The girl was too pretty for him. I could tell just by looking, the way she held herself apart from him. She would never fall for him.

“Alex will come back,” Mr. Eli said. “Mark my words; he appreciates this place more than he lets on. If I had a son... well, I wish I had someone as good as Alex to inherit this place. He has a good heart.”

I wanted to tell Mr. Eli that he was wrong. People with good hearts didn’t treat younger kids the way Alex treated me. But I bit my lip and said nothing.

“Suppose he got that from his mother, too,” Mr. Huff said gruffly. “Sure didn’t get a sense of forgiveness from me.”

A series of fireballs shot in the air—yellow, green, red. They began to die and fall, only to explode into interlocking spheres, like the Venn diagrams we did in class. My English teacher’s lessons, forcing me to think inside the curves: How are these things alike? Where do they overlap?

“Are you sure...” Mr. Eli began to say. “Do you think you ever will tell him?”



“No,” Mr. Huff said. His tone was absolutely firm.

“He’s bound to find out someday. South Texas is just too small a place. Everyone is connected somehow.”

“They never found us,” Mr. Huff said.

“No,” Mr. Eli said. “That’s true. This place is separate. But if he leaves—”

The old man never finished his sentence. The fireworks finale filled the sky, so bright that I could suddenly see the men’s faces, and they looked down and saw me.

Perhaps I should’ve played it cool. But in that moment I felt too much like a trespasser. I ran down the sand dune and along the beach into the dark until the fireworks were far behind me, echoing against the side of the hotel like cannon fire.



**The others were gathering in the parlor.**

Benjamin Lindy stood by the fireplace. Maia had come downstairs, ignoring my objections. She looked a little

better. She sat on the sofa now, comforting Imelda, who was crying into her apron. Chase and Markie were arguing with Ty, who seemed to have calmed down a little, or perhaps Markie had simply threatened to sap him over the head again.

Lane took a deep breath and walked into the room. I started to follow, but Garrett pulled me aside. "Now would be a good time, little bro, if you got something to say."

It took me a moment to realize what he was asking. "About Lane."

"Yeah, of course about Lane."

I shook my head. "Not really. Maybe there are some things I shouldn't *have* to say. But it wouldn't make much difference, would it?"

"You think I'm taking advantage of her."

"I think she's fragile. I think you're both emotionally strung out."

"You have any idea what she's been through? You realize who her husband is?"

"That's not the point."

"I like her, Tres."

He rarely called me Tres. He tended to save my name for times when he was seriously pissed off or needed money.

“Garrett, the circumstances are extraordinarily bad for starting to like somebody.”

He grunted. “How is that different than every other day of my life?”



**“It is true?” Imelda asked.**

I looked around the parlor. Alex sat on the steps with his head in his hands. Ty had crashed on the couch with an ice pack on his head. I couldn't tell if he was conscious or not. I was hoping not. Chase and Markie leaned against the pool table behind him, each with a pool cue in his hands. Benjamin Lindy stood by the kitchen door as if he were guarding the exit. Garrett, Lane and Maia shared the other couch. Nobody looked happy to be here.

“Chris Stowall is dead,” I said. “That’s true.”

Imelda crossed herself and murmured a Spanish prayer.

"Ty was right," Chase said. "This Calavera guy is gonna kill us all."

"He hasn't yet," I reminded him.

"Dude," Markie said, "he can't let anybody raise the alarm. He needs to get off the island."

"It won't help us to panic."

Garrett snorted. "A body in the cellar and one in the freezer, and we shouldn't panic. Thanks for the advice, little bro."

Always nice to know your brother is on your side.

"Whoever the killer is," I said, "I don't think we're looking for a stranger. Chris brought Longoria to the island because he knew Calavera would be here this weekend. Calavera is probably in this room."

Chase and Markie exchanged wary looks. Imelda's hands clenched on her apron.

"So why hasn't he killed the rest of us?" Garrett asked. "If this guy's such a cold-blooded murderer, it would be easy to do."

"I don't think he wants to," I said. "I don't think he enjoys killing."

“Yo, little bro. Tell that to Chris Stowall.”

“Calavera was cornered,” I said. “First by Longoria, then Chris Stowall. But I don’t think he relishes the idea of murdering everyone in this room.”

“If he has to,” Lindy said, “he will.”

“We don’t know that.”

“I’m sorry, son. I *do*. If you have any idea who the killer is, you need to tell us now.”

Alex stood suddenly, as if Benjamin Lindy had just slipped ice down his back. “And what will you do about it, old man? Start killing the suspects?”

“Alex,” I said. “You want to say something?”

He looked around at all of us, like our presence horrified him. Then he took a shaky breath. “Garrett?”

“Yeah, man?”

“Here.” Alex handed him an envelope—beige hotel stationery, like the one that had been slipped under my door. “In case something happens—”

“Nothing’s gonna happen, man. It’s okay.”

"In case it does, keep charge of that, okay? Don't read it unless..."

"Whoa, man. I told you—"

But Alex raised his hands to block Garrett's words and stormed out of the room.

I stood in uncomfortable silence, everyone's eyes on me. I felt like I was back in front of my English class at UTSA. I'd just assigned an unpopular essay on Chaucer's use of dirty jokes and the class was about to rebel. The only difference was that in most of my classes the students weren't armed.

"We should stay in here for what's left of the night," I suggested. "Safety in numbers."

"All right," Lane said.

Garrett looked unhappy. I had a feeling he'd had other plans about where to spend the night, and they did not involve anyone but Lane.

"What about Mr. Huff?" Lindy asked.

I looked at the doorway. I wasn't sure how to explain Alex's sudden exit.

"I'll talk to him." I turned to Imelda. "*¿Y dónde está Jose?*"

It was the first time I'd spoken Spanish to her. I could see her doing a quick mental rewind, trying to figure out if she'd said anything embarrassing around me in español.

"Upstairs, señor. The news about Señor Stowall—"

"I'll find him, too. Garrett, you and Mr. Lindy try to keep everybody else together."

"I don't have a gun," Garrett complained. "He's got a gun."

I handed him Maia's .357. "Now you have a gun."

It must've been a Texan thing. Two pistols in the room made me feel easier than just one. I turned and headed out the way Alex had gone.



**At the end of the third-floor hallway, light leaked through** an open doorway. I peeked inside and found Jose sitting on a bed. It was raining inside the room. The ceiling drizzled and sagged. It looked more like a washcloth than sheet rock.

The room smelled of marigolds and limes. In one corner was a little altar covered with a turquoise shawl. It held a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a few framed photographs, probably Jose and Imelda's dead relatives. A row of candles sputtered and flickered.

The bedspread was soaked. Everything was soaked. But Jose just sat there, holding his flashlight, watching the candles die one after the other.

"Jose."

It took him a second to focus on me. "The attic. I think the roof above us is gone."

"Do you know where Alex is?"

His eye twitched. "No, señor."

"Your things are getting ruined. You want help covering them?"

Jose's flashlight beam traced a figure eight on the soggy carpet. "There is not enough tarp in the whole house, señor. God's will, what He keeps or destroys."

I approached the altar. Among the photos of the honored dead, one showed Jose and Imelda, ten or fifteen years younger, each of them holding a baby.



"Your children," I guessed. "Twins?"

He nodded.

"How did they die?"

He looked up, anger flaring in his eyes. We were suddenly man to man. No subservience, no careful deference. "I don't talk about that."

Translation: *None of your damn business, señor.*

A trickle of rain spattered on my back. The drops against the damp carpet sounded like kisses.

"Chris Stowall was in the freezer for hours," I said. "You didn't have any reason to go in there when you prepared dinner?"

"No, señor."

"Who else goes into the kitchen, usually?"

"I didn't kill him, señor." There was an odd tone in his voice...almost like regret.

"You said you'd heard of Calavera before. Was it only from the news?"

Jose's nails bit into the palm of his hand. "That man,

Señor Brazos. When he came here—”

“Wait a minute. Peter Brazos came here?”

“In November. He...talked to Señor Huff.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“It was not my place, señor. The man stayed for only a few hours. He asked questions and left. At the time, I did not think—”

“He talked to you?”

“*Un poco*. He asked how long we knew Señor Huff. He mentioned names I did not know, showed me photographs of some men and asked if I had seen them.”

“The drug bosses he was prosecuting?”

“*No sé, señor*. Perhaps.”

On the altar, a raindrop hit a candle and it fizzled out. In the old photograph, the faces of Jose, Imelda and their children flickered. I didn’t like Jose’s story about Peter Brazos. I especially didn’t like that Alex never mentioned the visit. He’d pretended to know nothing about Brazos or the murder of his family.

“Señor, I’m sorry you came here,” Jose said. “You and

your wife."

I tried for a reassuring smile. I'm not sure I pulled it off very well. "By tomorrow, the storm should pass. With any luck, a boat will come. We'll all be able to leave."

"Yes."

"Alex wants to sell the hotel. What will you and Imelda do?"

He stared at me, as if the future tense meant nothing to him. "What can we do, señor? Mr. Huff gave us a home here. This is all we have."

The contents of a room. A few photos and candles. A turquoise shawl and some Mexican blankets. All ruined by the rain.

"Six months ago, Calavera killed a woman and her two young daughters," I said. "I don't think he planned to do that. I think killing them shook him up so much that he started to think about retiring. Possibly even making amends."

"Anyone who kills children, his soul is lost," Jose said. "There are no amends."

"We need to stay together," I told him. "We'll all sleep in the parlor."

"I have to check the basement first. Mr. Huff..." He hesitated. "Mr. Huff said it was flooding."

"Doesn't it bother you that there's a body down there?"

Jose gave me a look I couldn't quite read. I thought he might be about to tell me something. Then he rose and left the room, leaving me alone with the rain and the scent of extinguished candles.



**I had no luck finding Alex. Maybe because I was side-tracked.**

Somehow I got turned around on the first floor, running into a dead end where Alex had closed off the collapsed room, then heading back.

Yes, it's true. Despite being a former sleuth, my sense of direction is sadly lacking. Maia has a great deal of fun reminding me of this whenever we're lost on the highway.

I found a bedroom door ajar and figured it would do no harm to knock.

No answer. Natural curiosity, I looked inside.

After getting used to wreckage and chaos, I was a little shocked to find a completely neat room. The bedspread was folded down. An old-fashioned brown leather suitcase sat on the chair. One navy blue suit and a dress shirt hung in the closet. On the dresser lay a leather notebook, a ballpoint pen and a box of .45 ammunition.

Benjamin Lindy's room. Either that, or I had seriously misjudged the college guys.

Under normal circumstances, I would've backed out.

Well, okay. Perhaps not. But at least I would have hesitated, pondering whether or not I should invade Mr. Lindy's privacy. As it was, I went right in and opened the notebook.

He was a lawyer, all right. Everything was documented—neatly organized, dated and labeled, even though it appeared to be a personal scrapbook. The first thing inside was a studio portrait of a woman in her early forties, a little older than me, maybe my brother's age. She had short blond hair and green eyes. Her sharp nose and the determined angle of her jaw reminded me very much of Benjamin Lindy. She had his wry smile, too, though on a beautiful woman, the effect was quite different than on an old gentleman. Her name was printed at the bottom of the

photo: *Rachel Brazos*. The date: *Last Christmas*.

The next page: a letter Rachel had written to her father. She asked whether the family ranch had gotten any rain. She invited her father to visit in Corpus Christi. She wrote about the tiles she had chosen for her kitchen remodeling, a play her two little girls had performed in school. She signed the note *XOX, Rae*. Nothing consequential. The letter was dated about a month before the photo was taken.

Some pictures of the two Brazos girls followed. Halloween. School picture day. I flipped through them quickly. They were painful to look at.

There were some news clippings about Rachel's career at a local law firm. Following in her father's footsteps. One article recounted a criminal case she'd worked in conjunction with the district attorney's office. Apparently that's how she'd met her future husband, Peter Brazos. Rachel's successful legal career had been put on hold. Relatively late, she'd decided to become a wife and mother.

Like Maia. A little too much like Maia.

I kept turning pages. A few years farther back in time, one picture was labeled: *Rachel Lindy, graduation, Texas A&M*. Her hair was longer, swept over one shoulder. Her eyes gleamed with humor and confidence.

Next page: a poem by Rachel Lindy, clipped from a college anthology. The poem wasn't very good. It described a storm. I didn't want to read about storms.

Another letter from Rachel to her father. Judging from the date, Rachel would've been about twenty-two. She promised to visit over Thanksgiving. She gently chastised her dad for asking about who she might be dating. *Nothing serious, Dad! He would have to be as good as you, right? Guys like that are scarce!!!*

The oldest clipping was about Rachel's swim team in high school. Nothing earlier than that. Nothing from her childhood. No pictures of Rachel with her parents.

I flipped back to the most recent photograph of Rachel. Even without knowing her background, I would've guessed she was married with kids. The humor in her eyes was tinged with a kind of weary satisfaction—the look of a new mother who had a family counting on her.

“Finding what you want?”

Benjamin Lindy was standing in the doorway.



**“Your daughter,” I said.**

Lindy walked to the bed. He sat down stiffly, then folded his hands. “Yes.”

“Rachel and your two granddaughters were killed in that explosion. I’m sorry.”

In the dim glow of my flashlight, Lindy’s eyes glittered. “I’m done with sympathy, son.”

“You were friends with Jesse Longoria.”

“I told you, I asked his advice once. After that, we saw each other professionally a few times. I wouldn’t call him a friend. Then his supervisor Berry started communicating with that evil man.”

“Calavera wanted to make a deal.”

“He wanted to trade information for a new identity. Berry was helping negotiate his surrender. When Marshal Longoria found out, he did not approve.”

“Longoria tipped you off to what was happening.”

“On the contrary. I notified *him* what his boss was up to.”

“How did *you* find out?”



“Chris Stowall.”

“You knew Stowall?”

“No. I had never heard of Mr. Stowall until he called. He told me he knew who killed my daughter. He told me the killer was trying to make a deal with the Marshals Service to escape justice. I was incredulous. I contacted Longoria, and he was able to confirm the negotiations. Between us, we decided we could not let that happen.”

“How did Chris know to contact you? Why wouldn’t he just tell the police if he knew something?”

“Greed, sir,” Lindy answered. “Mr. Stowall wanted money for his information.”

“And he knew you wouldn’t go to the police? How?”

Lindy hesitated. “This whole area is a close-knit community, Mr. Navarre. Most people have heard of me. Rachel’s death was in all the media. I made no secret of my desire for revenge when she and her girls were murdered. I was quite vocal about the police’s failure to apprehend Calavera. I assume Chris Stowall knew all this.”

“How much did he want?”

“Fifty thousand dollars. Nothing, really.”

“You’d already paid him twenty thousand?”

“You mean the money you found in the duffel bag.” Lindy shook his head. “I don’t know where Stowall got that money. I had not paid him a dime. I did not intend to until we had found Calavera.”

I thought about the entries in Chris Stowall’s journal—the cryptic references to how much he needed money, and the suggestion that Lane had been encouraging him to leave behind his past shady dealings. Apparently, Stowall had other moneymaking schemes besides providing revenge opportunities to bitter old men.

“Chris promised Calavera would be here this weekend,” I said. “He sent Longoria a business card with the date, June fifth.”

“Yes,” Lindy said.

“Somehow he found an email from Calavera to the Marshals Service. Did Chris tell you anything else? Anything that hinted who Calavera was? Hotel employee? Guest?”

“Very little, Mr. Navarre. He brought us here. He promised irrefutable proof. He said...”

“Yes?”

Lindy tapped a finger thoughtfully on the top of his ammunition box. "He assumed I knew Rebel Island. He said I should have reason to hate this place."

"Do you?"

He hesitated a little too long. "No. Perhaps he simply meant this is where I would find my daughter's killer. That's why I should hate the place."

I looked down at the scrapbook, the picture of Rachel Brazos. She looked happy with her family and her life. She'd had every reason to expect many more years with her husband, watching their two daughters grow up.

"Mr. Lindy, once you find Calavera, what do you intend to do?"

The old man looked gaunt and hungry. Despite his formal clothes, his clipped gray hair, his grandfatherly manner, he reminded me suddenly of heroin addicts I'd known—polite, friendly, until you withheld what they wanted.

"Son, I know what happens in the legal system. You do too. My daughter's death will go unpunished, because that's a lesser evil when weighed against catching Calavera's employers. I can't allow that."

"You can't just kill him."

“How many has Calavera killed?”

“Give me your gun,” I told him.

He shook his head.

“Give it to me,” I repeated. “Or I’ll take it away.”

His face flushed, but I held his eyes. I could take the gun. I had no doubt. And I let him see that.

Lindy opted for the dignified solution. He took out his .45 and gave it to me. I ejected the clip, slipped it and the gun into my pockets. I took his box of ammunition.

“Son, you’re making a mistake.”

Suddenly the electric lights flickered on.

Somewhere in the distance, my brother’s muffled voice yelled, “Yes!”

Music cranked into gear. The steel drums of “Margaritaville” wafted down a hallway.

“No!” Garrett shouted. “Not *that* song. Kill it!”

I sighed. The way Garrett hated that song, I figured I’d better get back there before we had another homicidal maniac on our hands.

I left Mr. Lindy sitting on his bed, staring at the scrapbook of his dead daughter's life.

**The day Alex got out of the army, he found himself on** the streets of San Antonio with no plans, no home and not much money. He drove out of the gates of Fort Sam Houston, bought a six-pack of beer at the nearest convenience store and meandered down Broadway to the Witte Museum. He sat on the banks of San Pedro Creek, watching the geese glide by in the green water. Huge live oaks cast mottled shadows on the grass. Alex's eyes still hadn't adjusted from the harsh sunlight of Kuwait. He felt like he had sand in his boots, and not the good kind of sand from the Texas beaches. Desert sand—fine, dry and all-pervasive—from a world of unrelenting heat.

He took out his father's knife and ran his finger down the blade. He imagined himself walking on the edge. Today he had to decide. After four years of letting the army tell him what to do, where to go, when to eat, how to dress, he had to make choices again, and that scared him.

Finally he pulled out his address book. He hadn't used it

in months. Most of the numbers belonged to friends who had died or girlfriends who'd left him. He walked to a pay phone at the corner of Broadway and called Garrett. He got an answer immediately.

Garrett was in town, it turned out, visiting his brother, Tres. "I'll meet you at Liberty Bar," he said. "Gimme thirty minutes."

"You bringing Tres?"

Garrett laughed. "You think I should?"

Alex hung up.

Thirty-three minutes later, Alex arrived at the Liberty Bar. The two-story whitewashed building hadn't changed in decades. It was famously slanted like a carnival funhouse, with a balcony around the second floor. Inside, the hardwood floor creaked under the waiters' feet, and the leaning walls made Alex feel like he was in the belly of a ship. Liquor bottles gleamed against the bar mirror. Locals crowded the tables, tucking away pot roast sandwiches or chiles rellenos.

Garrett sat near the back exit. He was already on his second Shiner Bock. Alex hadn't seen him in over three years, but when he sat down Garrett started right into it, as if Alex had simply come back from the bathroom.

“So I was talking to Tres today, and he’s gonna get a state license. Become a legitimate PI. Can you believe that?”

Alex shook his head. He’d seen Tres a few times over the years, but it was still hard to think of him as a grown-up, much less an investigator. “I need advice,” he said.

Garrett nodded like this was the most natural request in the world, despite the fact that Alex had never once taken Garrett’s advice on anything. In fact, Alex had pretty much defined himself as a teenager by doing the opposite of whatever Garrett suggested.

Alex talked about his different ideas: starting a fireworks business and traveling the country, or moving to California. Or...there was always Rebel Island.

The name hung in the air between them. Glasses clinked at the bar. Trucks rumbled by on Josephine Street.

Garrett drained his beer. His eyes glinted as dangerous as sparks on kerosene. “I could go for dinner on the island.”

They left after lunch. By sunset they were on the beach, toasting the Gulf of Mexico and reminiscing. Within a week, Alex had decided to buy the hotel.





**Now, sitting in the dark, Alex unfolded his father's knife.** Once more, he felt like he was teetering on the blade. He thought about the letter he'd given to Garrett. He hoped Garrett would understand. It wasn't much to make amends, but it was all he could do. Hopefully some of the others would be spared.

Alex didn't care about himself anymore. He felt just like his hotel: battered, torn by the wind, coming apart at the joints.

He stared at the candy skull on the table. He had tried to fix things. He had tried to put aside his anger. But it hadn't worked. With the edge of his knife, he flicked the skull off the table.

"Calavera," he said.

And like magic, the door to the room creaked open. Alex stood. He knew he was going to fall off the wrong side of the blade this time. Nothing would save him—not Mr. Eli, not Garrett's advice, not even the hope that people sometimes change. They didn't. And Calavera would win.

## 25

**I shared a sofa with Maia and Garrett while I told them** about my conversations with Jose and Mr. Lindy. Lindy and most of the others were also in the parlor, but between the storm and the Jimmy Buffett music, it wasn't hard to talk without being overheard.

"Brazos visited the island," Maia said. "Two months later, his family was murdered."

"Yeah," I said.

"Why didn't Brazos come back here afterward? Did he ever follow up?"

"I don't know. If I could find Alex—"

"There's gotta be a reason," Garrett insisted. "So this Brazos guy asked some questions. So what? That doesn't mean Alex—"

"Garrett, Alex should've said something. He didn't."

“What about this Lindy guy? How do you know he isn’t Calavera?”

“It was Lindy’s daughter who died,” I said. “He isn’t an assassin. I mean...he wants to kill somebody in cold blood, but he’s not *that* assassin.”

“Great,” Garrett grumbled. “That clears it right up.”

“The poor man.” Maia sipped her red-raspberry-leaf tea. She looked over at Lindy, who sat in conversation with Jose. Jose looked uneasy to have the old lawyer’s attention.

“The poor man?” I asked Maia.

“He lost his daughter and granddaughters. How would you feel?”

“Like tracking down Calavera and butchering him. But I wouldn’t do it.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Okay,” I said. “I’d think about doing it, but you’d kick my butt if I tried.”

“Lindy has nothing left to lose,” Maia said. “No family. His career is behind him. He’s too old to care about jail time.”

"You think I should give him his gun back?"

"On the contrary. I think he may be more dangerous than this assassin. More unpredictable. But I also don't want to see him killed. If Calavera finds out why he's here—"

"I still think Lindy is nuts," Garrett said. "You sure he doesn't have another gun?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "And speaking of that, give me back the .357."

Garrett looked offended. "I'm your brother."

"A good reason for extreme caution. Gun, please."

Garrett muttered a few curses, but he gave me Maia's gun.

Jimmy Buffett kept singing about Key West. The time must've been well past one in the morning, and everybody looked even more tired than I felt. Ty was out cold from whatever medication his friends had given him. I kind of envied him. Chase and Markie were teaching Imelda to play Spit in the Ocean, which probably had some sort of cosmic significance when played in a hurricane. Lane had made herself a nest of blankets next to the wall. She was curled into a fetal position, but her eyes were wide open. Mr. Lindy was still talking to Jose, who was looking frazzled and soaked. Ceiling plaster flecked his black hair.

There was no sign of Alex.

“He’ll be back,” Garrett said, apparently reading my mind. “He won’t do anything crazy.”

“I hope you’re right. What was in the envelope he gave you?”

Garrett’s face darkened. “Just personal stuff.”

“Nothing about Calavera.”

“No.”

“You’d tell me if it was.”

“Hey, little bro. It’s cool. Alex will be back. The power came back on. Alex must’ve done that.”

I wasn’t so sure. The generator seemed about as predictable as the storm tonight. I also noticed that Garrett had not answered my question.

“When you told me Alex was having some problems even before this weekend, what did you mean?”

Garrett folded the bottom of his Hawaiian shirt like he was rolling a joint. “Money problems. The hotel wasn’t keeping afloat too well. Maybe there was more. I don’t

know. He said he and Chris..."

"Were arguing?" I supplied.

"Yeah. But don't get ideas, little bro. It doesn't mean anything. You know Alex couldn't hurt a soul."

I remembered Alex's steely look the afternoon he pushed me out of the boat, into the water with the blood and the sharks. I wasn't sure Garrett was being completely honest. I wanted to know what Alex had given him in that envelope. But I also knew my brother well enough to know I couldn't force the issue. He'd tell me only when he was ready.

"You guys get some sleep," I told them. "I'll keep watch."

Maia closed her eyes without protest. "Wake me if somebody else dies."

Garrett looked over at Lane.

"Go ahead," I said. "She could use some comfort."

He studied me, like he was trying to detect sarcasm. But he didn't look too hard, or maybe he just didn't care.

"Good night, then," he said. "And you watch. Alex is gonna prove you wrong."



**I'm not sure when I fell asleep. I must have been too exhausted** to even notice I was fading.

I dreamed I was teaching a class at UTSA. We were discussing *The Pearl*, talking about grief and the death of children. It was raining in the classroom. The students were trying to take notes but their laptops and legal pads were getting soaked. Lindy's daughter, Rachel, was one of the students. Ty, Markie and Chase were there. So was Imelda, holding a baby in either arm. Ralph Arguello sat in the back of the room, a beach umbrella over his desk. He kept grinning at me like he found my lecture amusing.

I talked about the Black Plague and medieval parenthood. I discussed the sociological theory that parents in the Middle Ages, who were so accustomed to loss, did not have the same emotional attachment to children as modern parents. Personally, I didn't buy that.

"Why not, *vato*?" Ralph asked.

"Just because death was more commonplace," I said, "doesn't mean life was cheaper."

Ralph smiled. "I love this guy. He thinks he's a professor."

The students shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Rachel Brazos and Imelda and Ty were all watching me intently. Rain pattered against their papers.

I looked down at the podium. My lecture notes had disappeared. “The, uh, intense emotion in *The Pearl*—”

“People don’t change,” Ralph interrupted. “They let grief tear them up. That’s what you’re saying, huh?”

“Well, yes.”

“And you had to look in a book for that, *vato*?” Ralph laughed. “Why don’t you look around?”



**“Tres.” Maia was shaking my arm. “The water.”**

I sat up groggily. “Your water broke?”

“No. Look.”

I might’ve still been dreaming. The carpet was spongy with salt water. Garrett was rowing around in his chair, waking people up. His wheels made strange squishy



sounds.

“Hey, get up.” He shook Mr. Lindy, who was slumped in the armchair. “Your shoes are wet.”

Lane paced nervously, a blanket wrapped around her like a queen’s robe. Chase and Markie were stirring on the floor. Their clothes were drenched.

“What the hell?” Chase said.

Water flowed down the steps into the parlor. The hall looked like a wood-paneled storm drain. The storm was still roaring outside, but louder now, like the waves were right against the building.

I got up and helped Maia to her feet.

Imelda ran in from the kitchen. “The basement is flooding. The señor’s body—”

“We can’t worry about that,” Maia said, trying to sound calm. “We need to get out of this room.”

“Imelda,” I said. “Help me with Mrs. Navarre.”

The maid seemed glad to have something to do. She took Maia’s other arm and together we walked toward the stairs.

“Look how fast the water’s coming in.” Lane’s face was ashen. “Where are we supposed to go?”

“Up,” I told her. “The second floor.”

“And if that floods?”

Garrett and I exchanged looks.

“Come on, darlin’,” he told Lane. “We’ve made it this far. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

He wheeled himself to the steps. Several inches of water were swirling in the foyer, racing down the hallway. “I don’t swim too well, little bro.”

“You won’t have to,” I promised. “Leave the chair and let’s go.”

He nodded uneasily, then slipped out of his wheelchair and hand-walked up the steps. As he navigated the hall, his torso in the water, he looked like a man wading up a deep, unfriendly river.



**Getting Maia upstairs wasn't easy. The stairs creaked and** groaned. Below us, the first floor sounded like a public swimming pool, water sloshing everywhere.

It was possible the whole hotel would get washed away. I knew that. But I didn't see any alternative other than getting into the middle of the building and hoping it didn't happen.

We settled everyone into a row of guest rooms on the second floor. Imelda bustled around making sure we all had enough sheets and flashlights. I figured the generator would go out again any moment, but strangely the power stayed on.

Maia got comfortable on one twin bed while Garrett and Lane collapsed on the other.

I fiddled with the nightstand radio and to my surprise found a garbled AM station. Three-twenty AM and the tail end of the storm was coming ashore. Winds of one hundred thirty miles an hour. Massive flooding from Port Lavaca to Port Isabel. Fifteen-foot waves. On the bright side, the rainfall should lessen by midday. The Spurs were playing tonight in game seven of the playoffs. Anyone who was still alive would have something to look forward to.

There was shouting in the room next to us. It sounded like Ty, Markie and Chase had gotten a second wind and Mr. Lindy was trying to referee. I decided not to interfere. They

probably needed the exercise.

Head count: Maia seemed all right for the moment. Garrett and Lane were fine. The three college guys and Benjamin Lindy were next door.

“Alex,” I said. “Did he ever come back?”

“Haven’t seen him,” Garrett admitted. “I thought for sure...”

He didn’t finish. Even *he* looked worried.

I thought about Ralph Arguello, grinning in the raining classroom. *Maybe you should just look around, vato.*

“Imelda,” I called.

She came to the doorway, her arms full of towels.

“Have you seen Alex Huff?” I asked.

“No, señor.”

“Where is his bedroom?”

She looked down, hugging the towels to her chest. “Mr. Huff is very private about his room, señor. I don’t—”

“I need you to show me.”

Jose appeared next to her, breathing hard. His pants were wet from the knees down.

“¿Que pasa?” he asked his wife.

“He...he wants to see Señor Huff's room.”

Jose frowned. “We will show him, then.”

“I'll go, too,” Garrett said.

“No,” I said. “Stay here. Take care of Lane and Maia.”

Garrett didn't look pleased, but the fact that I'd included Lane made it difficult for him to say no. Lane was curled on the bed, staring forlornly at the wall as if it would blow apart any moment.

“All right,” Garrett said. “But, little bro, nothing crazy, okay?”

“On a night like tonight? Of course not. Nothing crazy at all.”



**Alex's room was just down the hall on the left. The**

**door** was locked, which was a first. I'd started to think nobody at the hotel ever locked doors.

"Alex!" I yelled.

No answer.

The noise of the storm was louder on this end of the hall. It almost sounded like it was inside his room.

I pounded on the door. Still nothing.

Imelda stood next to me, twisting her apron. Jose's body was turned away from me, like he was trying to evade me, though I wasn't sure why. It seemed odd that just a few hours ago, I'd thought of him as a man with a perpetual smile. That smile was long gone.

"You have the key?" I asked them.

Imelda's eyes widened. "Señor Huff is the owner. He told us never to enter without permission."

"You don't clean his room?"

"Never."

"But you have to have a master key."

"I...Back downstairs," Imelda said.

“Downstairs.”

She nodded halfheartedly.

I looked at Jose. “You?”

“No, señor. I’m just the cook. I have no master key.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll break down the door.”

Jose tensed. Imelda started to say, “Señor—”

I put my shoulder to the door and smashed it open.

Inside, the room was a wreck. The window had been demolished, but the wood splinters and glass shards pointed toward the storm, as if something had been hurled out. A strip of torn red cloth fluttered from one jagged tooth of glass. The curtain was sprinkled with pink spots, like diluted blood.

I tried to come up with some other explanation, but I kept coming back to the same conclusion. Someone had been pushed out the second-story window. And whoever it was had been wearing a shirt the same color as Alex Huff’s.

**Maia couldn't sleep. The pangs had passed, but they'd** scared her worse than she'd let on. She lay on her side, trying to keep still. Lane Sanford was also awake. She was curled in the other bed with Garrett sitting at her feet.

"We used to have storms at the ranch," Lane said. "Once lightning hit a tree and it burned almost an acre. But I've never seen anything like this."

"Your family ranch?" Maia asked.

"No...Bobby rented the place."

Lane spoke his name like a cuss word she'd trained herself to say, a word proper ladies weren't supposed to know.

"You should get a restraining order," Maia said. "I'd be happy to help."



"I can't," Lane said. "Thank you."

Her tone was final. There was a secret there she wasn't ready to share yet. Abuse, probably. Something else, too—something Lane thought she couldn't bring to the police. The problem with working criminal cases so long: Maia could come up with a whole array of depressing possibilities, all equally plausible and horrible. And yet she could still be surprised. The worst violence, the most awful forms of depravity, always happened in a so-called loving relationship.

At least that made it easier for her to count her blessings. Whatever faults Tres had—however much he tortured himself with guilt or wrestled with his own demons—he was kind. He was a good man. He'd make a good father, Maia had no doubt, whatever happened with the baby. She depended on that. She counted on him so much it scared her. And she tried to tell herself Tres would be safe. They would make it through this weekend.

The storm rumbled overhead like an endless train. Noises from the other rooms eventually died down. Lane closed her eyes and began breathing deeply. Garrett stayed at his post at the foot of her bed, his hand protectively on her ankle.

Maia studied Garrett's face, looking for similarities to Tres. The hawkish nose and green eyes were the same.

Garrett hid his chin behind a scraggly beard, but she imagined it was the same as Tres's—a strong jawline, hinting at stubbornness. Time had not been as kind to Garrett, though. He was the same age as Maia. She remembered they had talked about that when they first met, how both of them were just turning forty. His complexion had turned sallow from too many years of hard drinking. His eyes were constantly bloodshot. His hair was frosted with gray. But he was still handsome in an unkempt way. He looked at her and smiled, and Maia couldn't help feeling a little better.

“You doing all right, darlin’?” he asked.

“Worried about Tres.”

“Ah, hell. He'll be fine. That bastard will drive you crazy if you keep worrying about him.”

“You have a point.”

“I've known him longer, darlin'. I just hope that baby gets some of *your* good looks.”

“He'll be beautiful, I'm sure.”

“He?”

“The last few days, I've started to think of the baby as a *he*.”

“A nephew to corrupt. I could handle that. *Uncle* Garrett...”

Maia pictured Garrett with a baby in his lap, the two of them taking joy rides in the wheelchair. The baby would be wearing a tie-dyed jumper, a miniature Jimmy Buffett hat. “Did you ever think about getting married?”

He glanced down at Lane. “I’m not exactly an attractive package, in case you hadn’t noticed. Kind of an extreme fixer-upper.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

“You’re telling this to a man without legs?”

“You know I didn’t mean it that way.”

Footsteps in the hall. Maia hoped it was Tres coming back, but it was only Mr. Lindy and the college boy Ty. Ty was clutching his stomach as if he were sick, and Mr. Lindy was helping him walk. They didn’t look inside the room as they passed.

“Maia, you’re lucky,” Garrett told her at last. “You and Tres. You stuck with it.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Maia promised.

“I used to think there was a perfect match out there for

everybody, you know? Alex told me that. Older I get, I realize there's just matches you make work, and matches you give up on. Ain't nothing perfect about it."

"You'll find the right person, Garrett."

He scratched his beard. "That's not what worries me. Question is, will the right person stick around?"

In the dim light, the lines on his face seemed deeply etched. His hair looked even more gray than usual. He gazed down at Lane Sanford as she slept, as if trying to memorize her face.

Maia felt the baby kick. She put her hand against her belly.

A *boy*, she thought. And though she had never been religious, she prayed: *Please, let him be healthy.*

"Why don't you get some sleep, darlin'?" Garrett told her. "I'll wake you if anything happens."

She wanted to stay up. She wanted to wait for Tres to return safely. But her eyelids were as heavy as lead. She closed them and drifted off, imagining Tres holding the hand of the baby as he took his first step away from her.

**“Tell me,” I said.**

Jose took his eyes from the broken window. “Señor?”

“You didn’t want me to come in here. What happened to Alex?”

He shook his head, no longer evasive. Just bewildered. “I don’t know.”

A shard of glass shook loose from the window frame. It flew past us, embedding itself in the wall.

“Señor, we must leave,” Imelda said. “Señor—”

I pushed toward the window, screening my face with my hands. The dark shape of the lighthouse loomed through the horizontal rain. The ocean churned below, waves surging against the side of the house. If Alex had fallen into that maelstrom, there was no chance of finding him.

I yanked the piece of red fabric off of the window. A piece of Alex's shirt. No doubt about it.

"Señor!" Imelda shouted over the storm. "*Please!*"

Wind buffeted me back into the room.

I didn't want to leave, but the glass and debris were too dangerous to contend with.

I stepped back and tripped over something hard.

I looked down. It was a wooden statue of a woman, about two feet tall, carved from cedar. The details, especially the face, were amazingly intricate. She had her arms crossed, one hand raised palm up, as if she were asking a question.

My mouth tasted like metal.

I was sure of two things about the statue—two things that were impossible to reconcile. First, this was the same statue I'd seen Alex Huff carving when I was a child, the day I'd surprised him in the lighthouse. Second, the woman's face looked a lot like a young mother I'd recently seen in a photograph.

She looked like Rachel Lindy Brazos.



**Garrett crumpled the piece of red fabric. “You’re telling me Alex jumped?”**

“I doubt it was suicide. If he went out that window, he was pushed.”

“No way, little bro. So his window was broken. So what? Half the windows in the place are broken.”

“It was busted from the inside.”

“He’s not dead,” Garrett insisted. “We gotta search the house.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t mention the wooden statue I’d left in the bedroom. I still couldn’t process what I’d seen—the adult face of Rachel Brazos, carved in cedar by Alex Huff when Rachel and he would’ve both been teenagers.

“Fine,” Garrett said. He glanced over at the beds, where Maia and Lane were both asleep. “I’ll search outside. Little bro, you stay here for a change.”

“Garrett, you can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

His stare was a little on the crazy side. “I’m not gonna sit

here if something's happened to Alex."

"We'll find him," I promised, but I was thinking about the ocean pounding the walls of the house, washing over the entire island.

There was a loud knock behind me. "Tres."

Benjamin Lindy stood in the doorway, looking weary and rumpled from his time with the college guys. He'd lost his tie. A strand of gray hair curled over his forehead, geriatric Superman-style. "I need to talk to you."

"What a coincidence," I said. I turned to Garrett. "Give me two minutes. We'll figure it out."

Garrett glared at me like I'd just suggested torching a Jimmy Buffett album, but he nodded grudgingly. "Two minutes."

At the end of the hall, Lindy looked around to make sure we were alone. "That young man, Ty. I took him to the bathroom just now."

"That's terrific news."

"You don't understand. He asked me to take him to the bathroom in his own room to get some Tylenol. He orchestrated that so he could talk to me away from his friends."



“And?”

Lindy's eyes were as cold as steel. “He has something to tell you privately. He says it has to do with Chris Stowall's murder.”



**Ty sat at the bottom of the stairwell, watching the water lap** against the steps. In the dim light of the hallway fixture, he looked like a wax figure, his face soft and sallow.

“Chase and Markie?” he asked nervously.

“Mr. Lindy is keeping them occupied.”

“This was a bad idea,” he said. “Forget it.”

“Ty, you got me down here. What did you want to tell me?”

He chewed at his thumb. “You should’ve let me leave last night. You don’t understand what they’re into. What they’re doing to me.”

The fear in his voice was beyond claustrophobia.

I thought about the way Markie had sapped Ty with a roll of quarters. No emotion in his face. Just cold efficiency. Few things would make a kid that age develop that kind of ruthless edge.

“Those drugs they sedated you with,” I said. “Where did they get them?”

Ty laughed weakly. “Starting to catch on, huh?”

“You’re trying to tell me Chase and Markie are dealers?”

“Dealers...Man, that sounds so *small*. For the UT campus, those two are the freaking *Wal-Mart* of drugs.”

“Chase and Markie can barely open a tequila bottle. Are you sure we’re talking about the same people?”

Ty spit into the water. “That’s what they want you to think. ‘Oh, they’re just stupid kids. It isn’t possible.’ Bullshit. Those two haven’t been kids since elementary school.”

The hall light flickered. I sat next to Ty. Together, we watched foam and dark water course down the hallway.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked. “They’re your friends.”

“They’re my *bosses*. They got hooks in me like you

wouldn't believe. I agreed to do this one last trip to clear my debts. I didn't agree to murder."

"You think they killed Chris?"

"Chris was part of the system. That money you found? That came from Chase and Markie. They paid him off every time they came down."

"But why would they kill him?"

Ty shook his head miserably. "This was supposed to be the last run, before the hotel shut down. Chris was pretty bummed about that. Maybe he leaned on Chase and Markie for more money."

Again, I thought about Chris's journal, the comments he'd made about escaping to Hawaii, his anger at Alex for closing the hotel. "So you've been smuggling in drugs from Mexico. What are we talking about? Heroin? Marijuana?"

"Oh, man, that is *old school*. We brought in Mexican pharmaceuticals. Ritalin. OxyContin. Codeine. You name it. That's what the people in the dorms want. Prescribe your own high."

"You could get pharmaceuticals here."

"In cheap bulk shipments? Easier to arrange that from Mexico. Warehouse security down there is a joke. Plus the

cartels and *federales* don't bother you. They're all focused on the 'illegal' stuff."

"How were the drugs brought in?"

"Fishing boat. See, that's the thing. You said there was no way off the island until the ferry. Maybe that's not exactly true. Chase and Markie have this plan—"

Steps in the hallway above. Chase called down, "Yo, Ty. You all right, man?"

Ty closed his eyes and swallowed. "Yeah. I feel like shit. But I'm...I'm better, I guess."

Chase and Markie came down the steps. They checked us out, trying to read what was going on.

"He's not making much sense," I told them. "You gave him too much sedative."

"He'll be okay," Chase said. "Come on, buddy."

Ty gave me one last look, like a convict going back inside the pen. Then he let his buddies lead him up the stairwell.



**I went back to our refugee room, wanting to talk to Maia,** but she was still asleep. For once, she looked comfortable. I didn't want to disturb her. Lane slept more fitfully. She was mumbling something that sounded like a protest. Garrett lay next to her, his arm around her waist.

He glanced up as I came in. We had a brief, silent conversation that went something like this:

Me: *No sign of Alex.*

Garrett: *If I could get up without waking Lane, I'd beat you with a large stick. Search again!*

I checked the next room and found Benjamin Lindy asleep on the couch. Chase and Markie sat on the bed having a quiet, earnest conversation with Ty. I decided to move on.

The next bedroom's door was also open, but Jose and Imelda were nowhere to be seen.

What now?

There was too much to think about, too much trouble besides the storm blowing through this hotel.

I stood at the end of the hall, looking down the stairwell

into the shadows. I thought about the story Ty had told me. Given my past luck, I shouldn't have been surprised to find myself cooped up with a trio of drug dealers, as well as a paid assassin.

I had no trouble believing that Chris Stowall had been making money by helping drug runners. In South Texas, that was a well-established part of the economy, right up there with ranching, drilling for oil and making acrylic-rattlesnake toilet seats for the tourists.

Still, I doubted Chris had died because of a drug deal. Certainly Jesse Longoria wouldn't have come down here for anything as petty as a crate of Mexican Valium. Both of them had been playing a much more dangerous game.

I rubbed my eyes. I kept seeing Rachel Brazos's face carved in wood.

Two bodies downstairs, and the death that haunted me most was a lady I'd never known.

I imagined Ralph Arguello laughing. *You hang out with the dead too much, vato.*

*No contest,* I pleaded. Then I turned and headed toward Alex Huff's bedroom.



**Inside, the storm had sprayed everything with broken glass** and sand like sugar coating on a pan dulce. Somebody, probably Jose, had nailed a quilt over the smashed window. The wind and rain had already ripped it to shreds.

I wondered if it was just wishful thinking, or if the storm sounded a little less intense now. It wasn't much louder than your average booster rocket.

I picked up the wooden statue and set it on the dresser. She still looked like Rachel, her hand out, asking some question I couldn't answer.

I went through Alex's dresser drawers, then his closet. After ten minutes of turning his room upside down, I'd found nothing remarkable. Nothing except the statue.

And that bothered me.

I knew Alex well enough to know that I should've found some memorabilia: the photos he'd once shown me from his fishing expeditions, his dad's army knife, maybe the signed Jimmy Buffett poster Garrett had given him for his twentieth birthday.

Despite his temper, Alex Huff was a sentimentalist. He kept old things. He remembered people he'd known as a child. He'd spent his life savings to buy this hotel because it had been dear to his father.

And yet this room looked like any other room in the hotel. Except for the wooden statue of the dead woman.

I got up and went to the window. The wind was definitely slacking now. Its howl was less insistent. Woven Guatemalan pictures rippled across the tattered quilt—men with machine guns, helicopters over a rain forest.

On an impulse, I ripped it down.

I was standing there, staring into the angry edge of the dying hurricane, when the hotel's power went out again.

As my eyes adjusted to the deeper darkness, I noticed something out in the storm—a flicker of light, and then it was gone.

I might've imagined it. Storms can play a lot of tricks with the light. But I was pretty sure I'd just seen a candle extinguished in the top window of the old lighthouse.



**Calavera squatted in the dark stairwell, listening to the** noises of the house. Four in the morning was a good time for murder. He would not normally choose to work in a house that was occupied. This had already caused him problems, almost given him away. But under the circumstances, he had no choice.

He set his hand on the unpainted timbers. The walls here were so close together his shoulders touched on either side.

He remembered his first job, so much like this one.

A police commander, a judge and a lawyer walked into the brothel. It sounded like the beginning of a joke, but the three men would never come out alive. Calavera had spent weeks studying their habits. He knew they would stay overnight on Sunday, as they always did, and so Calavera had visited on Saturday as a client. In the early morning, when everyone was asleep, he had laid the trap.

Monday at 4 AM, he watched from the building across the street. He lay on the roof with a rifle, just to be sure. The brothel's back doors were barricaded. He had seen to that. If anyone came out the front, or made it through a window, he would take care of them. He did not like loose ends.

He needn't have worried. The explosion was beautiful: flame blossoming simultaneously in the windows. The screams were short-lived. And no one came out of the building.

The display was better than fireworks. Blood rushed through his veins. He felt more alive than he had in years.

Soon, setting bombs had become his addiction. The money was good, necessary for his survival, but he would have done the work without pay. He had finally found something he was good at.

Now, he wished he could recapture that thrill. But this time was different. Necessary, yes, but he would take no pleasure from it.

He connected the last wire to a simple timer. So much could be accomplished with a single electrical pulse.

He sat for a few moments listening to the sounds of sleepers on the other side of the wall—gentle snoring, restless turning in bed. Tomorrow, he would be away from

here. He would start again, and this would be his last display. A work of necessity, hastily done. He didn't like that. But the beauty of fire wiped out one's imperfections. Fire was very forgiving.

He set the candy skull on the timer, knowing no one would ever see it. But he would know it was there, small sugary eyes watching as the seconds ticked down in the dark.

**I meant to venture out into the storm to investigate the lighthouse.** Instead, I went to check on Maia, lay down next to her thinking it would only be for a few minutes and ended up falling asleep.

So much for the intrepid hero of the tempest.

Most of my dreams were surreal, kind of like my life. Unfortunately, this time I dreamed about the day I quit private investigations, and that dream was always exactly true-to-life.



**I was in my office—the converted dining room of our Victorian on South Alamo.** It was winter in San Antonio. The wall furnace hissed. Outside, the sky was heavy gray and

the bare pecan trees looked like charred bones.

I'd just returned from San Fernando Cemetery, from my encounter with U.S. Marshal Longoria at Ralph's graveside. Longoria's words kept coming back to me: *If you can't stop feeling guilty, son, maybe you should find a different line of work.*

I had a pile of paperwork on my desk. A few skip traces. A divorce case. An undercover job I needed to set up with a local jewelry store. I also had a stack of essays to grade from my part-time teaching gig at UTSA. I was trying to decide whether I wanted to write a report about my client's cheating husband or grade sophomore papers on Chaucer's use of alliteration. The fun factor seemed about the same, either way.

Maia was in the living room, talking on the phone with her doctor. She'd been on the phone since I got home. I tried not to think about that. She was constantly telling me not to worry. The doctor was probably trying again to convince her to do amniocentesis. She was politely but firmly saying no.

She wasn't showing too much yet. She had white paint flecked on her fingers. She'd spent the morning painting the baby's room upstairs, even though I'd told her she should take it easy.

I checked my email. I had a lot of messages. My boss at

UTSA, asking again if I wouldn't reconsider taking another course. They were shorthanded as usual. He could easily move me to a full-time position. He mentioned the magic words: *health care*.

There was a message from a client, thanking me for finding her runaway daughter. There was an email from Ana DeLeon, Ralph's widow, with a photo attachment of their baby girl, Lucia. Lucia had her father's crazy grin as she dumped the candy out of her Christmas stocking.

Worst of all, there was a Happy New Year e-card from Rosa Gomez, the lady who had hired me to find her fugitive husband. I didn't know why Rosa kept me on her holiday list. She claimed I was the only one who listened to her, the only one who even tried to help her husband. I'm not sure I would've been so generous in her position. I had failed her miserably.

I shouldn't have tortured myself, but I found the file on Julio Gomez and looked through it again. Like homicide detectives, Pls get certain cases that just won't let you go. They are never resolved. They haunt you.

I'd never even met Julio Gomez, but I knew him well.

His photo showed a thin Latino in his late twenties. A good smile. Intelligent eyes. He didn't look like a criminal. You wouldn't latch your door if you saw Julio Gomez

walking down your street. When he was seventeen, he'd been messing around on a highway overpass with some friends, throwing rocks down at cars. One rock went through a Ford pickup's windshield with the force of a cannonball and killed a passenger. Julio had been tried as an adult, but he managed a plea deal—involuntary manslaughter. Light sentence. That had been his first strike. When he was twenty-one, he'd gotten in a fight at a bar. Unfortunately, the man had been an off-duty cop. This got Julio an assault conviction and a bad reputation among the city's police.

When he got out of jail again, Julio married his longtime sweetheart, Rosa. Julio tried to go straight, despite the fact that the cops often harassed him, knowing he had a short temper. Julio was doing all right—holding down a job, thinking about community college. Then the gas station where Julio worked was burned to the ground a few days after Julio had argued with his boss. Julio was brought up on arson charges. He made bail, panicked and ran. He told Rosa he couldn't take another felony count. More jail time would kill him.

Rosa was our down-the-street neighbor. She passed my business sign every day on her way to work. She came to me, begging me to find her husband. Julio was innocent of arson. Julio had to come back and stand trial.

I never found him. Within a few days, rumors started

surfacing about Jesse Longoria. The marshal had been asking questions about Julio, following the same trail I had. Except Longoria had been more efficient and more ruthless.

What bothered me most was that I never found the body. I couldn't prove what had happened. I couldn't give Rosa any closure. All I had were suspicions. But that morning at the cemetery, Longoria's smile had given me all the proof I needed. I thought about his pleasant eyes, his black wool coat, his gold college ring. He was a hunter with no remorse. He had found Julio Gomez, probably put a bullet through his head, dumped the body and gone out afterward for dinner and a show. He would've done the same for Ralph Arguello, or me for that matter, if we'd happened to cross him.

Why did I want people like that in my life?

I slipped Julio Gomez's file back into my cabinet. I stared at the picture of my dead best friend's daughter Lucia on my computer screen. Ana DeLeon's brief note: *Love from both of us.*

I closed the email program.

In the living room, Maia hung up the phone. She sat with her fingers laced, staring at the coffee table. I knew she was gathering her composure before she came to talk to



me. Especially during the first trimester, pregnancy had played hell with her hormones. She got emotional much more easily than usual, and she hated it. She spent a lot of time alone at the coffee table.

In six months, give or take, I would be a father. When I thought about the legacy I had from my own dad, what did I come up with? His old service revolver, a warped view of law enforcement and some painful memories from a childhood spent on Rebel Island.

I stared at the telephone. Then I picked it up and dialed my boss at UTSA. I told him I was thinking of going full-time. He said he'd start the paperwork immediately.

**Benjamin Lindy watched the sunrise through a hole in the wall.**

He'd always been an early riser. When he was a child, his job had been to tend the chickens on the ranch. He'd get up before first light and check for eggs, remove snakes from the hutch when necessary and let the chickens out to feed.

Early rising had been bred into him. It was a physical need. Around four in the morning, his feet would start to tingle and the sheets would begin to feel itchy. He *had* to get out of bed. On the rare occasion when he overslept and woke up to daylight, he felt sluggish and out of sorts, cheated of his best time.

This morning, he'd had several hours to think before the sun came up. He'd decided he would have to kill someone today.

The room he was standing in had been a parlor suite.

Sometime during the night, a telephone pole had pierced the wall—crossbeams, wires and all. It stuck about five feet into the room, hanging crookedly in the ragged hole it had made, the top of the pole pushing against the ceiling. Lord knew where the telephone pole had come from. There were none on the island, as far as Benjamin could recall. When he came into the room, his first impression was that a sailing ship had rammed the building with its bowsprit.

He slipped his hand into his pocket. The gun was still there. It was his spare sidearm, too small for his hand, but now he was glad he'd brought it. Years ago, he'd bought the gun for his wife, but she'd never touched it—one of the many things she'd left behind. He supposed there was some sort of justice in him using that gun today.

He watched the sky turn from black to steel. He still burned from the indignity of having his .45 taken from him, as if he were a child. A year earlier, the state had tried to take away his driver's license, simply because he was old. Then a murderer had taken away his daughter, as if old age did not rob a man of enough. Navarre had no right to rule over him. Benjamin had been wrong to trust Navarre. He would do no more than the law.

He remembered his last conversation with Peter Brazos, who of all people should've been his ally. Peter had turned all his attention to prosecuting the drug lords. He poured his rage into his work. But Calavera...Peter saw the assassin

as a tool, not the real target. When Benjamin had tried to warn him what the Marshals Service was doing, tried to suggest they take action before the assassin could cut a deal, Peter had shut him down.

“Not another word,” Peter snapped. “Ben, this conversation never happened. If they can bring the bastard in, I’m all for it. I want his bosses’ names. All of them. But you will do nothing outside the law. Do you hear me? *Nothing.*”

Benjamin backed down. He pretended compliance. And they had not spoken since.

Outside, the rain still fell, but the storm was dying. Today Calavera would try to escape. Benjamin wasn’t sure how, but he could not allow anyone to leave the island, not until the assassin was dead.

He would have to watch.

He replayed last night in his mind. His brief conversation with Ty had bothered him. Those boys were up to no good. Ty knew something about Stowall’s murder, but he’d wanted to talk to Navarre. He wouldn’t tell Benjamin anything.

Then there was Alex Huff, the way he’d left abruptly last night. And now where was he? Every time Benjamin looked at Huff, he had to constrain his anger. It could not be a

coincidence that the trail to his daughter's murderer had led here, to this vile hotel. The very existence of the place was an insult to him. And Alex Huff...he would have to be found.

Benjamin rested his hand on the telephone pole. He would have to be patient a little while longer. He would have to control his anger. But when the time came, he could not hesitate.

Blood for blood today. No one would take that away from him.

**As dawn broke, I stood at one of the many shattered windows on the second floor and surveyed the aftermath of Hurricane Aidan.**

It was still raining hard, like white noise rather than water. The northern stretch of the island had disappeared under the waves. As far as I could see—which was only about two hundred yards—the Gulf churned in a foamy gray soup that blurred into the sky.

The main bulk of the island had been reduced to a few acres around the hotel. The path was scoured away. The remaining palmetto trees were stripped of fronds. The boat dock had vanished, but as the waves swept back, the tips of the old pilings peeked above the water.

In front of me, the lighthouse rose dark and undamaged. Even the glass of the lantern house seemed to have survived the storm, which seemed impossible—insulting, really. But no light flickered in the windows. No sign of

movement. I still needed to check out the light I'd seen the night before, but I wasn't anxious to brave the rain again. I was steeling my nerves to go downstairs when I heard a cough behind me.

"Is it over?" Lane Sanford asked.

She was standing bleary-eyed in the doorway. Her hair was flat on one side. She had pillow-wrinkles on her cheek.

"Looks that way," I said. "What brings you here?"

"This is my room."

I might've blushed. I hadn't even noticed the dresses hanging up in the closet, the makeup kit on the bathroom sink. The door had been open, the room soaked with rain like all the others. I'd just walked right in. The past night in the hotel had eroded my sense of private property.

"Sorry," I murmured.

"It's okay." She came to the window and looked out.

The sky was getting incrementally brighter. I still couldn't see the sun, but there was a yellow quality to the gray, like butter in oatmeal.

Lane looked healthier in the light. The wrinkles around her eyes might've been from smiling rather than weariness.

Her blond hair had a silky sheen.

“When will the ferry come?” she asked.

“It’s more likely the Coast Guard will get here first. They’ll have some fast boats riding out the storm.”

She strained her eyes toward the horizon, as if trying to imagine such a boat. I could relate. After last night, the idea of rescue—the notion that anything could exist beyond Rebel Island—seemed as fantastic as pink elephants.

“My ex-husband was never here,” she said softly. “I owe you an apology.”

Out in the ocean, something surfaced—a gleaming white arc of fiberglass, the bottom of a capsized boat—and sank again instantly beneath the waves.

“Why did you run from him?” I asked.

“He murdered a man.”

“Who?”

Lane hugged her arms. “I don’t even know his name. Isn’t that terrible? He was...a migrant worker. Bobby and I lived near the train tracks outside Uvalde. One afternoon in March, while Bobby was at work, this man knocked on the kitchen door. He asked me for a drink of water. I shouldn’t



have let him in.”

“You let a stranger into your home?”

“He was thirsty and hungry. He was about to collapse. I didn’t see why not.”

I could think of a lot of reasons. A young woman alone in the country, letting a strange man into her house. But the way she said it made it sound like the most reasonable thing in the world.

“I was alone most days,” she told me. “It was hot. I had the kitchen window open and I was slicing apples. The whole house smelled like wheat from the fields. The man who came to the door...he had dark skin. He wore an old denim shirt, beige pants. His tennis shoes were worn through. He spoke good English. He said he’d hitched a train all the way from Piedras Negras. He had a wife and four children. He wanted to find work so he could send them money.”

I pictured the scene—Lane at one end of the kitchen table, listening to the immigrant’s story. It wasn’t hard to see why the man had opened up to her. When she wasn’t terrified, her face was kind and open.

“He ate a turkey sandwich and some apple slices and a glass of milk,” she remembered. “Then Bobby got home.”

She fell into a kind of trance as she told the rest of her story. It was as if she'd practiced it in front of the mirror many times, trying to make herself understand.

Bobby never came home before dark, she said. But that day he did. He'd had an argument with his foreman and walked off the job. He stopped at a store in Uvalde, bought a six-pack of beer and downed three of them in the truck on the way home.

When he found the Mexican sitting at his kitchen table, he turned on Lane. He struck her across the face, called her a whore. The Mexican man rose and told Bobby to stop.

Bobby grabbed a kitchen knife, the same one Lane had been using to slice apples, and the Mexican man lifted his hands as if that would stop the blade.

Hours later, after dark and a lot more alcohol, Bobby buried the Mexican. He forced Lane to help. They dragged the body to a creek bed behind their rented property and spent hours digging a hole in the wet black earth. Afterward, he told Lane he had only been protecting her. He drove the point home with a good beating. He'd only done what he had to do, killing that Mexican. If she told anyone, he would kill her. Lane had no doubt he meant it.

Three months later, she finally got up the nerve to run.

"I knew he'd never let me go," she told me. "He's still

looking for me.”

“Go to the police.”

She shook her head. “They’d put me in prison, too. I’ve stayed silent for months. I helped him hide the body. If I just hadn’t let that poor man inside, or if I’d told him to leave a little sooner—”

“What Bobby did wasn’t your fault.”

She brushed the rain off her face. “I told Garrett all this. I told him he shouldn’t get involved with me.”

I didn’t answer.

“I like him,” Lane admitted. “I don’t know what to do. He’s the kindest man I’ve ever met.”

“You need to get out more.”

She pursed her lips. “I understand you don’t approve. You don’t want him to get hurt.”

That stunned me. I’d been so worried about Garrett taking advantage of Lane, I’d never thought about Garrett getting hurt. But as Lane said it, I realized she was right. I didn’t want my brother falling for anyone. I’d seen him do that before. His depression when he was dumped—and he was always dumped—was terrible and dangerous.

And yet, looking at Lane, I felt like some chances might be worth taking, even if they were dangerous. Maybe it was the right thing to unlatch your screen door for a stranger once in a while, let them inside for apple slices and milk.

"I know some good lawyers," I said. "I'm married to one. We can help you work a deal with the police."

"You barely know me. You would do that for me?"

"Yeah, I would."

She rested her hand on my arm. "Garrett was right about you."

"What did he say?"

"That you could solve any problem. Or you'd die trying."

"I'd like to avoid the 'die trying' part."

She smiled. "I should go check on Garrett, leave you in peace."

"It's your room."

"I just came to salvage my things." She looked around helplessly, as if she'd already decided that mission was no good.

“Lane,” I said. “Did you know Chris Stowall was in love with you?”

Her eyes became unfocused. She stared into the storm. “Let me know if you spot the Coast Guard.”

Then she turned and left me alone with a window full of rain.



**I stood in front of Lane's closet and looked at her drenched** clothes. A dozen cotton dresses, all pastels, all the same utilitarian style. Four pairs of simple flat-soled shoes. Two small brown suitcases. I had a feeling Lane had brought everything she owned.

At the back of the closet, next to Lane's shoes, a black electrical cord curled like a snake, frayed copper wires sticking up at the end. I knelt to pick it up, but it seemed to be attached, crimped between the wall and the floor. It took me a minute to process why this didn't seem right. Then my skin turned cold.

I remembered last night—Lane screaming, swearing she'd seen a man in her room. A man who had vanished

into the closet.

I pushed aside Lane's dresses. I stepped into the closet and ran my fingers along the sides of the back wall. The latch was in the top left corner—a simple mechanism. I pulled it: the wall swung away from me.

A secret door, just like Garrett had suggested. The latch was much too high for him to have found it last night.

I backed out and found my flashlight. When I shone it into the closet, I saw that the secret area was narrow, no more than a few feet deep—a landing on a steep stairwell, crude wooden steps leading up and down, sandwiched between the walls of the guest rooms.

At my feet was the loose piece of electrical cord that had caught my attention. I picked it up. I wondered if it had been caught under the door last night when the man had fled in haste.

I swept the flashlight beam around the rest of the closet and into the stairwell, but I didn't see anything else suspicious. Just the frayed cord.

I stepped into the secret doorway. Down below I could see the flash of water. The flooding had not discriminated. Along with everything else on the first floor, it had found this hidden stairwell. I decided to go up and began to climb.

The steps were so steep they were almost a ladder, and they dead-ended at another door-size sheet of wood. I found the latch and opened it.

Voices. I was in someone else's closet. And judging from the smell of the clothes, I guessed it was a college guy's room.

"It's gotta be now," Chase was saying.

"Have you looked outside, man?" Markie's voice.

"I don't give a damn. It has to be now or it'll be too late."

"All right," Markie growled. "Christ, point that someplace else!"

"You're both crazy," Ty said. "Please, Chase, just let it go."

"Shut your mouth," Chase snapped. "You've screwed things up enough already."

Something went crunch. Unfortunately that something was right under my foot. Conversation in the room stopped. I had two choices: back down the stairs or jump out and say "Ta-da!"

Given that Markie had just accused Chase of pointing something at him, I decided on discretion. I backed out and

in the darkness relatched the wall panel.

I could hear the closet door opening on the other side. I was sure Chase and Markie were going to kick in the back wall and find me, but there was silence.

“It was nothing,” Chase said. “Damn storm making noises again.”

“Huh,” Markie said. He didn’t sound convinced, but the closet door closed, and I climbed down the stairs as quietly as I could.



**Apparently, it was not my day for visiting closets. When I came back out of Lane’s, I found Benjamin Lindy standing by the window.**

He turned as I emerged from the rack of dresses. He didn’t look particularly surprised.

“Miss Sanford told me you were here, Mr. Navarre. I didn’t realize she meant in the closet.”

I couldn’t think of another explanation, so I told him the



truth.

He stepped past me and checked the passage for himself. He peered up into the gloom. When he came out again, he looked troubled. "The boys' room, you say?"

"I could hear them arguing. I couldn't tell what about."

He fixed me with that courtroom gaze. "They're drug dealers, Mr. Navarre. Surely you've figured that out. Now I'm wondering if they are murderers as well."

"They've got nothing to do with Calavera."

"Mr. Navarre." Lindy's voice held a touch of desperation. "We are entering the most dangerous hours of the weekend. The storm is passing. Sooner or later, a boat will come. Calavera will be getting restless to leave this island. He cannot let us leave as well. He cannot afford to have the authorities alerted."

"You don't want the authorities alerted, either," I said. "You want to resolve this yourself."

Lindy didn't answer.

I looked down and realized I was still holding the frayed piece of electrical cord. I felt it was important, but I didn't know why. It bothered me almost as much as the statue up in Alex's room.

“How did Chris know to contact you?” I asked Lindy.

“We’ve been through this.”

“He didn’t know you personally?”

Lindy hesitated. “I assume he saw the news about Rachel’s murder.”

“You hadn’t been to Rebel Island before? You didn’t know Alex Huff?”

“No.”

“Alex wasn’t friends with your daughter? They didn’t go to school together or anything like that?”

“No,” he said coldly. “Why are you asking this?”

I thought about Rachel Brazos’s face, carved in wood. The face of a grown woman carved while Rachel was still a child. *A newmother.*

“What about your wife?” I asked.

Lindy’s expression hardened. “What about her?”

“There were no pictures in the scrapbook. Who was she? Did Rachel look like her?”

There was a sudden electricity in the room that had nothing to do with the storm. I knew I had crossed a line Mr. Lindy would never forgive.

"That has no bearing," Lindy said.

"You said you asked Longoria's advice about your wife. She ran away, didn't she?"

Lindy stared at the suitcases on Lane Sanford's bed. The rain in the window made a frame of static behind him.

"My wife was a troubled woman," he said. "Rachel's birth left her deeply depressed. Unbalanced. She disappeared and left me to raise our daughter alone."

"You never found her?"

"I stopped looking. That was Marshal Longoria's advice. She was better gone. He was right."

The bitterness in his voice was so fresh his wife might've left yesterday.

"Longoria understood vengeance," I said. "He wasn't so good with love. It sounds like he steered you wrong more than once."

"My daughter was murdered, Mr. Navarre. Her killer is here. I intend to find him."

I nodded. “Maia was wondering who’s more dangerous. You or Calavera?”

“Do not compare us.”

“Don’t try to kill him.”

A knock on the door. Jose came in, looking worried.

“Señores,” he said. “I’m sorry, but I thought...I happened to see. The three young gentlemen.”

“What about them?” I asked.

“They went downstairs,” Jose told us. “They just left the hotel.”

**Maia and Imelda returned to the Colonel's Suite and found** it hardly damaged at all. Rain still dripped from the ceiling into the overflowing silver cup. The air smelled of extinguished candles. The picture of Tres's father and the other two men hung crookedly on the wall.

Maia sat on the edge of the bed to catch her breath. The bedspread was dry and warm.

"I will pack your things, señora," Imelda said.

"That isn't necessary. I can get them."

Imelda didn't seem to hear. She found the suitcase in the closet and set it at the foot of the bed. "You should be ready to leave."

It didn't take long. Maia and Tres had always been light travelers. Within a few minutes, Imelda had folded their clothes and tucked them away. She found Maia's .357 wrapped in a nightgown and held it cupped in her hands as

if unsure whether to pack it.

“What’s bothering you?” Maia asked.

Imelda set the gun down. “I—I should help Jose get breakfast ready.”

But Maia could sense her indecision—wanting to say something, afraid to do so.

Usually, silence helped. In her practice, Maia would sit quietly for a long time, creating a space for the client’s statement. Let them fill the gap with words. But Imelda didn’t.

“I decided,” Maia told her, “the baby will be a boy.” And without knowing why, Maia explained her fears.

Imelda stared at her, as if she’d just noticed Maia for the first time. “This...disease runs in your family, señora?”

Maia nodded. “My brother died when he was very young. We watched him get weaker and weaker. Grief destroyed my father.”

“And the chances are good that your son will have this?”

“Yes.”

“But you risk it anyway.”

“I’ve thought about it. I’ve decided I am supposed to have this child.”

Imelda pursed her lips. “I thought the same thing with my own children...”

Maia waited, but once again, Imelda backed off. Whatever she was afraid of saying, the fear won out.

“Imelda,” she said. “If there’s a way I can help you—”

“You should get out of this old house, señora. Fresh air would do you good.”

“It’s still pouring,” Maia said.

Imelda folded the .357 back in the nightgown and packed it in the suitcase. “You are ready, señora. I have to help with breakfast.”

Alone, Maia reclined on the bed and listened to the rain plinking into the silver cup. She decided she should go down to the dining room, just to see what was happening. But she lay still and stared at the ceiling. She thought about her old home in China, how the rain would drum against the corrugated tin roof, and how she would fall asleep listening to her brother’s labored breathing—until the day he died. Ever since then, she could never fall asleep in a silent room.

**I got to the bottom of the stairs and found that the water** was receding from the first floor, leaving a spongy marsh of carpet, seaweed and salt foam.

The front door had been blown off its hinges. Outside, rain made a steady downpour, but the wind was almost tolerable. Waves lapped a few feet from the base of the lighthouse. Mounds of sand stuck up here and there above the churning water—scattered bumps that emerged and disappeared with every surge, so what was left of Rebel Island reminded me of a smudged charcoal rubbing.

From the outside, the hotel didn't look as bad as I'd feared. The roof had been scoured away in places, leaving a skeletal frame of beams. The windows looked more like craters.

Otherwise the building seemed intact, but something bothered me about its appearance. I couldn't decide what.

I asked Benjamin Lindy to stay behind. I wasn't sure how



his legs would hold up in the floodwater, and, more important, I didn't like the angry look in his eyes. But of course he didn't listen. He followed as I trudged into the tide looking for our college friends.

It wasn't hard to spot them. They were about a quarter mile north, standing ankle-deep in the stormy water like disciples. One of the guys—redheaded Chase—was squatting down like he was looking for something. The other two stood and watched.

I did a quick scan of the horizon. Nothing in any direction except storm and ocean. On a clear day, the coastline would've been visible from Rebel Island. Not today. If I hadn't known better, I would've sworn we were a thousand miles from the mainland.

I wanted to stop at the lighthouse and check on the strange flicker I'd seen the night before, but Benjamin Lindy was already ahead of me, wading purposefully toward Chase, Markie and Ty. I didn't intend to let the old man confront them without me. We had quite enough dead bodies as it was.



**Chase was on his knees in the surf, clawing at the wet sand** that sucked back into place as soon as he tried to scoop it out.

“Dude,” Markie told him. “We got company.”

Chase looked up at us, a vacant stare in his eyes. “It should be here. Two crates. They can’t just disappear.”

“He’s confused.” Markie slipped his hand into his pocket. “Been cooped up too long. Doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

I glanced at Ty. “Maybe he needs a Valium,” I suggested. “Or codeine.”

Markie’s expression darkened. He turned to Ty. “You *told* him?”

“I—I didn’t—”

“You sorry little—”

I saw the gun coming. I punched Markie in the gut as it came out of his pocket. The gun tumbled and was lost in a cloud of wet sand. Markie sat down hard in the water.

“Don’t hurt him!” Ty yelled.

It took me a second to realize he was talking to me. He was terrified I might beat up the guy who’d been about to

shoot him.

Markie rubbed his sore stomach. He eyed me with contempt. "Pretty fast for an old man."

He started to get up, but Benjamin Lindy stepped forward. "Stay down, son. Or this much *older* man will make you sorry. Now tell me about Calavera."

Coming from most eighty-year-olds, such a threat might've been amusing. No one laughed.

Markie looked at Chase and Ty. He shook his head cautiously. "We don't know anything about that."

"Calavera was connected to this island," Lindy said. "He did most of his work for the drug cartels. You were moving drugs through the island—"

"Totally different thing, man!"

"When the police start asking why a U.S. Marshal and your friend Chris Stowall are both dead," Lindy said, "you will look very bad."

I had to give him credit. The old lawyer really knew how to sweat a witness. Markie squirmed like the ocean was boiling suddenly around him. "We don't know anything about murder, okay?"

"How often did you come to the island?" I asked. "How did you make the exchanges?"

"You think I'm going to tell you that?"

"Every two months," Chase cut in.

"Dude, shut up!"

"We'd stay for a weekend," Chase said. "The Mexicans would bring a boat on Friday night when it was dark. We'd never see them face to face. They'd bury the drugs...here."

He lifted his hands. Clumps of sand dripped through his fingers. "Later that night, we'd come down and put the stuff in bait buckets, like we were fishing, right? We'd bury the payment and leave. The Mexicans would pick it up...today. Saturday morning."

"They'd leave the drugs first?" I said. "They trusted you to pay?"

Chase was slumped over, his spirit broken. Hard to believe he was the same smart-mouthed kid I'd picked out as the leader of the gang last night.

"Trust had nothing to do with it," he said. "You don't cross these people. Chris Stowall was the go-between, keeping an eye on the whole thing. If we'd tried to leave before the Sunday ferry, he would've radioed the Mexicans. We

would've been dead before we got back to the mainland."

"Dude, why are you telling them this?" Markie demanded.

"What does it matter?" Chase said. "We're dead. We're completely dead."

"Explain the 'completely dead' part," I said.

Chase stared at the hole he'd made in the sand—no more than a dent now. Markie said nothing.

Finally Ty took a shaky breath. "We should've picked up the drugs last night. We couldn't because of the storm."

"That's why Chase and Markie were trying to leave the hotel last night," I guessed.

Ty nodded glumly. "Now it's too late. The drugs are gone. The thing is...the Mexicans won't believe us."

"You didn't make up the hurricane," I pointed out.

"Doesn't matter. They'll expect payment."

"You brought money to pay them?"

"Thirty-two grand." Ty glanced at Markie. "But it's gone, too. It disappeared from the room last night."

Suddenly their distress made more sense to me. No

drugs. No money. Storm or not, their Mexican friends were not going to be happy.

"We've got to get them to come ashore," Markie said.

"They won't listen," Chase objected.

"Maybe not. But we take the boat."

Benjamin Lindy was studying the young men. It seemed to me his anger turned to disappointment as he did so. Once again, his vengeance was without a likely target. "What about Stowall? Did you kill him?"

"Hell, no," Markie said.

"That's not true!" Ty said. "Chris was blackmailing you—"

"Ty, shut up!" Markie warned.

"He wanted more money," Ty persisted. "They had a big argument. Chris said he needed to get away fast. He wanted an extra cut. He said he could make life really bad for us. He asked if we'd ever heard of Calavera."

Markie cursed. "That doesn't mean I killed him, dude."

"When was this argument?" I asked Ty, ignoring Markie.

"Friday afternoon. Not long before you got here."

“We didn’t kill him,” Markie said. “We don’t kill people, okay? It’s just drugs. It pays tuition, for Christ’s sake.”

I exchanged looks with Lindy. I hoped he was coming to the same conclusion as me—that whatever crap these guys had gotten themselves into, they weren’t murderers. They knew as little about Calavera as we did.

Then I heard the sound of a speedboat engine.

A sleek black twenty-two-foot Howard Bow Rider rounded the southern tip of the island, cutting its way through the chop. Nobody except the Coast Guard or drug runners would’ve been insane enough to be out in seas like this. And I had a feeling this boat was not part of the Coast Guard.

Chase scrambled to his feet. He and Ty and Markie watched silently as the boat approached. Two men stood at the helm. Both wore black rain gear, their hoods pulled down over their faces.

One man steered. The other held an assault rifle.

We had no place to run. No cover. If they decided to shoot us, we were dead. So I just stood there with the college kids, waiting to see what they would do.

The boat slowed, passing a hundred yards off to our right. The driver seemed to know this area well. He

navigated cautiously, keeping to the main channel, away from the submerged parts of the island.

The boat slowed to an idle. Chase held up his sand-caked hands in a gesture of surrender.

The two men studied us. What they saw: five gringos standing in ankle-deep water where their stash of money should have been.

Without a word or gesture, the driver sped up. The boat veered away. It headed out to sea, leaving a silver wake like a scythe.

Ty exhaled. "Close."

Chase stared at his empty hands. Markie's face was pale.

"What?" Ty asked. "They're gone, aren't they?"

I didn't have the heart to tell him. But their message was clear: the Mexicans wouldn't waste their time shooting Ty and his friends now. They would have it done properly, in a much more public place.

I knelt down and sifted through the water until I found the gun Markie had dropped. It was a .22, Ty's marksman pistol. It occurred to me that a .22 could've been the same caliber that had killed Jesse Longoria.



“Start planning your statement for the police,” I told Markie.

“The drugs are gone,” he said miserably. “What’s the point of talking to the police?”

“Because it might be your only chance at staying alive.”

I sloshed back toward the ruined hotel, leaving the college kids standing in the water where the source of their next year’s tuition had washed away.



**“What *kind* of wire?” Garrett asked.**

We were sitting in the destroyed dining room. I was briefing Maia and Garrett on my fun-filled excursion into the surf. Garrett’s question took me by surprise.

I dug around in my pocket, found the frayed copper wire and handed it to him.

He scowled. “You found this in Lane’s closet?”

“Yeah.”

“Ain’t for computers.”

I didn’t argue. Garrett was the computer programmer in the family.

He twirled the wire between his fingers. “So what’s it for?”

That’s when it hit me—why the wire had bothered me, something that should’ve been obvious. “It’s part of an IED.”

“A what?”

“Improvised explosive device,” Maia said, keeping her voice down. “A bomb.”

“*A bomb?*” Garrett definitely did not keep his voice down.

Jose and Imelda looked over from the kitchen doorway. They’d been scavenging breakfast for the guests and were now dividing up their loot—a bag of saltines, five green apples.

“A little discretion,” I told Garrett.

“Discretion,” he said. “Somebody tries to blow up Lane and you want discretion?”

“We don’t know that anyone was targeting Lane.” Maia

put her hand on Garrett's arm. As usual, she was able to calm him down a lot more than I could, but he still looked pretty damn angry.

He leaned toward me. "The guy we saw in Lane's closet—he was *real*."

"I think so."

"We scared him out of there before he could plant a bomb. He dropped this wire."

"One possibility," I agreed. "But why target Lane?"

Garrett stared outside. In a burst of optimism, Jose and Imelda had removed the plywood from the last intact dining room window. Slate gray sky and sea spread toward the horizon like unwashed sheets.

"It couldn't have been about her," Garrett decided. "Besides, we'll be outta here soon. Whatever this guy was trying to do—"

"Garrett," I said, as gently as I could. "Do you want to ask her about it, or should I?"

He twisted his linen napkin. In the stormy light, his three-day whiskers looked grayer than usual. "Yeah," he said wearily. "I'll talk to her."



**Jose and Imelda went off to distribute their high-cuisine** breakfast, which left Maia and me alone in the dining area, munching stale saltines and watching the rain make claw marks on the window.

“Drugs,” Maia said. “Someday maybe I’ll hear about a case that doesn’t involve drugs.”

We both knew the odds of that were long. It didn’t matter if you worked with runaways, prostitutes, politicians, murderers or socialites. Drugs were as omnipresent as sex and greed.

“Chris Stowall used his manager’s job to make some extra money on the side,” I told her. “He was mad at Alex for closing the hotel because his revenue stream was about to dry up. The twenty thousand from the boathouse—that was Chris’s life savings. He was getting ready to make a break for the mainland and disappear, as soon as he delivered Calavera to Longoria and Lindy. Chris stood to make an extra fifty grand from that. He figured he’d try to milk Chase and his friends, too. Get a little more money that way.”

“You don’t think he fabricated the Calavera story?”

“No. The email was real. Chris found it, somehow he realized what it meant. But I think he found something else, too. Something that really startled him.”

I told Maia about the statue in Alex’s room—the lady who looked like Rachel Brazos. I told her about my conversations with Lindy, who apparently had never visited the island before.

“Lindy’s wife,” Maia said. “You think that was a statue of her.”

I nodded. “She ran away. Now that I’m getting to know Benjamin Lindy a little better, I can’t blame her. I think she came here. The man who ran the hotel back in those days, Mr. Eli, he would’ve taken her in without question. She fell in love with Mr. Huff. She had another child, Alex. She died when Alex was young. I don’t know how. But I think that statue is of Alex’s mother.”

Maia shook her head. “Hell of a coincidence.”

“Not really,” I said. “Welcome to South Texas.”

I remembered what Lindy had said about the whole area being a close-knit community. Mr. Eli had said something similar, back when I was a kid: *South Texas is just too small a place. Everyone is connected somehow.*

Running into someone you knew, someone you were related to without realizing it—that was commonplace. The bloodlines in South Texas were as twisted as the barbed wire.

“Chris would’ve assumed the statue was Rachel Brazos,” I said. “He’d probably seen her picture in the media many times.”

“And that would’ve convinced him Alex Huff was Calavera,” Maia said. “He may have been right for the wrong reasons.”

I thought about that. Rachel Brazos and her two young daughters had died by mistake. I still had trouble believing Alex was a cold-blooded killer, but if he’d seen Rachel’s picture in the paper after the explosion, and realized who she was...That might be enough to cause remorse even in a man like Calavera.

“Perhaps Alex is gone,” Maia said. “Maybe he found a way off the island. When he left last night and gave Garrett that envelope...it sounded like he knew he wasn’t coming back.”

I wanted to believe her. If Calavera was gone, we were safe. Maybe.

“You really think that?”

"No," Maia sighed. Her facial color seemed better this morning. She'd managed the stairs all right, over my protests, but still, the idea of her packing bags or moving around at all made me nervous.

"Imelda helped me pack," she said. "She seemed distracted. I mean...even considering."

"You need to rest," I said. "We'll get you back upstairs. Safer up there."

She stared at the rain as it practiced pointillism on the window. "I'm tired of lying down. Tres, I think you should talk to her."

"Imelda?"

"She wanted to tell me something, but she wouldn't. Or couldn't. You should talk to her."

"I'm not leaving you by yourself."

"Please. I'm a big girl."

I looked at her belly.

"That's *not* what I meant, Tres. Find Imelda. See if she'll talk to you."

"Maia—"

“I’m perfectly fine. Besides, I’m not sure upstairs is any safer.”

“Meaning?”

She gave me a reproachful look: the same look she always gives me whenever I try to protect her.

“Tres, we both know that wire is a timing mechanism. What if Calavera wasn’t interested specifically in Lane? What if there are *other* bombs?”



**By the time I caught up with Imelda, she was in the kitchen,** salvaging linen from the floodwater. It seemed a hopeless task. She’d made a mountain of soggy napkins in the sink. Now she stood with her back to me, spreading out a tablecloth that looked like the Shroud of Turin.

My eyes drifted to the freezer room, then to the cellar door. I didn’t know if Chris Stowall and Jesse Longoria’s bodies were still in their respective places. I couldn’t see... or smell any change. That was fine by me.

“Imelda,” I said.



She turned toward me with a soft gasp. Her apron was sprinkled with brown stains. Her hair was tied back in a bun, but strands of it were coming unraveled, like a yarn ball a cat had been playing with.

“Señor, I didn’t hear you.”

I pulled myself up on the butcher block counter. “Maia thought I should talk to you.”

Imelda folded the tablecloth over her arm. “Is Señora Navarre well?”

“She’s worried about you. She thought you might have something to tell me.”

“Please, señor, if you wouldn’t sit on the counter. Jose is very fussy—”

“How did you lose your children, Imelda?”

Silence. She picked up a knife and set it in the sink. “It was five years ago. In Nuevo Laredo.”

“You lived in Nuevo Laredo?”

I tried not to sound surprised. These days, living in Nuevo Laredo was like sailing on the *Titanic*. For the past decade, the border town had been tearing itself apart as

rival drug lords fought for control. Police, journalists, judges—all were gunned down on a regular basis.

“It was a *reprise*,” Imelda murmured. “Jose did nothing wrong. He was a simple cook. But...someone believed he told the police something...It isn’t important now. So many killed for no reason. A wrong look. A wrong word.” Her voice was heavy with old grief. “They killed my children. When we came here, we had nothing. Mr. Huff took us in. We owe him everything.”

“Which would make it hard to speak against him.”

She held my eyes. She seemed to be struggling with something even heavier than the death of her children, some burden she was not sure she could carry.

“I understand you found a staircase,” she said at last.

“You knew about it?”

She set down her tablecloth. She smoothed the flood-stained linen. “You can live here for many years, and still the walls surprise you. Now you must excuse me, señor.”

After she’d gone I stared at the pile of wet napkins in the sink for several minutes before I realized what was bothering me.

*The walls surprise you.* I got up and headed for the

collapsed bedroom that Alex Huff had cordoned off on the first floor—the bedroom that would be catty-corner below Lane's, at the bottom of the secret stairwell.

**Garrett found Lane in Chris Stowall's bedroom, which** didn't make him too happy. She was sitting on the bed, looking through a journal. She'd changed clothes: jeans, a white T-shirt, slip-on shoes. A lot more practical for a hurricane, but Garrett didn't remember anything but dresses in her closet upstairs. Then it occurred to him she'd borrowed the shirt and jeans from Chris Stowall's wardrobe. She was wearing a dead man's clothes.

"His diary?" Garrett asked.

Lane seemed to have trouble focusing on him. "Yes. It was just lying here."

He wheeled himself over, feeling like an intruder. He'd hardly known Chris Stowall at all, but he was jealous of the way Lane ran her hands over his diary pages. Chris and she had a long history together. Garrett had known her only one day. That was the hardest part, whenever he met a woman—getting past the ghosts.

"I was thinking about taking the journal," she said. "I don't know what I'd do with it, but...it's all that's left of him."

"Give it to his folks?" Garrett suggested.

Lane winced. "His mother would shut the door in my face. Or worse."

"Then leave it. Somebody found my diary after I was dead, I hope they'd burn it."

"That incriminating?"

"I don't keep a diary, darlin'."

She looked down at the last page of writing, traced her finger over a drawing of a wave. "Chris wanted to do so many things. None of them ever happened."

"Did he choose the room you'd stay in?"

"I suppose. It was just an open room. Why?"

Garrett shifted in his chair. "That guy you saw in your closet? Tres thinks he was there for a reason. He found a wire, see. It might've been part of a bomb."

"A bomb."

"Yeah." Garrett felt guilty, heaping this on Lane after all

the other crap she'd been through. "My little bro, you know, he was just wondering—"

"Why a bomber would target my room."

"Something like that."

She closed the journal. She'd pulled her hair back in a ponytail, and Garrett liked the way it looked. He could see more of her face, her silver sand dollar earrings. She had a beautiful neck, smooth and white.

"Garrett, I've got skeletons in the closet. But Calavera isn't one of them. I don't know why he would bother with me."

"I figured it was crazy."

"But you had to ask."

"So these skeletons in your closet...it's not just your ex-husband, huh?"

"I don't keep a diary, either."

"Fair enough." He stared at the pocket of her T-shirt—Chris's T-shirt. It was decorated with a green crab and the words *Mike's Bar, Matamoros*. He and Alex had been there once. They'd borrowed the Navarre family sedan, told Garrett's parents they were going into Corpus Christi for

the day to search for a used car for Alex. Instead, they'd driven to the border for a few drinks. The memory weighed on Garrett like a lead apron.

"I need your advice," he told Lane.

"My advice? You hardly know me."

But Garrett felt like he knew her as well as he needed. He didn't know why, but he had no trouble talking to her, and he figured Lane must feel the same way. After all, she'd told him all about the murder her ex-husband had committed, that awful night they'd dragged the immigrant's body into the woods. Maybe with a person like Lane, you didn't need to keep a diary. She was a better place to record your thoughts.

"I want to know what to do," he admitted. He brought out the letter Alex had left for him, and told her what it said.

**Black plastic tarp and boards still blocked the end of the hall.** I ripped them away as best I could. The door itself didn't look particularly damaged. The knob turned, but it wouldn't open. I kicked it, gave it shoulder treatment. Nothing. As if it was barricaded from the inside.

I tried to convince myself it didn't matter. One blocked-off room. One more damaged area in a hotel that was falling apart. So what?

Then I noticed the number on the door: *102*. I was standing in front of the same room my parents and I had always stayed in—the last room they'd ever shared as a married couple.

I remembered at age twelve limping down this hallway, the sole of my right foot burning from a jellyfish sting. I'd been exploring the northern tip of the island, imagining I was hiding from Jean Laffitte's pirates, when I bravely charged the surf and stepped straight into a blue and red



bubble of pain.

My parents weren't anticipating me back until lunch. They expected me to take care of myself during the mornings. But I hobbled back to room 102, determined not to cry. Halfway down the corridor, I ran into Alex's father.

I'd only seen him around the island a few times before—cutting planks for a new dock or hammering tiles on the roof. He was a burly man. He had unruly blond hair like his son's, a scraggly beard, skin the color of saddle leather. His sun-faded clothes and unraveling straw cowboy hat always made me think of Robinson Crusoe. Up close, he smelled like whiskey, not so different from my father's smell, but Mr. Huff had a more kindly smile. There was an odd light in his eyes—the kind of look a sailor gets from staring too long at a watery horizon, as if the glare of the sun had burned permanently into his corneas.

He took one look at the way I was walking and said, "Jellyfish, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

A muffled shout came from down the hall—from behind my parents' door.

Mr. Huff pursed his lips. "Why don't you come to the kitchen, son? I'll put some baking soda on that sting."

“I want to see my parents.” My voice quivered. My foot felt as if it were melting.

“Son, it’s better you didn’t. Sometimes things have to get worse for a long time before they can get better.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about. He put his hand on my shoulder, but I jerked away and continued down the hall.

I heard the yelling. I should’ve known better, but I opened the door.

Little details: the shattered glass on the floor, liquor soaking into the carpet. The cut above my mother’s eye, a streak of blood trickling down her cheekbone. My father’s clenched fist, his gold college ring biting into the white flesh of his fingers.

“Get out!” my mother screamed. And in that heartbeat, I thought she was talking to me.

I turned and ran, the pain in my foot forgotten.

“Tres!” my father yelled.

I knew he was coming after me, but I kept running. I caught a glimpse of Mr. Huff’s face—pain and sympathy in his eyes. But he didn’t try to stop me. He didn’t intervene.

*Sometimes things have to get worse for a long time.*

Later, after my ill-fated fishing expedition with Alex, my mother found me and brought me back to the hotel room. The broken glass had been cleaned up. The cut on her eye was covered by a butterfly bandage. She treated my foot and tried not to cry as she explained that my father was gone. He'd taken the ferry back to the mainland without us. My mother and he were taking a little vacation from their marriage.

I didn't understand. In my mind, vacation meant Rebel Island. My dad was already *on* vacation. Where would he go?

Now, thinking back on that day, my foot began to ache again. I pressed my hand against the battered door of room 102 and imagined pushing it open, seeing my parents inside.

Why would Alex block off this room?

Only one way to find out. I turned and headed back toward the stairs.



**Lane Sanford was packing, but she closed her suitcase and** latched it when I came in.

“Here to see me or my closet?” she asked.

“Your closet,” I said. “Most popular one in the hotel.”

“Naturally.” She turned her back to me and bundled some clothes, then hesitated. Apparently she realized she needed to put them in the suitcase, but she’d closed it too quickly, and she didn’t want to open it in my presence.

“Did Garrett talk to you?” I asked.

She folded a pink dress. “About the bomb. Yes.”

“You sound pretty calm about it.”

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “That’s why.”

“I can show you the door.”

“Tres, I don’t believe anyone besides my husband would want to kill me. That’s what I mean. And frankly, a bomb isn’t Bobby’s style.”

There was tightness in her voice, like a guitar string tuned an octave too high.

“Were you and Chris Stowall involved?”

She shook her head. "Not the way you mean."

"In what way, then?"

"I told you. I'd known him since high school. Chris was no angel, but he came from a hard family. He knew how I felt. He would never hurt anyone..."

"Unless?"

She sat on her bed and looked up at me. "It doesn't matter now."

"Is that what you told Garrett?"

Her cheeks colored. "I told Garrett I was sorry we'd met like this. I told him Chris was a friend, trying to protect me. Chris offered me shelter. He offered me more help, too. But I refused."

"What kind of help?"

"To get my husband out of the way."

"To kill him."

"I don't think he could have done it. Not really. But he was angry. He said he knew someone who could."

"Calavera."

“I don’t know.”

“Chris used the same threat on Ty and Markie. He was helping them run drugs, pressuring them for more money. He seemed to like having Calavera as an ace up his sleeve.”

“Chris tried to help me, Tres. He didn’t deserve to die for that.”

The tone of her voice made me wonder if I’d completely misread Stowall’s feelings for her. “You talk about him as if he was a relative.”

She got up and took her suitcase. “The closet is all yours. I’ll take my things to Garrett’s room.”

She said it defiantly, daring me to protest her moving in with Garrett.

“Lane, was Chris your brother?”

The look in her eyes was close to pity, as if she felt sorry for how little I understood the world. “Tres, my married name was Stowall. Chris was my *husband’s* brother. That’s why he knew how much danger I was in.”



**The secret stairway was still there. I was kind of hoping it** wouldn't be, but I was used to not getting what I hoped for.

I thought about Lane Sanford, and how she'd ended up with such an inconvenient room. I wondered if Chris had given her this room for some reason. I was no longer sure what to make of it.

If Chris had made plans to help Lane against his homicidal brother, it made sense that he'd want an escape plan, including a lot of money. I remembered the little pictures Chris had drawn in his journal, the photo of Waikiki Beach on his mirror. Perhaps he still believed he could convince Lane to go with him. In time, he could get her to love him. A surfer's happily-ever-after. Pretty simplistic. But I couldn't blame him for holding out hopes for Lane. As near as I could tell, she and Alex Huff were the only ones who'd ever given Chris a chance at a clean slate. Chris had messed things up pretty bad.

I took a deep breath and headed into the stairwell. This time I went down instead of up.

I almost fell through on the third step. It cracked as I put

my weight on it and I flailed out, catching something with my hand that turned out to be a large nail. The metal bit into my palm. I could feel it bleeding, but I didn't want to look. One more souvenir I'd have from my honeymoon—a tetanus shot. I examined the remaining steps with my flashlight and found that they were in pretty bad shape.

I tested each one. Five steps down, two of them broke with a light kick. Finally, I managed to half walk, half wall-climb my way to the bottom, which was still covered in an inch or so of salt water. Unfortunately, there was another secret door. It opened into a closet, which opened into room 102. I didn't have to look around very long to see the place had been converted for use by a valued member of the hotel family. The assassin Calavera.



**“Come in here,” I told Garrett.**

He didn't look too happy about it. I'd ripped down the plastic and boards, and removed the blockade of furniture inside the door, but the floor was still tough to navigate with a wheelchair. Besides, Garrett knew I wouldn't have asked him to come down here unless I wanted him to see something important and unwelcome.



“Look around,” I told him. “What do you notice?”

I tried not to sound harsh. At least I think I kept my tone pretty cool. But Garrett winced like I was beating him up.

“Some of Alex’s old stuff,” he said. “His board. His fishing gear. That’s the poster I got him in Frisco.”

I resisted the urge to correct him. Nobody who’d ever lived in San Francisco called it *Frisco* any more than natives called San Antonio *San Antone*. There was something improper about it, like calling your mother *Toots*.

“What else?” I asked him.

“A refrigerator.”

“The power is off,” I said. “You can open it.”

He looked confused by this statement, but he wheeled over and did as I suggested. Inside was no food. Only chemicals. Bricks of plastic explosives. Coils of copper wire. A selection of pipes and timing devices.

“A bomb maker’s supply cabinet,” I told him. “Notice the security system?”

“What?” Garrett looked dazed.

"The light," I said. "Look at the refrigerator light."

He stared at the green metal orb where the light should've been. "That looks like a grenade."

"It is," I said. "Old drug dealer's trick. You put a lightbulb cap on the grenade, stick the filaments inside. When the door opens, the electric current hits the explosives. Anyone who comes snooping and doesn't know to unplug the refrigerator first—"

"Jesus."

"I almost didn't unplug it. It occurred to me when my hand was on the handle."

He looked at me like I was a ghost. "Tres, there's no way Alex... This can't be his stuff."

I didn't bother to argue. The room spoke for itself.

Garrett picked up something from the workbench. A red plastic guitar pick. It sat there amid timing fuses and pliers and a pile of firing caps. "Alex couldn't kill people."

"He was in the army."

"He was a cook."

"Not where he started." I handed him some papers I'd

found in the file cabinet—army transcripts. “He had demolition training, but he was transferred out.”

Garrett looked up blankly. “Transferred...why?”

“I don’t know. But he had the skills to make bombs.”

“He made fricking *fireworks*!”

“A good cover for getting some of the supplies he needed.”

Garrett shook his head. “No way. I can’t buy it.”

I’d expected denial. I didn’t push him. There was nothing I could say that was more convincing than just being here, in the place where Alex had fashioned his IEDs.

“Look, little bro.” Garrett’s voice was ragged. “Alex is a victim here. He’s missing, remember? He’s—he’s probably been murdered.”

“Or he made it look that way.”

“Come on! Can you see Alex blowing people up? Or shooting a lawman in the chest? Or hitting his own manager on the back of the head?”

He waved the guitar pick as if it were weightier evidence than all the bomb-making equipment.

“Garrett, Alex went out of his way to barricade this room. He lied about the ceiling collapsing. He knew what was in here. He *had* to. He was making bombs.”

“What do you want me to say? You want me to turn on my last goddamn friend?”

In the daylight from the unboarded windows, Garrett’s beard looked grayer than usual. His shirt was pale blue with a fading parrot on it, a remembrance of Buffett concerts past. He looked exhausted and defeated, but he’d still taken the time this morning to comb his hair, the same way he’d done on the Fourth of July, so many years ago, hoping to impress a girl.

“We need to find Alex,” I said. “He was ready to surrender before this weekend. He started negotiating with the marshals, anyway. We need to convince him to give up.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you, little bro?”

“Yeah, Garrett. It’s been a hell of an enjoyable weekend. Exactly the honeymoon I had in mind.”

He wheeled himself over to the refrigerator and stared at the equipment inside.

In the silence, I heard something in the hall—a wet floor-board creaking. I tensed, looking around for something to

use as a weapon, but there was nothing except my flashlight and several pounds of high-grade explosives. I opted for the flashlight.

I peeked outside. There was no one in the hall, yet I caught a scent that wasn't salt water or mildew or even death. It was the faint amber scent that might have been Benjamin Lindy's cologne.



**When I came back into the workroom, Garrett had unscrewed** the grenade and was holding it in his lap.

"Where is he?" Garrett asked.

"Who?"

"Alex. If he's hiding, we have to find him. Where is he?"

I thought about Benjamin Lindy, and what he might have overheard if he'd been eavesdropping. I thought about where a man could go on an island this size in the middle of a hurricane.

"I think," I said, "it's high time we visited the lighthouse."



**Calavera checked his watch. Only minutes left now.**

His things were safely stashed away. He would retrieve the money later, after the storm had passed. Then he would disappear for good.

What would the police think? They would have little to go on. They would scratch their heads about Alex Huff's fate, but eventually they would drop the case. They would accept the easy answer, because it meant less work.

No one would escape to contradict his story. He would make sure of that.

He looked at the last candy skull in his hand.

He had never meant it to be a calling card. The skull was a tribute, left at his early kills to remind himself of a dying child—a lone eleven-year-old girl.

It had been only one of many atrocities he'd seen in the

army. Why this one stuck with him, he didn't know. He came into the hut just as his comrades had finished their business. They slashed the girl's throat to silence her. The killer turned to face him, his eyes glazed. The blade of his knife glistened red. Calavera watched the girl die. He saw the light go out of her eyes. Her family was already dead. No one would grieve for her or even know what had happened.

And Calavera said nothing. He walked out of the hut and carried on, checking for weapon caches.

But he memorized the faces of the attackers. Within a week, all three of them had died. Freak accidents: the first blown apart by a land mine where no land mine should've been; another burned alive by an incendiary bomb; the third the victim of a defective grenade. Afterward, before his division left the area, Calavera went back to the location of that hut—now a smoking pile of ruins—and placed an offering to the girl: a few cookies, a wilted flower, a candy skull.

Her death kept things in proportion for him. If an innocent like her could die senselessly, why should he feel guilt? Why not take the money of the wicked to kill the wicked?

Even so, he had tried to stop. He had thought the days of Calavera were behind him, until New Year's Eve.



Now it was different. He had to kill indiscriminately to protect the only thing he cared about.

*It isn't too late, he thought. I could stop it now I could warn them.*

He threw the candy skull into the corner. There would be no tributes today. This was about survival.

He made sure his gun was loaded. Then he went out to complete his plans.

**On our way out we passed the dining room, which is why I saw Jose with the bodies.**

“Wait for me,” I told Garrett.

“Why?” Then he saw what I saw, and he didn’t look too anxious to follow.

In the dining room, Jose had laid out the two dead bodies on tables, each wrapped in white linen. I could tell which corpse was Chris Stowall. He was frozen in the fetal position. The other, Longoria, I would’ve been able to recognize from the smell. A day of death had mingled unpleasantly with his regular Old Spice.

Jose stared at the two men the way he might study a dinner setting, wondering whether he’d put the salad forks on the correct side.

“You moved them,” I said. I have a talent for stating the obvious.

“Everyone was packing, señor. It seemed to me if we leave...”

He didn't finish the thought, but I got it. *The dead have to leave, too.*

When the police finally got here, they were going to have a forensics hissy fit. The bodies had been moved so many times. Yet Jose's feelings seemed sensible, somehow. He was tidying up. Looking out for the guests. Even Longoria deserved some measure of final respect. Or maybe I'd just been spending too much time in this damn hotel.

There was a jangling sound from the kitchen, and Imelda appeared in the doorway, flipping through a big ring of keys. “Jose, I can't—”

She stopped when she saw me. Her eyes were pink from crying. The keys in her hand looked like the same set Jose had used the night before, to let me look through the office.

“It's all right, *mi amor*,” Jose assured her. “I'm almost ready.”

Imelda met my eyes briefly, set the keys on the nearest table and backed out of the room. Not for the first time, I had the sense she wanted to tell me something, but I'd begun to wonder if that was just the way Imelda was—perpetually frustrated by her inability to express all the

strange horrors she'd seen in her life.

When she was gone, Jose pocketed the keys. He picked up two tins of marigolds from the floor—the same marigolds that had been on his altar upstairs—and set them at the feet of each corpse. I wondered if he'd packed up his old pictures, too, and the *ofrendas* for his ancestors.

"You'll leave the bodies here?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, señor." Then he focused on me, as if realizing that this was an odd place for me to be. "Where are you going?"

"To look for your boss."

Jose kept the same stoic look he'd had folding linen over the corpses. "Do not, señor. Please. It isn't worth it."

"You're trying to protect him?"

Jose said nothing. He picked up a bottle of tequila from the wet bar.

"You've suspected Alex for a while, haven't you?" I asked.

"Help will come soon, señor. Let the police handle things. You should take your wife outside. Wait there."

His tone was about as convincing as the cologne on the

dead marshal.

"I'm going to the lighthouse," I said. "Come with me, in case it's locked."

"Only Mr. Huff kept a key to the lighthouse. No one will be there. Now forgive me, señor, but I need to finish setting things in order."

*Putting the house in dying order.* That's what my mother used to call it whenever she made me clean my room before our summer trips to Rebel Island. She never laid out corpses on the dining table, though.

I left Jose making his *ofrendas*—pouring shots of tequila for two dead men.



**Outside, the rain had waned to a drizzle. I could almost tell** where the sun was behind the blanket of clouds. There was still nothing on the sea but wreckage—no sign of a boat, a fish, a bird. The water was receding around the island. The northern stretch was still gone, but the main beach was almost back to where I remembered. The pilings of the boat dock jutted above the waterline. A

Volkswagen-sized metal drum, like a septic tank, had washed ashore nearby.

The lighthouse was locked. It had a solid door, weathered oak with a deadbolt. I stared at it resentfully. That didn't convince it to open.

"He ain't in there," Garrett said. "Probably locked it when you two left last night."

"No," I said. "He didn't lock it."

"Well, it doesn't matter, 'cause we can't get in."

"Back up," I said. "Way back."

"No way you're gonna try busting that down."

I hefted Maia's .357. Hastily, Garrett wheeled himself way back. I put my face next to the door and yelled, "Alex, if you're in there, move away from the door."

I stepped back about fifteen feet.

In a lot of movies, I've seen people stand next to the door and shoot down at the lock, which always struck me as particularly stupid. The lock is metal. What you're likely to get is killed by ricochet or peppered with splinters.

I shot three times down the center line of the door—top,

middle, bottom. The .357 made three decent-size holes. I kicked the middle. The door split in half like a piece of perforated paper.

Inside, morning light filtered from the windows high above. Canvas sacks were stacked in one corner. Against the opposite wall were a table and chair and a bedraggled man slumped over with his head cradled in his arms.

“Alex,” Garrett said.

Alex Huff’s red shirt was ripped across the back. He wasn’t wearing any shoes and his feet were bleeding. He seemed to be asleep.

He reminded me of a murderer I’d seen once in a police station—a guy who’d been caught after torturing three women. He’d been hauled into the station, put in an interrogation room to sweat. Far from getting agitated, the man had fallen asleep instantly, like he was relieved to be caught.

“Yo, Alex.” Garrett wheeled himself over and shook his friend’s shoulder. I stayed at the broken door. One of my bullets had chipped off a section of the limestone wall just above Alex’s head. If Alex had stood up, he would’ve died.

He didn’t wake when Garrett shook him, but he sighed deeply. An empty tequila bottle rolled off the table and clunked on the gravel floor.

I stepped closer, my finger still on the trigger, though I was pretty sure Alex wasn't faking. He smelled of tequila. His bare arms were crisscrossed with glass cuts.

I pulled him upright by his hair and he grunted, his mouth slack. His eyes opened and rolled back in his head and he coughed on his own spit.

"Alex," I said. "Wake up."

"Waaa."

"Get up, man," Garrett said. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

Alex blinked. He struggled to focus on everything around him, scowling, as if Garrett's question were an exceptionally good one. Then something seemed to occur to him. His expression turned miserable, and he put his head back down in his arms. "No," he groaned. "No, no..."

"Alex," I said. "We found the room with the bomb materials."

He mumbled something I couldn't make out.

"Come on, Alex!" Garrett pleaded. "Explain this to me, man. Please."



“Hotel,” he muttered. “My hotel.”

“What about it?” I asked.

He raised his head. The pain in his eyes told of a man who’d lost everything in the world.

“Is it over?” he asked me. “Has it blown up yet?”



**I ran into Markie in the lobby. Ran him over, actually.**

“Get out,” I told him.

“What?”

“Now! Where’s Ty and Chase?”

“In the parlor with Lane and the old dude. But—”

“Get them all and get out of the building.”

I think he asked me what was going on, but I’d given him as much time as I planned to. I sprinted up the steps to find Maia. My vision was tunneling. My mouth tasted like salt. Nothing mattered except getting her and getting out.

She was in our bedroom, curled up asleep, but her eyelids fluttered as soon as I touched her shoulder.

“Mmm?” she said.

“Fresh air time.”

“What?”

“Come outside.”

She studied my face, her sleepiness quickly dissolving.  
“What’s wrong?”

“We need to get outside.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

I was tempted to pick her up and carry her, but I knew she’d never allow it, and I wasn’t sure I could do it safely. As it was, I let her lean against me as we took the stairs. Every step I imagined as a trip wire, a second ticking off a clock. I said nothing. I didn’t want to make Maia upset. But the house was now a minefield.

Maia didn’t ask. She knew it was that serious.

We got to the bottom of the steps and saw Ty, Markie

and Chase lugging suitcases out the front door.

“A boat’s here?” Chase’s eyes were desperate, like a death row inmate waiting for a pardon.

“No, no boat.”

*Just get out of our way!* I wanted to scream.

Finally we were outside. I guided Maia across the dunes, as far from the house as I could get her. Garrett’s wheelchair was stuck in the wet sand and he’d given up on it. He was sitting on an intact section of boardwalk next to the ruins of the pier. The wind swept his hair to one side. Lane sat with him, hugging him tight. Chase, Ty and Markie plopped their suitcases down and sat on them, watching me. Benjamin Lindy was there, dressed in a funeral suit, his face as gray as the clouds. He gave me a steely look.

“Jose and Imelda,” I said. “Where are they?”

Nobody answered. Nobody seemed to know.

I cursed.

“What’s going on, Tres?” Lindy asked me. “Where is Alex Huff?”

If I had been thinking more clearly, I would’ve caught the deadly resolve in his voice, like a machine that had been

set to automatic. But I had other concerns.

“Stay here,” I told Maia. “Do *not* follow me.”

I ran for the house.

Inside: first floor. No one in the dining room except the corpses. They looked wet and they smelled terrible—doused in tequila. I didn’t have time to give their smell much thought. The kitchen was empty. The parlor and the office, nothing. I yelled for Jose and Imelda. No answer. I ran upstairs.

Third floor: Jose and Imelda’s room. The little altar had been cleared away. Some clothes had been packed and removed. The bed hadn’t been made.

The closet was open. One suitcase on the floor. Empty coat hangers. Their window had been un-barricaded. I looked outside; I wasn’t sure why. At the back end of the house, a line of battered dunes led down to the old boathouse where I’d scuttled the fishing boat the night before. And there were Jose and Imelda, just going into the boathouse. Imelda turned. She looked at the house, as if saying goodbye. She found her own window and locked eyes with me. For a brief second, she wasn’t sure who she was looking at—a ghost, perhaps. Then her eyes widened.

That’s when I heard the first noise. From the opposite side of the hotel, a rumble, like an approaching earthquake.

The floor trembled.

And then a strange clicking sound nearby, like a toy being wound up.

I focused on the suitcase in the closet. The noise was coming from inside it.

I hurled myself against the window and the room erupted in flames.



**I imagined Mr. Eli looking down at me, his face illuminated** by fireworks. Alex's father stood next to him. There were others there, too, but I couldn't make out their faces.

"Alex will make me proud someday," Mr. Eli said. "He has a good heart."

Mr. Huff grunted. "Nothing but trouble, if you ask me. Must've gotten that from his mother."

Mr. Eli didn't answer. In the next explosion, I saw Ralph Arguello's face illuminated. He smiled at me, like we were

sharing a good joke. Peter Brazos stood next to him, his eyes red and his face haggard. He held a candy skull in his hands.

“*Vato*,” Ralph greeted me. “It’s *loco* who you choose to sacrifice yourself for, ain’t it? Just gotta hope they make the best of it, eh?”

Red and orange starbursts lit up the sky, interlocking spheres of color.

I seemed to be moving, as if I were lying in a boat, slipping out to sea. Alex was taking me fishing again—back into the channel with the sharks.

He had a good heart, unless you asked him about his dead mother. He would hide me. He’d get me away from my father.

*You can’t hide on this island, runt.*



**I opened my eyes and saw nothing.**

I was being dragged backward through the sand, Maia’s

voice saying: "He's bleeding. We need bandages."

I hurt in so many places I was pretty sure I was dead. My left leg felt like it was broken. Something smelled like smoke, and I was afraid it was me.

I saw Ty's face above me. I was being carried away from the hotel, or what was left of it. The windows were boiling with fire. Smoke billowed into the sky. The building had been gutted, at least three explosions, maybe more. Already I could see the walls thinning, gobbled up from the inside by heat.

I sat up and blacked out. Maia was making a fuss, but I managed to promise her I was okay. She didn't look reassured. There was a deep gash on my arm that Jose was wrapping in his own shirt. My leg...I didn't think it was broken anymore, but I wouldn't be doing tai chi exercises any time soon.

I'd been very lucky, landing on the sand.

"Jesus," Garrett said. "The hotel—"

"Did everyone make it out?" Lane asked.

Markie said, "Where's Huff?"

"The lighthouse," Garrett said.

Chase paled. "Mr. Lindy."

"What?" I croaked. I looked around and realized the old man wasn't in the group. Surely he hadn't gone in after me?

"I saw him," Chase said. "He went up that way, toward the lighthouse. He had a gun."



**Ty shivered on the beach. His eyes stung from the smoke,** but he was glad to be outside. He couldn't imagine anything better than watching that horrible old building burn.

"Calavera will shoot us now." Chase paced a rut in the sand. "So what if we got out of the building?"

"Maybe not," Markie said halfheartedly. "He can't take us all." He had a smudge of ash on his jaw like war paint, but it made him look ridiculous. For the first time, Ty didn't feel afraid of him. After seeing the Mexicans in the boat, Ty found it hard to be scared of his companions. He'd seen the real threat, and it had calmed his nerves. If the Mexicans decided he needed to die, there wasn't much he could do about it.

"He'll fucking execute us," Chase insisted. "There's no help coming. Nothing."

Ty scanned the ocean. The rain had stopped. He still felt claustrophobic. The island was too small. His skin itched

with the need to leave. But it was so much better than being inside that hotel.

Suddenly he knew what he would do. If he got off this island, he would quit school and head back to the ranch. The hell with what his father said. The hell with Chase and Markie. He would work cattle the way his family had done since his great-grandparents' time. He would live under the open skies again, and if the Mexicans ever came after him, he would see them coming. They would learn how well he could shoot.

A dark spot appeared on the horizon. Ty watched as it got bigger. Then he started to laugh, because he knew either death or rescue was coming, and he wouldn't have to wait much longer.

"What's your problem?" Markie growled.

"A boat." Ty pointed to the sleek black cruiser that was racing straight toward Rebel Island.

**The first gunshot came as I reached the lighthouse doorway.**

Normally, this would not have inclined me to rush inside, but things weren't normal. Benjamin Lindy was standing in the middle of the room, a .22 in his hand. I didn't know how he'd found a second gun. At the moment, it was not my first concern.

Alex Huff was still sitting at the table. He was hunched over, fingers laced together, like a man in casual prayer. There was a bullet hole in the floorboards between his feet.

"To answer your question," Lindy told him, "it *is* loaded."

Both men saw me at the same time.

Lindy turned the gun on me. "No offense, son. But I'd like you to step outside. You won't be taking my sidearm twice."

"Don't do this, Lindy."

“Mr. Huff is the only one who can dissuade me,” Lindy said. “And I’m sorry to say he hasn’t done much on that count.”

Alex looked dazed. I doubted he could’ve mounted a rational defense even if he’d been so inclined. And he did not look inclined.

Black smoke drifted into the lighthouse from the burning hotel. The heat on my back was intense. I figured there was a good chance the building frame would collapse against the lighthouse and kill us all—or at least those of us Lindy didn’t shoot first.

“It’s all gone, isn’t it?” Alex tried to focus on me. I wasn’t sure if he realized who I was. “The hotel. Everything.”

“You destroyed it,” Lindy told him. “You killed my daughter. Her two little girls. You tried to kill everyone on this island. You will account for that, sir.”

The smoke stung my eyes. The roar of the burning house was louder than the storm the night before.

Alex swallowed. He looked at Lindy with an expression of pain, maybe even regret. “It’s not the way you think.”

“You deny you killed them?”

Alex looked down.

Outside, a distant voice yelled, "Hey! Heeeeeey!"

It sounded like Ty down by the beach, as if he were trying to get someone's attention. Almost as if he was hailing a boat.

Too optimistic, I thought. I couldn't be that lucky.

Garrett would be coming up behind me sooner or later. I didn't know how he would make it up the path, but I knew he would try. I wanted this resolved before he got here. Unfortunately, Lindy still had his gun pointed in my direction.

"Lindy," I said, "when your wife left you, you know where she went?"

His jaw clenched. "That is none of your business."

"She left you for another man. Alex's father. She came here, to Rebel Island."

Lindy's gun hand sagged. I thought about jumping him, but his expression made me hesitate. The old man looked like he was collapsing from the inside, like someone had set off a fire-bomb in his chest and any second it would burn through his skin.

I turned to Alex. "The statue you made. That was your

mother.”

“She died of cancer when I was young,” Alex murmured. “My father never got over it.”

“Rachel was your half sister,” I said. “After the bombing, you saw her picture in the papers. You realized who she was.”

Alex closed his eyes tight. Then he nodded.

“That’s why you tried to turn yourself in,” I said. “You realized you’d killed your own sister.”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Alex said. “I didn’t—”

“Liar.” Lindy turned the gun on Alex. I tackled the old man just as he fired.

Unfortunately, my balance was off. My leg was hurt and I was weak from the fall I’d taken. We both went down and I slammed my head on the table’s edge.

Maybe Alex hadn’t been as dazed as I thought, or maybe the adrenaline was just counteracting the booze. He bolted for the door but Lindy was already back on his feet, blocking the way. There was only one other way for Alex to go—up.

He took the stairs as Lindy fired again. And somewhere

down at the beach, I heard Ty yelling.



**I was staggering up the stairs as fast as I could. The eighty-year-old** man beat me by a mile.

By the time I got to the little landing at the top of the tower, Alex Huff had realized the obvious—there was no way out—and had turned to face his accuser.

Benjamin Lindy didn't try to stop me from climbing into the room. His gun was an arm's length from Alex Huff's forehead. If I tried to tackle him, if I interfered...the gun would go off.

Both men were breathing hard, completely focused on one another.

Out the windows behind Alex, gray sea stretched to the horizon, but there was something startling nearby—a black boat slicing through the waves, headed for the shore. It seemed impossible—an intrusion from some other world. After twenty-four hours of isolation, I would've been less astonished to see angels streaming from the sky.

"The Coast Guard," I said.

Neither man moved.

"Lindy," I said. "The Coast Guard is here. They'll take Alex into custody."

"You tried to make a deal for your life," the old man told Alex. "After all you've done."

"You don't understand."

"You contacted the Marshal's Office."

"No."

"I won't let you go free," Lindy promised. "I won't let you just disappear."

"He won't go free," I told Lindy. "Not with Longoria dead. They won't make any deals with him now. Let the law handle this, Mr. Lindy. Put the gun down."

"I didn't kill Rachel," Alex said.

No statement could've infuriated Lindy more.

"Try an apology," the old man said. "Plead for your life."

Outside, the boat bobbed closer. Several men stood at the prow. Out the opposite window, a column of smoke



billowed up from the hotel—wet wood and plaster and carpet going up in a blaze.

“We have to get out of here,” Alex said. “The rest will go soon.”

“He’s right,” I told Lindy. “There’s enough explosive material in the bomb room to blow up ten hotels. It’ll take out this tower.”

“Don’t change the subject,” Lindy growled. “I want to hear why you killed my Rachel. I want to hear you justify that.”

“Lindy,” I said. “He’s all that’s left of your wife. Let him stand trial, but don’t kill him.”

Lindy’s finger tightened on the trigger. Alex locked eyes with me. He was trying to tell me something. Like a silent apology.

Too late, I realized what he was going to do. He made a desperate grab for Benjamin Lindy’s hand, and the gun fired.

The shot pushed Alex against the window. The glass cracked under his weight but didn’t break. He slumped to the floor, holding his chest, his shirt already soaked with blood.

“Go,” Alex groaned. “Hurry.”

I knelt at his side. His face was colorless. He clutched his shirt, struggling to breathe, just like Ralph Arguello had done the night he died.

“I’ll help you,” I told him.

Alex shook his head.

Then he closed his eyes and didn’t move again.

The hotel rumbled behind us as another section collapsed into flames.

“Tres!” Garrett shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

I rose to face Benjamin Lindy. His face was blank, like a man who had decided his life was over.

“I’m done here,” he said simply. And he dropped the gun.



**Garrett and Lane were waiting at the bottom of the stairs.** Both looked sweaty and out of breath. Garrett was in his chair. Apparently, Lane had helped him up the path.

"We heard the shots," Garrett said. "Where is Alex?"

"Upstairs," I said.

I guess my tone said the rest.

Garrett focused on Lindy. "You bastard."

Garrett took out the .357—Maia's gun. My luck keeping track of weapons had never been worse.

"Your friend murdered my daughter," Lindy said. "Do what you need to."

He did not look concerned. He looked strangely like Alex Huff—as if he were caught in a riptide he couldn't possibly control.

"He wasn't a murderer," Garrett said. "He couldn't have been."

"Garrett," I said. "There could be more explosions. We need to get out of here."

"This bastard killed Alex in cold blood." Garrett's voice trembled. "You didn't stop him? You let him?"

I wanted to protest, but he was right. After months of reliving Ralph Arguello's death, wishing I could've thrown myself in front of the gun that took my best friend's life—

now another man had died the same way, right in front of me. And I hadn't been able to stop it.

Garrett nodded, like he was reading my thoughts. "Well, then, don't stop me now, little bro. You just keep on being a spectator."

He raised the gun.

"Garrett, no." Lane stepped between him and Benjamin Lindy. She knelt down in front of Garrett so they were eye to eye.

"Lane, get out of the way."

"I won't." She sounded more determined than I'd ever heard her. "You can't kill him. You're not like that."

"He shot my friend."

Lane cupped her hands on his knees. "Garrett, you promised to help me. Now let me help you. We're going to go down to that boat together. No one else is going to die."

"I don't need help."

"Yes, you do, love." She turned her palms up. "Give me the gun."

Garrett's face was gray with pain. He arched his back as

if he were trying desperately to stand—to use the legs he'd lost twenty years ago. Then he slumped back in his chair, defeated. He dropped the gun into Lane's hands.

The four of us were almost to the beach when the hotel disintegrated.

**Calavera** watched the smoke boil into the sky. **Windows** melted. The southwest gable collapsed with a sound like distant thunder.

He could not enjoy the explosion. Nothing had gone right. Some had died, perhaps. He wasn't sure. But too many had gotten free.

*Your own fault*, he chided himself. *You set the explosion too late in the morning. Your will was weak.*

The gun felt heavy in his pocket. The solution would not be so clean now, but he would have to act soon.

Across the island, someone was shouting. Another wall of the house collapsed in on itself. A tongue of flame curled up the side of the roof.

Soon, the only place that had ever offered him sanctuary would be a pile of rubble and ash. Maybe that's really what he'd been after with the bombs—destroying this place. He

had no heart for killing anymore. But this place had let him down. He'd let himself believe he could change his life here, find peace at last. And the island had deceived him.

Whether he wanted to kill or not, he had to protect his last secret. He had no choice.

And so he put his hand in his pocket, felt the rough cross-hatching of the gun handle, and waited.

**I watched the remaining palmetto trees burn. Stripped to the trunks by the storm, they leaned sideways from the wreckage of the hotel and smoldered like birthday candles on a stomped cake.**

The hotel had gone up in a second blast of glory, just as Alex predicted. Boards and plaster and ashes were sprayed across the dunes and against the lighthouse. The heat had cracked the tower's side. The glass top had melted and collapsed, and as we watched, the structure's cracks widened.

The poor captain of the Coast Guard boat wasn't quite sure what to do with us. He was a reservist, a former merchant marine, probably—the kind of guy who knew boats and storms and preferred both to humans. From the trapped look he gave us, I thought he probably would just as soon leave us stranded and sail away. He had a crew of two, both of whom looked pale and shaken from a night riding out the storm. They had sidearms, but I doubt they'd



ever used them. The captain told one of the men to radio in our situation.

“Radio who, sir?” the guy wanted to know.

The captain frowned impatiently. “Everyone, I guess.”



**Maia and I sat on the beach watching the clouds break and** the ruins burn. It seemed insulting that the sun should break through the clouds so brilliantly after the weekend we'd had. Gulls were starting to reappear. Sand crabs dug their way out of the surf, bubbling little geysers to clear their tunnels. The sea wind blew the smoke and ashes toward the mainland and fanned the flames.

The heat was finally too much for the lighthouse. The cracks deepened and the tower crumbled, imploding on itself in a pile of charred white blocks and burning boards.

“Nothing left,” Maia said.

The way she said it, I got the feeling she was talking about more than the buildings.

I put my hand on her belly. Normally, this irritated her—another sign of my constant worry. But this time I think she realized that I was doing it for a different reason. I needed reassurance—not that the baby was all right, but that I was.

She put her hands over mine. “I felt him kick a minute ago.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“You were busy almost getting killed.”

“That’s no excuse. I’m always busy almost getting killed.”

She shrugged, conceding the point.

One of the Coast Guard guys came up and offered us granola bars and water, but neither of us was hungry.

“An EMT is en route, ma’am.” He looked nervously at Maia’s belly. I figured it would probably make his day if he had to assist in childbirth. We thanked him, and as soon as he was sure that Maia was not going to start labor immediately, he nodded and moved off with visible relief.

“The police won’t have much of a crime scene,” I said.

Maia nodded. “What will you tell them about Lindy?”

The old man was sitting at the top of a sand dune, staring

out at the sea. His white hair was blown the wrong way, like a frosty wave. His expression was empty. I imagined he could turn to stone up there and no one would know the difference.

I wondered if Lindy might go free for killing Alex Huff. The crime scene, the body, the evidence would be hard to use. Not impossible, but it would take an act of will to bring charges against a well-known local attorney and make them stick. I wondered what the D.A., Peter Brazos, would think of all this.

"I'll tell the truth," I told Maia. "Not sure it will do any good."

"Lindy wants to be punished." Maia was sizing the old man up, the way I'd seen her do many times with clients. "It fits with his idea of right and wrong."

"Some system."

"Everybody needs closure," she replied. "This is his. He'll want people to know he took his revenge. He succeeded."

*He succeeded.*

I remembered Alex's attitude in the lighthouse—fatalistic, resigned. But also denying that he was a killer. *I didn't kill Rachel.*

It may have been his shot nerves, the cumulative effect of

years of a double life that made him sound so convincing. But his denial bothered me.

I looked down the beach where Markie was talking with the boat captain. Telling survivor stories. Ty stood to one side, calmly eating a granola bar. Chase was sitting in the boat like a kid ready to go home. He had an orange blanket around his shoulders, though the sun was rapidly warming things up. When he met my eyes, he asked me a silent, anxious question—*Will you tell the police about the drug running?* His weekend of panic behind him, reality was starting to sink in. He was beginning to realize that he might go to jail, or worse.

Garrett and Lane were talking nearby in the shade of the washed-up oil tank. Lane was sitting on her suitcase, Garrett in his chair. They were holding hands.

The waves washed the beach. The fires seemed to be burning out. Soon, Rebel Island would be just another sandy dot along the Gulf Coast. No distinguishing features. Its stubborn landmarks finally scoured off the map.

Something was wrong. It took me a minute to think what.

“Where are Jose and Imelda?” I asked.

I stood.

Maia’s face turned pale. “You don’t think they were

inside?”

I looked at the burning wreckage of the hotel and the crumbled tower. “I’ll be back.”

Maia asked where I was going. There was, she reminded me, no place left to go.

“Almost no place,” I agreed. And I headed toward the ruins.



**The Coast Guard guys paid me no attention. They were** making no effort to contain people, or keep us separated the way any cop would know to do in a crime scene. These guys were first responders. Their job was to rescue us, feed us. Not interrogate us. That was just as well. At this point, no amount of investigation was going to bring justice.

I imagined Benjamin Lindy would say the same thing.

I walked around the side of the hotel. The path was still there in places—gravel and paving stones blown with wet sand in a tortoiseshell pattern. I made my way past a

burning tree trunk, a broken rowboat oar, a spray of sodden clothing half buried in the sand. Gnats wove a hazy cloud above the sea grass. Sand fleas had survived, too. They were delighted to find my legs—fresh meat walking through their territory.

The heat of the building was not as intense now. I could walk next to it without feeling like my shirt would combust. My leg still felt like it would collapse on me any minute, but I managed to hobble over the rise and down the other side of the island.

The boathouse was the only structure still standing, though ashes had settled on its blue-shingled roof along with an odd assortment of other flotsam—a few dead fish, some seaweed and part of a shrimper's net. The door was open. Jose was standing in the doorway, watching me approach as if he'd been waiting.



**He had changed clothes. He wore jeans and a red beach** shirt and sandals that all reminded me uncomfortably of Alex Huff's wardrobe. As I got closer, I realized it *was* Alex Huff's wardrobe.

"Is Imelda all right?" I asked.

Jose considered for a moment, then gestured inside the boathouse.

"The Coast Guard is here," I said.

"Yes. I saw them." His eyes drifted up toward the hotel. "Did you find Mr. Huff?"

"We found him."

"Was he—"

He faltered as Imelda came up behind him. She, too, had changed clothes—a simple gray cotton dress. Her hair was pulled back and her face looked older in the sunlight—her wrinkles deeper, her eyes sunken and pale.

"Señor," she said. "Is—is your wife all right?"

"She got out before the explosion," I said. "Barely."

Imelda's shoulders relaxed a little. "I am glad."

"You two made it out as well," I noticed.

"We were lucky," Jose said. I noticed the *señor* was gone, no doubt burned up with the linens and the kitchenware and the dead bodies.

“The police will be here soon,” I told him. “They’ll hear the story of Calavera. I think we should talk before they get here.”

I nodded toward the doorway. Jose regarded me, then said reluctantly, “Yes. Perhaps we should.”



**Inside the boathouse, Jose and Imelda’s possessions** **were** stacked neatly against one wall. Two battered suitcases, a few cardboard moving boxes spotted from the rain, a garment bag full of clothes.

“Lucky,” I said. “You just had time to pack everything you own and move it out here.”

Imelda twisted the top button on her dress. She backed up, looking for a place to sit down, but there wasn’t much—just the fishing boat, half submerged on its side in the slip, a few piles of ropes, a bait bucket. The water in the slip sloshed angrily. The doors had come loose. One banged back and forth against the other, showing snapshots of the gray sea outside.

Imelda said, “Señor, we didn’t—”



“Imelda was upset,” Jose interrupted. “I told her I would move our things.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “Since you knew the house would blow up.”

Jose’s expression was as calm as a career gambler’s. “Señor?”

“You did have the key to the lighthouse. You just didn’t want me getting in there and finding Alex.”

He shook his head. “Why would I do that?”

“Maybe because Imelda ~~was~~ upset. Killing Jesse Longoria to protect your identity was one thing. Killing Chris Stowall, even. You never trusted him. But Alex was a friend. He helped you, gave you refuge. I don’t think Imelda wanted him killed. So you stashed him away in the lighthouse instead, doped up and drunk, until you took care of the rest of us.”

Imelda was watching her husband intently, as if she expected him to do something amazing—combust into flames or start speaking in tongues.

“Mr. Huff was kind to us,” Jose said.

“Very kind,” I agreed. “And trusting. He gave you freedom

to do whatever you wanted. You set up shop right under his nose, in room 102. You were running the hotel, the two of you, until Chris Stowall came on board. After the Brazos hit went wrong, Chris found that email and realized Calavera was at the hotel, but he thought it was Alex. He saw it as a moneymaking opportunity and got Longoria and Benjamin Lindy involved. You realized what Longoria was here for right away. You confronted him and killed him. Then you gave Chris Stowall the same treatment. Alex didn't know what was going on. He only began to suspect when he found the bomb room, but even then he wasn't sure who to blame. I imagine you directed his suspicions toward Chris Stowall."

"Mr. Huff told you all this?"

"No. He's dead."

Imelda cupped her hands to her face.

"He tried to take Benjamin Lindy's gun away rather than throw the blame on you," I said. "He died without giving you away. He was still willing to believe you were innocent."

"Don't say any more." Jose's voice was tight. "Don't stir up more trouble."

"You were an assassin in Mexico. You worked for the cartels down there. You knew explosives."

He didn't answer.

"Then your family became a target," I said. "Your children were killed, but it wasn't random violence. They died because someone was getting back at you. You left Nuevo Laredo and you found your way here. Maybe you tried to go straight, but you had lots of anger. You had skills that were going to waste. And you had Alex, who trusted you implicitly and had a background similar enough to yours—working with explosives. A perfect fall guy, should you need one. It wasn't long before you were rebuilding yourself a new career as Calavera."

Imelda started talking to him in rapid Spanish. I could hardly follow. She said she'd told him a thousand times. He had taken things too far. He should never have gone back to his old work.

He raised his hand and she fell silent instantly. I got the feeling she'd had a lot of practice at this over the years. She had learned to hold back, to fear her husband when he raised his hand like that.

Jose's face, which I'd thought of as made for smiling, now had the sharpness of a knife.

"I did what I needed to," he said. "For Imelda and for me."

"Because of money? You took the drug payoff away from the college kids—easy to do when you've got the keys to

their rooms. I imagine you've got a lot more stashed away. Is Chris Stowall's twenty grand in one of those boxes?"

"Even before that, we had enough to go anywhere."

"Then why didn't you leave?"

He glanced at his wife. "Leaving anywhere...is difficult."

"Huff ~~was~~ your family. This place was all you had. You messed that up when you murdered Peter Brazos's family."

"An accident."

"But you didn't contact the Marshals Service yourself. You've got no remorse."

"No."

"Alex, then," I guessed. "The Brazos killings were more than he could take. He contacted the Marshals Service, pretending to be Calavera. He was going to turn you in. Or maybe you made him think Chris was the killer."

"No," Jose said. "You do not understand. It was not Mr. Huff. The person who wished to turn me in was my wife."



**“You should have gone along,” Imelda said softly.**

“For what?” he asked. “You would lose me, too? Is that what you want?”

“No, *mi amor*. I do not want to lose you.”

“You already have, Imelda,” I told her. “Your husband kills people. It’s how he deals with his anger, keeps it in check. That’s why he chooses explosives instead of guns. The timer, the sense of control, the complete destruction of someone’s household—that has a lot of appeal to you, doesn’t it, Jose?”

His eyes were steely, but I doubted I could make him lose his cool. Jose was not the type. He wanted to be the master, the timer. He would kill in his own way.

“People die,” Jose said. “My children died before my eyes. Why should other lives matter to me? Why should I not choose the time and the way? I’m good at it.”

“But you made mistakes.”

He shrugged. “That’s over now. I will not make any deals. I will not apologize.”

“Jose,” Imelda said.

“You will stay with me,” he told her, “as you promised. I will take care of you. It will be all right.”

“No, it won’t,” I said. “This boathouse is a dead end, Jose.”

Then he surprised me. He did another calculation, came to a decision I didn’t anticipate.

He took out a gun—the same .38, I imagined, that had killed Jesse Longoria—and he aimed it at my chest.

**Maia tried to stay put, but it wasn't something she did well.**

She couldn't shake the feeling that Imelda had been trying to tell her something earlier. She told herself it didn't matter now. Help had arrived. They would head home and Maia would never see this place again. Tres would be right back, with good news or bad. The worst was over.

But it was hard to believe that. Maia had a tingling feeling between her shoulder blades that usually meant something was wrong. The far end of the island was hidden behind the rubble of the hotel and clouds of smoke. She knew Tres had gone to the boathouse, but she'd never seen it and didn't know exactly how far it was.

Damn him for running off. He was in worse shape than she was, for God's sake.

A shadow fell over her. "You sure I can't get you anything, ma'am?"

It was one of the coast guardsmen. He reminded her of Chris Stowall—young, blond, a little nervous. Then she remembered Chris Stowall was burned to ashes inside the hotel.

“Could you help me up?” she asked.

He looked a little flustered, but he took her hand and helped her to her feet. It was difficult to do this with dignity. She felt as if she was carrying a bowling ball around her middle, but she did her best.

“I’m going for a walk,” she announced. “Over that way.”

The guardsman frowned. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“No,” Maia answered. “It’s probably not.”

And she began walking toward the boathouse.



**“No,” Imelda said.**

Jose hesitated. I hoped he was having second thoughts. It's a different thing, killing a man while you're looking him in the eyes.

On the other hand, Jose had shot Jesse Longoria in the chest. He'd bludgeoned Chris Stowall to death and stuffed his body in a freezer. I doubted my boyish charm was going to keep him from pulling the trigger.

“They'll hear the shot,” I said, trying to sound reasonable. “They'll find me dead and know you killed me. You can't cover that up.”

I could tell his mind was chewing on that, coming up with solutions. I didn't want to give him time.

“Imelda,” I said, “do you want to stay with him?”

“Of course.” No hesitation, but her voice was full of

despair, as if I were asking her whether she'd like to walk on the moon.

"Tell him," I said. "His only chance is surrender."

The doors of the boathouse slapped shut and creaked open with a gust of wind. A curl of seawater sloshed over the concrete and doused my shoes.

"You'll go in the water," Jose decided. "Get in."

"No, Jose," I said. "It's over. No more planning. No more hits."

"Your body will be underwater," he said. "Under the boat. They'll find it eventually, but not for a while. We'll be gone by then."

Imelda was shivering. I needed her help. She was the only possible leverage I could use to make Jose change his mind. But I also couldn't wait for her. I was out of options. I was weighing the odds of attacking when the worst possible variable got added to the equation.

The boathouse door opened and Maia walked in.

"Ah," she said. "I caught you at a bad time."



**I locked eyes with her and I told her silently to go.**

Not surprisingly, she did the exact opposite. She came to stand next to me and took my hand. “I got worried.”

“Señora.” Imelda’s voice trembled. “You shouldn’t be on your feet...”

Her voice trailed off. I suppose she realized the futility of what she was saying, given the fact that her husband was planning to put a bullet in me.

As for Jose, he looked like a juggler who’d been thrown too many plates. His forehead beaded with sweat.

“Hello, Jose,” Maia said. “Do you mind if I sit down?”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. She pulled up an empty ice chest and sat down as best she could, holding my hand for support.

I was beyond worried. I was ready to unzip my own skin and run screaming into the sand dunes. I wanted, by sheer force of will, to make Jose and his gun disappear off the face of the earth.

"You remember when Imelda was pregnant?" Maia asked him. We might've been at a dinner among friends. Her tone was maddeningly casual.

Jose stared at her. I was sure he was going to shoot us, but finally he said, "I remember."

Imelda closed her eyes. A tear traced its way down her cheek.

"Why did you come?" Jose murmured. "I'll have to kill you both now."

"The third trimester is brutal," Maia said. "But sometimes you feel the baby move, and there's nothing like that in the world. Did you put your hand on Imelda's belly and feel that? Did you speak to your babies before they were born?"

"We need time to get away." Jose's voice sounded ragged, almost apologetic. "We can't have anyone tell."

"Let them go," Imelda begged.

Jose shook his head. He watched as Maia placed her hand on her belly.

"There it is," Maia said. "A kick."

Her smile was as astonishing as the storm, or the way the lighthouse had crumbled after one hundred and fifty

years.

"The killings didn't stop the hurt, did they?" Maia asked.

Jose didn't answer.

Imelda knelt at his side. "Please, *mi amor*. Don't."

She tried to take his gun. He raised it so she couldn't, but he didn't push her away, either.

"Imelda knew what she was doing," Maia said. "After those girls and their mother died...there really wasn't anything for you to do except turn yourself in. You'd arrived right back where you started. Pain. Grief. The death of children."

"It wasn't my fault," Jose said.

"Perhaps the death of *your* children wasn't your fault," Maia said. "Everything you've done since then is."

A new sound cut through the surf. It sounded like a small engine, something fast. Too soon for civilian watercraft to be back on the waves. Police, perhaps. Or a water ambulance.

"We can't get away if you live," Jose said.

"You'd have to kill us," Maia agreed. "You were prepared

to do that last night. You planned on destroying the entire hotel, hoping everyone would be in it. Was it hard, knowing that would include a family, an unborn child?"

"I told you to get out. I tried...It would have been all right if you hadn't come here. Alex Huff—"

"Alex would've taken the blame as Calavera," I said. "Even in the end, he didn't give you up. He would've let you go. Despite everything, he cared about you two. He believed everyone on this island deserved a chance."

Jose shook his head. His eyes were red now.

"You'd have to kill us," Maia said. "But that would be the wrong choice, Jose. It would be starting all over again."

She made it sound so sensible. All I could see was the gun and a distraught killer. I had been here before. The odds were terrible. I had seen too many people die. Everything I'd seen in my life told me that I had only one chance—to overpower Jose.

But Maia held my hand, gently restraining me. Maia's voice was calm, confident.

"*Mi amor*," Imelda said. "You would have to kill me too. I can't go through this. Please. No more."

Jose focused on her, as if seeing her for the first time.

She held out her hand.

Jose's jaw tightened. His eyes were as turbulent as the water in the slip. He pointed the gun at his wife's chest. Then he crumpled, kneeling next to her while she held his head against her breast, and he let out a sob that had been trapped inside him since the death of his children.

For a long time, the four of us sat in the boathouse. The only sounds were the waves against the hull of the sunken boat and the crackle of the fires dying on the hill.

**Imelda waited for someone to confront her, but no one did.**

They treated her like a sick child—someone to be checked on occasionally, spoken to gently, sheltered from the others in case she was contagious.

Jose was taken from her. A last kiss, and he whispered in her ear, “Say nothing.”

His only wish: to protect her from what she had done.

She sat on a tarp and wrapped herself in a shawl that smelled faintly of candles and altar incense. She thought about the day Peter Brazos had visited the island.

He had questioned Señor Huff, yes. But mostly he had questioned her.

The lawyer’s eyes had been like a falcon’s, dark and without mercy. *I know Jose was involved. Tell me how and*



*you could save him.*

She had no idea how Brazos found them: a confession from someone, a deal to betray Jose. They had been so careful, and yet someone knew who they were. After their children were murdered in Laredo, they had moved north, hoping to escape. Jose promised to stop working for the drug lords, but he still built his devices, still used the workroom Señor Huff had given him to plan occasional jobs. Bomb-making was in his blood like a drug. He could not leave it behind completely.

After Peter Brazos found them, she told Jose what they must do. She located his home in Corpus Christi, his other house in Port Aransas.

*We should run,* Jose told her. *We have enough money.*

But Imelda had run too many times. She loved Rebel Island. She wanted to grow old here with Jose, tending the hotel rooms, listening to the ocean. When she thought of Peter Brazos, threatening to take her husband away from her, her hands trembled. She lit a candle at the altar of her dead children, and made a promise.

*If you will not,* she told Jose, *I will.*

In the end, he had relented. But it had been her idea—her murder. The wife and children—if Imelda had not pushed Jose, if she'd given him time to plan...

Imelda had been coming out of the grocery store in Port Aransas when she heard two men talking about the explosion—the mother and the two little girls. Imelda's knees turned to water. She collapsed in front of the IGA and her grocery bag split, oranges and soup cans rolling through the parking lot. The men had tried to help her, but she ran. She didn't stop until she found a pay phone and called Jose.

They waited for Peter Brazos to revisit the island with an army of police. But nothing happened. At first Imelda did not understand why. Then she realized she had misjudged. Brazos knew less than he let on. He had no idea Jose was Calavera. He had simply been pushing on them as one of many leads to get at his targets in court. Brazos's wife and children had died for nothing.

Something had broken inside Jose when he learned about the little girls. He wandered the hotel at night, muttering the names of his victims, the dates of his kills. He believed the police would come for them eventually. Or worse, the drug lords. They would resent Calavera's botched, unauthorized assassination. It had caused them too much grief.

Jose made a plan. He would negotiate with the American Marshals Service, exchange information for immunity. Imelda pleaded with him not to, but Jose would not listen.

*It is the only way to save ourselves, he told her. They will find us otherwise, wherever we run.*

The marshal Jesse Longoria had arrived, but he did not want to negotiate. And everything had spiraled out of control.



**Imelda watched another boatful of police come ashore.** They brought black plastic cases, yellow tarps and cameras. They joked easily with one another, offering drinks from coolers as if they had come for a day on the beach.

Señora Navarre was talking to one of them. Her hands were cupped around a coffee mug. The señora's eyes caught hers, and an electric charge passed through Imelda.

The señora paused in her conversation. She fixed Imelda with a strange look—almost like pity. Then she turned her attention back to the policeman. She did not look at Imelda again.

*She knows,* Imelda realized.

And yet...Señora Navarre would not tell the police. Imelda wasn't sure how she knew this, or why the señora would keep silent, but she sensed it was true.

Imelda clenched a handful of sand. She was free, but she would never see Jose again. She had the blood of children on her hands.

*I will pay the price, Jose had told her. You must not. Please, you are all I have. Please, my love, let me do this.*

She wrapped her shawl around her. She would pay a price—only a different price than Jose. The world would be her prison until she answered before God.

She would go back to her cousin's in Corpus Christi. From there...she didn't know. She would find a new job, something to help people. She would add three candles to her altar and pray for the family she had destroyed.

Suddenly she understood Señora Navarre's look of pity. Imelda needed no more punishment. She would live alone with her ghosts and her altar, struggling to make amends, knowing it would never be enough. The police could do nothing worse to her than that. Señora Navarre understood, as only a mother could.

A pilot fish jumped from the water—a silver spark like a camera flash. Imelda watched for it again, but the waves churned gray and empty. She would have to settle for that

single splash—a tiny sign that the sea might come back to life.

**I had some idea how the Taino Indians must've felt when Columbus and his men rowed ashore.**

The three Coast Guard guys were only the beginning. An ambulance boat arrived next, followed by the Aransas Sheriff's Department, followed by the ferry filled with FBI agents and marshals and FEMA personnel. By the afternoon, the island was overrun by strangers. White tents were set up on the beach. Forensics teams combed the wreckage of the hotel. Three bodies were found, photographed, bagged and removed.

Jose and Imelda were separated from the rest of us, led away somewhere. I never saw them leave the island.

I had a series of interviews, most of which I would not remember later. Maia was checked out by a doctor. Some interviews we had to do separately. Some we got to do together. I ate a doughnut and drank a cup of tepid orange juice. Later on, a homicide detective from Corpus Christi

gave me a chicken sandwich. He told me something that had happened to him once at a barbecue for Peter Brazos. I don't remember the story, or why he felt he needed to confide in me.

It's strange how that happens. Being a witness, a victim, a participant in some terrible event seems to give you some of the qualities of a priest confessor. Instead of people comforting you, people look to you for comfort and understanding, as if you, by virtue of your trials, have gained some insight the rest of the world sorely needs. A capacity to endure.

Or maybe the guy just had a poor sense of social etiquette. I wasn't in much frame of mind to judge.



## **A medic who didn't know better told me all the gossip.**

Jose had given a full confession to the police. He'd claimed responsibility for the murders of Jesse Longoria and Chris Stowall. He had cleared his wife of any knowledge or guilt. Imelda, I suspected, would go free. That was the only condition Jose demanded in exchange for telling the FBI all about his employers during the time he

worked assassinations. Strangely, Imelda's dream of relocation under a new name would most likely become a reality. She and Jose would disappear. But they would not be together. Jose would be in prison somewhere. And Imelda...I didn't know where she would go. She would be swept out of our lives and gone.

Benjamin Lindy had collapsed shortly after hearing about Jose's confession. The medic told me Lindy was suffering from exhaustion, emotional fatigue. The smallest shock can be a big thing when you're eighty years old, and the past twenty-four hours on Rebel Island had been more than a small shock.

I'd given a statement about Lindy shooting Alex Huff, but I doubted it would make much difference. The crisis had already broken Lindy. He'd killed the wrong man. Now he would have to watch as the right man slipped out of his grasp, the very thing he'd tried so desperately to avoid. God had done a much better job punishing Benjamin Lindy for his deeds than the courts could ever do.

As for the UT boys, Ty, Chase and Markie had been questioned and released. Ty was given a sedative. The other two had been given Sprites and chicken sandwiches and told to please go away. They were the first to leave the island. I watched them go, and they stared at me nervously from the back of the police boat.



I had no desire to tell on their little drug smuggling problem. They would have enough to deal with when they got back. I would neither help them nor bust them. They weren't kids after all, I decided. They would figure out a solution, or go to the police, or face some gruesome consequences. It was their problem, not mine.

That left Lane and Garrett—a situation which was not so easy to put on a boat and forget about.



**They were sitting in front of the police tent after their** interviews. Garrett's chair had been cleaned up. He had, too. He'd managed to wash the soot off his face and pull a fresh Hawaiian shirt out of his luggage. Lane was sipping coffee, watching the sun go down. The sunset made her face look healthier, her eyes brighter.

Garrett acknowledged me with a brief nod as I sat on the canvas tarp next to him.

"It's just now sinking in, little bro. I can't believe Alex is gone."

"He was something."

Garrett drank his beer. The smell of Lane's coffee drifted by and was blown away by the sea breeze.

"We can leave soon," I said. "The ferry should be here in half an hour."

Garrett shook his head. "I'm not going just yet. I need some time to think about the island."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He locked eyes with me. "Alex left it to me."

I stared at him. I tried to wrap my mind around what he was saying. "You mean...Rebel Island?"

"The papers he gave me last night," Garrett said. "That was his will. He said if anything happened to him, he wanted me to know. He was leaving the place to me. He named you executor."

*"Me?"*

Garrett looked back at the smoldering wreckage. "Congratulations."

Part of me wondered why Alex would do such a thing. It would make Garrett a suspect. He'd have a strong motive for threatening Alex's life. But Alex had never thought that

way. He hadn't been a killer, just a lonely man who'd tried to live up to Mr. Eli's trust.

After all this, coming here to say goodbye to Rebel Island, my brother had ended up owning it. There was a lesson there somewhere—one of life's little ironies. But I wasn't sure how to take it.

"What'll you do with the place?" My tone probably said what I was thinking: *Why would you want it?*

"Do with it?" Garrett looked out at the sea and breathed in, as if clearing the smoke of the ruins out of his lungs. "Don't know. Maybe a smaller house. Maybe nothing at all. But I like being here."

"And you?" I asked Lane.

"I'll stay the night with Garrett," she answered. "They're leaving the tents set up until morning. Then I'm going back to the mainland."

"What about your ex-husband?"

"I'll confront him," she said. "And bring charges."

"If you want help—"

She shook her head. "I appreciate it. But I'll tell you the same thing I told Garrett. I have to do this myself."

She looked nothing like the crying lady she'd been at the start of the weekend. I wondered if she was just putting on a brave face, if she would crumble again in the presence of danger, but something told me she would not. She'd left her fear behind in the burning hotel along with most of her luggage—the last reminders of her failed marriage.

"You'll bring the police," I said.

She smiled ruefully. "I'm not stupid."

"And when she's done," Garrett said, "whenever that is, she might come back here."

"I might," she agreed.

It was tenuous. As tenuous as the idea that my brother could ever live on this island. Or ever have a relationship, for that matter. But at the moment, Lane and he were holding hands. They seemed at peace. And they really didn't need my presence.

"Good luck," I said.

I shook my brother's hand, told Lane goodbye, and walked away toward the ruins of the ferry dock.



**“You weren’t even arrested,” Maia observed, “much less killed.”**

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Kind of disappointing.”

We watched from the ferry’s stern as Rebel Island receded into the distance.

The sunset made a blood-red sky and a copper bay. Without its hotel or lighthouse or palmetto trees, Rebel Island looked like nothing much—a sandbar, a trick of the light. A shallow break where Jean Laffitte might run a Spanish ship aground. The kind of island that vanished in the space of a breath.

And yet...It was still there. It probably looked more now like it did three hundred years ago, when Cabeza de Vaca was shipwrecked nearby and hunted for lizards with the locals.

The ferry rose and fell on the waves.

“According to the EMT,” Maia said, “I’m due any minute. He was amazed the baby held out through the weekend.”

"Tough kid," I said.

She kissed me. "Tough parents."

We watched the island disappear. It didn't feel like the final goodbye I'd imagined. If the island really was Garrett's now, I might be forced to come back someday, but that didn't bother me. I wasn't so much worried about the things I was leaving behind. I was more interested in what I was going back to.

"I might take a PI case once in a while," I said. "If the right one came."

Maia raised an eyebrow. "If it didn't interfere."

"It would depend on the case," I said.

"Oh. Naturally."

She tried to hold a poker face as long as possible, but finally a smile made its way to the surface. "You almost made it seven months. Not bad."

"Oh, be quiet."

"Hey, when we broke up, you stayed away from me a whole year. Should I be insulted?"

"I shouldn't have brought this up until we were closer to

the shore. Twenty minutes trapped on this ferry with you. Gonna be a long ride.”

She kissed me again. Between us, the baby kicked. It felt like a tiny reminder, the kid telling me, *Get a grip, Dad.*

“Not such a long trip,” Maia promised. “Tell me what you want to do first when we get home.”

And so we sat together in the stern of the ferry, and we talked about the future.

## About the Author

RICK RIORDAN is the author of six previous Tres Navarre novels—*Big Red Tequila*, winner of the Shamus and Anthony Awards; *The Widower's Two-Step*, winner of the Edgar Award; *The Last King of Texas*; *The Devil Went Down to Austin*; *Southtown*; and *Mission Road*. He is also the author of the acclaimed thriller *Cold Springs* and the young adult novels *The Lightning Thief*, *The Sea of Monsters*, and *The Titan's Curse*. Rick Riordan lives with his family in San Antonio, Texas.



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