

The Devil's Deep

Devil's Deep, #1

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Chapter 1

It was ten minutes to midnight when Rosa Solorio entered the darkened room to kidnap the retarded man.

She found Chad Lett twitching in his bed, his arms curled into clubs, biceps stretched like cords. His hands formed claws. Muscles strained on his neck and his eyes fluttered. No sound came from his mouth, but it grimaced as if in pain.

“Dios mio,” Rosa whispered under her breath.

She knew Chad’s every spasm and moan. Three other beds lined the room. They held the other residents of Team Smile and after five years she could recognize each of their cries, moans, or screams from the other side of the facility.

But eighty minutes had passed since night meds. Team Smile took theirs ground into applesauce and spooned back until reflex made them swallow, and one of Chad’s pills was a muscle relaxant. He should have been asleep by now. Instead, that grimace, the right eye rolling, but the left staring straight ahead.

Rosa hesitated, doubting everything. Every question she’d asked herself, every time she’d studied Chad on nights like this, his face in shadows cast by the sterile, fluorescent light coming from the hallway. Maybe she was wrong.

She couldn’t pull her gaze from Chad’s eye. Not the rolled-back right eye—the *evil eye*, she thought—but the left. The *living eye*.

It had begun as a fantasy, spun in her own head. She’d dreamed about Chad Lett, not the profoundly retarded man warehoused at Riverwood, but a man who had walked by her side along the beach.

“Are you sure?” the man in her dreams had asked. “Absolutely sure? Look me in the eye, Rosa. Look! Then tell me that you’re sure I’m gone.”

And she found herself watching his eyes while she bathed him or fed him. The right showed only the glassy stare so typical of the lowest-functioning residents. But she couldn’t help but watch the left, wondering and afraid, as it blinked.

She stood over his bed one shift after Riverwood sank into its nighttime slumber. “Are you alive? Blink if you can understand me.”

And the left eye had answered. *Blink.*

He was alive. Not just a body that breathed and a heart that beat while the brain sat cold and still. But a man, alive inside that body. A man who had just blinked his answer. As if to say, *Yes, I’m alive. I’m alive and trapped in this hell. For God’s sake, help me!*

“Forgive me!” she cried. “I didn’t know. I swear, I didn’t.”

And still, it took two weeks to work up the courage to take Chad away from this place. Yet, here she was. Ready. “You’ll get help,” she whispered. “I promise.”

Rosa had five minutes before Anne Wistrom finished her cigarette break and returned to the nurse station across the hall. Rosa liked Anne and her cynical sense of humor. And she'd use a few words of Spanish, easy stuff like *hola* and *buenos días*, but it was the effort that won her points. But Rosa couldn't let the nurse see her carting Chad off in the middle of the night.

She brought Chad's wheelchair from the closet, then untied his restraints. Rosa lowered the bar on his bed and maneuvered the man into position to lift him to the chair.

Most of the bed-ridden residents at Riverwood Care Center—those handful so profoundly retarded they would never walk or feed themselves, wishful thinking and years of therapy aside—lived in wasted shells and could be lifted easily from bed to wheelchair and back again. Not Chad. The spasms kept his muscles strong. It didn't help that he kept twitching as she half-dragged, half-dropped him into the chair. She paused to catch her breath and listen for sounds from the hallway before fastening Chad's head restraints and wheeling him out.

She heard the floor cleaner down the west wing and knew that this early in the shift, the other night janitor would still be loading sheets into the wash, also in that direction. So she took Chad toward the east wing doors. The hall was silent but for the squeak of the chair's wheels on the floor and an occasional cough from the darkened rooms on either side of the hall.

A moment later Rosa pushed Chad into the chill February night. The cold sucked the warmth from her lungs. She wheeled him down the ramp, beneath icicles and a light, dry snow that glittered as it hung around the porch light. What had possessed her to move from the warm, perpetual summer of the Osa Peninsula to the mountains of Vermont?

Rosa's father was a fisherman. Rosa's grandfather had been a fisherman and her brother was a fisherman. But from the time she was a child, her father had promised her something else. "You are a bright girl. *Muy lista*. God means for you to be something else than a fisherman's wife, or a maid for American tourists." A doctor, Papá decided eventually. That's what she'd be.

He thought she was in the United States, studying. That had been the arrangement with Dr. Pardo. And in her letters, she always told him about her classes and the things her professors said. And then, when she couldn't stand to lie any longer, she told him how she was struggling with chemistry and calculus, thinking she could fail the supposed classes and thus be forced to drop out of school.

He'd returned encouraging letters. Don't give up, hija. You're a smart girl. As smart as any of the others. I believe in you. He returned the money she sent the family, urging her to hire a tutor.

She couldn't bear to let him down, so when the end of the semester came at the school she did not attend, she wrote back, exulting that she'd passed both classes she had not been failing, even earning a B+ in calculus. Oh, he was so proud.

Chad was calm now, but still awake. His eyes stared blankly to one side, where his head rested against the head shield. He gave no sign of noticing the cold. She'd seen him take shots without flinching. Once, a careless therapist put his chair too close to the radiator and his stocking feet had burned badly enough to raise blisters, all without movement or sound.

To all the world Chad Lett looked like any other low-functioning resident of Riverwood—one of the ruder therapists called them the slugs—only less responsive to light and pain. Only now, she knew differently. She imagined that he felt every prick, burn, and pinch.

Rosa checked for Dr. Pardo's car in the back lot and breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't see his Mercedes. She'd told Pardo about Chad's blinking and he'd urged her to keep quiet. And why should that be a surprise? It was Pardo who had promised Rosa's father to pay for her schooling in the United States, and that had been a lie. Why would he care about one paralyzed man?

Rosa wheeled Chad away from the globe lights on the end of the building, then looked beyond the gate to the street. There was an SUV parked down the street, by the park, but she couldn't see anyone inside.

She heard feet crunching through snow. Rosa turned quickly, her breath coming in a puff of steam that disintegrated in a halo around the globe light. A storm had dropped eighteen inches in late January, but since then it had been cold and dry. Under the eaves of the building, the untrammelled snow had eroded underneath, leaving a crust through which someone walked.

Who? Not staff, surely. A resident? Maybe Jason, coming to check the break room door and look for half-smoked cigarettes. But why walk across the snow instead of cutting through the courtyard? Besides, Jason knew he'd catch hell if anyone caught him out of bed at this hour. *Doctor Pardo.*

The crunching grew louder and a man emerged from the shadows. She let out a second breath, this one of relief. It wasn't Doctor Pardo.

"You said to meet in the street," Rosa said.

"Thought I'd have a look around while I was waiting."

The answer made no sense. Ten below and he was walking through the snow in expensive leather shoes and pressed pants. To have a look around? Her heart was still thumping and she just nodded.

She made to turn Chad around, but the man stopped her. "No, don't turn him. I want you to tell me, first."

So Rosa repeated what she'd told him on the phone earlier that day, how Chad could blink answers to her questions. "And to think that everyone here thinks he's retarded."

"Who else knows?"

"Just you and Dr. Pardo. He'll hurt me if he finds out I told you. I know he will. In spite of everything he's done to... help me."

The man just nodded, and this surprised her. Surely, he'd be upset or show *some* emotion. Instead, he looked thoughtful and eyed Rosa in a way that made her squirm. Maybe he didn't believe her. Rosa reached into the pocket of her scrubs and pulled out a small flashlight. "Here, let me show you."

The man took her wrist with a strong grip. "That won't be necessary."

The grip hurt. "What are you doing? Let go."

And then she saw something in his other hand and her apprehension turned to fear. It looked like a police officer's baton, but with two prongs on the end.

"Sorry, Rosa," he said. "Sorry you got involved. Pardo shouldn't have brought you here. I told him that. It was a big mistake."

She turned toward the building, but he jabbed the baton into her side. An electric jolt sizzled through her body. She dropped to the ground, muscles convulsing. Her body writhed. She remembered Chad in his bed, every muscle straining and the silent grimace on his face.

Only Rosa wasn't silent. She screamed, and when the electricity began to tingle out the ends of her toes and fingers and her scalp, she screamed again.

Another jolt, and this time her attacker was on top of her in the snow. He took duct tape from the pocket of his coat and taped her mouth, wrapping it around her head several times. When he finished and she could no longer scream, barely breathe, even, through the snow choking her nostrils, he started on her hands.

As he did, he spoke soothing words, as if talking to a child. "I didn't mean this to happen. You never should've got involved with Pardo."

He climbed off her, then jabbed her again with the electric prod, and again after he lifted her to her feet. Her legs dropped out from under her, but he grabbed her and kept her from falling. Chad still sat in his wheelchair a few feet away, wearing nothing but pajamas and a thin blanket. Rosa couldn't feel the cold through the burn and tingle of electric shocks.

The man gave her one last jolt, then tucked the stick in his belt and lifted Rosa over his shoulder with a grunt. He made his way toward the gate.

"I *am* sorry," he repeated. "I hope you know that."

Chapter 2

Wesley Pilson had been expecting a job interview, not a hostile cross-examination.

The woman's name was Rebecca Gull, QMRP, whatever those letters from her name plate meant. She looked a few years older than Wesley, maybe thirty. Nice body and a cute face. Would have been cuter if she hadn't looked so thoroughly disgusted as she read his résumé.

She set it down at last and raised an eyebrow in a skeptical gesture. "And with all of this, you're looking to come on as an HT?"

"Sorry, a what?"

"Habilitation therapist. An aide. Ten bucks an hour to start. Morning shift three days a week with a morning/swing double shift on day four."

"Ten bucks an hour," he repeated.

"Ten bucks an hour beneath you, Mr. Law School Bigshot?"

Money had nothing to do with it. Room and board came from the trust set up by his grandfather. Pocket money came from summer jobs, but even with his family's diminished fortunes, his parents still had enough to fill in the gaps. He didn't need the paycheck.

"Like I said on the phone, it's for school," Wes said. "I'm going into medical advocacy and I'm working on a special project for credit hours."

"And this doesn't have anything to do with your brother?"

“Of course it does, but it’s not just about that. I had the course already, I’m just changing my focus a little.”

Rebecca leaned back in her chair which now rested against the wall behind her. Her office was smaller than some closets he’d seen, big enough to hold a desk, a computer, two chairs, and a couple of cardboard filing boxes stacked on top of each other.

“This is terrible timing. If Saul hadn’t hand-delivered your résumé—thanks to a call from your professor—we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. I’ve got a state inspection in five days. I don’t have time to baby-sit you.”

He wondered about this state inspection thing. “You told me on the phone you’d already passed inspection, and that it only came once a year.”

“Yeah, it’s funny, isn’t it? I was happy to answer your questions, what was it? Two weeks ago? Thought you might come by and see for yourself.” She paused significantly. “Instead of calling the cops.” She pulled a business card from her desk and showed it to Wes. “A certain Lieutenant Roger Stiles paid us a visit in the middle of breakfast. I was so happy to see him. He took a look around, checked out your brother, shrugged, said he thought you were full of crap, but that he was obliged to report complaints to the state. The state, in its infinite wisdom and complete detachment from reality, decided another inspection was in order.” She put the card away, then fixed him with a hard look.

He found it hard to hold her gaze. He’d never meant to cause problems for the regular stiffs working at Riverwood.

Rebecca continued, “So here’s the thing. Inspections are hell. State looks at everything. *Everything*. The HTs, nurses, cooks, administrators are on edge and the residents feel it. They act out, and when we try to control the situation, they push back.”

“I’m a fast learner,” he said. “I can help.”

“I’m not hiring a summer intern, or whatever you aspiring lawyers do for fun. Do you have any idea how hard this is?”

“I’m not afraid of hard work.” He pointed to his résumé. “My first job was shoveling gravel for Northrock Construction.”

“You said it was a family company. Were you working for your father or something?”

“My uncle, but that doesn’t make the gravel any lighter to shovel.”

“What are you hoping to find? That we’re beating your brother when he forgets to throw his towel in the bin?”

“I have no idea what I’m going to find.”

“Right, but you’re looking for something. And if you’re looking, you’ll probably find it, even if it’s just in your head. And if we tell you no, you can’t come work here, then it looks like we’re trying to hide something. That’s what the administrator thinks and that’s why he hand-delivered your résumé. And that puts me in a shitty position.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to cause problems.”

“Well you are.”

The thing was, Wes had seen his brother at Christmas, and there were bruises on his arm. A tussle with another resident, according to Riverwood. His parents had bought it, but Wes was suspicious. And then, when Wes was in Vermont for

the end of winter term break, he'd picked Eric up to discover his brother wearing a cast on his wrist.

He'd read the official report. Eric had injured it when a pair of therapists were restraining him after an altercation over food. Sounded fishy. More so, when you included Eric's statement, recorded on the incident report: "They threw me to the ground and stomped me." The interviewer added a note in psychobabble: "Resident should not be considered a reliable historian."

And his mom wouldn't do anything about it. At the very least, she should have pulled Eric from Riverwood. Or how about calling the police herself, or hiring a lawyer? Fine, if she wouldn't ask the questions, Wes would. Who had hurt his brother and why? Why was Eric having so many incidents? And these psychotropic drugs they'd prescribed to control his behavior. Wes called bullshit on that one. Eric didn't need mind-altering drugs.

And Wes knew how to stick up for his brother. In third grade Wes had punched a sixth grader in the nose for teasing his brother. In high school he'd earned a college scholarship for an essay he'd written on growing up with a retarded twin brother. He'd taken a medical ethics seminar his first year of law school and determined to go into patient advocacy.

Dr. Sizemore had arranged a job with Brigham and Women's Hospital, a teaching affiliate with Harvard Medical. But this was better. He'd convinced his advisor that he could be objective.

Rebecca sighed. "The thing is, I'm down two HTs on the morning shift, which is when the inspectors are most likely to show up."

"What happened to the HTs?" Wes asked.

"I had to fire one guy after he no-showed for about the tenth time. I've been running an ad for three weeks, but the applicants so far suck. The other walked off the job two nights ago. Wasn't the first time someone pulled that. It's a tough job and underpaid. But I didn't expect it from Rosa. She'd been with Team Smile for several years and was great with the low-functioning residents."

"She couldn't take it anymore, or what?"

"Who knows? Rosa is from Central America. She doesn't like the cold and none of her family is here. I'm guessing she just went home. So here's the deal, Wes," Rebecca added. She reached into her desk and pulled out a job application. "I get that you're worried about your brother. Kind of refreshing, actually. Half these people you'd never know they had a living relative in the world. The other half have families who care and your brother is lucky to be one of them. I just wish you hadn't been such an asshole about it."

"You mean calling the cops?"

"The cops, the insinuation, the threats. I don't care if you pull your brother. Administration might, but it doesn't matter to me. Don't get me wrong, I like Eric. But frankly, he leaves, less work for me. But if you're leaving him at Riverwood, you've got to get over it." She chewed at her lower lip, expression thoughtful. "Maybe a couple of weeks as an HT will show you how the world works."

"I can handle it."

She said nothing for a long moment, then nodded. "Fine, you're hired. Not that I have any choice." She reached into a drawer and handed him a piece of paper and

a pen. "What I need is an official application." He started to fill it out on the edge of her desk.

Rebecca leaned back in her chair. When he glanced up, he saw a smile on her face. "Looking on the bright side, this is going to be fun to watch. Why do I think you're going to learn a few things?"

"We'll see," Wes said. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"We'll see about that, too."

Nevertheless, he had second thoughts by the time he finished the application. He hadn't told his mother yet. She'd been excited about the connections he'd make at Brigham and Women's and how it would look on his résumé. A little better than HT at Riverwood, followed on the page by laborer at a gravel pit.

Rebecca barely glanced at the application when he handed it back. "You'll start tomorrow morning."

His mother was going to flip out. She thought he was going back to Massachusetts tonight. She'd already loaded his clean laundry in the car and a box of food and toiletries.

"You look just like Eric, you know," Rebecca said as she led him to the door.

"You don't know how many times I've heard that."

"Kind of spooky, actually. Just like him, but there's that spark that he doesn't have. The IQ gleam, I guess."

"It's the only difference between us." And wasn't that true? About three minutes in the womb was all that separated them. Three minutes where Wesley was in the air, drawing great big breaths into his lungs and screaming them back out, while Eric was still inside, wrapped in his umbilical cord, turning blue.

* * * * *

Wes found his mother at home, sitting on the couch with the latest issue of *RN Magazine*. She glanced up as he pulled up a chair, then frowned as she studied his expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, just wanted to tell you I talked to someone at Riverwood and I've got a handle on this thing with Eric. They're going to let me observe for awhile."

She closed her nursing magazine and put it on the table. "They don't have to let you do anything. You're family, you can visit any time you want."

"Not like this. I'm going to be working at Riverwood. Habilitation therapist. I'll be right among the ground troops, should get to the bottom of this."

"They gave you a job? And you're going to do this from Massachusetts, how, exactly? Drive up every weekend? When will you study?"

"The job is full-time. It's my replacement for the Brigham and Women's gig. I've already talked to Dr. Sizemore," he added hurriedly.

Her look changed from skepticism to outright exasperation. "Please tell me you're not serious. Brigham and Women's is huge. Think of how much you'll learn, working in the legal department. Not to mention all the contacts."

"Mom, please. Listen."

"I don't get it. Are you doing all this on a whim? Haven't you learned anything from Dad?"

She meant this in the negative sense, of course. Wes's father had been a theater arts major at Cornell when she'd met him. Not the most practical major, and if Mom had listened to her father or brother she would have run in the other direction. Ellen Carter came from the Burlington Carters who owned Northrock, and they were practical people, civil engineers and accountants, who had grown rich on cement, gravel, and road base.

Jim Pilson, on the other hand, was the classic underachiever. Bright, but scattered. When Mom had met him, he'd turned his dorm into a workshop to make armor for a Renaissance fair.

Jim Pilson had taken forever to get his degree, then worked on a couple of PBS documentaries, before designing sets for a pair of failed off-Broadway productions. He'd tried his hand at running an independent record label, then started an underground newspaper, followed by and even shorter-lived radio station specializing in German Electronic Pop. Mom had sold most of her Northrock stock to her brothers to pay for these schemes. And after Wes and Eric came, Eric with huge medical bills tied to his retardation, their financial situation had grown even more precarious.

"And what about your civil procedure class?" she asked.

"Civil procedures will be tricky, I admit. I might be able to switch to pass/fail and then it won't count on my GPA. I'll need to talk to Dr. Caliarì. If that doesn't work, maybe he'll let me drop it."

"So you're dropping out of school."

"No," he insisted. "I'm not. This is school. Four credit hours."

"You've got this great opportunity. A degree from Harvard Law School is like a magical key. It will open any door."

"You've been reminding me of that since junior high."

"Then why blow it now? One more term and then one more year and you're done. For good."

Maybe it was guilt for the way she'd squandered her own share of the family wealth that she was especially adamant that Wes not blow his education trust fund set up by Grandpa Carter.

He stood from the chair. "I'm not going to blow anything. Worst case scenario, I've got one extra class this fall."

He could see what she was thinking. He was overreacting. There was nothing going on with Eric, she was sure of it. For his part, Wes couldn't figure out how she could be so blind. She visited Riverwood three times a week.

Or maybe that was it. Maybe she visited so often that the change in Eric had been too gradual. Wes, in school out of state, only saw his brother once a month and at holidays. He knew something was happening.

"You know me, Mom. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong, but I'm not going to be happy until I get to the bottom of this."

"There is no bottom to this, because there's nothing going on. Eric is just fine. He had a couple of accidents. It happens." She shook her head. "You're like Uncle Davis. A crusader."

"You make it sound hopeless, and wrong-headed. Like tilting at windmills."

"Well?"

“But that’s not it at all,” he protested. “It’s not a crusade if there’s something wrong going on. It’s—” He searched for the word. “It’s justice.”

“Oh, please.” She got up from the couch and went into the kitchen, where she unloaded the dishwasher with her back to him.

He followed her in. “You can’t see it because you’re totally fixed on other stuff.”

“Something other than my own sons?” Her voice had taken a hard edge. She turned around and set a stack of clean bowls on the counter a little too hard. “And what would that be, Wesley?”

He hesitated. “Money.” There, it was out.

“Money? You have no idea, Wes. No idea. The things I’ve done for this family. Your father... no, I won’t even go there. But for so many years it was all I could do to hold on.”

“Oh, I’m more than aware of that. Remember the time you sold the computer? Or when I couldn’t swim at nationals because you couldn’t afford to send me to Virginia? Or how about the time—”

“Just stop, please. Of course I remember. I think about that stuff every day. It kills me, and that’s why you can’t drop out of school. It seems like a good idea, now, but that degree is worth so much. I’m trying to save you from making the same mistake I did.”

“For the last time, I’m not dropping out, and there will be other Brigham and Women’s. And this project can be really good, I know it can. And I’ll figure things out with Eric.” She said nothing, just turned back to finishing the dishes, so he added, “Mom?”

“I heard you.”

“Can you talk to Dad? And just trust me for a little while?”

“I don’t know, Wesley. But okay, I’ll talk to Dad.”

He took that as a yes. Or rather, a step toward yes. When she shut the dishwasher door, he kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, Mom. And I’m sorry.”

Wes went to his bedroom. Eight years after high school, the room had begun to feel like a shrine to his teenage self. The same books sat on the shelves, his swimming trophies—regularly dusted by his mother—sat on top of the dresser. A framed picture hung on the wall of Wes as a scrawny kid of thirteen in a Speedo with his neck weighed down with eight medals, all gold. Another of Wes shaking the hand of the president when he’d gone to DC with the debate team. His favorite was Wes diving in the Golfo Dulce with a hammerhead shark in the background. God, how awesome was that? And his Uncle Davis, a genius for getting that shot, making it look like the hammerhead was right over his shoulder.

Wasn’t it the very next dive when Davis had drowned? Just when the Carters seemed to be pulling together, too, thanks, in part, to Uncle Davis.

He was studying the picture when he heard his mother walk down the hall, then into her room, where she shut the door behind her. She was going to call his dad, all right. She’d interrupt him at the playhouse to rehash the conversation. And no doubt find a way to blame him for Wes dropping out of school.

Wes couldn’t resist the urge to eavesdrop. After all, the conversation was about him. He stepped quietly into the hall, then into the hall bathroom without turning on the light. There was a second bathroom door that led directly into his parents’ bedroom. The phone in their room was an old one, with a cord, and it hung from

the wall just on the other side of that door. He'd learned long ago that someone standing in the bathroom could overhear phone conversations on the other side.

It was dangerous to overhear other people's conversations. He'd misheard a snippet once where his father seemed to be casually discussing the fact that his mother had cancer. He'd been eleven, and had cried himself to sleep that night, too ashamed to admit he'd overheard the conversation or in any other way ask for comfort or reassurance. Might have spent weeks worrying if his mother hadn't brought up the subject with Dad at dinner the next day. Turned out his father had been so casual because it hadn't been Wes's mother with cancer, but some coworker of Dad's at the radio station.

"Hello? Yes, it's Ellen. What? No, it's worse than that. He's going to be working at Riverwood. Right, he took an actual job."

Whoever it was on the other end, it was not Dad. Mom's tone of voice was wrong. Then who?

"I know," she said a moment later. "But what am I going to tell him? The truth?" Another pause. "You don't think that's suspicious, after I've told him a million times we're not moving Eric? Anyway, that's forty-five minutes away. With my job, I'll never see him."

After dropping out of Cornell to follow her husband on one of his wild schemes, Ellen Pilson eventually returned to school when she could no longer stand the poverty. She'd finished nursing school and now worked in Barre at Central Vermont Medical Center. The job had dug them out of debt and allowed them to buy a house. But the hours were long and often included weekends, double shifts, and holidays.

"No," his mother said. "Don't do that. Please." A pause. "Okay, okay. But he has nothing to do with this. Promise me nobody will hurt my son."

What? Did his mother know who was hurting Eric? And she wasn't doing anything about it? No, he must be mishearing again. Like the supposed cancer.

"Okay. Yes, I will," his mother said after another long pause. "Don't worry. But please, don't hurt Wes. Please."

A moment later, she hung up the phone. Wes should have crept back to his room as soon as he'd heard his mother end the conversation. Instead, he stood in the dark, unable to move. He'd misheard, alright. It wasn't Eric she was talking about getting hurt. It was himself.

Chapter 3

A naked woman walked past Wes at 6:10 the next morning.

He had followed Rebecca Gull through Riverwood's darkened dining room and into the hallway of the east residential wing, which already stirred with residents. The nude woman carried a bath towel and a Ziplock bag of toiletries. She was an elderly woman with thin, gray hair and sagging skin, breasts, and muscles. She didn't get far.

“Maxine,” a woman in blue scrubs called. “You’re supposed to go into the bathroom and then take off your pajamas.”

Maxine gave a frustrated grunt as her HT took her arm and lead her back to the bedroom, in part because she was now about five feet from the bathroom.

Becca, as Rebecca Gull told Wes to call her, didn’t seem to notice the nude woman. “The morning shift arrives at 6:00. We need the residents out of bed by 6:05. Team Smile gets sponge baths in the evening—no way to get them ready in time, otherwise—but you’ll still need to work fast to get all of them seated in the dining room by 6:45.”

“Why so early?” Wes asked.

“We load the bus at 7:45 to get the higher-functioning residents to their jobs. After they eat, they’ve still got to wash up, get their lunches, put on coats, and line up for the bus.”

Wes nodded. Eric worked at a place that packaged balsam gliders. Didn’t earn much money, but Wes doubted he produced much, either. More like an opportunity to learn life skills.

“What about the lower-functioning residents? Like Team Smile?”

“Team Smile and Team Challenge stay here. They might go for walks in the summer, or a field trip in the winter. Otherwise, you’ll do physical therapy, prop them in front of the television in the lounge—officially, something educational—or let them listen to music. The higher teams come back in the early afternoon. Then it’s dinner prep, dinner, classes, and bed.”

“Classes?”

“That’s right. You’re morning shift most days, but your double, you’ll need to teach classes.”

Many of the higher-functioning residents greeted Becca by name as they saw her. She smiled and patted backs. “Hi, Jilly. Morning, Bradley, how is your shoulder? Oh, that’s too bad. Hey, Carla, I got your new CD player. I’ll bring it by this afternoon.”

She sidestepped several other distractions until they reached the nurse station, at the junction between the east and west wings. Residents lined up outside the window to get their morning pills before they went to the showers. Some popped the pills in one at a time and washed them down with water. Low-functioning residents took theirs crushed and mixed with applesauce.

“What’s with all the pills?” Wes asked.

“Some of it’s psychotropic stuff, but most of the heavy pill takers are elderly. You know, blood pressure, cholesterol, that sort of thing,” she said. “No different from my grandma, I suppose.”

The men’s bathroom sat opposite the nurse station, next to the Team Smile bedroom. Its door swung open and closed every few seconds. Plenty of nakedness in there, as well. Men shaving, dressing, going into bathroom stalls, brushing teeth, undressing for the showers farther back. Male HTs wheeled in residents in chairs, or helped older men with walkers and bike helmets, or simply poked their head in and called out to higher-functioning residents to move them along.

One HT came out wearing gloves and holding a washcloth stained brown, which he dumped in the laundry bin outside the door. He saw Wes and gave a nod of

greeting to the new guy. “Fun stuff. Hey, Becca, what’s up?” He ducked back inside.

Wes looked back to see Becca watching for his reaction. He was not shocked by what he saw. A bit overwhelmed, maybe, but he’d grown up with a retarded brother, cleaned up a few messes in his life. He’d get used to it.

Harder to get used to would be the smell that hung around the bathroom. It was sour sweat, morning breath, urine from old bladders, soap, shaving cream, toothpaste, poop, mouth wash, all mingling with the chemicals that janitorial used to scrub this place down while the residents slept.

Wes said, “About the classes. Everyone I’ve seen is an adult. Trying to get their G.E.D. or something?”

“G.E.D.? That’s funny. No. Riverwood is a private facility, and about two thirds of our residents are paid for out of private funds. Like your brother, right? But a third are state funded. So we’ve got to follow state guidelines. And that means classes.”

He thought Becca was wrong about Eric. No way his parents could afford to pay for this place. Had to be what, a few thousand a month?

“Someone with more diplomas than brains came up with this thing called ‘graduated advancement,’” Becca continued. “GA means that residents are progressing from helplessness—say, Team Smile—to complete autonomy, or at least, the semi-autonomy of a group home. And real jobs. Team Smile is working on basic skills like swallowing, walking, eye contact, but some day they’ll be operating fork lifts and reconciling general ledgers.”

She paused as one low-functioning resident, escaped for the moment from his handler, walked past in a stiff-legged gait. He wore pants, socks, one shoe, and no shirt.

Becca watched him go, then turned back to Wes. “It’s a long-term project.”

“Wussy!” a voice cried.

Wes grinned as his brother hurried down the hall toward him, excitement in his eyes. Eric’s hair was wet and there were damp spots on his shirt where he hadn’t fully dried himself. He smelled of Ivory soap and an excess of deodorant.

“Hey, Ruk. What’s up?”

“Whachoo doing?”

“Gonna be working here for a few weeks. How about that?”

“Wicked cool. You with Team Progress?”

“No, Ruk, I’m the HT for Team Smile. But we’ll see each other all the time.” He studied Eric for new injuries or bruises. Nothing that he could see.

“Wicked cool.”

“Hey, Eric!” his HT called. “You left your pajamas in the bathroom. And you forgot to comb your hair.”

“You’d better go,” Wes said. “I’ll see you at breakfast.”

Becca raised an eyebrow as Eric turned back to the bathroom. “Wussy?”

“You know, Wesley, Wussy. Eric had a hard time pronouncing my name. Don’t think he even hears the difference.”

“The first time another HT hears that, nobody else will be able to pronounce your name, either. Looks like you got yourself a nickname.”

“Yeah, I thought of that already.” He shrugged. “Could have been worse. My parents could have named me Percy.”

She laughed. That was good. Wes already had the impression that this job would be harder than he’d first thought. The last thing he needed was to start off with the reputation as the jerk who couldn’t laugh at himself.

“You’re serious about this?” Becca asked.

“Of course I’m serious.”

“What I mean is, you’re not going to screw me over, right? God knows I can use all the help I can get, but last night I started thinking. You’re here on your own agenda. And if you think there’s something going on with your brother, it’d be easy to get your revenge by messing things up when the state inspectors are here.”

“That’s not me at all. And besides, I’m writing a paper. How is that going to go over with my advisor?”

“Or what if—just an example—you go check on your brother and leave your residents alone. You know you can’t do that, right?”

“Of course. Look, Becca, I’m studying patient advocacy. And I’ve been taking care of my brother all my life. I know this isn’t a game. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m going to take this seriously. I’m not some trust fund kid who doesn’t know how to work. And I’m not afraid of or disgusted by the mentally handicapped.”

“Then come on. Let’s wake your team.”

They entered Team Smile’s room. Even with two of them on the job, it took a half hour to get the four residents out of their hospital gowns, into fresh diapers, and dressed. Becca showed Wes where to find their clothing and which closet held whose personal belongings.

“If Aaron starts to scream, pop one of those classical CDs into his player. Almost always works. Jan finds a warm breeze through the window comforting. That is, when you can get a warm breeze in Vermont.”

There were four members of Team Smile, three men and a woman. Normally, Becca explained, Riverwood segregated the teams by gender, due to bathroom issues, and the fact that the residents may be retarded, but their adult bodies still had natural sexual urges.

“You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff that’s happened here over the years. Some of it would get people arrested in the real world. No worries of that with Team Smile.”

She said it helped to think of Team Smile as a nursery of infants with very high needs. “Only they’re ten times as hard to move and not nearly as cute. You’ll never see one of these guys signed out by family.”

“Never? They don’t have *any* visitors?”

“Someone came to see Chad Lett once. A sister, I think. Other than that, I’ve never seen anyone in three and a half years. Except for Jan, they’re all middle aged. Their parents are dead or very old. But even so, none of these guys are like your brother, or even like a baby, for that matter. They don’t recognize people, they don’t smile when they see something pretty. They respond to pain, heat, and cold, but that’s about it. Chad doesn’t even do that. His muscles move and twitch constantly—that’s why he’s so damn heavy—but you can give him a shot and he

won't flinch. Makes it tough for family to bond when you're pretty much a vegetable."

Maybe so, but it disturbed Wes to think of people rotting in this place for year after year after year, alone and forgotten.

Becca said, "We lost a guy on Team Smile last fall. Died of kidney failure at fifty-eight. Your life expectancy takes a hit when you live your life moving between bed and wheelchair. He'd been institutionalized since the 50s. Turned over to the state at the age of three months. Fifty-eight years in a place like this. Can you imagine?"

"Jesus."

"Yeah. Well, good luck with graduated advancement with this crowd. Your classes are tracking an object, recognizing their names. Stuff like that. I'll show you the book later. Goals and methods and a log you need to keep. My opinion is that it's more useful for you—make you feel like you're doing something other than changing diapers—than for the residents. You'll come and go and ten years from now someone else will be giving the same class and not one of these people will be able to track an object or recognize his name. Just be damn sure you're teaching the classes when the state inspector is watching. Other than that, mark the book, but don't sweat it too much."

"God, you're cynical." He couldn't stop himself from voicing it aloud.

"Realistic, not cynical. I fight the battles worth fighting." Becca gave him an appraising look. "But I get the feeling you're the sort who likes noble quests. This might just be the perfect place for you. You'll find plenty of hopeless causes if you stick around. After you get knocked on your ass a few times, I suspect you'll take a more realistic turn yourself."

It was the second time in as many days that someone had implied he was a crusader. Well, what of it? That's why he was going to law school, his sights fixed not on something like corporate law, where the money was, but on medical law. To reform places like this, to bring dignity to people like his brother, Eric.

"Look, I'm not saying you shouldn't care," Becca continued. "All I'm saying is that if your IQ is in single digits—hey, I'm not kidding. Jan's the brains of the group and her chart says she's got an IQ of nine. All I'm saying is you're not going to teach them a damn thing. But if you want to make their lives better take a page from Rosa's book."

"Rosa is the woman who quit last week?"

"Right. Rosa was always rubbing their feet, moving their limbs, taking them into the fresh air, that sort of thing." A frown passed over Becca's face. "Weird how she just walked off the job. Wasn't even her shift; she'd taken over for Kirk, who was sick."

A few minutes later and they had the residents buckled into their wheelchairs and ready to go. The chairs were elaborate contraptions, with head restraints, full support for legs, and about thirty settings, none of which, Becca told him, were typically used.

Physically, the work wasn't difficult, other than the effort of lifting them from bed to chair, and yet the experience was uncomfortable. He used his whole body to bear their weight, holding them so close he could smell them. He touched bare skin on arms, legs, back when dressing the residents, and held their torsos and

heads in place while fastening restraints. Intimate, that's the word he was looking for.

Wes and Becca made two trips to wheel Team Smile into the dining room. They weren't the first to arrive, but not the last, either. One guy from Team Challenge—walkers, but not talkers, Becca said of the team—grew angry about something and stripped just inside the dining room. When ignored, he hit himself on top of the head and made as if to bang his head against the wall. Most residents, however, came and sat down without incident.

Kitchen staff served Team Smile's eggs, toast, and sausage in piles of yellow and brown paste. Team Challenge shared a table and were lucky enough to eat their food chopped into pieces instead of pureed. Kitchen delivered plates for Becca, Wes, and Team Challenge's HT. He eyed the food with little interest.

"Not hungry?" Becca asked. She spooned food into a resident's mouth, then took a bite of toast. "Or did you eat before you came?"

"Something like that." He alternated between Chad and Jan, pushing it back until reflex took over. Half of it came back out again.

"Try the toast, first. Or maybe the juice. Give it a couple of days and you won't think twice." She nodded at the woman feeding Team Challenge. "This is Carolina. She's from Peru."

Carolina smiled and held out her hand, which Wes reached across the table to shake. "No English," she said with a thick accent. "Sorry."

"Admin wasn't too happy about that," Becca said, "but frankly, it doesn't matter with Team Challenge. They're only one step above Team Smile. English skills aren't as important as patience and reliability. And the English will come. How is your English class?" she asked Carolina in a slow, deliberate tone.

Carolina shrugged and waved her hand in a 'so-so' gesture.

"Estás en los estados unidos desde cuando?" Wes asked. *How long have you been in the United States?*

Carolina gave a surprised smile. "Llegué hace unos seis meses. Eres Tico?" *I came about six months ago. Are you a Tico?*

The question surprised him. Tico was shorthand for Costa Rican. She'd placed the accent. He'd been speaking Spanish since he was a child, and thought he spoke pretty well, but almost nobody recognized the accent.

"Show-off," Becca said in a good-natured voice. "Where did you learn Spanish?"

"My grandfather owned a beach house in Costa Rica. I spent a lot of time on the Golfo Dulce when I was a kid. Surfing, deep-sea fishing, the typical stuff."

"Sure, the typical stuff."

He turned to Carolina and answered in Spanish. "No, I'm not a Tico, but that's where I learned Spanish. You must have known someone from Costa Rica."

"Rosa was a *Tica*."

"Really? The one who quit?" Wes asked.

"That's right. Is today your first day?"

"It is. My name is Wesley. Wes. My brother is Eric Pilson on Team Progress."

She looked at him more closely. "I can see that. You look like him."

Becca interrupted again and Wes felt the awkwardness of talking back and forth between two people, neither of whom understood what the other was saying. "The Spanish thing might come in handy. Presuming you stick around." She finished

her juice, then stood up with a slice of toast in hand. “I’ve got some stuff to check on and then I’ll be busy getting residents onto the bus. Just keep feeding these guys until they start spitting it back again. You’ll have to use discretion with Chad. Can you stick with Carolina until I get back? Oh, and if you quit, at least be decent enough to wait until the end of the shift. Then, you can phone in whatever lame excuse comes to mind.” This time, at least, her tone was light.

“I’ll still be here when you get back.”

“Good. I’ll give you your tax stuff after lunch.”

Shortly, the other residents finished and dispersed to the bathrooms while Carolina and Wes kept feeding their residents. Carolina didn’t seem in a hurry, so he took his time, too. Every time he glanced her way she was watching him.

They took their residents into the lounge on the far side of the dining room when they had finished eating. Carolina turned on the television. The channel was set to CNN. Four of her residents sat passively on the couch, enthralled by the moving figures, while Dale, the one who had tried to strip before breakfast, made a beeline for the doors. Carolina kept bringing him back, sitting him down, then repeating the exercise.

Meanwhile, the higher-functioning residents streamed back through the dining room and lounge on their way to the bus. HTs picked up boxes from the kitchen filled with sack lunches. The first group left and a second, smaller group followed a few minutes later. It was much quieter then, with only the sounds of the kitchen staff from the next room and the television. It was only 8:30.

“Tell me,” Carolina said after a few minutes. “What part of Costa Rica?”

“Where we spent our vacations? Called the Golfo Dulce. On the Osa Peninsula.”

“That’s near Puerto Jiménez, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” he said, surprised. The south was sparsely populated and isolated by terrible roads. He’d met people in San Jose, the capital, who hadn’t known where to find Puerto Jiménez on a map. “Have you been to Costa Rica?”

“No, never.” She got up to chase after Dale again. When she returned, she asked, “Can you keep an eye on my residents for a minute?” When he agreed, she disappeared toward the kitchen. She came back a few minutes later with another woman by her side. The second woman dried her hands on her apron as she approached.

She wore a sleeveless shirt beneath her apron, in spite of the season, and plenty of makeup, in spite of the early hour. Her reddish-brown hair—dyed, he was certain—was pulled into a tight bun behind her head.

“Buenos días. Soy Yamila,” she said. Mexican accent. And then, in accented, but good English, “You’re Eric’s brother?”

“Buenos días. Yes, I am.” He stood and offered her his hand.

Instead of taking his hand, she turned to whisper something in Carolina’s ear. The younger woman nodded and whispered something back. Wes didn’t like how they looked at him. There weren’t many Spanish-speaking immigrants in Vermont, and even fewer native Vermonters who spoke Spanish. Spanish-speakers were invariably friendly and chatty when they encountered someone who spoke their language. More so someone like Carolina, who spoke little English. These two looked just shy of hostile.

“Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” Yamila said. “Something happened to our friend Rosa. And we think you know something about it.”

Chapter 4

Wes looked back and forth between Yamila and Carolina with growing confusion. “Me? You think I had something to do with it?” He switched to Spanish. “Como es que yo tendría la culpa?”

“Stick to English,” Yamila told him. “Your Spanish isn’t as good as you think it is. And Carolina can understand the English, too. Tell us about Rosa Solorio.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” he said. “I’ve never met her. They told me she quit.”

“Mentiroso,” Carolina muttered. She retrieved Dale and sat him on the couch yet again. She changed the channel to a children’s show, but Dale ignored the TV, and the other residents didn’t seem to care.

“I’m not lying,” he protested. “I never even heard of Rosa before yesterday. I don’t know why you think I’m involved. Is it because of Costa Rica? Totally a coincidence. Thousands of Americans go to Costa Rica every year.”

“We should go to the police,” Yamila said. She turned and said the same thing in Spanish to Carolina, who nodded.

And now Wes knew they were bluffing. “You think something happened to Rosa, but you can’t go to the police, can you? You’re not legal. Was Rosa legal?”

“I don’t know,” Yamila said. Her voice took a brittle edge. “But why that matters? Because she is illegal it’s okay that something happened to her? Because she doesn’t have no papers?”

“No, I’m just thinking. Maybe she was deported.”

A snort. “In the middle of her shift? They come and arrest her in the middle of the night and deport her without telling Riverwood?”

“Fine, so she quit. Maybe she’s running from an old boyfriend. Or maybe she found out her sister has cancer and she hurried back to Costa Rica. Who knows?”

“She wouldn’t leave without telling us,” Yamila said. “Never. We go to her apartment. She leaves her things. Why? Her landlord don’t know nothing. She doesn’t tell no one that she was going. Rosa was a woman, very... *seria*, you know. She wouldn’t disappear like this.”

“Did you call her family in Costa Rica?” Wes asked.

“We don’t have the number.”

“Then I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know anything about it. How could I?”

“Because you know her, don’t you?” Yamila asked. The Mexican woman folded her arms and glared. Both women watched him as if expecting him to fold under this new information.

“I already told you. I never met her before in my life.”

“Hijole, you’re such a liar. It’s obvious you know her. You say yourself you pass a lot of time on the Golfo Dulce. Rosa is from Puerto Jiménez.”

“That’s just coincidence,” he said. “My grandfather had a house in Costa Rica. Puerto Jiménez is the only town of any size on that part of the Osa Peninsula so yeah, I’ve been there a bunch of times. So what?”

“And your mother?” Carolina asked in a quiet voice, in Spanish.

“What? My mother?”

The Peruvian continued, “Yes, your mother. Your brother is Eric Pilson, right? Well, your mother looks like you, too. So don’t deny it. And she comes to get your brother.”

“Yes, I know. But so?”

“And she comes in the middle of the day, too. When the place is nearly empty and everyone has left for work. I’ve seen her talking to Rosa.”

He frowned at this. Mom only picked up Eric evenings and weekend days off. Why would she drive out when he wasn’t here?

“She must be here to talk to the nurse about Eric’s meds or something.”

“Right,” Yamila said. She refused to speak Spanish to him, as if that were a privilege he hadn’t earned. “And that’s why they go into Team Smile’s room to talk in private, instead of the nurse station.”

Yamila, working in the kitchen, must have heard these things from Carolina. And if they were right about Mom, then no wonder they focused their suspicions on him. But come on. But then Wes remembered the conversation he’d overheard from the previous night. His mother, talking to someone on the phone who was not his father. And pleading for Wes’s safety. What about that?

Yamila studied his expression. “You know something.” It was not a question.

“No I don’t.” He tried to clear his face of whatever had drawn Yamila’s attention. “And it’s none of my business anyway.”

“Carolina and me, we can do nothing.” Her voice softened. “Will you help us, please?”

He thought about it. Say he tracked her down. He wasn’t Rosa’s brother or her boyfriend, or even just a friend. She’d think he was some kind of weirdo.

“Maybe I’ll swing by Rosa’s apartment and see if anything turns up. And I’ll talk to my mom. Maybe she knows something.”

Damned if he could see a connection between Rosa and that phone conversation. And what if he did uncover something? This was his mother he was talking about. What was he going to do? Call the police?

* * * * *

“I need a one-eyed pirate, a hunchback, and a whore. Take your pick.”

“Who has the best lines?” Wes asked.

His father thumbed through the script. “I’m thinking the whore. Not as much time on stage, but she’s got some great one-liners. Man in drag is perfect for that role. Totally over the top.”

Dad hadn’t been satisfied with the auditions. He’d filled the major roles, but still had a few comic relief types to fill. So long as Wes was sticking around, his father figured he may as well take a part.

“Did you call your professor yet?” his mother asked from the kitchen. It was her night for dinner, and unlike Dad, who usually microwaved a frozen pizza or lasagna, she had an actual meal on the way. Smelled garlicky.

"I'm driving to Cambridge on Friday."

"But aren't you missing class already?"

"I missed one. It won't kill me. And Friday I'll talk to Dr. Caliarì and explain the situation."

"Oh, Wesley."

He wasn't going to get into it with her, not now. He'd been avoiding her since she got home from work. Truth was, he was afraid he would blurt out the questions that had been troubling him since that morning.

Fortunately, Dad dominated the dinner conversation, reading from his script, planning out sets, and then switching conversation to the telescope he'd ordered online. He had joined a group of amateur astronomers who were searching for near earth objects with the goal of detecting asteroids and comets that might pose a threat to the earth. Naturally, this necessitated a high-end telescope.

His mother had complained about the cost of this latest adventure. "Are you kidding? Two thousand dollars? Have you seen the state of our checking account?" But Wes's father was no more interested in Pilson family finances than in the mating habits of white nosed coatis. Come to think of it, probably less; Dad had once talked about opening a animal rescue center in Costa Rica. Never mind, the telescope was ordered. It would see intense use for a year or two before it found its way to the attic or eBay.

Dad disappeared to the den after dinner to play with his casting list. Wes washed the bigger pans by hand while his mother loaded the dishwasher.

"Mom, what do you know about Rosa Solorio?"

She paused a beat, her back facing him as she bent over the dishwasher. "Who?"

When she straightened, he turned her around to face him. "I'm serious, Mom. The girl at Riverwood. I know you've been talking to her."

"Does Eric have a new HT?"

"What? No. Rosa worked with the low-functioning residents, not Eric's team."

"Then I don't know. I talk to people when I visit. Oh, and there was a woman subbing for Rod when I picked up Eric the other day. Is that who you're talking about?"

It sounded plausible coming from her mouth, but he'd seen hesitation and a flicker of doubt as he'd turned her around. He felt his jaws clench. "Can you pretend for a minute I'm not ten years old anymore?"

He'd been ten when his parents had institutionalized Eric. They could no longer manage or afford round-the-clock care with Ellen Pilson pulling double shifts to dig out from debt. Wes came home from school one day to discover his brother gone. They hadn't asked his opinion. They hadn't asked Eric, either.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm not ten, and I'm not an idiot. I know there's something going on. Something that has to do with me and with Eric and that girl from Costa Rica. Did you have her deported, is that what happened?"

"What girl from Costa Rica?" she asked and for the moment her confusion looked genuine, but maybe she'd just got herself into character more thoroughly. "You mean this Rosa person?"

“Yes, that’s exactly who I mean. Well, she’s gone. Left in the middle of her shift. Come on, Mom. What’s going on? Why would they deport her? That’s it, isn’t it? That’s what happened to Rosa.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but hesitated. He waited. “Mom?”

“You’re worked up over nothing, Wesley.” Her tone had changed. “There’s nothing going on with Eric and now you’re grasping at something else. Why don’t you go back to Cambridge tonight? I don’t know, maybe you need to see someone.”

“A shrink?”

“A school psychologist. Someone. You seem stressed out.” She gave him a concerned look. “It can’t be easy trying to keep up with school and worrying about your brother. Reminds me of when I was trying to finish nursing school and pulling double shifts waiting tables. Totally exhausted, trying not to fall asleep in class, stressed about grades. Started to get paranoid. I was actually worried that Dad was having an affair, he seemed so distracted and I hadn’t been giving him any attention.”

“Dad?” He couldn’t see it.

She laughed. “I know, totally stupid. He was having an affair with that dumb radio station is what it was. There was one night I got so worked up I just lay in bed, totally wrung-out, dozing in and out of various nightmares where every table in the restaurant was filled and I was the only waitress on duty. And every time I woke up I stared at your father and imagined him sleeping with another woman.”

She’d so neatly deflected his attention that for a moment he was fooled. He was ready to discount everything Rosa’s friends had told him and his own concerns as paranoia. Except for that overheard phone call.

Meanwhile, his mother turned back to the dishes. Any crack Wes had opened in her defenses now closed over and it occurred to him for the first time that if he was right this was not a casual lie. She’d been hiding something for a long time. Long enough to protect her lie with a variety of moats, drawbridges, and battlements.

“I’m going out for a bit,” Wes said. “Just to clear my head.” He gave her a peck on the cheek as she filled the soap holders and started the dishwasher.

He wasn’t ready to escalate this to the police. His mother’s equivocating aside, he still thought there must be a reasonable explanation for Rosa’s disappearance. Maybe he’d have more answers after checking out Rosa’s apartment.

The address Yamila had given led Wes downtown, a few blocks from Riverwood, to a nice, quiet neighborhood near the river. The apartment building itself overlooked a snow-covered park on one side and woods on the other. He parked in front of the building and took the exterior stairs to her apartment on the second floor.

Rosa’s friends had driven by the apartment, letting themselves in with Rosa’s spare key, given to Yamila for safekeeping. She’d been gone, but had left almost all her personal effects behind, including furniture and clothing.

“Sure, but if they’d deported her,” Wes had retorted, “the INS wouldn’t bother confiscating her coffee mugs and end tables. All it means is that she left in a hurry.”

To his surprise, the door was open and the lights on in Rosa’s apartment. An elderly man stuffed newspapers, books, and other personal belongings into a

garbage sack while a younger woman, wearing rubber gloves, cleaned the windows.

Something had been bothering him as he'd parked and climbed the stairs and now it became obvious. The building looked like an oversize Vermont farmhouse, rather than a boxy, cinderblock thing. Brass lamps lit the brick walkway. It had more mature landscaping than you'd expect from a newer building. An upscale place.

"You here about the apartment?" the man asked, spotting Wes at the doorway. He had one of those old-time Vermont accents, where 'apartment' became *apartment*.

"I'm looking for Rosa. I used to work with her. Wanted to see if she still lived here."

"Nah, she moved out in the middle of the night. People have already called from her work. Told 'em to call me if they got ahold of her."

"She didn't seem the sort to move out in a hurry."

"Yeah, it was kind of funny," the younger woman said. She looked like the man's daughter. "She always paid her rent on time."

"About the rent," Wes said. "What do your apartments run, anyway?"

"Two bedroom apartments like this one are fifteen-fifty per month," she said.

"That much?"

"It's a good value. Granite countertops, hardwood floors, large master with a view. Come take a look, if you'd like." Her tone wasn't defensive, just matter-of-fact. Take it or leave it.

"Sure," he said, stepping in.

It wasn't a question of whether or not it was a good deal, he thought as he walked through. It was a nice apartment, the kind that would go for two, three times that in Cambridge, Mass. But what did Riverwood pay the HTs? Ten bucks an hour, right? Maybe eleven or twelve for someone who'd been there a few years. So let's say Rosa made twelve, that'd be what? Two thousand a month, gross. No way she could afford this place.

Not to mention the furniture. He'd assumed that Yamila and Carolina were talking about particle board stuff from Wal-Mart, second hand couches and the like. No, this was high-quality, not top of the line, but new, matching, and comfortable.

"Rosa didn't send anyone for the furniture?"

"No. Pretty much too late by now." He met the woman's eyes, then saw her father look away and realized they probably meant to sell the furniture to cover the lost rent. Or rather, it was a perk of the job, as he doubted they owned the place.

"Whatever," he said. "I'm just trying to figure out why she left without her stuff."

"Happens more than you'd think," the old man said.

"Yeah, but not usually here, Dad." The woman turned to Wes. "We manage another place, and people are always cutting without warning. Usually, about the time we start calling to ask why their rent is late again. Someone like that will take as much as you'll give them, then, when you won't take anymore, they move on to scam someone else."

"But that's not what Rosa is like," Wes said. It was a statement, but also a question. "I mean, she's the sort to pay her rent on time. Right?"

“Sure. Always arrived in the mail by the first. Money order.” She shrugged. “Look, if you don’t know what happened to her, there’s nothing we can tell you. Wouldn’t even recognize her if I saw her. We’ve got enough tenants that I only know the ones who call to bitch about every little thing, or who can’t pay their rent on time. And like I said, that wasn’t Rosa. So unless you really want to check out the apartment...”

Wes did just that. The apartment was clean, but disheveled. Closet doors and medicine cabinets hung open, their contents pushed around. He went to the bedroom. The bed was made, but the mattress askew.

“Did you leave these drawers pulled half out?” he called from her bedroom. Clothes lay on the floor or shoved to the side of the drawers.

“We haven’t touched that room yet.”

He didn’t find anything personal. No papers, no pictures, nothing that indicated who lived here. He could see the dusty outline of what looked like a picture frame on the nightstand, and he thought about that. Would she take a picture, but leave all her clothes and furniture? Maybe. But surely there’d be a bill or a jotted phone number, or a receipt, or something.

Wes could have explained away everything, assuming he took it in pieces. But when you added it together—Rosa’s disappearance, his mother’s phone call, this expensive apartment—there was a hell of a lot of coincidence to explain.

He walked back to the front room where the two managers were loading dinner plates into a box. “Can you guys stop what you’re doing for a little bit?”

They turned with a frown. So he explained that people were worried about Rosa. The police might want to come check it out. It would help if they didn’t scrub down every surface. There might be fingerprints or other items of interest.

“Well, I guess we can stop for tonight if you think the police would be interested in having a look. Dad?”

The old man nodded. He looked troubled. “I never thought...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Wes said. “The whole thing is probably nothing, but you know, Rosa’s friends are worried about her. I don’t know if the police will come, or what they’ll look for if they do. But if you could hold off for, I don’t know, even until morning, I’d appreciate it. Why don’t you give me your number and I’ll let you know one way or another.”

Wes left with their name and phone number. It was about 7:30 and he figured he could still stop in at the police station and tell them what he’d learned. It was only a few blocks away.

But when he got back to the car and tried the door, it was locked. He frowned. He wasn’t in the habit of locking the door while he was in Vermont. Suddenly paranoid, he glanced in the back seat of the car, but couldn’t see anything. Still, it was dark, and...

A movement behind him. He started to turn. Something jabbed him in the back. It was like a fire on his spine and as he flinched away, the pain followed as his muscles convulsed. He fell hard, disoriented. There was a man behind him, but he couldn’t move or control his body in any way. The attacker rolled Wes onto his stomach and twisted his arm behind his back, then drove his knee into Wes’s spine to hold him down.

"I don't believe in warnings," said the man on his back. "A waste of time, generally. By the time someone needs a warning, it's too late."

The tongs of the stun gun, or whatever it was that had knocked him to the ground, tickled the back of Wes's neck. If he could just roll over and knock the man off balance, maybe he could gain his feet. But he was afraid of the stun gun.

"But you stumbled into this by accident. And I'm very sorry about that. Tell you what. Walk away now, go back to school and this can stay our little secret. Keep stumbling around and someone's going to get hurt. Several someones. Your parents, your brother. You."

He tried to turn to say something and perhaps get a glimpse of his attacker. But the man held his head down. "Okay, I understand," Wes said. "I'm done."

"Good. Now, I'm sorry for this."

He released Wes, then gave him another jolt. It went on for what seemed like forever, though it probably only lasted a few seconds. When it was over, he lay in a fetal position, groaning. A figure strode away into the darkness.

At last he leaned against the wheel of his car and took in deep breaths of the chill night air. He calmed himself. He brushed away the gravel and bits of ice from his cheek. His muscles ached.

He looked around but saw nobody on the street. Just darkened cars, a few houses and apartments, but no moving vehicles. No sign of his attacker. It was anger, now, that flooded him. That last, long jolt hadn't been meant to frighten him. It had been pure, vicious sadism. Watch him twitch like a bug impaled on a pin.

Wes spoke into the darkness. "This isn't over."

Chapter 5

Lieutenant Roger Stiles worked a squeeze ball with alternating hands while Wes shared his fears that something had happened to Rosa Solorio. Wes told the officer that a couple of her friends had approached him (being careful not to give personal details about the women who were likely not in the country legally) and that he'd talked to her landlord and what the man and his daughter had said that made him suspicious.

Wes hadn't been happy to see Stiles on duty and could tell the feeling was mutual. Stiles hadn't taken the initial complaint about Wes's brother well, either, said it was a matter for the state. As Becca had confirmed. Stiles's tone of voice only confirmed his skepticism. "So let me get this straight. You got a job at Riverwood. Dropped out of law school. Is that right?"

"I didn't drop out. I'm dropping one class and I've shifted a single project."

"But you dropped your class to keep an eye on your brother, is that right? Then why are you worried about this woman? What's that got to do with your brother?"

"Well, see, I speak Spanish, and..."

"You already said that. She needs an advocate and all that. But what's your angle? Romantic?"

“What? No. I never even met her.” He hated the defensive tone in his voice.

“Then I don’t see your interest in the matter.”

“Look, there’s something else. When I was coming back to my car after checking out this woman’s apartment, someone attacked me.”

Stiles leaned back in his chair. “Attacked?”

“Look at this.” Wes lifted his shirt to show his back; he’d checked himself in the mirror to see the stun gun had left marks on the skin. “Some kind of a stun gun or taser. Went right through my shirt. Some guy jumped me when I was getting in my car.”

But Stiles just leaned further back. “And?”

“It was like someone kicked my legs out from under me. This guy pinned me down and threatened me. He told me to back off about Rosa Solorio or next time it would be worse.”

“Anyone else see the alleged attack?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did you get a look at this guy?” Stiles asked with a subtle quote/unquote around ‘this guy.’

“It was dark. He was strong and held me face-down. Gave me another shock before he left. When I got up, he was gone.”

“Why don’t you stop right there?” Stiles said. “Before you dig yourself any deeper.”

Wes mentally kicked himself. What an idiot. He’d gone about this backwards. He should have said first thing, “Someone attacked me,” showed the marks on his back, and then told Stiles about Rosa.

“If you’ll just look at my back.”

“Did you know my dad worked for your grandfather?” Lieutenant Stiles asked. “Twenty years at the gravel pit as foreman. Earned good money. His dad, too. Grandpa got his start operating a horse-drawn scraper, back when Northrock was still called Vermont Rock and Gravel.”

“Lieutenant Stiles.”

Stiles ignored his interruption. “You know, your grandfather saved this town during the Depression. Built a road on Mount Mansfield that nobody paid him for. Practically ran his own CCC before the government started hiring men to build the dam on the Little River. He must have lost a hell of a lot of money. My grandpa and my dad worshipped your grandfather.

“I even worked at Northrock one summer. That was tough work, shoveling gravel all day, but it was damn good money for a kid just out of high school. I worked with your Uncle Davis. That kid worked his ass off, shoveling gravel just like the rest of us. I was sorry to hear that he’d died.”

Wes interrupted a second time. “I don’t see what—”

Stiles leaned forward and his face hardened. “Frankly, Mr. Pilson, I think you’re full of shit. You’re looking for attention. You jumped on a couple of accidents your brother suffered—yeah, I’ve seen the reports and I talked to your mother and to several people at Riverwood—and when nothing came of that, you’re trying to get me worked up about an illegal alien who you don’t know, who undoubtedly is cleaning hotel rooms in Boston or has simply gone back home to Mexico or

wherever. And when I didn't pay enough attention you made up this story that someone attacked you."

Wes had nothing to say, just the sputter of protest that he knew would not change anything.

Stiles said, "If you were anyone else, you'd be looking at charges for filing a false report. But because you come from a good family—"

"Since I come from a good family, can't you give me the benefit of the doubt?"

"I already am. I'm going to assume that you really were concerned about your brother. And I'm going to assume that you really did worry about this woman who worked at Riverwood. And I'm going to forget the story about the attacker with the taser, who nobody else saw and who you cannot describe, because I'm going to assume that you got excited and thought I wouldn't get involved unless you embellished your story."

"I don't believe this."

Lieutenant Stiles rose to his feet. "My advice? Quit this dead-end job at Riverwood and go back to school. Now, I've got traffic court tomorrow, so if you'll excuse me, I'm kind of busy."

Wes stood to go. He felt exceptionally bitter. "I'll call Rosa's landlords and tell them to go ahead and clean the place. They'll be happy to know the police don't give a shit about immigrant girls. It'll make their job a lot easier."

"Don't mess with me Pilson." Stiles's voice had grown dangerous. "Don't even."

Wes left the police station thoroughly disgusted. He wondered if he should go to the state police, but since Riverwood was in the village, they would undoubtedly just refer the matter back to Lieutenant Stiles.

But he sure as hell wasn't going to leave it alone. He wanted to talk to Becca. Would she still be at work at this hour? She said she'd been pulling a lot of overtime. He could swing by Riverwood on his way home and see.

* * * * *

Doctor Pardo peered into Chad Lett's eye with a small flashlight. The retarded man lay in bed, restraints in place to keep him from thrashing against the bars in the middle of the night. Pardo turned the light on, then off again. He put the flashlight into the left pocket of his lab coat.

He took out a small vial from the right pocket, then turned to the man standing over his shoulder, away from the bed. "A few drops of this should clear up the condition."

What condition? Chad Lett asked. He felt the words travel to his tongue, his lips, his vocal cords. But of course no sound came out. No movement, not even a twitch, stirred the muscles and the words died in his mouth, unspoken.

He felt everything, heard everything. When his muscles seized, shards of pain stabbed through his limbs. When a fly landed on his face, he couldn't twitch a muscle to chase it away. When his arm or leg got stuck in an awkward position he had to sit with the discomfort until someone moved him. He could taste the pureed shit they shoved into his mouth until his reflex swallowed it. He could even see, if something walked in front of his vision. But he could not move, could not interact with his environment. They had warehoused him in this room and here he

would spend the rest of his life. People came, went, some kind and gentle, others unfeeling or callous.

Years had passed. He guessed five, maybe six of paralysis. He didn't know for sure, because the early months remained a blur. Chad had awakened from a coma like a diver swimming up from the depths, his oxygen low, the sun a dim memory far above. The smell of Windex, bleach, the smell of hair and shampoo as a woman, perhaps a nurse, bent over him. Then came sounds: a beeping heart monitor, the whir of a linoleum scrubber, a television droning from the next room.

Doctors came, others who must have been family or friends. He heard them talking about him. Brain damaged. A vegetable. One step from brain dead. No point, then. They'd removed the breathing tube and to everyone's surprise, his body had taken over breathing. There was discussion; should they stop feeding him and let him die?

"And there will be no chance that he'll ever recover?" someone had asked.

"No chance whatsoever." A doctor.

It was this moment that he regained full consciousness. The slumber, the drugged feeling from which he'd been clawing for weeks, fell away and he was fully awake for the first time. *No*, he cried. *No, I'm alive. I'm in here. I'm alive!*

"You're dead," came a cold voice from elsewhere in his mind. It sounded like it came from the other side of the wall—slightly muffled—as if from a fellow prisoner in some dark dungeon.

No, I'm not.

"But you are. You're a man being buried alive. Your family is standing over your grave, mourning your death while they shovel dirt on your coffin. They can't hear you screaming inside. Does it matter if you've died now or if you slowly suffocate later?"

Chad had no idea how long he'd been unconscious in the hospital and the next several weeks were a daze. Much of the time he lay unconscious or asleep as his body and drugs fought to keep him alive. Later, they transferred him to Riverwood, to live among the vegetables.

He wanted to die. He tried to die. He was incapable of committing an act of violence against his person, but he slipped into a depression as deep as the coma from which he'd emerged. He concentrated for hours on his heart, commanding it to stop beating.

I am already dead. Let me go!

And he learned that one cannot simply will oneself to die.

His companion brought him out of the depression. "Wake up," said the voice from the other side of the wall. "Live."

I am alive. I cannot die.

"I don't mean 'fail to die.' I mean, live!"

Who are you? Chad asked.

"I am your fellow prisoner. I'm the one locked away in your mind. The fellow prisoner of the Château d'If."

Faria. Like in the Count of Monte Cristo. Edmond Dantes, thrust into the bowels of the prison, dead to his fiancée, to his family. His fellow prisoner, the poor, doomed priest, Abbé Faria, unjustly imprisoned, had been Dantes' teacher and confidant.

“You may call me Faria if you wish, Monsieur Lett. I like the name.”

Chad was not insane—he had merely traveled to the edge of sanity—and he knew that Faria was not real, but a manifestation of his subconscious. His mind groped for some way to communicate with the outside world; barring that, it would hold dialogue with itself.

Life at Riverwood was monotony itself. Every morning they would take Chad from his bed, change his diaper, dress him. A pureed breakfast would be followed by some mind-numbing show like *Price is Right*.

Chad passed between boredom, depression, and anger, often suffering all three emotions in the same day. One day the HT for Team Challenge put the TV on the Discovery Channel while he and Rosa helped the short kitchen staff clean up after breakfast. They’d left Chad turned at an angle, but he could hear.

It was a show about spine and brain injuries. Specifically, locked in syndrome. It featured a man who had suffered an injury to his upper spine, rendering him almost completely paralyzed, but for the ability to blink his eyes. He’d suffered mutely for several months before someone recognized that he was still alive inside his broken body. He had worked out a means of communicating with his wife and his children.

Oh my god, Chad thought. *That’s me.*

Except for the part about controlling the eyes, of course. Chad couldn’t do as much as twitch a single muscle. Oh, and the fact that the man’s family gave a damn, while Chad had no one.

Every bit of his attention focused on the show. For several minutes the entire world disappeared as Chad learned what he had become. The show talked about future treatments for the spinal injuries, beginning with stem cell research. But the two HTs returned at that moment and one of them hunted down the remote and pointed it at the television.

No, Chad begged. *Don’t. Please.*

The channel changed. “Come on down!” the man on the television cried. “You’re the next contestant on the *Price is Right*.”

“My favorite show,” Faria said dryly. “So much better than that boring brain stuff. Chad Lett, come on down. You’re the next contestant on the *Price is Right*.”

Goddamn it.

Chad spent the next half hour in a silent rage. He mentally broke everything and everyone at Riverside. He tore the building to the ground, then stacked the corpses of its workers and residents in the ruins and burned them. When that was done, he moved his destruction to the town, then to the state, until eventually all of New England was a sulfurous, radioactive slag heap where nothing would grow for ten thousand years.

When his tantrum spent itself, Faria asked, “Are you quite done yet? Good. Sometimes I think you’d rather feel sorry for yourself than do anything.”

What the fuck can I do?

“Remember what your father told you.”

Chad’s father was a workaholic. Lying in bed, ravaged by cancer at the age of eighty-nine, he’d been placing phone calls to his business associates from his hospital bed. The last thing he’d said to Chad: “Did you get that contract you bid on?”

“Keep busy,” his father had told him again and again. “I don’t care if you have to dig a hole. It doesn’t matter. And if you still need to keep busy, fill the hole in again.”

I remember, he told Faria.

“Then get to work.”

Chad’s body was a useless husk that brought nothing but pain. But his brain worked. He exercised his memory. He repeated overheard conversations until he could remember a dozen sentences word for word. He worked on his math, doing multiplication tables and calculating the area of rooms at Riverwood.

But his salvation came from Spanish.

He’d spent significant time around Spanish speakers, had taken the subject in high school and again in college, but had been an indifferent language student. He remembered how to introduce himself and the words for fruits and colors, but laziness and the passage of years had calcified him into a monolingual. Even when he’d traveled abroad, he hadn’t bothered with the language. Hearing Rosa and Yamila speak and for a time Team Challenge’s HT, a man named Joaquín, made him regret that he’d let the opportunity pass him by.

And then one of the graveyard HTs came with his Spanish CDs. He was a college student who only lasted a few months, but he was struggling with his Spanish class and every time things were slow, he would come in and put one of his CDs into Aaron’s CD player. He’d sit next to Chad’s bed late at night and listen to his lessons.

It was a simple program, meant to play in the car or in the background while one did something else. The program would say something in English, wait a moment while the listener tried to recall the phrase in Spanish, then repeat the phrase in Spanish.

“When does the next bus leave for Seville?”

“Cuándo sale el próximo autobús para Sevilla?”

“I would like to change two hundred dollars for Mexican pesos.”

“Quisiera cambiar doscientos dólares por pesos Mexicanos.”

The college student simply could not get the Spanish. His accent was terrible. He could listen to a lesson twenty times and not be able to respond before the Spanish cut in. Chad could tell that he was trying to translate word for word rather than learning the language on a deep level.

But Chad, frozen in bed, unable to even mouth the words, learned. He paid ferocious attention to the lessons and all day, while waiting for his unknowing teacher to return, he would repeat phrases in his head and form new ones. He worked out grammar rules and tried to match them with the dusty memories of his own schooling.

All too soon, the college student quit, first the lessons, then the job entirely. But by now, Chad had started down the path. He listened to Rosa speak with Yamila and Joaquin. They spoke so quickly that at first he couldn’t tell where one word began and the other ended. Between the noise he occasionally picked out individual words: “quiero, tú, comida,” and these words eventually grew more complex and more numerous. Soon, Chad learned new words from context and he added these to his interior conversations.

Chad dreamed in Spanish. He imagined himself emerging from his stupor one day to stun Rosa with his perfect Spanish. He and Faria held long, admittedly limited conversations in Spanish, the abbé's knowledge of the language growing side by side with his own.

One day, he and Faria chatted in Spanish for some two hours about a variety of subjects. They were not capable of discussing international politics or the diet of the scarlet macaw, but neither did they run out of words as they might have several months earlier.

"Not bad," Faria said when they finally switched to English. "Not bad at all. I'd have taught you myself, but alas, you and I share knowledge and information. Unlike the Abbé Faria of literary fame, I can only teach you that which you already know."

If only there were French speakers around here, or German, we could start on something new.

"It's been, what? At least eighteen months in this place." Faria asked. "Maybe longer. A long time to spend in prison, but men have spent decades in the Chateau d'If."

Don't remind me.

"You'd better pick something more ambitious than Spanish if you want to avoid insanity."

What are you talking about? Chad asked.

"Do I have to spell everything out for you, my friend?"

Just humor me. I want to hear you say it.

"I'm talking, my dear Dantes," said Faria from the other side of the wall, "about tunneling through these walls. I'm talking about escape."

Chapter 6

Today was Becca Gull's birthday and she was pulling a double shift. Thirty years old. Big milestone, wasn't it? Half a dozen calls had vibrated through on her cell phone. Her brother, no doubt, and her parents calling to wish her a happy birthday. Probably her boyfriend, Andrew, and maybe a couple of friends from Portsmouth, where she'd gone to high school. She let them go to mail and didn't call in to get the messages.

Becca sat at her computer long after Saul Cage went home for the evening. These records were a mess; she had class logs to organize, incident reports to file, and patient records to input. Three residents had left for group homes in the last month, and two more had come back, revolving door style. There was another who'd transferred from a place in Bennington and she didn't even have a file for him yet. Too much time spent subbing for missing staff. She'd filled one spot with the quixotic Wes Pilson (*let's see how long that lasts*, she thought), but the candidates for the other HT were crap. Of course they would be, at ten bucks an hour. Who wanted to wipe asses at six in the morning for ten bucks an hour?

This damn inspection. She'd been just holding it together until that lovely bit of news. Saul had come down from his office while she and Carolina were tag-teaming Team Challenge and Team Smile. He'd seemed annoyed to step onto the floor, and more annoyed when Becca kept interrupting him to chase after Dale, on his normal flight pattern.

Saul frowned. "Can't you keep him—here, let me show you how it's done."

She stepped back. "Please, do."

"Now, Dale. I want you to sit here. Yes, sit, Dale." He put his hands on Dale's shoulders and pressed until the man flopped onto the couch. Saul turned to Becca. "Now I'm going to keep my hands here for a moment, then let go. When he stands up, I'll do it again and firmly repeat that he must sit down. This is especially important. Every time you sit him down, use his name."

Dale had an IQ of eleven. He didn't know his name from his nut sack. Becca figured it would take Saul about two seconds to figure this out. But as Saul kept struggling to get Dale to sit, repeating his command again and again, she realized that perhaps she'd overestimated Saul's own IQ. He kept at it, pleading with Dale to obey. And each time, Becca knocked five points off Saul's IQ. He was at group home range before he turned to Becca in exasperation.

"What's wrong? Why isn't Dale listening?"

"He's not the best listener in the facility." *And if you ever set foot on the floor you'd know that already.*

Dale had one goal, to get from wherever he was to wherever he was not. He could figure out a push handle on a door; anything more complicated and he'd stand in front of the door and scream. Fortunately for Dale, ninety percent of the doors in Riverwood were push doors. The state wanted residents to be able to escape in the event of a fire. Riverwood had never suffered a fire, but the police and neighbors regularly brought back Dale when they found him wandering down the middle of the street.

Dale had come to Riverwood after a long and glorious career breaking the certification of lesser facilities around New England. Even if you were lucky enough to have understanding inspectors, the one-on-one attention Dale commanded meant your other residents could run amok.

Carolina returned from the bathroom, and Saul took the opportunity to abandon the floor. Becca followed. And it was in Saul's office that she heard the bad news; state was coming back next week. Are we ready?

It was the perfect moment to quit. God, it would have been great watching Saul sub for her, subbing for an HT. Put him on Team Challenge. "Dale? Dale, why aren't you listening?" Instead, she listened, nodded, and then outlined her plan for getting through the inspection short-staffed.

And now, on her birthday, Becca's frustration reached its boiling point. She'd always wanted this job. She'd got her degree in sociology and done the additional work to pick up her QMRP certification: qualified mental retardation professional. She'd suffered under the delusion that the mentally handicapped were sweet and childlike. The people who worked with them would be the kind of people who rescued abandoned puppies and helped blind people cross the street. Smiling Down Syndrome kids and Special Olympics every day.

Truth was, the residents were not all sweet Down patients. They suffered a variety of organic brain issues, behaviors, and sexual urges that could not be satisfied. And the employees saw Riverwood as just another job. Some were great, others jerks. And some, like state and admin, were merely clueless.

Becca thought about bagging it. Get her masters, then teach at an alternative school or maybe even go for her Ph.D. and go into private practice. Either of those choices had to be less soul-devouring than Riverwood.

Alternatively, she could mail it in. The nurses did it; they just gave the residents whatever meds Dr. Pardo prescribed because it made their job easier. Saul Cage did it; he left early every Friday to ski or golf. He came to the floor so rarely that half the HTs didn't recognize him if they ran into him in the parking lot.

"Or," she said aloud. "I could keep licking Saul Cage's balls."

Becca had been staring at the screen for several minutes without typing a single character. She minimized the window, shut down her game of solitaire and rose to her feet. She grabbed her coat. It was warmer outside than it had been; snow melted from the roof and trickled down the gutters. She walked around the building, watching for Dale or other escapees as she did. There was Roger, having a smoke beneath the porch light off the courtyard. He was a higher-functioning resident, but the guys that ran the group homes didn't like him. Said he was antisocial and didn't clean up after himself. Becca had never had a problem with him.

"You should put on a hat, Roger."

He rubbed his bald head with one hand while holding the cigarette to his lips with the other. "Nah, not cold. Think spring's on the *way*." Other than the way he emphasized the last word of every sentence, Roger could have been any guy out for a smoke.

"I'm afraid we've got a lot of winter left. It's just a February thaw. They say it's going to turn cold again next week."

"I hope it's not too *cold*. They say it's supposed to *snow*?"

"I don't know, Roger, I didn't hear. But you know, it doesn't usually snow when it gets really cold." Roger looked glum at the prospect of cold without snow. She added, "I'm sure it won't last long. You know what they say, you don't like the weather in Vermont, wait fifteen minutes."

"Oh yeah. That's what they *say*."

She found it calming to talk to Roger about the weather. But she only had a few minutes to clear her head before she had to get back to work. "Well, I've got to get going. Make sure to shut that door when you go back inside."

"Yeah, I *know*."

Becca continued around the edge of the building. The rooms were mostly dark, although a few flickered with television lights. Another ten minutes and the grave staff would go around and give lights out to these night owls.

Even more of the snow had melted on the west wing and as she walked toward the doors by the employee parking lot her foot kicked at something. Becca bent, thinking it was trash, and came up with a hard piece of plastic. She held it under the globe light on the porch and wiped away mud and snow with her thumb.

It was Rosa Solorio's name tag. It still hung to its clip, which had come unfastened. Becca looked over her shoulder with a frown. It was almost like Rosa

had come out the door mid-shift, unclipped her name tag and then tossed it into the snow bank. She must have been pissed at something to leave like that.

Becca pocketed the name tag and was about to go inside when she hesitated, suddenly uncertain. She walked to the snow bank where she'd kicked up the name tag. The snow was mostly melted elsewhere in the courtyard, but nobody had walked directly under the eaves and here it was still several inches deep. She bent low.

Clearly, now, she could see an indentation in the snow. The imprint of a glove or hand, a leg, and a deeper part where a body had been. Rosa had fallen here in the snow; that's how she'd lost her name tag. Stumbled, coming around the building, Becca supposed. But what was she doing under the eaves, where the snow was deepest?

What if the explanation were not so innocent? What if someone had knocked her down here?

Chapter 7

"Here, hold your eye open," Dr. Pardo said to the man lying rigid in the bed in front of him. He pried open the man's eyelids, then took a dropper and held it over the exposed eyeball.

"Not the left eye!" Faria cried from the other side of the prison wall. "Don't let him do it!" Gone was the abbé's analytical tone, replaced by panic.

It was the left eye that held Chad Lett's hopes. The left eye that was his window to the world. Chad and Faria had tunneled quietly beneath the walls of the island fortress. It had taken months, years. But at last they had reached the edge of the prison. The Chateau d'If stood at their back, the open sea at their face. Chad could almost smell the sea salt, hear the cries of gulls that meant freedom.

What do you mean, escape? Chad had asked the abbé. Chad had lay in bed, having just held a conversation in Spanish with his invisible companion through the walls of their shared prison.

"Let's escape from this hellhole. Just like in the book. We'll make tools of broken plates and rat bones. We'll dig, inch by inch toward the outer wall. And when we get there, we'll swim for freedom.

An intriguing plan, Chad answered. *If I really sat in the dungeon of a French castle. If there were really a treasure waiting on the outside to turn me into The Count of Monte Cristo. Instead of chained by my paralyzed body and imprisoned in the fortress of my own skull.*

"Must you be so literal minded?"

Just tell me what you mean.

But Faria deserted him. For three days he did not come to the wall to speak. And after three days it came to Chad. His body was a prison. He would never regain control. But he didn't need to. All he needed was a tiny hole in the outer wall. One small way to tell the world he was alive. And the world would come to him, find a way to communicate.

What did he know about paralysis victims? Be it stroke or spinal injury, they could make progress with intensive therapy. Chad's own grandmother had been wheelchair bound after a stroke but had regained limited control of her limbs and much of her ability to speak.

Chad spent the next two weeks sending exploratory impulses to each toe, each finger, each muscle. *Move*, he urged them. *Twitch. Flex.*

Nothing. Not a single muscle responded to hours of pleading, threatening messages. And yet... and yet he had two candidates. The first was the index finger on his right hand. After hours of concentration, he could almost feel a twitch. Another full day of work and he had the sensation a second time.

The second was his left eye. It could see better than his right, almost like it focused itself from time to time. Even more promising, he'd felt something almost like a ripple in his lower eyelid. It started twitching involuntarily at one point on the following day and Chad wondered if this were its way of expressing fatigue.

The eye. He would go for the eye. An eye that could focus would be useful. And more than anywhere else, an aide or a nurse might look at his eye and see it blinking, not just randomly, but with a message. But only if he could control his eye. He had to teach it to respond to his brain.

Weeks went by, months, with no progress. It was like throwing his bulk against a giant boulder; the boulder never moved, but the effort of pushing left him exhausted. He slept fourteen, fifteen hours a day. When he was awake, he fought the boulder.

And then the boulder moved. The entire wall of his prison shifted. Faria stirred. "What was that?"

I moved the stone. He'd twitched a muscle in the lower eyelid of his left eye. Just once, and then the stone had settled into place.

"For God's sake, don't stop. Keep pushing."

And he did. He pushed and pushed and pushed.

And one day he broke through.

He'd always been glad when Rosa was on shift. She spoke to the residents of Team Smile in Spanish as she worked. She massaged their feet and shifted them in their beds more often than the rules required. When Chad's muscles spasmed, she would rub his legs or back.

And Rosa paid attention. She never pinched his skin in his wheelchair or, like that bastard who no longer worked here, set his feet to cook next to the radiator. And sometimes she looked him in the face and said, "I wonder how much of you is still down there. Does some part of you know where you are and what happened? Or is your brain really dead?"

I'm not dead! he cried. I'm alive!

She knew. She knew what had happened to him. She didn't know that he still lived inside, but she knew. He heard her talk to Dr. Pardo, when the man came into Team Smile's darkened room at night to press Rosa against the wall and tear down her pants. Pardo used her, hard, desperate, while Rosa seemed powerless to tell him no, even if she cursed herself and Dr. Pardo after he left.

"I can't do this any longer," she told Pardo one time as Chad heard her pulling her clothes in place. "It's wrong."

"It's just sex, it doesn't matter."

"I'm not talking about that," Rosa said. "This man, he deserves more. He deserves justice."

"He's dead. What does he care?"

"He's not dead, and you're not sure anyway or you wouldn't switch to Spanish every time we talk about him."

"That's just superstition," Dr. Pardo said. As if to prove his point, he switched to English. "Like crossing yourself when you go past the graveyard."

"It doesn't matter. I can't do this anymore, I want to go home."

"You can't go home or you'll never get an education."

"That's what you keep saying, but it's been five years. Five years. And I've done nothing."

Janitorial had passed in the hallway then and Pardo slipped away. A moment later and Rosa had been alone with Team Smile, crying softly to herself. Two days later, Chad made contact.

She'd been combing his hair after giving him a sponge bath and dressing him and he'd been twitching his eyelid, desperately, anxiously. They were just the slightest tremors and the effort had exhausted him to the point of stopping.

Rosa leaned over. "Let me get that gunk out of your eye, I..."

He stopped as soon as she started talking about his eye. A second. A twitch. Another second, two twitches. Another second, one twitch.

"Are you, can..." Her voice trailed off a second time. "No, it's my imagination."

Look at me, he begged. *Don't turn away*.

"Are you alive?" she whispered. "Blink if you can understand me."

Chad was almost to the point of collapse from the strain, but nothing could stop him now. He blinked. Rosa put her hand to her mouth and shrank back. "*Dios mio*."

"She knows," Faria said. "Rosa knows. We'll be free."

Two weeks later and Rosa was sneaking Chad out in the middle of the night. And then something terrible had happened to her. And now, Dr. Pardo stood over Chad with a dropper.

"Is that going to hurt?" asked a man standing over Pardo's shoulder. The voice gave Chad chills. He knew that voice. But from where?

"No," said Pardo. "Of course not. He won't feel a thing." Pardo squeezed the dropper. A drop formed on the end, bulged, and dangled.

No, Chad thought. *No, don't do it. Please, don't. Please.*

"Are you sure? I thought you said he was..."

"Very sure. The drops will be numbing, soothing."

A single drop of liquid fell onto Chad's exposed eyeball. It felt like a drop of boiling acid. His eye watered over and he screamed, or would have screamed, had he not lay there silently, motionless, taking whatever scalding poison had dropped into his eye.

"This should take care of things," Pardo said. He looked at Chad as he said it and it was almost as though he were speaking to the crippled man instead of the other person in the room.

"So what is the plan?" the other man asked, letting out a breath.

“It will make his eye turn red and seep. Tomorrow I’ll come, take note of it. Next week, the same thing. It won’t be any surprise to anyone when he loses his left eye. There will be a paper trail, in fact.”

“Jesus, that’s got to suck.” The shudder was audible in his voice.

The pain faded slowly from Chad’s eye, but not his terror. They had discovered the hole he had dug to freedom and were now bricking it over. When they finished, he would remain in his dungeon forever and ever.

From the other side of his mind came the sound of Abbé Faria screaming and throwing himself again and again against the wall.

* * * * *

Wes found Becca Gull in her office, talking to a guy named Frank, who worked the graveyard janitorial. Frank had a piece of paper and was pointing out numbers and figures.

“So look,” Frank said. “The money will come in as little as two weeks if everyone follows the plan.”

Becca looked up in surprise as he entered. Surprise, and, Wes thought, relief. “Don’t tell me you’re quitting already.”

“Of course not.” Wes wondered if that’s why she looked happy to see him. “Is that what you want me to do?”

“You quit before state comes and I’ll kick your butt. Then why’d you come in so late? Did you pick up someone’s shift?”

“So you’ll do it?” Frank asked, looking back from Wes to the paper and then to Becca. “It’s just ten dollars and an envelope you have to mail. You add your name to the bottom of the list and just a couple of weeks later it will be your turn.”

Wes looked at the paper and now he understood. The relief on Becca’s face had been because she hoped the interruption would save her from Frank.

“What’s this?” he asked. “A pyramid scheme?”

“It’s not a pyramid scheme,” Frank said in an irritated tone. “It’s a multi-level wealth generator. You send ten dollars to join and when it’s your turn, you get somewhere between fifty and a hundred thousand dollars.”

“So a chain letter. A pyramid scheme.” Wes picked up the paper. It was a list with names and a silly note at the bottom about not breaking the chain and getting lots of money for doing nothing. “These things never work.”

“It’ll work if you follow it,” Frank said. “Just do the math.”

“Yeah, but where does the money come from? People higher up the chain. And the list expands exponentially. In about two months everyone in the world is on the list, supposedly, and who is going to pay *them* off? It’s mathematically impossible.”

Frank didn’t understand this line of argument, and they went a couple more rounds before the man said, “It’s people like you who ruin it for everyone else. If everyone just went along with it, everyone could get rich.”

Wes just blinked, not sure where to start on that one. Frank turned back to Becca. “Anyway, I’ll leave it here. It’s a great opportunity.” He scowled at Wes, then turned to leave.

“Well, you got rid of him,” Becca said. “Thanks for that, I guess. Pretty sure Frank will scratch you off his Super Bowl party list, though.”

"I don't have much tolerance for stupid people."

"Right, and that's why you're working here."

"Totally different. These people have an organic deficiency. They didn't choose..."

"Oh, god," she said with an exaggerated roll of the eyes. "Because the normally stupid people—the ones you disdain with every sigh and sneering remark—they *chose* to be dumb, right? They purposefully set out to mess you up at the DMV or misread their seat assignment on the airplane. Right? Oh, and you worked so very hard to be smart, so that makes you morally superior to all those fools with IQs between 80 and 95."

"Let me tell you about Gil," she said. "He was a resident here for a few weeks. Left just before you showed up. He's the sort that comes through every so often, between group homes. Thing is, if you met him on the street, you wouldn't think of him as retarded. Never mistake him for smart. God, no. Just another one of the marching morons. He's borderline."

"And?"

"But half the HTs didn't get that he was retarded. You could hold a real conversation with him. Not about the looming insolvency of the Social Security system, but stick to the weather or the Red Sox and you'd be fine. And you know, most people can't talk about that other stuff anyway. So they didn't get it. You get half the HTs here—the lifers—and they probably have an IQ around 90, 95. Low end of average. Gil, he's maybe 75, 80. Better genes, a few less beers downed by his mother when Gil was *in utero* and he'd have been *working* here, not living here. It's a continuum, Wes. Just one step at a time and you'll track from the slugs of the world to the Einsteins. Oh, and the influence you have on your own IQ is close to nil." She nodded. "So next time you feel like being an asshole to the janitor, pause a beat, will you?"

Her words stung and his tone became defensive as he pointed to Frank's chain letter. "You weren't going to sign up for this thing, were you?"

"Of course not. I was going to be annoyingly non-committal and then blow it off."

"Well, maybe I should have kept my mouth shut," Wes said. "I'm sorry. I was just being blunt."

"So was I. But with you, not Frank. Nothing is going to change Frank. You, on the other hand—I think you might be capable of self-reflection. Now what's up?"

Wes had second thoughts. It was clear Becca thought he was a prick. But he didn't know where else to turn. Not the Waterbury police, obviously, and not his mother. Dad wouldn't stand up to Mom, no matter what. Aunt Charlotte, maybe? Uncle Bill? But really, Becca seemed like his best hope.

And so he told her everything. She listened without interrupting. When he got to the part about the attacker with the stun gun he watched her carefully. No skepticism on her face, but it occurred to him that she might be doing the same thing she'd done when listening to Frank's pyramid scheme.

"You don't believe me," he said when he'd finished.

"I didn't say that."

"I know, but Lieutenant Stiles didn't believe me."

"That's because you already jerked his chain once," Becca said.

“And because when it came out I almost didn’t believe it myself. I wouldn’t have believed it if Frank had told me. This is Vermont. Stuff like that doesn’t happen here.”

Becca opened her desk. “Look what I found.” She tossed an employee badge on the desk. “Rosa’s. Found it in the snow. Looked like an imprint of a body, but the snow has melted a bit, so it’s hard to tell for sure. And she might have just tripped and lost it in the snow.”

“You believe that?”

“I don’t know. I did a minute ago.”

He picked up the badge. Rosa was an attractive girl with chestnut hair and dark eyes. She became suddenly real. “You should go to the police.”

“You know what? Saul Cage, our administrator, already called them last week, on my insistence. I didn’t think anything had happened, but you know, someone disappears in the middle of their shift and you want to be sure. The police went to Rosa’s apartment. Said she left a bunch of stuff, but they didn’t see anything suspicious. They checked out her social security number, figured out it was fake, and wrote her off as an illegal who packed up and went home.”

“Lieutenant Stiles didn’t tell me that,” Wes said, feeling irritated.

“Why should he? It’s not his job to tell you everything he knows. Especially not when he thinks you’re a loose cannon.”

“Is that what you think about me?”

“You’re a cannon, but not loose. Fixed down at all times and blasting away at distant objects. This thing about your brother. I swear there’s nothing sinister going on. I’ve been here long enough to know that kind of stuff is typical. That it happened more than once is just bad luck. Sorry.” She shrugged. “But it doesn’t mean you’re wrong about Rosa or that you’re making up stuff about someone attacking you or what you heard your mom say on the phone.”

“Well, thanks for that, I guess. But I’ve got to know, do you think I’m onto something or not?”

She looked at him without speaking, as if mulling it over. “I don’t know,” she said at last. “Yeah, maybe. I can half convince myself you made up that you were attacked—not saying you did—but Rosa’s badge, the expensive apartment...”

“Then you do believe me.”

“But why you? That’s the part that doesn’t make sense. You don’t know Rosa.”

“It’s Eric, I tell you,” Wes said. “It’s the only connection I have to Riverwood.”

“Maybe.” She didn’t sound convinced. “Question is, what now? We’re not going to get anywhere with the police. Saul Cage is an idiot in the non-clinical sense of the word. He won’t help us. You said you’d talked to Carolina and Yamila?”

“I did. They were hostile at first, but I think they believe me now. Maybe they’ve got a good explanation for how she afforded that apartment. If not, maybe we can figure out how to get hold of Rosa’s family.”

“That’s another connection, isn’t it?” Becca said. “That Costa Rica thing that set off Carolina and Yamila. How big is this gulf place you were talking about?”

“The Golfo Dulce? I don’t know. Twenty thousand people on the peninsula side maybe. Not that big. I guess there’s a chance I know someone who knows Rosa. Maybe someone else was thinking the same thing as Carolina and Yamila. That I knew her somehow. And they’re trying to scare me off.”

"I like your idea of tracking down Rosa's family," Becca said. "I might be able to dig up something, too. I've got access to employee records. And maybe there's an incident report with Rosa's name on it."

"Can you show me where you found Rosa's badge?" Wes asked. "We should have a look just in case anything else fell off."

Becca shut down her computer and gathered her papers into a stack. She locked the door behind them as they left her office. They made their way through the darkened lounge and dining room and into the west resident wing. Two men came down the hallway toward them. One wore a lab coat and the other was dressed in a business suit.

"Dr. Pardo," Becca said, sounding surprised. "You're here late."

And to his surprise, Wes knew the man in the suit. "Uncle Bill."

"Hey, Wes. Your mom said you'd got a job here. Not going to law school anymore?"

"I've got a lighter course load this semester. I'm working on a special project. What are you doing here?"

Uncle Bill said, "Your mom wanted me to take a look at Eric. She said you were worried something was happening to your brother. You were so insistent she started to second guess herself."

Bill Carter was the youngest of the three Carters. He'd never married; Wes's father joked that Bill's bride was Northrock. Or maybe just his lover. Because men sometimes tired of their wives, but Bill continued to shower the company with time and attention. In that way, Wes supposed, his uncle had inherited something from Grandpa Carter.

The thing was, Ellen Carter had become estranged from her father and her brother, Bill over something to do with the company. Uncle Davis had tried to bring his brother and sister together again after Grandpa died, but now Davis was dead, too, and as far as Wes knew, his mother and uncle dealt with each other only so far as necessary. Strange that she'd have asked him to take a look. She must be more worried than she'd let on.

"Well, thanks," Wes said. "I appreciate that."

"No problem. I meant to stop in earlier, but we're bidding to pour on a nuclear reactor in Upstate New York and I'm up to my eyeballs in paperwork. Doctor Pardo and I just looked in on Eric." Uncle Bill gave a sympathetic shake of the head. "Wes, he looks alright to me."

"I didn't see anything, either," Dr. Pardo said. He spoke with a slight accent. "We read the incident report. Very straightforward, Mr. Pilson. And whenever I've seen your brother, he seems happy to be here."

"That's what I keep telling him," Becca said. She looked at Dr. Pardo. "Did you sign him in?"

"Yes, of course."

"Okay, thanks. Don't forget to sign him out, too. Saul has been on my case lately about that."

"I will."

As the two men started past Wes and Becca in the other direction, Uncle Bill said, "For what it's worth, it's a good thing you're doing. Doesn't look like anything

is wrong here, but I can totally see why you'd want to be sure. If you can fit it in with school, so much the better."

"So you're not the only one thinking about Eric," Becca said and she and Wes continued down the west wing. "Hope you're feeling better about all that."

But Wes was still frowning in confusion. "Totally doesn't make sense. Why the hell would she call Uncle Bill?" "Second opinion, sounds like. You freaked out, got her freaked out."

"You don't understand. My grandpa cut my mom off from the family when she married my father. Even after my grandpa died, my uncle didn't want anything to do with her. Only got worse after Uncle Davis died—he was the peacemaker of the family."

"Your grandpa. That's the rich guy?"

"Yeah, founded Northrock. Elwin Carter. The guy the engineering building at UVM is named after."

"I've heard of him," Becca said. "There still a lot of money in the family?"

"You could say that. Not much in our withered branch. My mom sold most of her stock to her brothers to fund my dad's adventures. Grandpa never gave her any more. After Grandpa died, things were better for awhile. We used the family beach house in Costa Rica."

"Maybe things are changing," Becca said. "Your uncle obviously cares about Eric."

"He barely knows my brother. Most of the time, Eric didn't even come with us to Costa Rica. Probably hasn't even seen Eric in five years."

She turned as she pushed open the door. "You sure about that? Because this isn't the first time I've seen him here."

And now Wes was really confused. He couldn't think of any reason for his uncle to visit Eric. It occurred to him that he wasn't the only one in his family with a connection to Costa Rica. Could this have something to do with Rosa Solorio?

They kicked around in the snow where Becca found Rosa's employee badge. "I'm still thinking, I don't know, that she just fell down," Becca said. "We're not just taking a bunch of unrelated things and mashing them together in a conspiracy, are we?"

"Someone attacked me, remember?" He shook his head. "No way I'm going to let that go."

"Yeah, well don't get yourself killed," Becca said. "At least not until after state certification."

"Thank you for your concern."

She met his eyes, and gone was the teasing tone, replaced by a serious set to her eyes and mouth. "Okay, now I'm serious, Wes. Be careful."

Chapter 8

Wes entered the security code and the gates glided open. The valley-facing bank of lights from the Vail-style lodge lit up the hillside above him. Faux-gas lamps

blinked on automatically ahead of the car, then shut off as he passed. A twelve foot fieldstone retaining wall shored up the left side of the lane. On the right, a sweeping view toward the village of Stowe.

His tires crunched gravel as he pulled in front of the house and automatic lights lit up the porch. Somewhat self-consciously, he parked his ten-year old Civic between a Cadillac Escalade and an Audi convertible and stepped out. It was impossible not to turn toward the village in the valley below before approaching the doors. The property commanded a fantastic view of the white spire of the church and the brick and clapboard buildings along Main Street. Must look even better in the day when you could see the forests and mountains. It had turned cold again, and even though it was supposed to snow later in the weekend, he could hear the roar of the ski resort's snow guns, getting a jump on mother nature.

Wes walked between the log columns that supported the porch and rang the bell. His aunt opened the door seconds later.

"Wes!" she said, embracing him. "Come in."

"Thanks, Aunt Charlotte."

"Oh, god. Charlotte, please. That aunt stuff makes me sound so old."

Charlotte looked anything but old. Wes thought she'd been a good fifteen years younger than his Uncle Davis when they married. That made her, what? Mid-thirties now? But if he'd run into her on the street he'd have thought her in her late twenties. Petite, bursting with energy, like someone who has downed one too many coffees, and frankly, pretty damn hot. She wore linen pants and a v-neck top that showed some nice cleavage.

He followed her into a front room that could have swallowed the Pilson house beneath its cathedral ceilings. A stone fireplace rose from the floor like an extension of Vermont bedrock. The second floor balcony overlooked the room. The whole house looked vast and extravagant—okay, so it was—but Wes also knew that his uncle had been obsessed with energy efficiency and had spent a good chunk of change to remodel the house to make it as energy efficient as possible.

A man sat on the couch reading with a glass of wine on the coffee table in front of him. He stood and offered his hand. "You must be Wes. I'm Christopher."

Christopher was tall and fit and much younger than Wes's uncle had been. He wore glasses and had a bookish look about him.

Wes took his hand in a firm grip. "I heard about the engagement. Congratulations to both of you." He smiled at Charlotte. "My mom will ask about the ring, of course."

She held up her hand, showing a huge, glittering thing that nevertheless stopped short of gaudy. Wes made a few appreciative comments although frankly, he didn't know diamond from glass.

"So you're at Harvard Law," Christopher said. "You know I wore the crimson myself back in the day. M.B.A."

"Cool. I understand you've got some biodiesel thing going?"

"Biodiesel is the competition, actually. We're doing cellulosic ethanol, which means making gas from wood chips, agricultural waste, that sort of thing. There's lots of energy in stuff we're currently throwing away."

"If it means we can stop buying oil from dictators and terrorists, I'm all for it."

“Exactly,” Christopher said with a nod. “Well, I’d love to talk more about it. Fact, Charlotte would tell you I can talk all night about fascinating tangents like enzymatic hydrolysis, but I understand you’ve got other stuff, so I’ll leave you two to it.”

“Seems like a decent guy,” Wes said as he and Charlotte climbed the stairs to the second floor. “All that stuff about alt energy reminds me of Uncle Davis. That time in Costa Rica, that’s all he was talking about.”

He stopped, awkward. Uncle Davis had drowned on that trip, just a couple of days after Wes had flown back to Vermont. The news had come as a horrible shock. He’d attended the funeral, even though he hadn’t known his uncle nearly as well as his father’s family, not after so many years of estrangement from the Carter family.

But if he’d upset Aunt Charlotte, she didn’t show it. “That’s how I met Christopher, you know,” she said. “Davis had a bunch of investments in these little startups and they’ve taken off the last couple of years. I had to keep an eye on them. I don’t know if Christopher’s company will come to anything, but with gas so expensive, everyone is paying attention.”

They reached Uncle Davis’s old office. Wes had passed a den off the front hallway, but Charlotte said Davis had preferred to work up here where he could look out the windows toward the valley. It wasn’t untouched like Wes’s old room at home, but neither had Charlotte converted it to something else. A picture of Uncle Davis inspecting a work site hung on one wall. Next to it hung a picture of Davis on a boat with Uncle Bill, the two of them hefting a marlin. Various plaques and civic awards decorated the wall behind the desk.

“What’s this picture you’re looking for?” Charlotte asked. “Something from Costa Rica, you said?”

“Most awesome picture ever. I’m staring into the camera and there’s this enormous hammerhead over my shoulder.”

The photo had arrived in a mailer a full week after the accident. Wes hadn’t recognized the company—some photo lab that let you upload photos—and he tilted out the mailer’s contents without knowing what he would find. A chill spread down his back as he looked first at the picture and then at the printed note his uncle had included with the order:

Wes,

Check this out! It turned out even better than I’d hoped. I took one look and knew I had to send it to you. What a great dive. Hope we can do it again some day.

Davis

A message from beyond the grave, like those voice mails from the Twin Towers that people couldn’t bring themselves to delete. It all seemed so fresh that he could hardly believe that it had been five years already.

Charlotte swung open the closet doors and pointed to some cardboard boxes on the floor. “I’m not sure what picture you’re talking about, but if I have it, it’ll be in here.” She chewed at her lip. “It’s uhm, still difficult to look at the pictures, so I’ll wait downstairs. You can take anything you need.”

"I am sorry," Wes said. "He was a great guy. I always wish I'd gotten to know him better."

"You can blame that stupid Carter family stuff. If it had been up to Davis, he'd have put an end to it, but your mom and your Uncle Bill were stubborn as hell."

"Yeah, I know. Before you go, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

Wes hesitated, afraid to push too hard and feeling guilty for lying about the picture. "How did Uncle Davis die? They didn't tell us much, just that he drowned. But he was a strong swimmer. Did he get caught in a rip tide or something?"

"Nitrogen narcosis," Charlotte said. "Went down too far. They said he was following a king angel fish."

He nodded. They called it Rapture of the Deep, and it could take even the most experienced diver. Once you got to a certain depth the nitrogen in your bloodstream from breathing compressed air gave you a light, euphoric feeling. It was like drinking a few beers; you started to feel pleasantly buzzed, and forgot little things like your dive computer and your air supply.

"Wasn't the first time he dove too deep," she continued. "He just liked that feeling of leaving the real world behind. Never would have let him go down that far if I'd been with him." Her lip trembled and her eyes looked moist.

"Well, thanks. Hopefully, this won't take me too long. Sorry if I—"

She seemed to regain control of her emotions. "It's all right, Wes. Take your time."

Compared to his father's collection of photos—when Dad hit a hobby, he hit it hard—Uncle Davis's was a modest half-dozen cardboard boxes stuffed with photos and, in some of the older boxes, negatives. Still, a lot by most people's standards. He dug in as soon as his aunt left the room.

The pictures spanned several years of time. The early ones focused on the company, starting with a series of pictures from a dam construction in Quebec. A few minor projects, then a fat chunk of pictures of the Moose Hollow Road; he recognized the aerial photos of the mudslide that had buried the highway. Northrock had won the bid to rebuild the road during winter, which included blasting away thousands of tons of rock. That was before Wes was born, but his father had hinted that Ellen Pilson's blowup with the family was tied somehow to the project.

He skimmed these pictures and got to Uncle Davis's later obsession, the alternative energy stuff. Wes found pictures of solar arrays in the desert and electric cars and high-speed trains. And windmills. Dozens of windmills: offshore, on mountain ridges, sitting alone in fields, or clumped in mountain passes.

All interesting stuff, but it had nothing to do with Costa Rica, so he continued through the boxes. More of the same. The last box held travel pictures. There were pictures of Davis and Charlotte all over the world: in ruined castles, in front of cathedrals, at the pyramids, on the Great Wall of China, by Mayan ruins in the jungle. Pictures of Arab souks and Buddhist temples, and even several on some sort of elephant trek into the rain forest. But most of all, the box was stuffed with pictures of Costa Rica.

Davis had kick-ass shots of dolphins and whales and sharks. There were reef fish and marlin so close you could see their eyes bulging. But the pictures didn't

give Wes much help. There were a few of Puerto Jiménez, Matapalo, and the Corcovada, including some wildlife in the park. Maybe eight or ten had people in them: women washing laundry, boys playing the surf, a man with a surfboard. But Uncle Davis had never focused on people in his pictures, not even the Northrock stuff.

He was wasting his time. He'd driven to Cambridge that morning to talk to Dr. Caliari, who'd acted like a real prick. No pass/fail option, and he would be marked down for every class he missed. Caliari had to force attendance, because his lectures were coma-inducing. Dr. Sizemore never forced anyone to attend class. You went because you wanted to.

Because he'd started to feel self-conscious about how much time he was taking, Wes almost shut the last box of pictures before he spotted the manila folder tucked into the back. He pulled it out and spread it on the floor.

And there was the picture of Wes and the hammerhead shark. That had been a hell of a dive. Most of the others hadn't wanted to dive again. Half the group was leaving the next day; the rest begged off out of fatigue from the previous day's diving. Just when Wes was about to give up trying to convince them, Uncle Davis had volunteered to be his diving buddy. His mother and Aunt Charlotte had come out on the boat, but not suited up or dived.

Once in the water, Wes and Davis cruised near the edge of the reef before dropping over the edge. They'd poked at an eel that snapped at them from its cave before Uncle Wes had tapped him on the shoulder and pointed up. There, in black silhouettes against the turquoise light filtering from above swam more than a dozen hammerhead sharks. What an adrenaline rush. Uncle Davis lifted his underwater camera and snapped away.

Wes had a blow-up of this one in his room, so he set it aside and looked at other pictures of that dive, none of which he'd seen before. There were some good ones, but nothing as cool as that shark over his shoulder.

There was a bunch of other stuff in this folder, too, as if Charlotte had tossed it in and then put the folder away never to look at again. He found airline ticket stubs, and Uncle Davis's unused ticket for the return flight. Because of course, he'd never come back, except as ashes. There were a couple of 5,000 colones bills, worth about ten bucks each, and Davis's dive certification card. Wes was stuffing it back into the envelope when a receipt for a charter boat caught his eye. Written in bad English:

Two persons, four heures charter. 17 April. 45,000 colones.

And then signed at the bottom by someone named T. Solorio. It was a generic receipt with no company name or address.

Wes stared at the receipt. April 17? He couldn't remember the exact dates, but it was close to the time of that trip. Only they'd never had fewer than four people on the boat, some combination of Wes, his parents, Uncle Davis, Uncle Bill, and Aunt Charlotte. This couldn't be one of their dives.

But the name: Solorio. As in Rosa Solorio.

Only what did that have to do with Riverwood and why his Uncle Bill had come to visit Eric? And what made Rosa disappear, and someone attack Wes with a stun gun? And his mother? What was that about?

He thought for several minutes, but still couldn't fit the pieces together.

Chapter 9

The road down from Bolton Valley Ski Resort had to be pushing ten percent grade, Becca thought. A few inches of snow and you could ski down to Route 2. All they'd need was a lift.

Becca's phone rang when she was halfway down and she pulled her Cherokee over to answer, not wanting to talk and take the mountain at the same time. It was snowing again and getting dark. And she'd spent most of the day Sunday skiing, so she was tired.

There had been a few freshies on the mountain. Not exactly a powder day, but it was only the second ski day she'd taken that winter and she wouldn't have been up for big powder, anyway. She stuck to the groomed trails, mostly blues with a couple of blacks when she felt ambitious. Even with the inspection looming and feeling wrung out from two weeks of double shifts, a day on the mountain had improved her mood.

It was Andrew. "Hey, babe," she said. "I just left Bolton. Went skiing today. I am so out of shape."

"Yeah, I went skiing today, too." His voice, curiously flat.

"Really?" Her knowledge of California geography was weak, but taking a day trip from the Bay Area must have meant a hell of a drive. "What's the closest resort?"

"Actually, I'm at Tahoe. Came with a couple of buddies from work. Taking Monday off." And then he started in, nervously, she thought, about the trails that he'd skied.

"I don't understand," she interrupted. "You're at Tahoe now? What about next week?"

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that. Things are picking up at work. You know, this deadline. Crazy. I'm not a hundred percent sure I can go. And I had the condo already for this week."

"You said you'd switched the reservations," she said.

"I think I forgot."

"You think you forgot? What are you talking about? Are you canceling? I've got my plane tickets and everything." She'd been holding out for this trip; it was the only thing keeping her sane. And god, she was feeling lonely and missing him. "Andrew?"

Silence from the other end. And Becca realized that he was breaking up with her in his passive aggressive way. This was how it had been when he'd taken the job in San Francisco (just a year, he'd promised); he told her only after he'd interviewed and accepted the job offer. She could not believe she was sitting here on the side of the road, having this conversation on her cell phone.

She felt herself taking on that whiney tone that she hated so much in others. “Is it because I couldn’t come last week, is that what this is about, Andrew? You know I couldn’t help it. I had to rearrange my schedule. We lost two HTs and there’s this certification thing, and besides...and I already told you all this stuff.” She forced herself to stop. “Andrew?”

“I’m here.”

“Is this it?”

“I don’t know.”

“We said one year. One year long distance and then—”

“I know,” he said. “It’s been nine months already and I don’t feel like coming back. Things are good here. I’m good.”

“And if I came to California?” she asked. Stop pushing, she told herself. Just stop.

“I don’t know. I’m just, I don’t know. Ready to move on.”

“Can you say what you mean, for once?”

But people didn’t just grow a backbone in the middle of a breakup. “I don’t know, what do you think?” he asked.

What did she think? Hadn’t things run their course when Andrew had first told her about his new job? You didn’t move to the other side of the country without your girlfriend. Unless, that is, you meant to make your girlfriend into your ex-girlfriend.

And the stupidest thing was that she knew that if she pushed, he’d back down. She’d see him next week in Tahoe. And if she pushed harder, he’d say that he wanted her to come to California to move in with him again. And if she kept pushing...well, god, now she wondered if she’d pushed him into the relationship in the first place. Maybe he’d never been that keen on her. Maybe he thought she was a pushy bitch. Maybe she was a pushy bitch.

“Okay, Andrew,” she said when she couldn’t stand sparring with her inner critic any longer. “Good luck out there. Take care.”

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“God, no. What is wrong with you?” It was almost like he wanted her to push back. Or at least, expected it and couldn’t believe she was letting him off the hook so easily. “No, I don’t want to talk. It’s obvious what’s going on here. Let’s just... let’s not end this badly. Or worse than it has to be. And I don’t want to talk. So, goodbye.”

And with that, Becca hung up. Funny, wasn’t it, how a nice day could turn to shit in about two seconds.

A half inch of snow had piled on her windshield while she talked. And there was a car behind her with its lights on. How long had it been there?

She was in a turn off and it occurred to her that it might be a flatlander, afraid of driving in the snow. He’d seen her pulled over, mistaken the reason, and stopped to wait out the snow with her. Waiting would be a mistake; the snow plow wouldn’t come until it had cleared Route 2 below. In the meanwhile, if it came down any harder, they’d be stranded on the mountain.

Becca got out of her car and went back to talk to the driver of the other car. It was cold and the snow swirled around her face. And getting dark, fast. He drove a Ford Expedition; shouldn’t have problems with that vehicle. He pulled away as she

came to his window. She caught a glimpse: young man, ski cap. No ski rack though, or skis that she could see in the back.

She returned to her car. It was a white knuckle drive hitting the switchbacks, riding the brakes, and trying not to skid. She passed the Expedition moments later, pulled off the road again. He came back onto the road, behind her this time.

Make up your mind, dude.

She'd feel better with him in front, rather than behind, trying to follow her tracks down the mountain. He was getting uncomfortably close and this only made her slow down.

And then, he accelerated and the asshole actually pulled around her, like he was going to pass. Jesus. She hit the brakes and he hit the brakes too, driving on her left. A car came from the other direction, inching along, and laying hard on the horn as the driver saw the Expedition blocking his path. The Expedition fell behind Becca again.

This time, he came up on her bumper and nudged her. She swore and fought to keep the Cherokee from sliding. She'd go right into the trees. She looked in her rear view mirror, her anger turning to terror. This was not some random jerk.

He nudged her again, harder this time. She slid toward the edge. Her wheels caught and she straightened the Cherokee just before going over the shoulder. And then the Expedition pulled around her and was down the mountain, going too fast. It hit a bend, fishtailed, then regained control. In a moment it was gone and someone was honking behind her. Becca had come to a complete stop and she gripped the steering wheel with trembling hands.

The road now looked like an icy cliff and she thought there was no way she would make it down the mountain. But the car behind her was honking hard now and she inched back into motion.

* * * * *

The state inspectors arrived Monday morning at 6:30, and things promptly went to hell.

It started when one of Carolina's residents scratched her on the arm, raising blood, and she had to go to the nurse station—per regulations—and get a bandage. She'd been doing the fox, goat, cabbage trick, where you have to cross the river without leaving the goat alone with the cabbage or the fox alone with the goat, only in this case, it was Dale who could not be left alone.

She said something to Wes as she left, but he'd been shuttling his own residents to the dining room and somehow he ended up losing Dale. One of the three inspectors caught him as he was leaving the building and brought him back to Carolina without comment. Dale screamed his frustration.

"Quien es la negra?" Carolina asked when the inspector left with her clipboard tucked under arm. Who is the black woman?

"State inspector."

"Already? Didn't we do that a few months ago?"

Becca rushed past with some sheets under her arm and Wes blinked at Carolina, stunned that she hadn't known. It was all everyone had been talking about. Yet somehow, though she understood more English than she spoke, Carolina had missed it. As he explained, a tense look came over her face.

The inspectors stood around the room, making notes or whispering to each other. Maybe sensing their HTs' anxiety, the residents were louder than usual, more resistant to instruction. A Team Winner resident threw his food when he discovered the menu had changed, and there would be no French toast. Soggy eggs hit one of his teammates in the face, sparking another meltdown. Jack, Team Winner's HT, couldn't get things under control until Becca came over to soothe the two men before they came to blows.

Carolina wrinkled up her face as she pushed Dale into his seat in an attempt to get him to eat some pureed toast. "Oh, and I just changed him, too," she said in Spanish. "Couldn't he wait until after breakfast?"

Wes caught a whiff. He looked over her other residents. "Go ahead and change him. I'll keep an eye on these three."

She let Dale rise, stagger away from the table, then took his elbow and guided him toward the resident wing. One of Carolina's other residents made a hungry-sounding protest and Wes reached across the table to spoon eggs into her mouth.

Becca joined him at the table a minute later and took over for Carolina. Wes was glad to see her. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm all right." She smiled and for a moment, some of the exhaustion left her face. "I keep telling myself that if we fail and they fire me, it'll be Saul Cage out here pulling double shifts until he finds my replacement. Which, at my salary, could take awhile."

"You look wiped out. Did you even leave this place this weekend?"

"Sure. I even went skiing on Sunday. Broke up with my boyfriend. Other productive stuff."

"Oh," Wes said. "I'm sorry."

"It was probably over anyway," she said as she spooned eggs into an open mouth. "It's never a good sign when your boyfriend moves to the other side of the country. Still, it pisses me off that he waited until I was about to fly to California. We were supposed to go skiing at Tahoe the day after tomorrow. It was the one thing helping me through this inspection. When it comes time to break up with your girlfriend, be a man and just do it."

"No girlfriend here."

In fact, it had been six months since he'd had a date of any kind. There was a girl in his civil procedures class that he'd wanted to ask out, but it looked like that ship had sailed now that he was just trying to keep from failing the class.

Becca said, "The real reason I'm so tired? I couldn't sleep last night because someone tried to run me off the road when I was coming down from Bolton."

Wes leaned forward. "Are you kidding me? What happened?"

She told him how she'd got off the phone with her boyfriend to see someone waiting for her, how he'd driven off, and then come in behind her to try to push her off the road. Wes listened with alarm.

"It might have been nothing," she said. "Just some jerk. But he didn't have skis in his truck. I don't think it was random."

Wes thought. Who had seen them together? His Uncle Bill and Doctor Pardo. The other employees of Riverwood. But she'd said it was a young man driving an Expedition. Oh, and Carolina and Yamila, but they were the ones who had pushed Wes to find out what had happened to Rosa—Carolina had already asked him that

morning, in fact, if he'd come up with anything—and both incidents had involved men. Wes's attacker had been a native English speaker.

"I don't know what to think," he said as he worked on feeding Chad Lett, whose muscles kept tightening. Chad's left eye was seeping; the nurse had told him that the man had some sort of infection.

"I can't believe how pissed I am. I was scared. Shaking. But pretty soon I just wanted to find this asshole and run him off the road. For about five minutes, I would have done it, too."

Wes nodded. He knew exactly what she was talking about. His anger still hadn't faded from the attack with the stun gun. That Lieutenant Stiles hadn't believed him only made him angrier. "You know, if this is about my family, you could walk away and you'd have nothing more to worry about. You want to let it go?"

"After what happened at Bolton? Hell, no." She spooned the food dribbling down a resident's chin. "About your family. You find anything new?"

"Here, check this out."

Wes handed her the receipt he'd pilfered from Aunt Charlotte's house. She looked at it for a moment before she nodded, folded it, and handed it back.

"Solorio. So Rosa does know your family. There's something messed up here."

"But I still don't see how this involves Eric," Wes said.

"What if your brother isn't involved. Maybe this is about your uncle who died in Costa Rica."

"Okay, but what about Rosa? And my mom? I keep coming up blank. You do any digging in the files this weekend?"

"Some," she said. "Didn't turn up anything. Oh, I did unlock Rosa's employee drawer. She left her mp3 player. Same sort of thing you saw at her apartment, with all the furniture she left behind."

"This wasn't a girl who was planning to leave in a hurry."

"If we had a number we could call Rosa's family," Becca said. "By the way, I talked to Yamila. Rosa told her she paid for her apartment with money her family sent from Costa Rica. Thought it worked the other way around. It's the people up here who send money back home."

"Yeah, usually. But there are plenty of rich people in Costa Rica. Well, in San Jose or Alajuela. Not so many on the Osa. The only people with money down there are foreigners."

"Could be Rosa was lying to Yamila."

"Could be," he agreed.

Carolina returned with Dale, who looked happy to be walking. He tried to angle away from the breakfast table, but Carolina guided him back to his chair and pushed him down. He popped up, whack-a-mole-style the instant she removed her hands from his shoulders.

Around the room, residents finished their breakfasts and headed back to wash up before going to the bus.

Becca stood up. "Guess I should get going."

Wes got up and followed her until they were out of earshot of Carolina. "You still have time off this week?"

"Five days starting Wednesday." Becca looked disappointed. "Guess I should tell Saul I'll still be around. Unless someone runs me off the road first."

“You got a passport?”

She gave him a sharp look. “Yeah.”

“Because I’m going to Costa Rica.”

“You’ve been here how long? And you’re already taking a vacation?”

“Come on, Becca. I’ve got to go.” He shouldn’t be surprised that this was the first thing to cross her mind. “And it’s only two days. The other three I have off anyway. We can find someone to fill my shifts.”

“I won’t be filling anything. You want time off, you’ll have to ask around. But, okay.” She paused. “What does that have to do with my passport?”

“Want to come with me?”

And now her eyebrows raised. “To Costa Rica? Are you serious?”

“I’m serious. I know the country and can speak Spanish. We can go digging around the Osa Peninsula until we find the Solorios. See if Rosa went home, or what they know.”

“You don’t need me for that.”

“Sure I do. What if Rosa doesn’t want to be found? I could walk right past her on the street without recognizing her. And even if I do find her, she might talk to you before she talks to me.”

She hesitated. “No, I can’t go. To Costa Rica? On a lark? How about if I keep looking around up here while you’re gone. Then, when you get back—”

“A lark? Don’t you know me better than that by now?” He kept his tone light. “Like taking a job at Riverwood? Costa Rica too far beneath you Ms. Bigshot QMRP?”

“Touché.”

“Besides, I know what’ll happen if you stay here. You’ll be too stressed about the inspection stuff to stay away and your boss will keep calling to bug you about stuff. You’ll probably end up working all your regular shifts. Am I right?”

Her lips tightened and he thought he’d pushed too hard, that she was going to dig in her heels. But then her expression softened. “You know what? Why not? Yeah, why the hell not? They have good food in Costa Rica?”

“No, not really. You’ve got beans and rice and when you’re tired of that, rice and beans. A bit of chicken, usually tough. Good fruit, though. Best you’ll ever have.”

“How about seafood? I love seafood.”

“Yeah, they do fish pretty well,” Wes said. “Especially when you catch your own. And Costa Rica’s warm. Much as I like skiing, sun sounds great this time of year.”

“No kidding.” She broke into a big smile. “Yeah, I’ll go. Thanks for asking. Well, I’d better get going or we’ll never get these guys on the bus in time. Call me later.”

Carolina was watching him as Becca walked away. Wes wondered how much she’d understood.

While Carolina and Wes wheeled and walked their residents to the lounge, the other residents moved in spurts toward the front doors as their HTs helped them into coats, gloves, and hats. Calm descended on the lounge and dining room. But the residents started to return less than ten minutes later.

Some were quite pleased, others, like Wes’s brother, grumpy. “What’s the matter, Ruk?” he asked, stopping Eric as he passed.

“No work, Wussy. No work today.”

“There’s too much snow and the bus can’t get out of the lot,” Eric’s HT explained. “The driver called the city and said it would be another hour, hour and a half for the plow. By that time, it’ll hardly be worth it, so Becca is calling the job sites to tell them we won’t be coming.”

Becca appeared a moment later and gave him a raised eyebrows, wide-eyed look of the “please shoot me now,” variety. The state inspectors, however, could barely conceal their delight. Something had gone wrong and now they could see how this place *really* functioned.

It was like a Nor’easter, when the weather patterns clash, and the end result is towns buried in snow, beaches washed away, and power outages. Half the residents were delighted to be home, the other half irritated. And all, torn out of their routine, acting out.

There were two stripping incidents, a resident caught feeding her blanket down the toilet, flush by flush, multiple tantrums, and, of course, Dale used the distractions to stagger-walk toward the nearest exit.

Only Becca’s heroic efforts kept things from collapsing. Watching, and occasionally helping put out fires, Wes was struck by just how good she was. Residents and HTs alike gave her respect. And, all cynicism aside, she cared about these people. Surely, the state inspectors would see as much.

He’d happily reclassified her as something other than cynical burnout, the rather unfair niche into which he’d put her on their first meeting. He liked her.

Question was, did Becca’s own classification system still label him under the heading of ‘asshole?’ Well, maybe not. She’d just agreed to go with him to Costa Rica.

Chapter 10

Eric chanted in delight when he saw what was for dinner. “Meatloaf! Meatloaf! Meeeeeeeatloaf!”

Wes grinned as he turned the meatloaf onto a plate and brought it to the table. “Hey, Ruk. You mean you like meatloaf?”

“Love meatloaf!”

“Then you’ll love this one. I made it out of ground up worms and pig snouts.”

“Pig snouts!” Eric roared with laughter as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “Worms and pig snouts. And worms.”

“Yeah, sorry. I ran out of boogers for the sauce.”

“Boogers!”

Dad was at the playhouse again but promised he’d be home before Eric had to go back to Riverwood. Wes had put the meatloaf in the oven and Mom brought home some side dishes she’d picked up at Shaws.

She groaned as she finished setting the table. “Don’t you guys ever get tired of that game? At least it’s not farts and bum-bums again.”

“Farts and bum-bums!”

Wes wanted to talk to his mother before Dad got home. "I called Brigham and Women's," he told her. He dished up food for Eric. "Legal still has the opening if I'm interested."

"Really?"

"I figure it doesn't matter for the project, but Brigham and Women's would be better for my résumé." He hoped she couldn't sense the lie. "I'm driving back tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear it."

Her relief only made him feel more guilty. And then he remembered her own lies and that made him angry. "Mom, what's going on here? Don't give me that look, you know what I'm talking about."

"Really, I don't," she said. She put down her glass of milk. "What do you mean?"

"Mom, listen to me. One of the HTs disappeared from Riverwood and I went to check out her apartment to make sure she was okay. Someone attacked me. Told me to lay off or he'd kill me. Can you believe that? Now, I want to know. What's going on?"

She spoke slowly. "Wes, why do you think this has something to do with me?"

"This is where you freak out, Mom. 'Oh, my god, you were attacked?' But look at you, all calm. Almost like you knew already."

"Wes."

He continued, "I know you told someone I was working at Riverwood. I don't know who you told, but I have my guesses." He shook his head. "I can't figure out what's the big deal. I got a job at Riverwood. I wanted to keep an eye on my brother. Why would anyone care? I don't know and I don't care. What pisses me off is that you'd lie about it."

She sighed and didn't speak for a long time. "Wes, you think the world is so simple. That you can take a knife and cut right through it. Put everything good on one side, and all the yucky, nasty stuff on the other. Well, it's not that simple."

"Why don't you try me? You might find I'm not as simple-minded as you think."

"You're not simple-minded," she said. "You're simplistic. That's a different thing."

"Damn it, Mom. He rose to his feet and started clearing his dishes, appetite gone. He had to do something or he'd be throwing them across the room. "Someone knocked me to the ground with a stun gun. Do you have any idea what that's like? I was scared and angry. Is it possible that *you* know something about this? Jesus."

Eric looked up from his food. "No fight."

She started crying. "You don't understand. You can't understand."

"Mom, please."

"Just go back to school."

"I *am* going back to school. That's what I just told you. But I'm not going to forget this. My god, my own mother..."

"No fight," Eric said again, more insistently. "No fight!"

Wes said, "Eat your meatloaf, Eric. It's getting cold." He turned to go.

"Wesley, don't leave like that. Please."

"I have someone else to talk to before I leave, Mom. I'm sure you know who."

"Wesley."

But he was already heading for the door, getting his coat and gloves and checking his pocket for his keys. Only when he got to the car did he have second thoughts. It had been one thing to go to Aunt Charlotte's house at night, another to go find Uncle Bill. Because his distrust of Bill had been growing in his mind all day. Uncle Bill had been at Riverwood, doing something. What?

He'd feel better confronting Uncle Bill at work after Wes finished his shift at Riverwood tomorrow. He had a couple of hours before the flight.

But he didn't want to go home. He didn't want to see Eric or Dad, and certainly not Mom. The next fight, when it came, would be an ugly one. He wondered if this is what it had been like for Mom when she'd fought with her father and brothers. That particular fight had led to twenty years of estrangement from the Carter family. Was he prepared to burn bridges like she had?

So instead Wes drove through Waterbury until he got to Route 100, then headed south, toward the Mad River Valley. For a moment he thought about continuing south, cutting over to White River Junction and taking the freeway back to Massachusetts. Write them all off. Finish law school on his own.

But he thought of Rosa Solorio. Of the man who had threatened him and the truck that had nearly run Becca off the road. Those thoughts fed his anger and determination. And so when he reached Hancock, he turned around and retraced his steps and planned how he would confront Uncle Bill.

* * * * *

Northrock's main office was a modest brick building north of Essex Junction, next to an open air gravel pit. Tuesday afternoon, after finishing work, and an hour and a half before he was going to meet Becca at the Burlington Airport, Wes pulled into the parking lot. He watched gravel and rock pass from a loading bin, through a crusher, and along a conveyor belt to pour onto a mound higher than the office building itself.

An articulated loader sat on a slab in front of the building with a plaque memorializing three construction workers killed in an accident. Someone had carefully brushed both the machine and the plaque clear of snow and ice and shoveled a path to its base. Wes wondered what his grandfather would have thought of using old equipment as industrial art.

Wes's grandfather had started as an uneducated laborer. The Carters had been a canal boat family, freelancing cargoes along Lake Champlain and through the canals of New York State. When the railroads destroyed the canal system in the late Nineteen Century, the Carters sold their boat for scrap and descended from poverty to abject poverty.

Elwin Carter's first job had been flipping pancakes in 1915, at the age of ten. He'd spent a year in Maine working in the mess of whatever work crew his father had joined. He came back to Vermont, attended school for two years, then went to work as a laborer himself. He worked a year at the granite quarry in Barre, Vermont, then got a job with a road crew. With no vices like smoking or drinking and an ability to work older men into the ground, Elwin saved almost four hundred dollars by the time he was eighteen. He bought a draft horse and a scraper and went into business for himself three months after his eighteenth

birthday. He was twenty-five and employed a dozen men when the Great Depression hit.

The Depression destroyed most businesses. It was milk and honey to Elwin Carter. Elwin's competitors owned buildings, overhead, and bank loans, while he had none. He bought equipment from the bankrupt for pennies on the dollar, and cherry-picked the best men from the unemployed. He had already built a reputation for being on time and under budget and by 1935 was a millionaire who employed almost two hundred men. President Roosevelt invited Northrock's young founder to the White House as an example of how the nation could pull itself out of the Depression. Northrock expanded and prospered through the New Deal projects, the war years, and the 1950s boom, when the nation built the interstate freeway system.

And now, with Uncle Davis dead, Wes's mother having sold her company stock and been disinherited for fighting with her elderly father, Bill Carter ran Northrock. Its expansion years were behind it, its founder dead, but the company still won hundreds of millions of dollars in annual contracts throughout New England and into Quebec and Upstate New York.

After some resistance from the receptionist, Wes made his way back to Bill Carter's office. His uncle motioned him in. Civic awards decorated the walls, together with pictures of Grandpa Carter as a young man with FDR, then with Eisenhower, both men wearing hard hats as they surveyed hundreds of men and their equipment. Most curiously, Wes noted a framed, hand-painted sign that read, "Home of the Moose Hollow Widow."

Uncle Bill had risen from his desk as Wes entered and noticed him eyeing the sign. "A souvenir from your Grandma Carter."

"Moose Hollow. Isn't that the town in Maine cut off by the mudslide?"

"Exactly. Took us two months around the clock in the middle of winter to reopen that road. We blasted away half a mountain, moved millions of tons of rock and earth. My brother and I—even your mom—were working fourteen hour days and still my dad wanted more. As you can imagine, Grandma didn't see much of my Grandpa for awhile. She hung this in the window to shame him into spending more time at home."

"Did it work?"

Bill chuckled. "What do you think?" He sat back down and indicated for Wes to take a seat on the other side of the desk.

Wes obeyed. "It was just a road. Wasn't as important as his marriage."

"Are you kidding? Just a road? That town was cut off from the world. The only other way into Moose Hollow was a dirt trail over the mountain, impassable in winter."

"Yeah, but it didn't need Grandpa around the clock to get it built, did it?"

"Really, it did. If it was going to get built in two months in the middle of winter, then yes, absolutely." Bill leaned back in his chair. "So what's this about, Wes?"

His uncle carried an aura of power that would have been tangible in any situation. Here, behind a massive desk, walls decorated with trophies of his success, and overlooking Northrock's gravel pit, Wes felt doubly intimidated. "I don't know if my mom told you, but I'm going back to Massachusetts."

"Glad to hear it. Looked like you were getting sidetracked."

“I thought you said it was a good idea.”

“Yeah, well.”

Wes took a deep breath. “I don’t know what’s going on, Uncle Bill, but I wish you’d leave me and my brother out of it.”

“Better back up, Wesley. What are you driving at?”

Wes paused, as if trying to think and not quite making a connection. “The way I figure it, you’re still angry at my mother. And you’re trying to scare her by threatening Eric and me. Well, stop. I don’t want anything to do with it.”

Instead of answering, Uncle Bill turned his chair toward the window. “Look at that gravel pit, Wesley. We have bigger pits—although in this day and age it’s damn tough to find new sources, what with all the environmental crap—but this is the first one. Whenever I get a moment, I look out that window. I think how my father and his men shoveled gravel by hand from that very hillside, loading it into mule-drawn wagons. You know, all that gravel was left by the glaciers, and now we’re turning it into roads.”

“What do roads have to do with it?”

“Roads have everything to do with it. The sooner you figure that out, the sooner you’ll figure out life, Wesley. The strength of a nation comes not from its armies, but from its roads. The roads move the armies. They bring trade and prosperity.” He nodded. “You know, it was roads that made the Roman Empire. And it was Roman roads, still in use hundreds of years later, that kept the lights on in the Dark Ages. When people neglected their roads, they fell to starvation and ruin. Those few places that maintained the Roman roads managed to fight off the barbarians and the bandits.

“A thousand years from now, this country will be a memory,” Bill continued. “Forests will reclaim our cities or invading armies will burn them to the ground. Our buildings will collapse or be scavenged for building materials. But whoever lives here will still use our roads and remember who built them. The greatest monument of American civilization will be the Interstate Freeway System. And you know what? We built those roads. Northrock.”

Wes blinked, not sure if his uncle wanted him to respond. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying this company means everything to me. And I’ll do anything to protect it. To keep building roads.”

He still didn’t understand. Did Uncle Bill blame his mother for something? Is that what had happened? A power struggle between his mother and his uncle for control of Northrock? And his mother had come up on the losing end, and now Bill was trying to explain why he’d been so ruthless? Whatever it was, Wes didn’t know as much as Uncle Bill thought he did.

Bill flipped open his day planner and pulled out his checkbook. “This is what I want you to do, Wesley.” He wrote out a check. “I know you’ve got Grandpa Carter’s trust to pay for school, but your mother said you were going to do an internship this summer to get some experience and make money for housing, or your car, or whatever. I want you to come work for me, instead.” He pushed the check across the desk.

Wes looked down at the check and his eyes widened. Ten thousand dollars.

"I'll write you another check at the end of the summer. Another at, say, Christmas, if you need it."

"I didn't come here for money." Nevertheless, he couldn't stop looking at the check.

Uncle Bill continued as if he hadn't heard Wes's objection. "Point is, you'll finish law school and come work for Northrock. You know, I'm not married and I don't have anyone to train for the business. That could be you, Wes. We'll build roads together."

Wes took the check, folded it and put it in his pocket. "Thank you, Uncle Bill. That's very generous of you."

Uncle Bill smiled, held out his hand for Wes to shake and said, "Good. Now get back to Harvard and show those prep school pricks how a Carter man can work."

Wes pushed his way outside in a daze. His uncle hadn't bought it, not entirely. Or else why had he gone on that rant about building roads, the Romans, and all that? And yet, Wes had been caught up in the moment, and yeah, the temptation of the money. He pulled the check out of his pocket and read it again to make sure it was real, and not post-dated to his graduation.

He'd charged two expensive last-minute plane tickets to Costa Rica yesterday. His plan had been to charge the rest of the trip costs and then make minimum payments on his cards until he got things settled out with the clerking he still hoped to do that summer. No more worries on that front.

"Thanks, Uncle Bill," he said to himself as he started the car and turned on the heater, "for funding your own investigation."

* * * * *

Dr. Alan Pardo pushed Carolina against the wall. He lifted the Peruanan's scrub top and slid a hand under her bra, pinching her nipple between two fingers. His mouth found her neck. He hooked his other hand around her butt and pulled her against his crotch. He loved the tension in her body, the pleasure mixed with anxiety in her movements.

"Not here," she said in Spanish. But she didn't push him away. "Not at work."

"It's ten-thirty. And the door is locked. It's the safest place in the world."

Pardo had eight different nursing homes and care centers as clients, so he spent little time at each one, but required that they give him an office as part of his contract. He couldn't stand to work in someone else's space. This particular office he'd found useful for other reasons, first with Rosa and now with Carolina.

In a few moments he had Carolina naked and straddling his lap. Still fully clothed himself, he put his hands on her breasts and squeezed her nipples between his fingers. He unzipped his pants to free himself and pulled the girl down onto his body. Carolina gasped as he entered and leaned her head back with eyes closed.

She was a brown girl and he could see the Inca in her face. That wide, peasant face you found throughout Latin America. Black, thick hair. Dark nipples. Pardo had known a thousand girls like that in El Salvador. Features a little different, end result the same.

Damn *campesinos*. Damn his father for trusting them.

The Pardos had owned a ranch in the Salvadoran highlands. A thousand head of cattle. Two thousand *manzanas* planted with coffee. Fruit, nuts. It had been a good living for generations and should have continued that way for generations more. But the leftists had taken power and the junta started confiscating land. It became illegal to own more than 200 *manzanas*—about 300 acres. No way to make a living off that.

They were idiots, all of them. Families like the Pardos had built El Salvador, had always run her economy. The *campesinos* were good for labor, but anything that required planning or foresight was beyond them. Dr. Pardo's father, Diego Pardo, had tried to work with the *junta* at first, then allied himself with the other families of the highlands in their struggle against the government. Nevertheless, he'd continued to work alongside his *campesinos*, to eat with them, and educate their children.

Alan Pardo had been away in Costa Rica, looking at land in case the family needed to leave the country. On the day he'd returned, bombs tore apart the agricultural ministry in San Salvador, and the bodies of two nuns had been found in Cuscatlán. As he drove onto the plantation, sullen faced *campesinos* lined the road with machetes in hand. He didn't recognize any of them.

He parked his truck in front of the fountain and stepped out with a gun in hand and another tucked into his belt. Maquilishuat trees interlocked their branches around the courtyard. It was October and they'd shed their leaves to cover themselves with pink-tufted flowers, some of which showered onto the courtyard to cover the violence evidenced therein. Disemboweled mattresses and clothing lay strewn about. A hand-crafted rocking chair, now kindling. Smashed picture frames and slashed paintings. His mother's plates, brought by his grandmother from France before the war, lay in shards. Any culture, anything of beauty, trashed.

A cloud of flies lifted into the air as Pardo passed from the outer courtyard to the inner. They buzzed around his face and the tang of blood hit his nostrils, now overpowering the smell of Maquilishuat blossoms. A body lay on the flagstones in a pool of blood. A dark blanket covered it, which he realized were flies as he got closer. Another day or two and it would be crawling with maggots. Boots gone, shirt stripped off. They'd hacked off one arm, nearly decapitated the body. But he recognized the iron-gray beard. His father.

Sick with rage and fear, he strode to the front door of the house itself. The heavy oak and iron-bound door lay on its hinges, with axes and crowbars discarded in front. Voices shouted inside, a high pitched scream. He saw movement at the foot of the great stone staircased that curved toward the upper level.

Dios mio, no. Graciela!

Pardo's wife lay at the foot of the stairs, throat cut, her beautiful eyes dull and glassy. Her dress was above her head, her underwear lying to one side. They'd raped her first.

And two *campesinos* stood next to her body, looking up the stairs. More shouting from upstairs. One man held a cigarette to his lips. The other casually swung his machete back and forth as if anxious to join the business above.

"You!" Pardo shouted, pointed at the men with his free hand.

They turned with eyes glittering and teeth bared, like wild animals. He'd seen men like this every day of his life, short, brown men with leathered skin. They took directions from people like Pardo. They did not stare back with defiance.

Pardo shot the first man in the head. The second man took a step back, then reached for the fallen man's machete. Pardo found it first. He dropped his gun and swung the heavy blade. The first blow almost severed the man's hand. The second, his head. Pardo turned back to the man he'd shot, who was somehow still alive. Not for long. Animals.

Upstairs, Pardo found five men outside his father's bedroom, swinging a chest against the door in an attempt to break down the heavy oak doors. Women's voices screamed inside. Pardo shot two of the men, hacked two others to death, while the final man fled, bloodied, but alive. Inside the room, his mother, his two sisters, and his two young sons. They'd been barricaded inside for more than thirty-six hours and the room smelled of shit and sweat and urine. The campesinos had caught Pardo's wife trying to escape to look for help.

The living members of the Pardo family fled before the *campesinos* returned in force. Soon, they fled the country. Pardo went back to the hacienda once, after the civil war. The finca had returned to forest, save for a dozen squatter families and their chickens scratching an existence from the land. He hadn't expected any different.

So what was it that made Pardo keep coming back to peasant girls like Rosa and Carolina? Self-loathing? A fetish for animal-like sex that he could only satisfy by bringing girls back to his office and taking them without so much as fully removing his pants?

Carolina came with shuddering gasps that heightened Pardo's excitement even as they repelled him. He finished and pushed her off, while pointing to her clothing. "You'd better get dressed."

As she pulled on her panties, he found himself watching her with disgust, much of it directed toward himself. He kept coming back to these peasant girls. And why, after everything they'd done to him? He was like a dog eating its own vomit.

His phone was vibrating in his jacket pocket as he pulled it on. It was his oldest son. "Yes, what is it?"

"Why haven't you been picking up?" James asked.

"I was busy."

"They went to the airport."

"Did they board already?"

"Yes," James said. "Flight just took off. Newark."

"Damn."

"David wanted to stop them. Thought we should call in a bomb threat to keep the plane on the ground until you told us what to do. He wasn't happy when I let them go."

"You did the right thing," Pardo said. Thankfully, he'd sent his sons together this time. He needed James to reign in his younger brother's impulsive behavior. David had already tried to run Rebecca Gull off the road when Pardo had clearly told him to just follow her car. A bomb threat would have been a disaster.

And David, though reckless, was a check on James's ambition. Neither boy had any memory of El Salvador, but by the time Pardo had returned from South

America, they were old enough to have digested their grandmother's stories of the finca and the hacienda and the injustices suffered by the Pardo family. Pardo had shaped this anger over the years until both boys were committed to regaining the family's land and honor.

"What now?" James asked.

"Stay at the airport until I make a few calls. I'll get back to you soon." He hung up. Was Newark just a stop on the way to somewhere else?

He turned to Carolina and switched to Spanish. "Why don't you go. I've got work to do."

"Okay."

She straightened her clothes and returned to the floor. He found himself softening as his self-disgust faded. Carolina, he thought, would be more reliable than Rosa. So long as he kept paying her rent and her son's daycare. And so long as she was illegal. She was afraid. It was fear that kept the *campesinos* well-behaved. Rosa, unfortunately, had not been enough of a *campesina*. He knew that now.

Alone now, Pardo dialed Bill Carter's number.

Pardo had met Davis and Bill in 1985 at a dairy farm in Costa Rica. The young men had just survived the death of their father and were traveling for several months before returning to take control of the family business. It had seemed like an odd time for an extended trip, but Pardo later caught undercurrents of a struggle between the brothers and pieced together their story. This was the Carter brothers' attempt to build a relationship that would keep them from tearing apart the family company. Davis and Bill left the business in the hands of a trusted associate while they spent the New England winter in Latin America.

Chaos submerged most of Central America at the time. Paramilitaries and death squads fought leftists in El Salvador and Guatemala. Communists had taken over Nicaragua, and southern Honduras was awash with Nicaraguan contras and CIA advisors. Costa Rica formed a wall of stability on the southern edge of this madness. Pardo, his fortune gone, his residency in the U.S. not yet granted, left his sons with their grandmother in Panama while he looked for opportunities in Costa Rica. He found his way to the Quaker settlement of Monteverde, in the highlands north of San Jose. He worked for the Quakers, who were happy for his expertise with cattle and land management.

He met Bill and Davis when they came to explore the cloud forests of Puntarenas. There wasn't much tourism infrastructure in those days, so they paid the Quakers for lodging. They stayed several weeks, working with the Quakers during the week and exploring the mountains on weekends. Pardo had never seen anyone work as hard as these two brothers, certainly not Americans. It was all the more surprising when he learned they came from a rich family and didn't need money to support their travels. Pardo and the Carters became friends.

Bill spoke some Spanish—he later mastered it—but Davis spoke little, and so they conversed in English. They'd just finished school, Bill with a bachelor's degree in accounting, and Davis with a master's in civil engineering. When the two brothers left Monteverde, Alan Pardo went with them.

The three young men hitchhiked the Panamerican Highway to Panama, then took a boat to Ecuador and continued south. In Peru, Shining Path guerillas

stopped their bus as it hugged a cliff edge through the mountains. The bus came around a bend and there was a pickup truck blocking the road with three men carrying AK-47s and a fourth waving a pistol. No masks, Pardo noted with alarm.

The bus could not turn around on the narrow road, and the men boarded, pistol-whipped the driver, and threw him from the bus. The attackers let out a torrent of curses and half-baked revolutionary slogans and ordered the terrified passengers off the bus. They lined up Pardo and the two Americans with everyone else.

A cliff loomed on the left side of the road and a steep slope dropped into the brush and trees on the right. Buses sometimes went over that slope; there was no shoulder and little room to pass vehicles coming from the other direction. It was cold in the open and the air was so thin that Pardo gasped for breath from the simple exertion of forming a line with the others.

A woman with a wide, peasant face stood next to Pardo. She carried a baby at her breast, who cried and rooted for its mother's nipple. The woman helped the baby latch on while retying the wool cap on its head. The absurdity of her actions struck Pardo. Nursing, while waiting for her execution.

"They're going to kill everyone," Pardo told the two brothers.

"How do you know?" Davis asked. He sounded calm, but for a certain tightness in his voice.

"No masks. If they were taking hostages, they'd have covered their faces. Look at everyone. They know it." The Andean *campesinos*, be they old women, mothers with children, or workers returning from the field, looked stricken, but did nothing. There had been dozens crammed onto the bus, and if they'd charged the four men, they'd have easily overwhelmed their captors. He glanced at the woman with the baby and her eyes met his, pleading with him to do something.

"Then why are they just standing there?" Davis asked.

"Because they're *campesinos*. They can do nothing without a leader."

"Hell with that," Bill said. "Start shouting on three."

On Bill's count, the three men shouted in English and Spanish: "*Corran! Run! Nos van a matar!*"

Chaos erupted among the Peruvians. Children screamed. People ran in every direction, while others threw themselves to the ground. Two men charged the nearest guerilla who turned his weapon just in time. The first man's body jerked and jived as he fell to the ground, punctured with bullet holes. The second grabbed the gun, but the other guerillas were firing wildly and cut down both the attacking *campesino* and their comrade. The woman with the baby fell in front of Pardo, and her baby rolled away like a discarded package. Her breast flopped loose, and milk still dribbled from her nipple even as the breast bloomed red.

Pardo, Bill, and Davis threw themselves over the edge of the road. They slid, fell, and staggered into the brush below. Branches sliced at Pardo's face. He kept staggering down, letting gravity do the work, following his two friends, until they collapsed, exhausted and gasping for air.

"Oh, god," Bill said. "Oh, god." He spit. His face looked as though someone had dipped a brush in red paint and then flicked it in his direction.

Davis tried to climb to his feet. "The baby. They shot the baby." He clutched something in his hands. The baby's wool cap. Somehow, he'd scooped it up before

they'd gone over the edge. The man stared at it, gaping, as if he was holding the baby's head itself. Meanwhile, Bill kept yammering, "Oh, god," and spitting someone else's blood from his mouth.

Pardo grabbed Davis and yanked him back to the ground. "Shut up, both of you."

They quieted down, crouching to stay hidden among the trees. From the hillside above, gunfire, screams, more gunfire. The sound of the pickup truck driving off. Finally, silence.

"We have to go back and help those people," Davis said. It didn't surprise Pardo that he was the one who'd suggested it. He'd grown increasingly sentimental as they'd traveled south, his brother harder, more realistic.

"And what?" Pardo asked. "Clean up the dead bodies? So that when the *Sendero Luminoso* comes back they can shoot us, too?"

"Thought you were going to be a doctor," Davis argued. "Aren't you supposed to help?"

"I'm supposed to stay alive." He looked to Bill for confirmation. "Right?"

Bill looked conflicted. He looked back up the hill, then into the woods below. "They're probably all dead, anyway. I don't think we should go."

Davis had continued to argue, even tried to assert his right to decide for both brothers, being the older of the two. Pardo told them straight out that they could go or not, but he wasn't going up the hill to check out a bunch of dead peasants. In the end, they would have to go back up anyway, because there was no way they'd get out of this ravine if they went any further down. But they decided to wait out the night, for the army to come collect the bus and the dead bodies, then climb to the road and flag down another bus.

That evening, that horrible, endless night, wrapped in leaves and hugging each other to conserve warmth on the hillside below, Davis said, "All those dead people. They were helpless."

"What do you expect?" Pardo asked. "They're *campesinos*."

"What does that mean, anyway?" Davis asked.

"Peasants."

"So? That's not a permanent condition. My mother's father was an illiterate French Canadian, and my mother's mother was born an Irish peasant. Poor, superstitious, uneducated."

Pardo didn't know anything about Irish or Canadians, but he knew what he'd seen in El Salvador and Costa Rica. "*Campesino* is not a condition. It's not a race. It's not what you are, it's who you are. You can take these people and send them to school and they'll just be stupid, superstitious people who can read. That's if they don't drop out, run off, get pregnant, whatever, first. And the opposite is true, too. Look at those Quakers in Monteverde. They live on the same land and with the same government as the poor masses of Latin America, but they've built something. The only difference is that they were Quakers from America."

To his surprise, Bill, the younger, practical one, took his brother's side. He was currently at the end of their little huddle and his voice sounded from over Pardo's shoulder. "You know, my father didn't have anything. His father was a day laborer, just a few years removed from the canal boats. My Dad worked his ass off and

made something of himself. I've seen these peasants. They know how to work. Hard."

"So does a mule," Pardo said. "When you're driving it. As soon as you stop, it sits down and refuses to move."

"You're studying to be a doctor," Davis said. "Why? If you don't like people, why bother?"

"It's not what I want, it's what's necessary. I need some way to support myself until I get my land back from the campesinos."

They had survived that night, and their trip. Here Pardo was, a quarter century later, and he still hadn't reclaimed the family land. Davis was dead but Bill, at least, had realized his dream of taking over his father's company.

"Hi, it's Pardo," he said when Bill Carter picked up the phone. "You were right. Wesley didn't go back to Massachusetts. Took a plane to Newark. And he wasn't alone. "

"The girl? What's her name?"

"Rebecca Gull. The QMRP. You think they've gone to Costa Rica?"

"Yes, that's what I think. He's latched onto this Rosa thing."

"So what do they know already?" Pardo asked. "And what do they guess?"

"It doesn't matter," the man said. "They've gone too far. I tried to warn him. I tried to scare him. I tried to bribe him. There's only one thing left to do."

It was chilling, Pardo thought, that a man could speak so coldly about his own nephew.

"Question is," Bill continued. "Can it be done with a minimum of fuss?"

"It's Central America," Pardo said. "We can do anything we want there."

"Yes, I know." A pause. "Okay, then, go ahead. Take care of the girl, too."

And it struck Pardo that this was more of the same. Bill Carter knew what had to be done. He just couldn't go through with it without Pardo's help.

Chapter 11

Wes and Becca landed in Puerto Jiménez at ten the next morning, having flown from Burlington to Newark, then to San Jose, before finally taking a prop plane to the Osa Peninsula. It was an exhausting series of flights and layovers, but Wes felt his strength return at the first breath of Costa Rican air. The tropical sun burned overhead and the air smelled of salt water mixed with flowers and fruit.

They rented a Land Rover, stopped at a market to pick up supplies, then drove south, toward Matapalo. Cattle grazed the fields of lush grass that lined the road. The fence posts were straight branches that had continued to grow after being planted in the ground; some were full-fledged trees. On the right, forested hills marked the edge of the Corcovada preserve. On the left, glimpses of the blue waters of the Golfo Dulce.

"What happened to the road?" Becca asked when they reached the first stream.

Wes downshifted to first, then crawled through the water. “This is actually a good road, by Costa Rican standards. Except for the last river crossing. You don’t want to hit that after a heavy rain.”

“Tell me about the house,” she said. “You’ve been here a lot?”

“My Grandpa Carter built it about forty years ago. There wasn’t any tourism in those days. That was the idea. He worked so hard the rest of the time, he needed a place to get away with the family where he didn’t have to think about cement, roads, or construction. He had two boys—my uncles Davis and Bill—and a daughter.”

“Your mom.”

“Right. They came here once or twice a year. My mom didn’t come for awhile after the blowup with her dad—that was before I was born—but then he died. My Uncle Davis let us use the house again, but I think it was my Aunt Charlotte who pushed for us all to get together that last year.”

“Aunt Charlotte was your Uncle Davis’s wife, right?”

He nodded. “Right. She’s a great person. And you know, it all went fantastic. Until my uncle drowned not long after I got back to Vermont.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I didn’t know him all that well. We had a couple of awesome dives together and it seemed like everything was changing with my mom and her brothers. But here’s the thing. My grandpa didn’t want the company falling apart after he died. And he was still kind of pissed about how my mom had sold back her shares. So he put everything in control of my Uncle Davis. After Davis died, Bill badgered, bullied, whatever, my Aunt Charlotte into selling back the majority interest in Northrock. Probably a good thing. From the sake of the business, I mean. But she wouldn’t get rid of Casa Guacamaya. Far as I know, nobody has been down since. That was about five years ago.”

“So what happened to the house?”

“Still the same, I guess.” He reached the second stream, crossed it, then said, “There’s a local family that takes care of it. Shouldn’t be hard to convince them to give us the key. I’m sure they’ll remember me, even if they don’t recognize me right away. And they might know something about the dive operations on the peninsula.” He carried the receipt for that fateful charter tucked into his wallet.

Pastures gave way to forest and the road grew more rutted. But the surface was damp, cutting down on dust, and they could drive with the windows down. Bird calls filled the air. A coati crossed in front of the Land Rover. Becca scrambled for her camera, but it was gone before she could get the lens cap off.

“Don’t worry,” Wes said. “We’ll see more. Probably sneaking into the house to steal food. If the monkeys don’t beat them to it.”

“This is awesome,” she said. “I’m glad I didn’t just cancel my vacation.” She hesitated. “Thanks, Wes.”

He smiled, enjoying seeing how happy she was. “I always love coming here. And you know, this is where I learned Spanish. All those years playing with soccer with the local kids. And a few lessons,” he admitted.

“Sounds like a great childhood,” Becca said. “We never could have afforded to go somewhere like this.”

“To be honest, we couldn’t either. The house was free and we put our food and supplies on the Carter account at the pulpería. I think Uncle Davis paid it off, I’m not sure. We came when we could scrape together money for plane tickets. Even then, Mom sometimes had to fly back early because of her job.”

“You keep talking about how poor you were,” Becca said.

“That’s because we were.”

“Relative to your grandpa and your uncles, you were poor. Relative to a family like mine, I don’t think so.”

“No, really, we were poor,” Wes protested. “We rented our house for fifteen years before my mom managed to buy it. Sometimes we lived on ramen noodles and mac and cheese. My mom would pick up extra shifts at work, and once she got a second job waiting tables.”

Becca turned to look at him. “Then how does she afford Riverwood?”

“She doesn’t. If it wasn’t for state money, we’d have to move my brother to a place in Burlington.”

“That’s the thing,” she said. “I looked through Eric’s paperwork just a couple of days ago, remember? Riverwood is expensive, because we take so many high needs residents. The state wanted to move Eric to Champlain Acres in Shelburne a few years ago.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Wes said. “It would’ve been an hour each way to see him and that would have been tough for my mom. But she petitioned, and the state caved.”

“No, they didn’t.” She gave him a funny look. “What happened is that your mom started to pay out of pocket instead of moving Eric.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, but that can’t be right. It’s got to be what? Thirty thousand a year to keep him there?”

“Way more. Starts at six grand a month, depending on the level of care. But let’s say six thousand. That would be over seventy a year.”

“My mom is a nurse. She doesn’t make that kind of money.”

“All I know is that she’s paying for Eric’s care. I have no idea where she gets the money. But she’s been paying for over two years now. Out of pocket.”

If she hadn’t been so certain, Wes wouldn’t have believed it. They’d never had much money. He had no idea how much those early misadventures of his father’s had cost, but it had to be on the order of tens of thousands of dollars. They’d only just avoided bankruptcy. There was always food and a roof overhead, but Mom was also setting thermostats to 64 degrees in winter and making do with beat-up cars and home haircuts. They almost never ate out. Things had been better in the last few years, but she still worked long hours.

So how the hell did she pay seventy thousand a year to Riverwood Care Center? Probably the same way that Rosa paid for her expensive apartment. Someone with money did it for her. Uncle Bill?

They came to the big river crossing with its steep descent and even steeper climb up the far side. Becca closed her eyes and put her hands on the dashboard as Wes took the river. They reached the turn-off for Casa Guacamaya a few minutes later. The house was just as he remembered it.

Casa Guacamaya was made of bamboo, raised on poles above the ground to keep out animals. Didn’t work for the monkeys, who just swung in from the trees.

The coatis, relatives of raccoons and just as mischievous, often found their way inside, too. The shutters were closed against animals and trespassers, but you could prop those open and fill the house with an ocean breeze.

Although the house was shut up, the trees were well tended, the bushes trimmed, and leaves, husks, and coconuts had been swept from the grounds. A basket sat on the ground, filled with clippings and half-eaten fruit dropped down by monkeys and birds.

A man in shorts with no shirt or shoes came through the trees, apparently drawn by the sound of the car.

“Sorry,” the man said as Wes and Becca stepped out. “Private house. No beach access.”

“*Hola Javier,*” Wes said. “It’s me, Wesley Pilson. Davis and Bill’s nephew.”

“*Pura vida!*” Javier exclaimed and his face lit up. “Nobody told me you were coming. My wife cleans the house with broom this morning. She has good time, no?”

“Great timing.”

“Yes, I mean timing. Let me check the radio and my wife can bring, uhm... blankets for beds.”

“Thanks,” Wes said, “but there’s no *prisa*. We have milk and things to put in the fridge. After that, we’ll take a walk on the beach. You can take care of things, then. Sorry we didn’t call.”

“No problem, Mr. Pilson.”

“Just Wes, please.” He turned to Becca. “This is Becca. And Javier Lopez.”

“Nice to meet you,” Becca said, holding out her hand.

Javier shook her hand. “*Pura vida*. Welcome to Costa Rica.” He turned to Wes and said, “Very pretty girl that you have,” in that blunt, friendly way of Costa Rica, where little old ladies pinched the cheeks of small children and called them *gordito*—chubby—in an affectionate way.

Wes smiled, but didn’t dare comment on that aside, one way or the other. “How is your wife? Lula, is that right? And two children?”

“Yes, you remember good. One daughter, one son. Let me help with your things.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Wes said. “We don’t want to interrupt whatever you were doing.”

Javier gave a dismissive wave of the hand. “I am fishing is all. Let me get the key. It will be only a minute.”

He disappeared into the trees and returned with the key, then helped them bring everything into the house. The house was clean, but plastic tarps covered the furniture. It was hot inside with the windows closed. A moment later and they’d propped open the windows on the ground level and to the upstairs bedrooms and verandas.

“You go to the beach,” Javier said. “I bring back sheets for the bed and clean this all up.”

Wes glanced at Becca. She was out on the veranda, looking across the trees to the beach. He turned back to Javier and said, “Can you make two bedrooms?”

“*Claro que sí.*”

“Ooh, look at that!” Becca exclaimed as Javier left. “Hurry, it’s a parrot.”

Wes came out to see. "A scarlet macaw." It sat on a branch and let out a rasping squawk. "Tons of them around here."

"Hey, don't ruin it for me. It's pretty damn rare for me."

He laughed. "That's not what I meant. What I mean is that this is the best place in the world to see scarlet macaws. That's what Casa Guacamaya means in Spanish. Macaw House." The macaw squawked again and lifted into the air.

"It's beautiful. Look, what's that bird?" A small flock of colorful birds flew overhead, but disappeared before he could identify them. "This place is awesome," Becca added. "Come on, let's check out the beach."

He hurried to keep up. She ran down the path, stopped to exclaim about the land crabs that lived under the coconut trees on the edge of the beach, then stripped off her shoes and socks, rolled up her pants and ran for the ocean. Becca splashed through the waves. She came out a minute later, her pants wet where they'd started to fall.

She laughed and Wes found himself laughing back. "You're different out here," he said.

"What, you mean not a bitch?"

"You're not a bitch," he said. "I wouldn't even call you cynical anymore." He searched for a word. "You're intense. That's what you are."

"It's the only way I can survive working under Saul Craig." She put a hand over her mouth. "I swear, that's the last time I'll say that name on this trip."

"Does that mean you're not planning to call Vermont and find out the results of the state inspection?"

"God, no. Come on, let's check out those rocks." She ran across the sand and Wes ran after her.

Later that evening, exhaustion from the trip setting in, they sat on the upstairs veranda, drinking a couple of beers and eating chips, cookies, and sliced papaya. Neither had felt like cooking. It got dark in a hurry in the tropics and they used a single fluorescent bulb to light the veranda. The house was solar powered, which meant you had to watch the electricity at night, or the battery would exhaust itself by morning and the fridge and the fans would shut off. The light attracted bugs.

Becca had changed from her travel clothes and wore a pair of shorts and a white top with spaghetti straps. No scrub top here. Dressed down and barefoot, she was a different person. Mellow, relaxed. Not to mention that he had a hard time taking his eyes off her.

She set down the novel she'd scavenged from her bedroom, picked up her beer, and propped her feet on the end table. "I'd love to hang out here for the next few days, sipping piña coladas and walking barefoot on the beach, but we've got to come up with a plan for finding Rosa. Or at least her family. Any ideas?"

Wes had given the matter some thought. "Problem is, there's a lot of people who rent boats on the Osa Peninsula. Several places take fishing charters, and there are water taxis to cross the golfo. And fishermen. They rents their boats sometimes." He took the receipt from his wallet and handed it to Becca. "See, there's no address or letterhead, so it might be an off-the books operation." She handed it back and he put it away. "Maybe Javier has heard of them. If not, there's a dive shop in Puerto Jiménez. They might know."

"We need to be careful," she said. "Scope things out, first."

“What do you mean?”

“If nothing happened to Rosa we’re going to look like idiots if we blunder up to her house making claims. Or maybe they don’t know anything is wrong, because it’s only been a couple of weeks. They’ll freak out and start calling people and stuff. It will make it hard to look into this other stuff with your uncle.”

“Believe me, I learned my lesson with Lieutenant Stiles,” he said. “It matters how you say things and in what order.”

“The other thing is—well, it’s weird and I can’t put it together. Your uncle who died, Rosa who came to Vermont. Your other uncle and your mom and maybe your aunt—the dead guy’s wife. They’re all mixed up in something and maybe the Solorios aren’t innocent bystanders, if you know what I mean.”

He did, and he couldn’t make any more sense of it than Becca had. “We might have to tell them who we are sooner or later. Or at least who I am. Because I want them to take me where my uncle died.”

“You thinking of taking a dive?”

“I’d like to, but without a dive buddy, I’ll have to snorkel instead. I can free dive—you know, what I can do on a breath of air—and swim down as far as possible.”

She took a sip of her beer. “Why can’t I be your dive buddy?”

“No time to get you certified. Certainly not for deep water.”

“See, you protest that you grew up poor, but there’s something, I don’t know, upper class about the way you talk. And the way you make assumptions.”

He blinked, confused. And wondering, all of a sudden, if everyone saw him that way. Didn’t matter at Harvard, of course, but everywhere else...what exactly, did she mean by that?

“I’m already open water certified,” Becca explained. “Just funny that you didn’t ask. I’m not advanced open water, so I don’t want to go deep or try anything too funky.”

“Where have you dived?” he asked, pleased.

“Lake Champlain and once in Narragansett Bay, in Rhode Island, with my boyfriend. My ex-boyfriend,” she added quickly. “Anyway, I have my own dive computer, fins, mask. Got a wetsuit, but I looked online and they said I wouldn’t need it here, so I left it home.”

“No, a dive skin is good enough, just to protect you from the prickly stuff. We can buy that. Awesome. Well, let’s take a dive where my uncle drowned, if we can find it.” He paused. “Sorry. I should have asked. God, you must think I’m a total asshole.”

“Look, Wes. We got off to a weird start. But a girl doesn’t fly to Costa Rica with a guy she thinks is a jerk.”

Some of it was the setting, no doubt, sitting on the veranda with an ocean breeze and the birds and frogs and other nighttime animals adding to the ambience. Some was no doubt two beers on a nearly empty stomach, but what he really wanted to do was lean over and kiss her. If she hadn’t intimidated him, he’d have moved faster.

“I don’t want you to think I’m saying...” Becca began. “I mean, I just broke up with my boyfriend and I’m not big on rebound relationships.”

Wes was already leaning in her direction, but grabbed quickly for his beer. Thank god he hadn't moved faster.

"How old are you, anyway?" she asked.

"Twenty-six. What about you?"

"Just turned thirty. So there's another reason."

He said, "If I'd just turned thirty and you were twenty-six, would you say the same thing?"

"Well, no, but..." She looked at him suddenly and began to smile. "I think you were getting ready to put the moves on me."

Wes started to sputter a protest, then stopped himself. "Maybe I was," he said, sounding more defensive than he meant. "You're here, I'm here. You said I wasn't a jerk... I mean, it seemed like the thing to do."

He didn't like the way that came out, like he was just screwing around, and sure enough, Becca took it the wrong way. "Come on," she said, her tone growing irritable. "My boyfriend just dumped me. By phone. A couple of days before I was supposed to fly to California to meet him. Please don't jerk me around, okay? I'm not in the mood."

Wes got up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. Look, I'm tired and acting stupid. I'm going to go to bed. You might not want to stay up too late. The howlers give an early wake up call."

"I'll keep that in mind."

He went downstairs, angry with himself for being such an idiot, and angry with Becca for making him pay for it. He checked his watch. Only 9:15. It always felt later out here with no town lights and dark so early. In a couple of days they'd adjust, what with it getting light by six and the birds and monkeys starting up even earlier than that. For now, however, he didn't feel like sleeping.

Wes went to the kitchen to throw away his empty beer can, then stepped onto the lower porch without turning on the light. He could hear Becca shifting on the couch above him, even the pages of her book rustling. Light spilled over the edge of the veranda and onto the grass in front of the house. It cast the Land Rover in shadows and turned the trees into dark statues. He froze.

There was a man standing underneath one of the trees, looking up at the veranda where Becca sat. Wes stood in the darkness and the man hadn't looked his way.

The man stared for a long time, then turned and disappeared into the trees, toward the beach. And still Wes stood frozen, heart pounding.

Chapter 12

Alan Pardo leaned over his patient and shined a light into the man's eyes. First the affected eye, then the clear one. Ann Wistrom had called him to Riverwood, worried about how Chad's eye continued to seep. Pardo had called it pink eye and prescribed antibiotic drops.

“Good news is it seems to be affecting just the left eye,” he said, flipping off the light.

Pardo and Wistrom sat in the nurse station where they’d wheeled Chad, dressed in his nightgown, strapped down. The eye was red, seeping. Must hurt like hell, somewhere deep in that flesh prison where this man lived. Team Smile’s HT—hired on to replace Bill Carter’s obnoxious nephew—was a temp, and she helped them lift Chad out of bed, but hadn’t followed them into the nurse station.

Pardo leaned back in the chair, chewed on his lip and affected a worried tone. “I’d hoped the antibiotic would clear it up. You’ve been giving him the drops?”

“Of course,” Wistrom said, voice peevish. She’d probably mentally diagnosed Chad’s condition, come up with a treatment plan herself. And now she was just waiting for Pardo to come to the same conclusion. Typical nurse attitude, in other words.

Pardo said, “I think I’ll bump that to something stronger, see if that helps.”

Not that the antibiotic would do anything, since Pardo had induced the condition himself by dripping dishwashing liquid onto Chad’s eyeball. The beauty was that dishwashing liquid was just corrosive enough that repeated treatments would damage the eye without making someone rush Chad to the emergency room.

“Of course, it might not be conjunctivitis after all.” He hesitated, as if considering. “Could be scleritis, but that usually affects young women. Still...”

“That could cause blindness,” she said.

“Could. Well, scleritis is unlikely, but possible. I should take him to an ophthalmologist to be sure.” And here he was on shaky footing. Pardo was pretty sure that seeing the inflammation of the sclera, an ophthalmologist would, indeed, diagnose scleritis. He’d probably prescribe a corticosteroid. And of course, with an ongoing irritant introduced into the eye, the condition would not improve. Chad would go blind in the communicating eye and Pardo would have his paper trail.

But what if he got an aggressive ophthalmologist, who ignored that Chad was a non-responsive patient with no family to advocate for him? What if he dug into the causes of the scleritis and, having ruled out disease, decided that the cause must be a household cleaner or other irritant. Could it possibly come back to Pardo? He thought not, but he wasn’t sure. What he did know is that he didn’t want people digging into Chad’s files.

His pager buzzed. It was the pre-arranged signal from his son. “I’ve got to go. I’ll take another look next time I’m in. Of course, if it gets worse or spreads to the other eye then give me a call and we’ll bump up the priority.”

“What about the pain?” she asked, still studying Chad, immobile in his chair. “If it’s scleritis, he’ll be suffering. They say scleritis feels like a drill boring through the eyeball.”

“You can irrigate the eye. Massage the tear ducts. Other than that, I wouldn’t give him any pain pills. He may not feel anything anyway.” He made a note to Chad Lett’s chart, then left the nurse station. He passed a man cleaning the floors in the hall, but didn’t make eye contact.

James waited in the Mercedes. Pardo climbed in and said, “That wasn’t fifteen minutes. Maybe ten.”

“They’re in Costa Rica,” James said. “Arrived at the house this afternoon.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. David called while you were inside. I answered your phone.”

“Fine, no problem. And he knows he needs to wait for you?”

“I told him. He didn’t want to wait. Said he could move in tonight, while they slept.” James wore little emotion on his face, but looked out the side window with his intense gaze, as if studying something in the distance. “He might not wait.”

“He’ll wait.” Pardo’s phone rang as he started up the car and pulled out of the Riverwood parking lot. “That’s probably him right now.”

James reached for it and looked at the incoming number. “It’s not David.”

“Let it go to voice. They can page me if it’s an emergency.”

“Yeah, but check out who’s calling.” James held the phone over the steering wheel.

He looked at the caller ID and his mouth went dry. Waterbury police. It rang again, then a third time.

He picked up as he pulled the car over. “Doctor Pardo speaking.”

“Doctor Pardo?”

Hadn’t he already said that? “Yes, speaking.”

“This is Lieutenant Roger Stiles of the Waterbury Village Police, do you have a few minutes to come down to the station?”

“Tonight? It’s kind of late. What’s this about?”

“You’ve been identified as a person of interest in a missing person case.”

Pardo said, “I don’t follow. I don’t know anyone who has gone missing.”

“Do you know Rosa Solorio?”

Any doubts about the call disappeared. He had to be calm and had to avoid giving too much information—or not enough—especially before he knew what the police were working with. “Yes, I know Rosa. Haven’t seen her recently, though. Has something happened to her?”

The police officer didn’t answer the question. “Good, can you come down to the police station? Now, if possible? Dr. Pardo?” he added after a few seconds of silence.

“Yes, I’m just leaving work. I can be there in ten minutes.”

He hung up the phone and turned to James. “That’s not good.”

“What happened?”

“Somehow they’ve tied me to Rosa’s disappearance. Can’t think how or why. I’m going to drop you off. Go to the Rolodex on my office desk. Call Steven Pinkerton, my lawyer. Use your cell phone, not the house phone. I don’t want him coming down or getting involved in any way at this point, but I need to be sure he’s available. Can you do that before you leave?”

“Of course.”

Pardo turned the key in the ignition. A trickle of doubt worried at him. He had visions suddenly of the leftist police officers who’d stopped him in El Salvador just a few kilometers from the Honduran border. He’d spent three days in a filthy, rat-infested hole of a jail. Spent ten thousand dollars to bribe his way out, but not before they’d hung him upside down, beaten the feet of his soles, then shoved their batons up his anus. Thank god he was in America.

* * * * *

Wes locked the door of the porch as he entered the house. How safe were they really, in the middle of nowhere? Javier Lopez and his family lived only fifty or sixty yards away, but beyond that, there wasn't another house within a half mile. Anyone could get in here, and though he told himself it had probably been Javier he'd seen, he couldn't shake the worry that someone had known they were coming to Costa Rica. What if his uncle hadn't believed Wes's story about going back to Massachusetts and sent someone to follow him.

He pulled down the shutters in the kitchen and the bathroom on the main floor, and then locked the door and went upstairs. Becca's room had a wonderful view toward the golfo, together with a view of the best tree for visiting birds and monkeys, which was why Javier had made it up for her. But that tree would also give access to an intruder; better would have been the empty room on the other side of the hall. Since Wes didn't want to alarm her, he went into her room and dropped the shutters.

"What are you doing?" Becca called from the veranda. There was a tree there, too; he'd wait until she went to bed and then lock the door to the veranda.

"Need to shut your window or the monkeys will come in."

"While I'm asleep? I thought you said they'd come into the house while we were out." She came off the veranda and down the hall just as he was leaving her room. She looked at his face. "Wes, are you alright? What's going on?"

And so he told her about the man he'd seen in the yard.

"Why didn't you just tell me that in the first place?"

"Cause it's probably nothing. And I didn't want to freak you out."

"But *you* sound freaked out."

"Exactly," he said. "Over nothing. This has to be the safest place in the world. That guy was probably Javier. It's not even ten o'clock. Maybe he just came to get—I don't know—his tools that he left out."

"You going to shut your window too, or just mine?" Becca asked.

"Don't need to. There's no tree outside my window. You want to change rooms? There's a nice breeze coming in through the open window."

"I'll be fine," she said. The tension drained from her voice. "It's not hot. Besides, I can just wait until you're asleep and then open my window again." She smiled as she said it.

Nevertheless, an hour later, when they were each in their respective beds, Wes had brought up a knife from the kitchen which he tucked beneath the mattress and the box springs and he could hear Becca moving around in her bed long after she should have been asleep. He had his ipod; normally, he'd play one of his mellow playlists to help him relax when he was in a new bed. Instead, he sat listening to insects and frogs and wondering about every rustle in the bushes below. They made him nervous at first, but they were probably coatis, peccaries, and the like. There wouldn't be animals foraging across the property if someone was lurking down there.

Wes was just drifting off to sleep when a noise in his room startled him awake. He groped for the knife.

"It's just me," Becca's voice said from the darkness. The floorboards creaked under her feet.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm a little scared. It's so dark and there's so much noise out there, and with that man you saw and no lock on my bedroom door..." Her voice trailed off. "I know it sounds silly."

"Not so silly that you didn't scare the crap out of me coming into the room like that," he admitted. "Do you want to switch rooms? The one on the other side of the hall from yours has a lock."

"No, I want to climb in bed with you," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Sure. Yeah, of course."

Together, they fumbled around trying to find the zipper for the mosquito net that surrounded the bed. At last, Wes reached over his shoulder and flipped on the reading lamp on the headboard. He found the zipper, unzipped it, and Becca climbed in beside him.

She wore a green camisole and a matching pair of bikini panties. And then the light was off and she was lying up next to him. She'd brought her own pillow, but she put her arm around him as she snuggled down.

Oh, god, Wes thought as he felt her breasts push against him and her legs against his, her breath against his neck and her hair falling against his bare chest. What now?

"Sorry about earlier," she said. "It's a tough time for me and I got snippy. I know you didn't mean anything."

"It's okay," he said.

"I wasn't always like this, you know."

"Like what?" he asked.

"I mean, how you see me at work."

"You're capable and dedicated. There's nothing wrong with doing your job and doing it well. And the residents love you."

"But the staff doesn't. I don't have any friends at work. I used to," she added. "I met my ex-boyfriend at Riverwood. Andrew was working as an HT while he was going to UVM. He was the brother of another girl—Alicia—who quit just after Saul made me QMRP. Alicia and I were best friends. The job was actually fun back then."

"What happened?" Wes asked.

Becca pulled away and propped herself on one elbow. "Everything was cool when I was just another HT. But I got my degree—finally!—and got a promotion. My friends thought, 'awesome, now we can screw off, cause Becca's the boss.' Or something. I don't know. Wasn't so awesome when I had to call at 6:00 in the morning asking why the hell they weren't at work. Andrew found another job while he finished school. Saved our relationship. For a few years, anyway."

"What about your friend?"

"Alicia?" She sighed and lay back down again. "Let's just say that it sucks having to fire your best friend. And she's not usually your best friend afterward."

"I'm sorry."

"Water under the bridge. These days, I keep a friendly distance from my coworkers. Which begs the question of what I'm doing here with you."

"Because you don't think of me as your coworker," Wes answered.

"Maybe not."

They lapsed into silence. Whatever Becca had been thinking when she'd climbed into bed, it was gone now. She rolled onto her stomach and a few minutes later her breathing evened out and she became still and quiet.

Wes knew he'd lie awake all night so long as her body was touching his. So he eased to the far side of the bed, turned onto his side and listened to the sounds of night. And finally, fell asleep.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Roger Stiles didn't seem hostile or suspicious, but Dr. Pardo knew this might be an act. The officer offered him coffee or a soda and had him sit across the desk. Pardo declined, but accepted a cup of water from the cooler. It was late at night, but Stiles scooped up several files spread out as if he'd been working. He set his own coffee directly on the desk, ringed with the evidence of many coffees past. His right hand worked at a stress ball.

Dr. Pardo took a sip of water. "So what's this about, officer?" He spoke slowly enough that he could concentrate on minimizing his Spanish accent. It had a tendency to trip him up when he was nervous.

Stiles said, "Tell me how you know Rosa Solorio."

It was a dangerous question. Suppose Stiles already knew just how well Pardo knew Rosa. That he'd helped her come from Costa Rica. That he'd given her money. That he'd slept with her. Admitting too little would move him from person of interest to prime suspect.

Or maybe Stiles knew nothing. Maybe he was asking around just to get Bill Carter's pesky nephew out of his hair. So happened that Alan Pardo was a doctor and a Spanish-speaker to boot. He might know what was going on in the heads of these illegal immigrants and be respected enough to give a reliable, level-headed opinion.

Suddenly grateful for the water, he took another sip. "Good girl," he said. "Worked several years at Riverwood. Costa Rican." He paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "Not quite sure why she quit like that."

"Like what, do you mean?"

"From what I understand," Pardo said, "she just walked off in the middle of a shift."

"Strange."

He gave a deliberate shrug. "It happens. It's a high stress job and low pay. But Rosa was a good worker. Didn't seem like her."

"Can you think of anything that might have set her off? Money problems? A boyfriend? Fight with a coworker?"

Again, a possible trap. Let the doctor claim ignorance, then spring some bit of information that made it clear that Pardo was lying. He decided on straight denial. It was the safest of two bets.

"I didn't know her that well. See, I'm a consulting physician. I have eight regular clients—nursing homes, long-term care facilities, and rural clinics—plus three others that call me in from time to time. I probably know Rosa better than most of the aides, but that's just because we're fellow Spanish speakers. I'm from El Salvador," he added, to remind Stiles that he and Rosa were not from the same country. He wanted to add that not all Spanish speakers crammed ten people into

a two bedroom duplex with an El Camino propped on cinder blocks in the front yard, that some of them were not campesinos. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut on that score.

Lieutenant Stiles nodded. He drank from his coffee, looked down at it as if surprised to discover that it was cheap, break room stuff, instead of, say, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, then set down the cup and leaned back in his chair. "It's odd, then."

Pardo couldn't help himself. "What's odd?" His accent sounded thick in his ears.

"Here's the thing. I had a complaint already about Rosa's disappearance. Someone at Riverwood came by. I took a quick look, figured the girl went home or ran off with her boyfriend."

"Right, she was an illegal alien, after all," Pardo said. "By definition, not really stable."

"That's how I was thinking," Stiles agreed. He jotted something in his notebook, then looked up and met Pardo's eyes. "Except that earlier today I got a call from Planned Parenthood. You know, they have an office in Waterbury."

"I've seen it. Little red building on Main Street." A nervous tickle.

"That's the one. They reported her missing."

"Planned Parenthood reported her missing?" Pardo asked. "I don't understand. Why would they be looking for Rosa?"

"Because she was pregnant, Dr. Pardo. She made an appointment for an abortion consultation. And when she didn't show up, they called her house. Number disconnected. This being Vermont, and not, say, Boston, they didn't let it go. They called her landlord. Then they called the Waterbury Village Police Department. And here's where it gets interesting," Stiles added. He leaned forward. "As her emergency contact, she gave your name. Get it? She said we should talk to you if anything happened to her."

Coño. Shit.

Rosa pregnant? Supposedly, she'd been going to Planned Parenthood already for birth control pills. It further chilled him to think of his DNA carried inside the girl. Pinning him definitively to Rosa if they found her.

"Ah, I understand," Dr. Pardo said, even as his mind worked furiously.

"Please, explain." Still very polite, but there was a tinge of suspicion in Stiles's voice.

"Rosa came to me a few weeks ago, distraught. Asked me if it was possible to get pregnant if the man had always pulled out before ejaculation. That's the gist of what she tried to ask, anyway. She seemed more than a little naïve about the subject. And of course, I told her that any uncovered penetration could lead to pregnancy. Rosa said her family was Catholic and would kill her if they found out she was pregnant. I suggested she go to Planned Parenthood."

"Why did she come to you?"

"A lot of these HTs—the aides at the care center, I mean—don't have health insurance. Certainly not an immigrant like Rosa. I'm probably the only doctor she knows. Believe me, officer, I'm used to requests for free medical advice." He hesitated. "In this case, it seemed like the right thing to do."

"And you suggested an abortion?"

“Of course not,” Pardo said. He was feeling more confident now. “That was her idea. I told her not to do anything without thinking about it first. There were several options. Planned Parenthood has counselors trained for this kind of thing. Of course, they’re more than happy to help arrange an abortion, but that’s another question.” He tried to leave it neutral, or maybe slightly disapproving. Sympathetic of the girl, but disappointed in her behavior. “I guess she gave Planned Parenthood my number as her doctor because she doesn’t have one.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this straight up?” Lieutenant Stiles asked. “When I asked if you knew Rosa Solorio?”

“With all due respect, officer, you didn’t tell me what this was about. For all I knew, she’d been picked up for shoplifting and thought of the most responsible Spanish speaker she knew to get her out of trouble. Would have hardly been appropriate, in that case, to tell you she’d asked me about getting an abortion.”

“Okay.” Stiles rose to his feet. “Sorry for the inconvenience, Dr. Pardo. But I appreciate you coming down to answer some questions.”

Pardo also stood. “I hope she’s okay. Maybe she decided to trust her family about this pregnancy thing.”

“Or ran off with her boyfriend,” Stiles added. “At least it gives some possible reasons why she disappeared.”

Quite. In fact, it occurred to Pardo that this might be a blessing in disguise. The police knew about Rosa’s disappearance, true, but now they had a suspect in the hypothetical boyfriend that had got her pregnant.

The police officer led him to the door of the police station and held it for the doctor. “If you do hear from Rosa, or hear any rumors from her coworkers—anything, really—please give me a call.” He handed over a business card, but didn’t follow Pardo into the cold night air.

“Don’t worry,” Pardo said. “I will.”

Chapter 13

It took Ellen Pilson two days to find the remains of the fire. She knew it was near one of Northrock’s spring projects. She’d driven first to Northfield, south of Montpelier and scouted every side road for miles. The next morning, she rose before dawn—needing to be at work by 9:00 AM—and drove south along 100 before cutting west on 125. She found a Forest Service road a quarter mile from the cutout where they’d park the heavy machinery come spring. It had been decades since Ellen had stood on a Northrock job site, but she recognized it as the best place to put a trailer. The crew would stay in the trailer mid-week to save two hours or more of commuting every day.

Ellen parked the car next to the highway, changed her shoes for boots, then bundled herself in a ski parka and mittens. The snow fell short of her knees, indicating that it had been plowed at some point, but she was still exhausted before she’d gone fifty yards. Soon she had to pull back her hood and unzip her parka she was so hot.

But she was rewarded for the effort. She followed the road into the forest maybe a third of a mile and discovered a construction trailer sitting just where she'd expected it. Or rather, the remains of a trailer, a ruin of charred framing and warped siding. Just another construction accident, right? And just like that winter road in Maine, nobody could pin it on her brother, Bill Carter.

The weather had been terrible that day in the mountains of Maine. It had been "spitting" as they said in New England, for most of the morning, leaving a slushy accumulation of several inches. They didn't usually work under these conditions. In fact, everything about the Moose Hollow job was unusual. Instead of moving in short stages of a mile at a time, they tackled the entire twelve mile stretch at once. To the north, someone would be blasting, others hauling away mud or rubble, others grading further down the mountain. By five o'clock, when it grew dark, stadium lighting bathed the mountain in light so night crews could work until daylight.

Elwin Carter practically lived on the site; he'd further divided the project into thirds with each third under control of one of his children. Ellen had the middle third, above the landslide that had buried the old highway and through the gap in Dibble Mountain. The mountain shuddered off piles of rubble as they blasted to widen the gap. But it wasn't yet big enough to pass the larger equipment. Some three hundred feet back from the summit, Northrock widened and graded a cutout where they'd dumped road base and parked graders, wheeled dozers, scrapers, compactors, and other heavy machinery. Ellen's other brother, Davis, was already on the far side, his survey crews working around the clock. They'd helicoptered over the most critical supplies, but they needed Dibble Mountain out of the way. Bill, the youngest, worked at Ellen's back, further down the mountain.

Ellen's father checked her progress ten times a day. "Is that road open yet? Tell me what you need. More explosives engineers? How many? You'll have them by 3:00."

He woke her at 5:30 the morning of the accident by pounding on the door of her trailer. She answered in her pajamas. He looked like he'd been up for hours. Seventy-five years old and he could still work her into the ground. Sleet iced his hard hat. "You've got falling rock."

Ellen stepped barefoot down the slushy metal stairs of the trailer and saw that he was right. Destabilized by the blasting, rock had fallen onto the cutout. A boulder the size of a car had rolled just fifteen feet from her bedroom on the east side of the trailer. Thank god nothing had hit the equipment. She'd heard nothing, but since she'd learned to sleep through the blasting, it could have punched into her bedroom without waking her. She squinted up at the black shadow of the mountain. That mountain had become her enemy.

"Move the equipment," her father said. "Then get up there and knock that stuff loose."

"What do you suggest? Should I—"

"That's for you to figure out." His eyes narrowed. "Don't let the men see you dressed like that."

"They're just pajamas, Dad. Don't you wear pajamas?"

"Of course, but I'm not a woman."

"What's that supposed to mean?" A hard edge slipped into her voice.

"I mean I see you on the job and you're wearing slacks and something... I don't know, *feminine*. A young woman in a hard hat. Hell, from a distance you look like my secretary." Her father nodded. "I want to drive by and have a hard time telling if I'm looking at you or one of your brothers. Need the foremen and laborers to think the same thing. Get it? They're construction workers."

"Doesn't give them the right to act like pigs."

"That's not what I mean. I'm not worried about some guy grabbing your ass. You can handle that. But let me tell you something, Ellen. You think I'll still be here in ten years? Hell, I'll be lucky to get five. One of you has got to take over. That'd be Davis, wouldn't it, because he's my oldest son. Only you told me the job is yours. Because *you're* the oldest. Fine, I'll forget you're a woman, because you're smart and work hard."

She was speechless. Elwin Carter's idea of a compliment was a semi-satisfied grunt. Competence didn't merit a pat on the back; it was expected. And he'd just said she was a hard worker. Wow.

"But if you're going to run this place, you can't be a woman. Not even a hard-edged bitch who knows how to crack skulls. You've got to think like a man, act like a man, and when you're on the job, you'll look like one. Even if you have to sleep in overalls and a hardhat. We clear on that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now prove your brothers wrong. Get that pass open!" He turned and sloshed back to the car, which swerved around a fallen boulder and a hydraulic excavator to head back down the mountain.

Ellen looked over the cutout. She could push the trailer to one side but the machinery would have to go back down to the valley. She went inside, changed, gulped down a breakfast of coffee and toast and got to work. There was some talk of a Nor'easter starting that weekend; she needed to get that pass open before it snowed. She called in anyone with a CDL-A license.

Ten minutes later and she was on the radio with her brother, Bill. "We've got falling rock up here. I've got some equipment I need to drive down the mountain. I need your guys out of the way."

"We're torn up at the mile three elbow," Bill said. "I'm running a culvert. You can't get anything heavy down until this afternoon. Give me till four-thirty."

"No good," she said. "I can't blast until I knock down the loose rock, and I can't do that before I get this equipment out of the way."

"What about the shoulder at mile five?" he asked.

That was no shoulder. That was a spur of the slump, the part of Dibble Mountain that had shrugged away after three weeks of heavy rain. The state of Maine had sent dozers and excavators to clear first the road, then, when that was abandoned, keep the channel open for Maple Brook. Twenty-four hours later, they'd given up as millions of tons of mud continued to slide into the valley. A lake had formed behind the dammed river, flooding dozens of homes and hundreds of acres of farmland in Moose Hollow.

Some of the landslide pressed against the new, higher road at mile five. It was stable enough that her brother had stored road base and gravel on the side next to the road.

"There's no way in hell I'm going to park four hundred tons of equipment on that thing," Ellen told Bill.

The radio crackled. "What's your choice? Let it get crushed by falling rock?"

"Or you could fill that hole and let me back down the mountain."

"Can't do that, Ellen. I'll lose half a day. Look, that cutout is stable. I've got the seismic report right in front of me. It's settled eight centimeters since January and nothing for three weeks. I don't know what things look like up there, but if I were you I'd get that stuff down here. You could ask Dad."

That wasn't an option. Not after Dad's speech. "And you'd park on it?"

"I already have. Got three trucks out there already."

But an hour later, when she was on the edge of the slump, she saw Bill's so-called trucks. They were half-ton pickups. She had thirty ton compactors, fifty ton hydraulic excavators, sixty ton scrapers, and even a hundred ton wheeled dozer. There was a whole line of machines snaking up the mountain. The air filled with the stink and rumble of diesel engines.

Her foreman, Harvey Drummond, pulled up his pickup truck and jumped down to face Ellen. "Jesus fucking Christ, Carter. You're going to park on that thing?"

Drummond was in his mid-fifties, his face jowled and his nose thick and pockmarked, his skin tanned to the consistency of leather. He'd worked his way up from laborer and still had the forearms of a longshoreman. You never saw Drummond's men standing around, watching one guy work an excavator. Men from his crews regularly won productivity awards and the fat bonuses that came with same. Elwin Carter paid Drummond what he was worth; Ellen had seen the man's paychecks.

"Bill said it was stable."

"Yeah, he did?" Drummond looked around. "Where is your brother?"

"Not here, but he swore this thing was good."

A grunt. "Well that's not enough for me. I want to see some paperwork."

This was just the sort of man her father had been talking about. If she couldn't win over Drummond she may as well put on heels and lipstick and work behind a desk, because she'd never get anywhere on the job site.

"Listen, Drummond, I've got half the fucking mountain falling down on me. Boulder damn near crushed me in my sleep. Bill said he looked at the seismic report and he's had his guys measure slump. He says it's stable. Now let's get this equipment parked, get our work done on Dibble Mountain and get our stuff back up there. It'll be here, what? Two, three hours?"

A moment of hesitation. "Yeah, all right. Long as you're sure about that seismic."

Drummond was cautious as he helped her position the equipment, putting nothing close to the edge. It meant that by the time they pulled the last scraper into place, it hung three feet onto the new road, which was no good, because it blocked even the smaller trucks from using the road. She and Drummond had another argument, before he finally agreed to move something forward. They found the most stable, widest part of the slump and directed the driver to inch forward with an articulated hauler/ejector. Ellen stood at the rear.

"Another six inches," she called.

The wheels began to turn, the treads gripping the muddy ground. And then they started spinning and Ellen frowned, her mind not yet grasping what was happening. Only they were spinning because they were off the ground and they were spinning in reverse. The whole nose of the truck was sinking, lifting the back end. Drummond and the driver shouted at each other and then the driver threw himself from the cab. He scrambled away on all fours, heedless of mud or snow. The truck leaned over the edge of the slump.

“No,” she whispered. Then cried, “No!” as she ran toward the cab.

The edge of the hillside sloughed away and the truck slid straight down. She ran to the edge, forgetting safety even as the other drivers and men sprinted toward the road, afraid the entire hill might collapse. She got there just in time to see the truck mow through a stand of small trees at the bottom of the hill. It crushed into a massive oak tree and snapped the thing like a toothpick. But the tree brought it to a stop.

Ellen stared down, her mind racing as to how she could recover the truck before her father came. It looked surprisingly undamaged. And the driver had jumped out, right? She’d have to move the rest of the trucks at once, but—

And then she looked around for Drummond and realized he was nowhere to be seen. He’d stood in front of the hauler, directing it toward the edge. He must have slipped when trying to get out of the way. She turned, her hand clamped over her mouth, fighting back a scream.

They found Drummond’s body pulped between the truck’s grill and the stump of the oak tree. They called paramedics, but it was a recovery operation, not a rescue.

Elwin Carter dressed down Bill, Davis, and Ellen as soon as he returned from the hospital with Drummond’s body. He directed most of his wrath toward his daughter. She listened while he raged, then offered her defense.

“Bill told me that hillside was stable. Bill, you have the seismic report. Show him.”

But Bill didn’t have the seismic report. He denied any such conversation, expressed bewilderment that Ellen would have dreamed of parking on the edge of the landslide. Anyone could see it was a disaster waiting to happen. If he’d only known—god, if he’d only known!—he’d have rushed up here and overruled her. And of course, more than one driver had overheard Ellen and Drummond arguing about safety.

Two other men died on Moose Hollow that winter, one with his head caved in by a falling rock and the other when a chain broke and dropped a Jersey barrier on his back. But Ellen only learned of these fatalities later. She never worked on a Northrock site again. Instead, she’d gone back to Connecticut, to the only person who stood by her: Jim Pilson.

If nothing else, Bill’s treachery had taught her how his mind worked. It had led her to this burned-out trailer.

She took several pictures of the rubble with her digital camera, then picked through the wreckage. She found a gas can and took a picture, then took advantage of the gray of early dawn to take several pictures of the surrounding trees to get the trailer in context.

Ellen scrolled through the pictures on her camera before leaving. Perfect.

She'd found the fire. She had proof.

* * * * *

The howler monkeys came from the south early the next morning. There had been a lot of early noise from birds, of course, but Wes and Becca managed to go back to sleep in spite of the chattering, fighting, and whatnot. But when Wes heard the monkeys, he knew he had only a few minutes. By the time the howlers reached the fruit trees in the yard, their barks filled every available space in the yard and house.

Becca climbed out of bed, hurried to the veranda in her camisole and panties and cried out, "Wes, hurry! Look."

Dutifully, Wes pulled on shorts over his boxers, then followed her outside. Becca leaned over the railing and craned her neck to look up into the branches. It was still cool and goose bumps speckled her arms and legs.

Howlers leaped from branch to branch, grunting and bellowing. Others tore into the guanabana fruit, dropping half of it to the ground. Coati and land crabs would come later to take advantage of their sloppy eating habits. There were maybe fifteen or twenty monkeys in all, including the babies, who clung to their mothers' backs and looked down at Wes and Becca with dark, liquid eyes.

"A toucan," Wes said, pointing to the long-billed bird gliding across the yard to the thicker trees that separated Casa Guacamaya from the Lopez house.

"Awesome."

"It's not a favorite of birders, since it preys on the eggs of song birds."

"And here I thought they ate Fruit Loops."

They watched the birds and monkeys as the sun rose over the *golfo*. Javier Lopez came into the yard carrying a basket. He was still barefooted and bare-chested. A girl walked next to him, pretty, maybe sixteen or seventeen, with long black hair, tied into a pony tail. Becca went inside to get dressed as Javier spotted Wes and called up, "I bring this for you."

Wes went downstairs and unlocked the door, then went through the kitchen opening the shutters while Javier put the basket on the table. There were stubby bananas, papayas, mangos, and other, more exotic fruits. It had been too long since he'd had fresh, tropical fruit, and even the bananas looked fantastic. Becca came down a minute later. She'd pulled on shorts, but still wore her green camisole top.

"You mean you can just pick this stuff whenever you want?" she asked as Javier told her about a few of the more unusual fruits. "Did you see the monkeys?"

"*Monos congos*," Javier said. "The howlers." He smiled. "Good that you like. Every day they come."

She said, "We saw a toucan, too. And a scarlet macaw yesterday." Becca smiled at the girl, who returned a shy smile.

"Ah, sorry. This is my daughter, Maritza."

"Buenos días, Maritza," Wes said. He couldn't believe it was the same girl. He remembered a child who would race up and down the beach barefoot. The eyes were the same, bright and curious. "Do you still draw those wonderful pictures?" he asked.

Javier cut in before she could answer, his face beaming with pride. "My Maritza goes next year to San Jose to study art in university. Look, I show you."

He had tucked several drawings into the basket and handed half of them to Wes and the other half to Becca. They were drawings of the *golfo* in pastels or inks. Colors and light glowed from every picture.

"This is fantastic," Becca said to Maritza, who returned a modest smile. "No, I mean it. Could I buy one of these? I'd love to hang it on my wall back home."

Maritza blinked and shook her head, not quite following, so Wes translated for her. "Oh, no," she answered in Spanish. "These are just drawings. Feel free to choose whatever you like. Really, I insist."

Becca seemed hesitant, and Maritza equally insistent that she wouldn't take money. At last Becca thanked her and chose a picture of a grinning boy straining to lift a green sea turtle while the surf foamed around his ankles.

"And look at this one," Javier said, removing one more. "Not new, this one, but maybe you remember this day, Wes."

The picture was a man working on a roof. There was an overhanging tree with a spider monkey hanging by its tail, watching the man work. Two brown-skinned children played soccer at the bottom of the tree.

Javier said, "Maritza draws this five years ago. We save for your family. This picture she draws of your uncle, putting solar on the roof."

The girl spoke, again in Spanish, "Could you give it to your aunt, please? She was so kind, always bringing me art supplies from Vermont. I felt so bad when Señor Carter died and I never had a chance to tell her I was sorry for what had happened."

"I'm sure she'll love it."

It was a skilled drawing, stylistic, yet perfectly capturing this place in the Costa Rican rain forest. And Maritza had been only twelve when she'd drawn it. Wes thought he could even remember her sitting in the notch of a tree, drawing the picture. And just like a Carter for his uncle to work while on vacation.

"This is good," Becca said. She turned to Wes. "Look at these boys playing soccer. This one's face. And the hands of this boy kicking the ball."

"Very good," Wes agreed. "I'm so glad you've got the chance to study in San Jose."

Javier said, "Maritza wants to be teacher of art. But San Jose, I think, is very different for her, no?"

Wes and Becca set the two drawings aside, returned the rest to Maritza, then took out some of the fruit and covered the rest with a cloth. Becca found a knife and sliced papaya, mango, and star fruit. Wes grabbed a piece of mango and popped it in his mouth. Juice dribbled down his chin. Fantastic.

Javier sent his daughter to get clean towels and more toiletries for the house, even though Wes and Becca insisted they had everything they needed.

"If I remember," Wes said after the girl was gone, "my Uncle Davis was obsessed about solar power down here that last trip."

"The electricity makes big difference for us. He say he puts solar on every roof on the Osa. He has plans for Vermont, too."

"Así es. He did have big plans. But you know, solar power doesn't work nearly as well in Vermont. For one thing, the roofs are covered with snow half the winter."

"I would like to see that, someday."

Wes smiled. "Might need different clothes before you come." He grabbed more fruit, which Becca was eating almost as fast as she cut it. "His plan in Vermont was wind mills. Most of our electricity comes from hydropower in Canada or from a nuclear plant."

"Unless they build that coal-fired plant they keep talking about," Becca added.

"That's what got my uncle worked up. He wanted windmills instead."

"Your family builds roads, yes?" Javier asked.

"Not my mother and father, but the bigger family, yeah. Roads, bridges, all sorts of construction. I don't know if Uncle Davis was going to start another company or do it with Northrock, but wind was his big plan. That and solar panels in Central America."

"He is good man. How do you say, *generoso*?"

"Generous."

"Yes, generous. We are very sad when he dies."

"Where you with him when he died?"

Javier frowned. "But he died in the United States, no?"

Wes opened his mouth to refute Javier, but stopped himself, unsure suddenly of Javier Lopez. Why would he say that?

"Something wrong?" Becca asked. She turned to Javier. "I'm sorry, Javier, would you like some fruit? I didn't mean to be rude. It's just so good I forgot."

"No, we already have a lot of fruit." He was watching Wes.

"No, nothing is wrong," Wes lied. "I mean, thinking about it brought back memories. Sad memories. But you know, I couldn't remember exactly how it happened. I wasn't there. I flew home early because spring break was over. And it's been a few years."

"There is no hospital in Puerto Jiménez," Javier said. "Just a clinic. So they take him in boat to Golfito. Then to Neily. It is near the border with Panama. But it is not enough so they take him in airplane to go home."

Only Wes knew the body had never gone home. Instead, they had cremated Uncle Davis in Costa Rica, then flown the ashes home. Wes remembered quite clearly the internment at the mausoleum, and the urn containing Uncle Davis's remains. Aunt Charlotte weeping, his mother stone-faced, pale as a dead woman herself. And Wes sitting in the overly heated room, tie so tight it felt like it would suffocate him, thinking that just a few days earlier he'd been diving with Uncle Davis. And thinking of that awesome picture with the shark and how his uncle's next dive had been his last.

Maritza returned with the towels and the toiletries and she and her father left a few minutes later. As soon as they were out of sight, Becca gave Wes a curious look. "Thought you were going to ask about the Solorios."

"Sure," he said. "Only I stopped trusting Javier all of a sudden." He told her about the discrepancy between what had happened after Uncle Davis died and what Javier had told him about flying the body to the U.S.

"Are you sure they didn't bring him back to the U.S. and then cremate him?"

"Yeah, because I remember there was some kind of problem bringing back the body. My Aunt Charlotte had a hard time deciding whether to bury him in Costa

Rica or cremate him and bury his ashes in Vermont. And I'm sure Javier wouldn't forget something like that. So why is he lying?"

"Maybe he's not," she said, cutting the skin from another mango. "And it's not just that I like him for bringing all this fruit."

"Speaking of which, you eat anymore and you'll be running for bathrooms all day."

"Just this last piece. Then I'll have a piece of bread." She popped a slice of mango into her mouth, then held out the plate to Wes, who couldn't resist, in spite of the distinct feeling that he'd already eaten too much himself. "Here's why I don't think Javier was lying," she continued. "First, it's a stupid thing to lie about. Where does it matter where he died? Second, we already know your family is covering up something. Makes more sense that they're the ones who lied to you about how it played out. Right?"

"So my Uncle Davis died in the States?" Wes asked. "Like you said, why does it matter?"

"Wouldn't matter to Javier, but it might matter to your family. Maybe they botched something on the air ambulance. It was in international airspace and they wanted to cover up what happened. So they cremated him quietly back home and told you and the authorities it had happened in Costa Rica."

Wes thought about it. "The only thing that explains is why Javier has a different story about the cremation and funeral. Doesn't cover anything else. Such as Rosa coming to Vermont, or why people think the secret is big enough to threaten my life and try to run you off the road. Anyway, I don't want to trust Javier. Not yet."

He watched as Becca finished off her fruit then dutifully reached into the fridge to get a piece of bread. He said, "I'm going to jump in the shower. We should get going; it'll be 9:00 before we get to Puerto Jiménez."

It was after 9:00, in fact, by the time they pulled into the dive shop, a place named Tropical Adventures. The shop was on the *golfo* side of town, next to a small resort with a restaurant where several foreigners ate breakfast on a patio overlooking the water. The owner of the shop was a German man named Bernd who'd lived in Costa Rica for fifteen years.

After checking out prices on equipment and making small talk, Wes asked the owner, "Know of a charter service run by someone named Solorio?"

"Don't think so. Here in Puerto Jiménez?" Bernd asked.

Becca was over checking out the goodies aisle: dive sausages, fancy logbooks, dive computers with all the bells and whistles, and dive scooters. It was all stuff that cost too much and added little to a dive but was so fun to look at.

Wes shrugged. "I don't know." He'd already thought of a story. "My father came to the Osa a couple of years ago, said Solorio took him to some great places that nobody else knew about."

"Every Tico with a *lancha* has his own secret dive spots or fishing holes. I wouldn't worry too much if you can't find the exact guy."

"Yeah, I know," Wes said. "Only my dad made a big deal of it. He and this Solorio guy still email. My dad already told him I was coming, and sent me off with all the contact information. Which I promptly lost, of course."

Bernd laughed. "Alright. What else do you know about the guy?"

“Not a lot. Can’t even remember if the dive thing is his main business or if he usually does fishing trips or whatever.” Wes thought of the hand-written receipt. “Probably just a side business. We’ll be all over the Osa in the next couple of days and probably even head across to Golfito. So maybe I’ll just poke my head in wherever and see if they’ve heard of the guy.”

“You might try Andres at Tiburón Tours in Golfito. He knows just about everyone on the Golfo Dulce.”

Only Wes didn’t think it was on the *golfo* side of the peninsula. The week of the accident they’d already dived on the *golfo* several times, so he thought it likely that Uncle Davis had driven around to the other side of the Osa Peninsula, to dive in open ocean. “How about on the far side of the Osa? Anything out there?”

“Sure.” Bernd thought for a moment. “Is your dad a serious diver?”

“Yeah, pretty serious. Advanced Open Water, with an additional course in wrecks and underwater photography. Why?”

“Because there’s a group of fisherman at Agujitas, you know, near Drake. They do stuff on the side, like sport fishing and hauling divers to Isla del Caño at a discount. You’ve got to do all your own prep and safety stuff. They don’t dive themselves, but they keep their ears open and know plenty of good dive spots. Your guy might be out there.”

Wes nodded. “Sounds like something my dad would’ve dug up. What’s the going rate for something like that?”

“Fuel is through the roof at the moment, so more expensive than you might think. Say, forty thousand, fifty thousand colones. More if you want a long dive and you’ve got to take the boat out farther.”

Fifty thousand colones would be about a hundred bucks. “Still, that’s a lot cheaper than signing on with an official tour.”

“Exactly. Just be sure you know how to handle your own equipment because most of these fisherman don’t know the first thing about dive safety.”

“No problems there. Thanks. We’ll probably swing by later today or tomorrow to rent some gear.” He grabbed a card from the counter as Becca followed him outside.

“Sounds like good info,” Becca said when they were outside again. “You see their camera stuff? Wicked expensive, of course. It’d be great to take some pictures, but I guess I’ll be stuck with one of those underwater disposable jobs.”

“They take decent enough pictures,” Wes said. “But please tell me you’re not one of those divers who spends her dive trying to get the perfect picture of a rooster fish.”

“Can’t say. They don’t have rooster fish in Lake Champlain.” She grinned. “Seriously, though. I’m not going to waste this dive floating in one spot until my tank runs out of air.”

It was three times as far to Agujitas as to their beach house in Matapalo and Wes didn’t want to waste a day driving out just to hit a dead end. So he wandered around town, checking in shops until he found a woman in one of the sodas—little restaurants that served rice, beans, and chicken—who gave him the number of her cousin in Agujitas. Wes bought a 2,000 colones phone card and hit the public phone while Becca hung out in the park, reading her book and sipping a banana licuado.

The cousin in Agujitas had never heard of the Solorios, but gave Wes the number of someone who might. This next woman had what he was looking for. "Claro que lo conozco," she said. *Of course I know him.* "Ernesto Solorio is my cousin's padrino. He's a fisherman."

Wes didn't know what *padrino* meant. Godfather, maybe? And the name on the receipt had been T. Solorio, not Ernesto. But what were the odds? Had to be related. He took a risk. "Is Ernesto related to Rosa Solorio?"

"Asi es. Rosa is Ernesto's daughter. But she's gone to El Norte."

He flashed a thumbs-up to Becca as she looked up from her book. She returned the signal. But then he realized that the woman in Agujitas still considered Rosa to be in the U.S., which wasn't a good sign.

"Rosa said her father might rent me a boat for some diving."

"I have no idea about that. The Solorios don't have a phone, but I can give Ernesto a message if you want. Or you could ask around at the docks when you come to Agujitas. They'll show you his boat or tell you when he'll come in."

Only problem was, Wes and Becca could drive out and still find that Solorio had taken his boat out fishing for the day. "A message would be great. Just tell him we want to hire him to take us diving tomorrow."

"What time?"

"We'll be in Agujitas by ten in the morning."

Sound of a woman scratching out the message. "Under what name?"

"Last name is Gull," he said, giving Becca's name instead of his own.

Ten was early. They'd have to leave the house by six. But he figured Ernesto Solorio would wait if he thought they'd show up early. Any later and he might just head out fishing. When he hung up, he went to Becca and told her what he'd learned.

"Her dad's a fisherman? Doesn't sound like the type who can send money to pay for his daughter's apartment."

"No, it doesn't. With any luck, we'll find Rosa and she can explain it herself."

"So what now?" Becca asked.

"Let's rent some gear from Bernd so we'll be ready first thing in the morning." He paused. It was a great day, perfect weather, blue sky punctuated by towering white clouds that drifted across the peninsula. "That leaves the rest of the day to take advantage of this awesome weather. Anything you want to do?"

"Funny you should ask that," she said. She pulled out a brochure folded in her pocket. "Got this at the dive shop."

It was a brochure for an animal sanctuary south of Golfito. The owner rehabilitated injured birds and animals. There was a picture of a smiling tourist holding a baby two-toed sloth. Suggested donation, ten thousand colones, about twenty bucks.

"Let's go down to the docks and see if we can find someone to taxi us across."

"That would be really cool. But, uhm, just a minute," she said. "I've got to find a bathroom."

"Too much fruit?" Wes asked.

"Maybe."

He raised an eyebrow. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Yeah, well it was worth it. Or, at least, I think so. Ask me again in an hour."

Chapter 14

Chad's left eyeball had turned into a torture device. Sometimes it felt like red hot ball bearing shoved into his eye socket. Other times, like someone scratched a shard of glass back and forth across his cornea. At its best, it was a spoonful of sand between his eyelid and eyeball.

With the pain, his ability to blink that eye disappeared. In the Chateau d'If of his mind, Chad curled in his prison cell, unable to move. From the other side of the wall, he sometimes heard the abbé cry out in pain, other times babble incoherently.

And then, relief. After Anne Wistrom met with Pardo—lying, twisted demon of a man—and the doctor pretended not to know what had caused the inflammation, he had let slip the method to relieve Chad's suffering. She had given his eyes regular baths with artificial tears.

And the pain receded. His eye began to heal. He knew that his torturer would return, and this time, the pain would be worse, the damage, greater. The cycle would continue until blindness ended his hopes of escape.

Thursday night, Frank, the janitor, came into the room to talk to the temp, a girl named Kelly Ann. Temp or no, she was the perfect HT for Chad, talking to him continually as she dressed him for bed, and gentle in her touch. With the other employees, however, she turned self-conscious and shy, awkward in her short, chubby body.

As for Frank, he was a decent guy, but always into some scheme or other and not quite as smart as he considered himself. Tonight, he was talking about how he was going to set up a web site as a rival and companion of eBay. The hook was that his site would allow people to auction items they intended to purchase from eBay.

"So it's like a reseller for eBay auctions," Frank said. "You find a great deal and then make your money as the middleman. Kind of like those people who shop yard sales, buy the bargains, then hold their own sales to make a profit. And I take a very small cut of every transaction."

"Wow, that sounds like a great idea," Kelly Ann said.

Frank nodded. "All it takes is one percent of eBay's users to come over to eBay-squared—that's my site—and I'll be rich beyond your dreams."

Right, Chad thought. And why don't the eBay-squared buyers just go to eBay in the first place? Get the good deal themselves?

Wasn't that the point of eBay, to make the process completely transparent to bring together the highest paying customers and the lowest-price sellers? Not to mention that the real eBay would send Frank a cease and desist letter about twenty-four hours after he opened his site.

Frank continued with the ever-more preposterous details of his plan and next thing Chad knew Frank and Kelly Ann were making out.

Funny how they always choose my room.

The abbé's voice came from the other side of the wall. "Doesn't seem to bother you. In fact, I think you rather like it."

Ah, so you've stopped feeling sorry for yourself.

"For the moment, yes."

How did we get to the point where I'm comforting you, my dear abbé?

"We got to that point, Mr. Lett, when even your subconscious started to go mad."

Insanity on top of insanity. Even the voices in his head were hearing voices. Nice.

Well, we're not so insane yet that we don't recognize it. So cut the shit and help me think. There's got to be a way out of this.

The voice was quiet, then came the sound of shuffling on the other side of the stone wall, as if the abbé were moving himself into a more comfortable position. For a split second, Chad felt himself floating out of this body, moving about the prison cell, the wet, kissing sounds of Frank and Kelly Ann fading away. He could smell the rot, the stink of his own body, hear the rats scabbling in the dank corner of his cell.

"What I want to know," the abbé said, "is why Dr. Pardo is torturing you."

He's blinding me. Cutting me off from the world.

"But why? How does he even know you?"

The problem was, Chad hadn't simply awakened in this cell. It had taken months of semi-consciousness to emerge from the coma. Somewhere between the trauma and the long, slow climb to awareness, he had lost his past. It was nothing but a jumble of images and half-remembered faces.

The first time he remembered Dr. Pardo was in a hospital speaking to the doctor on call, talking over charts as Pardo was about to take custody. Chad heard grim words to describe his condition: minimally conscious, obtundation and stupor, cognitive death.

But I'm alive in here. Somebody, please, help. I'm not dead, I'm fully conscious. I'm alive!

And for some reason they were calling him Chad Lett.

That's not my name! he'd cried. That's not me.

"Yes," the abbé said, dragging him back to the present. "You became prisoner number thirty-four."

The governor at the Chateau d'If had numbered the prisoners to erase their identities. And so had Chad received a random name, no different than a number.

"There's someone else," the abbé said. "Go back. Think about that."

Yes, there was someone else in the hospital room. He couldn't see the person, but heard the feet moving.

My wife, he'd thought at the time. Is that you? Can you see me? Can you look into my eyes and see that I'm alive in here? Please, where are you?

But it was another man. "And you're sure," he said in a quiet voice. "He will never waken?"

The first doctor told Pardo and this third person, "He sustained deep brain damage in the accident. The blow penetrated straight to the brain. There was internal bleeding. He's alive, certainly, but it helps to picture a profoundly retarded individual who does not recognize the world and cannot interact with it in

any way. You might be fooled by flinches or movement, but it's the same—if you'll pardon the blunt analogy—as what a chicken does when you cut off its head. It might flap around for awhile, but without its brain..."

Of course, this doctor was wrong. The fact that Chad was silently arguing every point was proof enough of that. But he did not have a voice in the conversation. And so they shipped him to Vermont, to warehouse him with the congenitally retarded residents of Riverwood Care Center.

"You've got to go back farther than that," the abbé said. "You were already imprisoned by then. What about before you became prisoner 34? Before you were Chad Lett? Think, man."

"You're hot," Frank was telling Kelly Ann between kisses. "You know that, don't you?"

There was rustling. Sound of clothes dropping to the floor.

"Not here," Kelly Ann whispered.

"Best place for it, baby."

"What if someone comes?"

"Nobody is going to come," Frank said. "Wistrom is on break. Takes her ten minutes to make a pot of coffee. Forty minutes to read her magazine and drink it all. The nurse station will be empty till then. Joel's still folding sheets for the next hour."

"But what about them?"

"Who?"

"*Them.*"

Frank snorted. "The residents? Jesus, are you kidding? These slugs don't know shit from sherbet. They sure as hell don't know or care what we do."

The lamp flicked on next to Chad's bed. "See, this one's awake," Kelly Ann said. She leaned over and Chad could see heavy, free swinging breasts. She covered herself with one arm, then used the other to pull up Chad's blanket to cover his shoulders.

"So? Come on, turn that off."

"But how do you know he doesn't know?"

"He doesn't know." Frank had softened his voice. It was coaxing now. "Come on, turn it off. This guy—uhm, Chad—has an IQ of like five or something. There's no way he *could* know, or even understand."

"Look at his eye," she said. Her voice was tender. "They said he's got an infection. Poor guy."

Frank let out a sigh that told Chad he was all but abandoning his hope of getting laid. He leaned in. "Yeah, that looks nasty."

From the other side of the cell wall, the abbé said urgently, "Wake up, prisoner. It's a chance."

Chad blinked his left eye. Then he blinked it three times quickly, then three straight blinks, followed by three more rapid blinks.

"You think the light is bugging him?" Kelly Ann asked. "Look how he's blinking."

"Funny. Kind of like a pattern," Frank said. "Check it out."

Blink-blink-blink. Pause. Blink... blink... blink. Blink-blink-blink.

Frank chuckled. "Like Morse Code."

It is Morse Code, you idiot. It's a goddamn S.O.S. He tried again. Blink-blink-blink. Blink... blink... blink. Blink-blink-blink.

"Don't make fun," Kelly Ann said. "Whatever makes his eye do that it's got to hurt."

"Sorry," Frank said. A pause. "I think the light is bugging him." He flipped it off.

Chad's eyelid spasmed once as he let go his concentration. He slipped back into paralysis, exhausted, defeated.

"Jesus," said the abbé. "And they call *you* the retard."

"You'd better get out of here," Kelly Ann said. The sound of rustling clothes again, but this time Chad thought she was putting her clothes on instead of taking them off. "I don't want to get in trouble."

"Alright." Frank sounded surprisingly mellow about the whole thing. Probably already thinking about his eBay-squared scheme. "Come say 'hi' if you get bored."

After he left, Kelly Ann stayed behind in the darkened room. She sang to herself in a pleasant, contralto voice. It was just something silly from the radio, but it soothed Chad. As his frustration faded, he grew sleepy.

"You know what I think?" the abbé said. "I think that was a sorry effort on your part. Why are you so complacent?"

Shut up, Faria. You have no idea how much effort it took to blink like that. What kind of pain I'm in.

"I do and I don't care. You've been here five years and you've managed to twitch one goddamn muscle?"

You're supposed to encourage me. When did you become the petulant one?

"When you decided you didn't care."

What do you want me to do? Spend the next two years learning how to twitch another muscle? he asked the abbé. So that people can say, 'poor guy, give him a sedative?'

"No, I want you to figure this thing out. Who are you? Prisoner 34? Chad Lett? You've got to go back. Farther. Before the accident. Better yet, remember what happened."

I suffered a traumatic injury, remember? I lost my ability to form new memories for a long time. Still can't even remember what happened before. Let alone how I got like this.

"Lame, lazy excuses. You'll have to try harder."

Not now. I'm too tired.

"Ah, I thought so. You don't want to. Because you think it will make you unhappy. You'll find out your wife didn't love you or your family stabbed you in the back and that will hurt. It's easier to lie motionless in this bed night after night. That's right, you like it here."

Go to hell.

"I will. What do you think about that? I'll go right down to hell and I'll leave you here alone to fester in your own thoughts. A locked-in, drooling idiot. For the rest of your pathetic life. God, that could be what? Twenty years? Thirty?"

Chad was silent for a long time and he could hear the abbé breathing heavily on the other side of the wall. For years the man had patiently encouraged him, but what had changed? The urgency of the situation had changed, that's what. Deep inside, Chad knew he might only have one more chance to make contact with the

outside world. He had to be better prepared. He had to have a plan, to take charge at once. That had been his problem with Rosa Solorio. He had let her make the plans and she had stumbled. Someone had got her.

Truce, abbé? he asked his friend.

“Truce,” the man agreed.

Talk to me. Tell me what to do.

“I’ll try, but we’re both locked in here together, remember? I don’t have any more resources than you do.”

Okay, a course of action, then.

“It’s your memory. That’s the key. You’ve got to remember what happened.”

But how? I don’t have memories of that time. I was in a coma.

“But those memories are down there somewhere,” Faria said. “You’ve got to find them. Think, man. Think.”

How about self-hypnosis? I made this place, this prison. Surely I can take myself back, imagine myself there again. I can put myself there again. In the water. What do you think about that?

“Perfect,” the abbé said. “Let’s get started.”

Chapter 15

It was a brilliant, blue tropical day. Warm, but with a breeze off the ocean. Wes and Becca drove back to Puerto Jiménez, continued north on a dirt road to Rincón at the top of the golfo, then cut across the northernmost, narrow part of the Osa Peninsula on an even rougher road to Agujitas. Becca gripped the sides of her seat during each river crossing and looked at Wes with alarm when they reached the big crossing at the Río Drake.

Wes stopped the Land Rover at the water’s edge, not liking how deep, wide, and swift the river looked. The crossing was a beast, even by Costa Rican standards. He stepped out of the air conditioned vehicle into the thick, warm air and walked to the edge.

He turned back to Becca who leaned out the window. “There’s a set of tracks going in, so someone must have crossed already this morning.”

“Yeah, but do the tracks come out the other side?” she asked. “Or were they swept away to their death?”

“Funny.”

Still, he was nervous. The tire tracks looked bigger than his own. So he took off his sandals and waded in. The water wasn’t as deep as it looked. Keep a steady speed and he should be okay. He returned to the Land Rover and drove into the river, slow and steady. They breathed a sigh of relief when they climbed up the other side.

The only other time that Wes had been to the Bahía Drake had been by boat during the rainy season, when the road was impassable. Now, it was merely bone-jarring. And slow.

At last they reached Bahía Drake. Agujitas was a small village pinned between the Pacific Ocean and the mountainous wilderness of the Corcovado. There were several adventure lodges on the hillsides, but the village itself sat right against the beach. There was a pulpería, a school, and a health clinic. A soccer field, of course.

They parked near the pulpería. A breeze came off the ocean, but it was still warm in the direct sun, and the day promised to grow hotter.

“Thank goodness we’ll be on the water,” Becca said.

There was a dock in town, with a collection of sport fishing boats and a ragged fleet of locals’ fishing boats. Two men waited on the docks, one about fifty, the other, maybe twenty. They wore shorts, sandals, and white t-shirts. Both men were shorter than Wes, but wiry.

“Are you Mr. Gull?” the older man asked.

“Actually, that’s my name,” Becca said. “I’m Rebecca Gull. You can call me Becca.”

“And I’m Wes.” He held out his hand.

“*Pura vida*. I’m Ernesto Solorio. This is my son, Tomás.” Both men shook his hand in turns.

Tomás. That would be the T. Solorio from the receipt.

“You got our message, then,” Wes said.

“Claro. We’re happy to take you out. Fifty-five thousand for four hours. Ten thousand an hour after that. Does that sound right to you?”

“Seems fair.” He indicated behind them. “Our gear is in the truck.”

“And you’ve dived this area before?” Ernesto asked. His English was quite good and Wes decided this must be an active side business with plenty of contact with English speakers.

“Not here, no. But I’ve done dives in Costa Rica before. This is Becca’s first time to the country. We’re experienced divers—I can show you our dive cards if you’d like—so we just need someone to take us out, point out a couple of places.”

“Do you have anywhere in mind?”

“Somewhere around Isla del Caño,” he said. He purposefully spoke the name of the island as if he were speaking English. Becca gave him a look.

“Sure, there are lots of good places. Paraíso is very popular. Yesterday, I talked to two Canadians who went to Cueva Tiburón. They saw lots of fish but there were some strong currents, too.”

“Cueva Tiburón. That’s... shark cave?” Becca asked.

“Yes, you speak Spanish?”

“No, not really. Just a few words. What’s that first place? Paraíso, you said?”

“Paradise. It’s just a name. I don’t dive, but there are snappers, barracudas, and rays.” He turned to Wes. “Do you speak Spanish?”

“Just a little,” Wes lied.

“My son doesn’t speak much English, yet, but he’s learning.” He looked at Tomás. “*No hablan español*.”

Tomás shrugged and gave a friendly smile. “I try English.”

“Let’s load up,” Wes said, “and we can figure out where to go.”

Ernesto nodded. “Tomás can help with your gear. You can park down here. It’ll be easier.”

“Good, I’ll get the truck.”

“What’s all that about?” Becca asked as soon as they got out of earshot of the two men.

“You mean the Spanish? You never know when it might be useful to overhear a conversation. Anyway, remember I want to get on the boat before asking about Rosa or my Uncle Davis. Don’t want to give him a chance to call anyone. Know what I mean?”

“Okay, I’ll play along. But he seems like a decent enough guy, and he might be worried about Rosa.”

“So much so that he might not be happy if we tell him something happened to her. Would suck to be on a boat with a couple of pissed off Ticos. Especially when we’re diving.”

“Point taken. I’ll follow your lead.”

They pulled the truck to the docks and helped Tomás with their gear while Ernesto readied the boat. They pulled away a few minutes later, chopping against the surf as the shore retreated to their back. The green mountains of the Corcovado stretched behind them. Wes put on his sunglasses against the glare of sun on water.

Ernesto opened up the engine. The wake split the water behind the boat. There were a handful of other boats, some with fishing lines in the water, others headed for open water like they were. About ten minutes later, they passed someone fighting a marlin or swordfish that launched itself into the air. Tomás pointed and said something to his father. A yellow speedboat paced them off starboard.

Becca took off her shorts and t-shirt. She wore a bikini underneath. “Come on,” she said. “I feel like I’m sitting here in my underwear with you all dressed.”

“You know those dead fish that wash up on the shores of Lake Champlain when the ice melts in spring?” Wes asked. “That’s what my skin looks like under here.”

She’d opened the bottle of sun block, the heavy SPF 45 stuff for protecting bleached Vermont winter bodies. She slathered it on her skin. “Yeah, well take a look at me.”

“Why do you think I’ve got these sunglasses on? I’ve seen darker ski trails.”

“Strip, buddy,” she said and tossed him the sun block. “Or your view will get a lot less interesting when I put my clothes back on.”

“I’ll strip.” He peeled off his shirt, then squirted sun block onto his hands. He and Becca ended up doing each other’s backs.

Ernesto sat at the wheel and chatted in Spanish with his son. The engine drowned out their words. Wes got the impression, though, they were happy to be doing the tourist bit instead of fishing. Change of pace, he guessed, and probably paid better than the average day’s catch.

When they were maybe a mile off shore, Ernesto throttled back the engine and called back, “You know where you want to go, yet?”

“I do,” Wes said. He fished into the pocket of his shorts. “I want you to take me to my uncle’s last dive.”

Ernesto looked back with a frown. “What? Your uncle? Where did he go?”

“Maybe you can tell me.” He walked up and handed Ernesto the receipt.

The man looked it over. “This doesn’t tell me anything. I give this to everyone who pre-pays for a tour.”

"I'll bet you remember this dive. My uncle was Davis Carter."

Ernesto let the engine die to an idle and stared at the receipt. He looked at Wes with a new intensity.

"Que te pasa?" Tomás asked. *What's the matter?*

But Ernesto didn't answer his son. "What's this about, Mr... Carter?"

"Last name is Pilson. Davis was my mother's brother." He kept his voice firm, but not hostile. "You were with my uncle on his last dive. Where was that?"

Ernesto gave a suspiciously long pause. "He dove at Bajo del Diablo. Off Caño Island."

"Tell me about the dive," Wes said. "Advanced?"

"High intermediate. Underwater volcanic hills and canyons. Lots of fish, rays, sharks."

Wes nodded. A person suffering nitrogen narcosis, caught in the so-called rapture of the deep, could get lost in underwater canyons. "How deep?"

Ernesto considered. "Sixty, eighty feet."

And that's what made it an intermediate dive. Deep, but not excessively so. In fact, it was too shallow for nitrogen narcosis. Rapture of the deep was the cousin of the bends. At depth, under pressure, the body could absorb more nitrogen than on the surface. The bends happened when you surfaced too quickly and all those nitrogen bubbles expanded. Nitrogen narcosis, however, was the drunk/mellow feeling that came from all that nitrogen when you were still underwater. Just like alcohol, some people felt it earlier than others. At 150 feet it was almost inevitable; many felt it at 100 feet. But at sixty or eighty? Not likely.

He kept his suspicions to himself. "And you're sure that this is where Davis took his last dive? Bajo del Diablo?"

Ernesto nodded grimly. He still didn't meet his son's questioning gaze. "Absolutely certain, Mr. Pilson. Very popular dive. Huge manta rays, schools of barracudas, jacks, snappers, and lots and lots of sharks. White tips and bull sharks."

"Take us there. I want to dive it."

"Of course. It won't take long." He throttled up the engine.

Wes went back to sit with Becca. Now that it was noisy again, he figured they could talk in low voices. "That was an interesting reaction. Notice how he started calling me Mr. all of a sudden? He's guilty as hell about what happened."

"Or scared because of your family," she offered.

"There's that," he admitted.

"But how deep did he say it was?"

"Eighty, max."

"That's what I thought. You said your uncle drowned after suffering nitrogen narcosis. That doesn't happen at eighty feet."

"No. And Ernesto was sure that this was the dive. Of course," he said, as something occurred to him, "they don't go in the water themselves. Just take experienced divers out to dive on their own. What I'm thinking is that there's a deeper part."

"Maybe," Becca said. She didn't sound convinced. "Why don't you get the rest of the story, see where else Ernesto disagrees with your Aunt Charlotte."

“Good idea. But let’s check out this dive first. If it really is sixty or eighty feet, we’ll grill Ernesto some more once we’re back on the boat.”

The wind caught Becca’s hair and blew it across her face and she flicked it to one side. “Or better yet, when we reach dry land. Case it gets ugly.”

“Bajo del Diablo,” Wes said. “That’s the name of the dive. Means the Devil’s Deep or Devil’s Depth. Ernesto says there are lots of sharks. Bulls and white tips, mostly.”

She looked nervous at that. “Sharks? Is he just trying to scare us?”

“There’ll be sharks, all right. But don’t worry. Just don’t start bleeding into the water and you’ll be fine.”

“So, no open wounds. Check.”

Wes and Becca reviewed underwater hand signals: come here, go that way, ears won’t clear, going up, low on air, etc. He’d never used most of the signals, but heaven help you if your equipment failed and you needed to buddy breathe but couldn’t remember the sign. Becca knew them better than he did; seems she’d already reviewed them the night before their flight out of Burlington.

Isla del Caño came into sight. It was a small island with trees climbing the steep hillsides and palm trees to the edges of its beaches. Rocky islets grew into the ocean, making an approach from this side difficult. A few minutes later, Ernesto throttled back the engine. The boat rocked on the swells while the two men came back to where Wes and Becca sat.

Wes was suddenly conscious that they were in a boat in the Pacific Ocean, a dozen miles from the mainland, with two men who’d been with his uncle when he’d died. Just what happened on that last dive?

“This is it,” Ernesto said. “You sure you want to go down?”

“I was with my uncle that last trip to Costa Rica. We dived together just a couple of days before he died. I’ve never come to grips with it. I need to go down. Do you understand?”

“I’m not sure,” the man said. “Maybe. But it’s your life and your dive. Just be careful. It was an ugly day. I think about it a lot. And I don’t want something like that to happen again. So be careful.”

“We will,” Becca said.

The boat rocked in the water. Tomás flipped open the storage chests and hauled out their air tanks and the duffel bag holding their smaller gear.

Becca had bought a dive skin at Tropical Adventures in Puerto Jiménez. It cut off at the thighs and just past the shoulders and was green with splashes of pink and neon orange. Basic black for Wes. Unlike Becca, he had to take off his swim trunks to get into it, which he did in the cabin.

“Tell me,” Becca said as she squirmed into her skin. “Does a dive skin smell like old socks after a few dives?”

“Yeah, pretty much. They’re a lot cheaper than dive suits, though, so when it gets funky, you can toss it.”

She finished and looked down at herself appraisingly. “This is a hell of a lot better fitting than a dive suit. I might actually look good in this.”

Wes eyed the bright, swirling colors. “Good as in tasty. Like a sea turtle. All those white tip sharks...”

“Nice try,” she said. “You’re not scaring me out of this.”

Wes checked the equipment. He secured their tanks to their BCs—the buoyancy compensators—then attached the first-stage regulators to the tanks, hooked up the inflator hoses, turned on the air from both tanks, and then hit the purge buttons on the second-stage regulators. Becca helped with this last step, taking a couple of breaths from her second-stage regulator.

And then they suited up, BC first, then mask, snorkel, and fins. Becca tucked the disposable underwater camera into a pouch on her belt next to her dive computer. They turned each other around, inspecting to make sure hoses weren't pinned beneath straps. They reviewed the releases on each other's equipment, then checked the pressure gauges one last time. Two okay signals.

Wes secured his mask and regulator with his left hand and collected the hanging stuff in front with his other and then took a big stride into the water. He brought his legs together in a kick as he entered to bring him back to the surface. Then he turned around, swam backwards a few feet and gave Becca the okay sign. She followed him in.

And a moment later they faced the boat and the two men who stood on its swaying surface. The water came up and down on their masks and they gave another okay to the men on the boat, then gave each other thumbs down. Time to visit the deep.

Wes purged the air from his BC and went under. Gone was the growl of the boat motor and the sound of waves slapping the hull, replaced by the sound of his own breath and bubbles venting from the mouthpiece and streaming around his face. Pressure. He equalized his ears. The warm water gave way to ropes of cooler and warmer water that wrapped around him and eased him down.

The sunlit world disappeared overhead, replaced by the glimmering diffusion of light that penetrated the darkness below.

Chapter 16

The water was warm as a bath. He drifted, weightless, while bubbles swirled beside his head and he breathed the cool, neutral air of the tank.

A sapphire devil swam in front of his mask, flashed its brilliant blues, then was gone. An enormous dog-toothed snapper moved past, languid, mouth gaping. To his right, sea anemones waved against the current.

And he could move. His limbs, his head, turning to watch a school of salmon-colored horseeye jacks. He kicked his fins and followed the jacks as they swirled around the reef. He could move, but his body seemed to do so of its own volition. A tap on the shoulder.

Chad Lett turned around. There was another diver there. Who? His mind searched for the answer, but stuck as it was several years in the future, away from this body and this moment, he couldn't find the answer.

The other diver pointed and gave the closed fist. *Danger.*

You never took the danger sign for granted at fifty feet. He looked where the other diver pointed. Hammerhead sharks. Somehow, in the last few minutes, while he'd been preoccupied with the reef. An awesome sight.

His dive buddy was young. Chad gave him the okay sign. Nevertheless, butterflies churned in his own stomach. He reached for his camera.

Before he snapped the first picture he knew they would be great. As his dive buddy floated above him, he took one picture, then another. God, these would be great; he'd have to go to Puerto Jiménez to get them developed at the first opportunity. This one, he thought as he took another. This one I'll blow up and send to my nephew.

"Wrong dive," a voice said in his ear. "Come back. We have to keep searching."

He knew the voice. Abbé Faria. Chad returned to the present like a man rising too quickly from the depths, shedding his mask, belt, tanks, even flippers. A moment later and he was in his body. The prison.

He was strapped into his chair, sometime after lunch, when the higher-functioning residents had already left for work. The television droned.

The host tested several men to see which had fathered the baby of the agitated woman on stage. The woman was young, black, and unprepared for the hostile, bleated jeers of the audience. She looked to the host for comfort, but he was playing her, feigning sympathy while he let her paint herself as a slut.

Thanks, Chad said. For a minute there I was diving in Costa Rica. I'd have hated to miss the big reveal. I just have to know who fathered that baby.

"Knock it off," Faria said. He was all business today. "You can't just immerse yourself in whatever memory you come across."

It was close. I could feel it. Just a few days from the beginning of the coma.

"Maybe close, but not close enough. You've got to push right up to the moment."

I can't. Even that last memory, I can't remember where I was or who I was with.

"Not true. That boy was your nephew. That's something."

But not enough.

"Exactly. That's why you have to keep digging. What about your wife? Where was she?"

Yes, what about his wife? What had happened? His memories of emerging from the coma were, if anything, more hazy than those leading up to the accident. An image here, and snippet of remembered conversation. And yet he could not remember ever seeing his wife. She must have died, too. Or abandoned him.

Chad retreated further and further into his head. Further into his memories. He focused on his breathing, even though he had no more control of it than of his heartbeat. The television faded into the background. He heard Faria's voice, but far in the distance. "Your wife. Think about your wife."

* * * * *

Wes had never gone down so far that he'd felt the rapture of the deep, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to tell the difference between that and the euphoria that washed over him as he dropped into the water.

He'd never been afraid of water. He'd sucked at baseball, been of average height and weight and thus unsuited for long-term success in basketball or football, and had only played soccer casually. But he had good stamina, a lean body type, and

the kind of focus that made for a good swimmer. His first years on the swim team he'd collected a few ribbons at the lesser, dual meets, or piggybacked on stronger teammates to place in relays at the invitationals.

But as time went on, the other swimmers grew lazy or dropped out while Wes kept at it. He developed his technique, his stamina, and his focus. And he started to win. By the time he was sixteen he was one of the strongest AAU swimmers in Vermont and had a shelf of trophies, medals, and plaques that his mother still dusted and arranged in his room, even when he was away at college.

He'd quit after his junior year of high school. To reach the next level would have taken another degree of dedication, and swimming had become work. After so many trophies, ribbons, and medals, even the thrill of winning wore thin.

When his mother had reconciled enough with the Carters to gain use of Casa Guacamaya, she'd signed Wes up for diving lessons.

He'd been cocky his first dive lesson. They'd done drills at the swimming pool, including collecting objects from the bottom, controlled breathing, and the like. His impatience, both at his fellow, nervous students, and at the sluggish pacing of the instructor, continued into his second lesson, where they went over the equipment about five times in ten different ways.

The third lesson they went down. It was just a pool, but it changed everything. Underwater, you were something different. You relied on your equipment. On your dive buddy. On your wits. And if things went wrong, you couldn't just swim to safety. You had to think about your buddy, about nitrogen levels in the blood, about tank pressure.

And now, enveloped in the warm water of the Pacific, surrounded by fish, he felt that mix of comfort and vulnerability. And the beauty: the diffuse light, the colors of fish, the volcanic spires and boulders, coated with coral and anemones. Dark canyons and underwater caves fissured between the rock. Here and there, a glimpse of sandy bottom. A white gorgonia grew in the gap between two rocks; its spreading branches looked like the calcified roots of an uprooted tree.

Becca floated just ahead of him, flippers kicking gently. She froze as a young white tip shark cruised past—maybe five, six feet long—then gave him the “come here” sign. It was a moray eel gulping from its hole in the rock.

And then she turned to watch a school of barracuda torpedo through the water. Wes gestured for her to follow. He wanted to seek out the deep part. You should always do the depths first, then rise to shallower water to let the body purge itself of dissolved nitrogen. Otherwise, it meant a boring, timed ascent.

They cruised the area for a few minutes before Becca pointed him to a jagged gap between two angled black rocks. A cave, maybe eight feet across. It was already deeper around the edges of these rocks, and the bottom of the cave looked deeper still. He flashed an okay and followed her down.

After a second their eyes adjusted and they followed the contours of the cave. They disturbed a huge grouper, who brushed past. Becca flinched, but a moment later gave him the okay sign. They continued to follow the cave to its depths, dumping air from their BCs to descend.

And a moment later reached the bottom. Wes checked his dive computer. Eighty-two feet. He gave Becca two okay signs to let her know there was no

problem with their dive, but then gave the “something’s wrong” signal and pointed to his dive computer. She checked her own.

Eighty-two feet was too shallow for nitrogen narcosis. That would have taken a hundred feet, minimum. Probably more like a hundred-thirty, given that Uncle Davis was an experienced diver.

So what had happened down here? Equipment failure? Shark?

None of that made sense. Aunt Charlotte had told him nitrogen narcosis. Was Ernesto Solorio lying about where his uncle had died? Was his Aunt Charlotte lying about how?

He gestured for Becca to follow him up; it was dark down here with fewer fish and deep enough that every minute would increase the time needed to flush nitrogen from their body. He added air to his BC to increase his buoyancy, and turned around as he climbed to make sure his ascent was clear.

Halfway up the cave, they met another diver coming in the opposite direction. They hadn’t seen anyone else since they’d left the boat, but Isla del Caño was a popular dive site.

What was surprising was that the other diver appeared to be alone. It was foolhardy to go into a cave without a dive buddy. Somewhat annoyed, in the same way he got irritated with helmetless skiers who shot by on the trail without announcing their presence, Wes gave the danger signal, a clenched fist, followed by the sign, “get with your buddy.”

The diver ignored Wes and continued to swim toward them. Becca grabbed Wes’s arm and made her own danger signal.

Wes looked toward the diver again, now just a few feet away and closing fast and felt a jolt of alarm. The man held a dive knife in his right hand. His left grabbed for Wes’s mask.

* * * * *

The rain started early in the day. The tourism people preferred the term “green season” to “rainy season,” and most of the time it held. It would rain in the morning or the evening and the rest of the day would be clear and pleasant, sometimes as much as ten to fifteen degrees cooler than the dry season. Yesterday, the weather had been perfect and the whole group had gone diving in the Golfo Dulce.

But the day started with sprinkles and turned into a downpour by mid-morning. Rain pounded on the roof and ran off in sheets.

It was Chad’s wife’s birthday. She was only twenty-nine, which made him feel old. He’d got up early to serve her banana macadamia nut pancakes in bed. The others came down while he was still in the kitchen, made hungry noises and joked they’d eat the pancakes and his wife would never know.

The others were up and out of the house early because they’d heard over the radio that a heavy rain was coming and they wanted to make it to Puerto Jiménez before the rivers flooded the road. Chad’s nephew was headed back to the States. The other two would come back later in the day or tomorrow, depending on what happened with the weather.

Chad’s wife would take a separate flight to Boston tomorrow to attend a charitable fundraiser. He’d miss her, but it would be fun to spend more time with

just his brother and sister. In the meanwhile, he had a whole day alone with his wife. A rare occurrence at the Costa Rica house.

“So we’re sure?” he asked. They lay together in a hammock on the veranda, listening to the rain.

“I’m sure,” his wife said. “I know it’s only been a year since the wedding, but if we’re both sure...I mean, why wait?”

He tried to imagine what it would be like to have a baby. Hell, he was still trying to get used to being married. He’d spent so many years working for his father, building the company, and then running it after Dad died. That had been a steep learning curve.

But god, did he love this woman. She was smart, sexy, and gentle. Oh, and very patient. He could be stubborn and self-centered.

They’d talked about a baby. She’d gone off the pill a couple of months ago and they’d used condoms since, but had yet to take that final step.

“Of course we can’t stop at one,” he told her. “That baby’s going to want a sister or brother.”

She kissed him, then pulled back slightly. “That’s what it means to be a family. You, me, our children. Years and years from now, when we’re gone, everyone who looks at their faces will see us, still together. A little bit of me and a little bit of you, bound together, forever. But we’ve got to be sure.”

“I’m sure,” he said after a long moment, knowing he was taking a step into an unknown land. You could read about a place or talk to others who had been there, but until you smelled its markets and talked to its people, that country didn’t yet exist. Not for you. Having a baby would be like that.

She wrapped her arms around him and plunged her fingers into his hair. Their mouths found each other, their hands pulled at each other’s clothing. It was awkward getting undressed in the hammock, but at last they were together and it swayed gently with their motion. The smell of rain and jungle mingled with her smell to fill his senses. He felt light, almost floating, as if riding a wave. The wave built and built and finally whitecapped and crashed into shore.

They lay together, spent. She put her head against his shoulder and traced her fingers along his chest. The rain drummed against the roof. He could almost feel the forest growing around them, deep and green and endless.

“You’re diving again on Thursday?” she asked a long moment later.

“That’s the plan.” He was still on a high from seeing all those sharks yesterday. He’d gone straight to an internet café in Puerto Jimenez to order prints of the best pictures, and couldn’t wait to give his new camera another spin.

“Don’t go too deep, okay?” Three of the last week’s dives had been deep water. Even with properly timed ascension, you could get in trouble with too many deep water dives in too short a period of time.

“It’s off Isla de Caño. Bill said most of it is fifty to eighty feet.”

“Okay, but I always get nervous when you dive without me. You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

She lifted slightly and gave him a mischievous smile. “Because our children will need their daddy.” And then, serious again, as she lay back against his shoulder. “I love you, Davis.”

And back in Vermont, at Riverwood Care Center, the broken man, the prisoner, emerged from his trance. The air held the faint odor of carpet cleaner, but the scent of rain and his wife still filled his nostrils. On the television, people screamed at each other, words punctuated by a continual stream of bleeps to censor their words, rendering it incomprehensible. And yet, for a second, his wife's voice lingered in his ear. Her touch against his chest. *Davis.*

My god, he thought. I'd forgotten my own name.

Chapter 17

The Abbé Faria spoke from the other side of the wall. "You're no longer Prisoner Number 34. You have become Edmund Dantes once again."

Or, in this case, Davis Carter.

"Can you go farther?" Faria asked.

What do you mean, farther? Don't you mean closer? Closer to the accident?

"Yes and no. The injury wiped clean everything on the surface, but little bits broke up and drifted down into your memory. They've got to be down there, somewhere."

It's like the depths of the ocean down there, he said. Only I don't know if there's a bottom. I keep diving and diving, but I can't find it.

"You're almost there, my friend."

But what if I can't come back? He wasn't sure what he meant by that. Lose himself? Find the answer, but be destroyed by same?

"I'll bring you back. I swear it."

Again, he dropped into those depths. His memories, as he found them, were a confused jumble. Chewing a banana in the darkness, with a hollow voice asking him if he wanted an ice tea. Walking along the tide with horseshoe crabs brushing his toes only then his feet became the crabs and he looked to see his arms had become flippers and his hair palm fronds. He was on a bamboo roof with an electric screwdriver. He was flipping through photos of sharks.

And then, like falling overboard, he found himself diving. It was black at first, then sparkles of light, and finally he found himself suspended in the water. Only his dive buddy wasn't his nephew. Wes had had flown home to Vermont.

It was his brother.

They'd rented a boat out of Agujitas, come out to Bajo del Diablo.

"Just the two of us," Bill had said the day before, when the clearing weather had opened the possibility for another dive. Ellen had eaten something funny and would stay at the house. "We ought to do something adventurous. I'm thinking mahi mahi. Yellowfin. Maybe even some kind of bill fish. Something big."

They picked up spear guns at a dive shop in Puerto Jiménez, then swung north and then west to cross the peninsula. A couple of river crossings were white-knuckle, with the water still high from the rain.

It had all been perfect, except for the argument with his brother. Same old thing.

“So, you’re going to break up the company,” Bill said.

“You know that’s not what this is about. We’re changing directions is all. And gradually.”

“What’s the difference? We stop building roads, you set off on this other scheme. Maybe it works, maybe not. But the gist is that you’re using Dad’s company—built carefully over nearly three quarters of a century—as seed money for a start-up. You can’t see why that alarms me?”

Bill was driving, and he shifted aggressively, hit rivers instead of approaching with caution.

“The world’s changing,” Davis said. “What happens when people don’t need new roads? When the oil runs out and something takes its place? Isn’t it better to adapt with the times?”

“The world will always need roads. I don’t care if we go back to ox-carts. Someone is going to build them and someone is going to maintain them.”

“Maybe, but the way you talk, you expect that someday the whole world will be pavement and parking lot. Strip malls and subdivisions as far as the eye can see.”

“You’re either building or you’re collapsing,” Bill said. “Building is civilization.”

“Energy is civilization, too. And think how many billions of dollars will be spent on wind and solar over the next twenty years. We can be a part of that. We can make a difference. Alt energy isn’t just good for the environment, it’s good business.”

“But energy isn’t *our* business. You’ve read a few books, you’ve taken a few classes. You’ve put up a couple of windmills in Vermont and you’ve come up with a crazy scheme to put solar panels on every roof on the Osa Peninsula. That doesn’t make you an expert. What if you’re wrong? What if they build more nuclear plants? What if they build these clean coal plants everyone is talking about? And we’ve got all our money in wind and solar. What happens then? And meanwhile, we’ve forgotten how to move earth and build roads. We’ve retrained our crews and sold off our scrapers and dozers. That’s the end of Northrock, or NorthPower, or whatever clever name you’ve given Dad’s company.”

Davis knew it was a risk. And he’d always known that Bill would fight him. His own father would have dismissed the idea. But it didn’t matter. He knew what he wanted. He knew what was right.

“I’ve told you what I’m going to do,” Davis said. “I’ve listened to you and I’ve taken your concerns under consideration.”

“Right. Sure.”

“But Dad left me in control. I’ve shown I can run Northrock. I’ve shown I can build on what he left us. And now I’m going to show you the possibilities of a new direction.” He hardened his voice. “You can either come along, or you can sell me your shares and retire from the company.”

“I sure as hell am not selling out.”

“Good.”

They continued in silence, and Davis considered the matter settled. His brother would continue to resist behind the scenes, of course, but a year from now Northrock would be a totally different entity. There would be no turning back. If Bill Carter wanted to devote his life to building roads, fine. He wouldn’t do it with the Northrock capital, personnel, or name.

Bill seemed strangely serene as they continued toward Agujitas. Rosa Solorio met them at the docks. She was an attractive young woman, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two, and explained in passable English that her father and brother had taken the boat to Drake that morning to work out some problem with the motor, but would be back in about twenty minutes. No problem, they said. Bill flirted with Rosa in Spanish.

Davis stood to the side, ostensibly checking his gear. Truth was, he felt out of place. He spoke very little Spanish, had never felt the need to learn. Bill had learned the language, Davis thought, primarily to flirt with girls. So far, his brother had shown no interest in settling down with one, be she American or a Tica.

Kind of like Dad, Davis thought. Elwin Carter had married late and even then never been truly faithful, assuming you thought of Northrock as the man's lover. A demanding, needy lover who accepted no rival.

Rosa laughed at something Bill said. His Spanish was fluid and confident. The way he stood, his jaw forward, his body straight and tall, reminded Davis of their father. At work, standing astride a job site like some great industrialist of years past, the resemblance was even more uncanny. Bill Carter had been born to run Northrock. It was in his genes, in his blood. He would build on the legacy of his father, even exceed him. Ah, except for the minor inconvenience that his older brother held the reins of the company.

Ernesto arrived a few minutes later with Rosa's younger brother, a boy named Tomás. Boat working fine, Ernesto assured him. They paid Rosa, took a receipt, then the four men loaded dive gear. Rosa stayed in Agujitas.

"Smart girl," Bill said, as they pulled away. The brothers sat at the back, separated from the two Costa Ricans by the sound of the boat motor.

"Pretty young."

Bill gave a dismissive wave of the hand. "Oh, god, yes. Don't worry, I'm not going to make an ass of myself."

Davis looked at his brother, surprised by his expansive mood after their argument of the morning. He wondered, then, if his brother had made a decision. Sell his shares to Davis, take his millions and start his own company. A rival and successor to Northrock. Beholden to no one. Perhaps it was for the best.

"What I meant," Bill said, "is that Rosa's too smart for the Osa Peninsula. Seriously, look at this place." He gestured toward the shore and the charming, but ramshackle collection of buildings snuggled between the forest and the ocean. "You know Rosa wants to be a doctor? How's she going to do that in a place like this?"

Davis shrugged. "Go to San Jose, I guess. Assuming her family can come up with the money." He gave his brother a sideways glance. "Or some generous American could fund her education."

"She wants to go to the U.S. No different than half the people in this country. Point is, what's a girl like that doing in a place like this? A waste. If she'd been born in, say, Massachusetts, she'd be in medical school already. There's always a scholarship for someone bright and driven."

Seemed a lot to extrapolate from a ten minute conversation. Anyone could say they wanted to be a doctor. There were plenty of obstacles besides poverty to overcome.

“Wish I’d eaten something,” Davis said. He sometimes got motion sick on a longer boat ride like this one and hadn’t wanted to be leaning over the edge of the boat, tasting his breakfast a second time as it came up. But the ocean was smooth today and he felt fine. Well, hungry, as it turned out.

“I’ve got some energy bars. You want one now?”

“Nah, I’ll wait until after the dive.”

Bill looked out over the waters, not toward the dive site, but toward the receding mainland. “Funny, really,” he said a few minutes later, almost to himself. He was apparently still thinking about Rosa. “It all comes down to an accident of birth.”

They came to the island. A few minutes to suit up, review their dive plan and drink a bottle of water each, then they were under, sinking, sinking. Spear guns in hand. Bajo del Diablo was a riot of fish and color. They’d dived here before, and seen all kinds of amazing sights. But their purpose today was more lethal.

Bill led. They followed a series of fissures deeper and deeper, looking for that big quarry. A black marlin or maybe a yellowfin. A marlin could top four hundred pounds, a yellowfin two hundred. Either one put up a hell of a fight.

The trick with these big fish was to use their curiosity against them. Find the fish, stop, float as close to motionless as possible and let the fish come up to investigate. Get a good shot, then inflate the buoys and go along for the ride. Eventually, the fish would rise, exhausted from the wound, the weight, and the buoys.

They were at seventy feet, according to the dive computer, when Davis started feeling light headed. He checked his computer, his air. Everything looked okay. He’d suffered nitrogen narcosis before, but never above 120 feet. And he hadn’t even been down that long. Should take a lot longer to dissolve enough nitrogen in the blood to make him this lightheaded. Weird and frustrating.

Davis signaled for his brother to stop, then floated for a few minutes, breathing slowly and evenly, trying to clear his head. But it grew worse, like he’d had a couple of beers on an empty stomach. Disgusted with himself, knowing it meant the end of the dive, he opened his hand, palm facing inward and swiveled it back and forth. *Something’s wrong*, the signal told Bill. And then, with reluctance, thumb up. *Going up*.

Even through the mask, he could tell that Bill wasn’t happy about the development. They’d just started. Hadn’t even seen their prey. But there was nothing Bill could do but follow.

Davis was still clear-headed enough to check his dive computer and see that they only needed a brief stop midway up. The computer didn’t think he had a problem, so why did he?

He kept giving Bill the “something wrong” sign, and expected his brother to take the lead as they worked their way back through the underwater canyons. But his brother apparently had not taken him seriously, or was so annoyed at aborting their dive that he wasn’t paying attention. In a moment, Davis was in real trouble.

The bubbles from his mouthpiece seemed to float in slow motion. A fish swam past—or was it a school of fish?—and he watched with a dazed feeling. It was impossibly flashy with colors. He turned to find himself in a cave with a narrow, seemingly moving hole above him. Or was it below? He kicked his legs, but they felt leaden, and he didn’t know if they moved or if he just thought they moved. The

spear gun fell from his hands, spinning in a lazy circle as it dropped toward the bottom.

And there was his brother, floating to one side, doing nothing to help. Watching. Was he upside down? Was that possible?

Davis's hands made drunk motions in the water. *Danger. Something's wrong. Danger. Something's wrong. Something's wrong.*

And still, Bill did nothing.

Davis remembered that bottle of water. His brother had given it to him. Hadn't he suggested it, even? Said something like, "Don't want to get dehydrated," as he'd handed it over and taken a drink from his own?

And Davis, thinking about Charlotte and how she'd told him to be careful, drank almost the whole bottle. Had the lid been opened already? He couldn't remember. But it had gone down on an empty stomach.

Davis fought the urge to panic, to strip out the mouthpiece that was suddenly bothering him. He only just remembered that this would mean drowning. Instead he turned and turned, trying to find that light in the cave that meant the surface. His hands brushed the wall, cut against the jagged rock, but he didn't feel it and only dimly noticed the blood staining the water.

And then Davis's hands found open water. How long had it been? Ten minutes? Twenty? A few seconds? His vision was so messed up now that he was nearly blind, but he trusted his hands. He forced himself through the hole. It was tighter than it looked and he squirmed to make it through.

He was confused again, and worried he'd gone down instead of up. But he'd forgotten to vent his BC and the extra buoyancy was carrying him up, and quickly. Davis looked over his shoulder to see that his brother had followed him from the cave and was just a few feet below him.

Bill pointed his spear gun at his chest. A pneumatic spear gun, designed to bring down a four hundred pound marlin.

For that single moment, Davis's vision was clear. He saw the grim set to his brother's eyes. Davis could almost hear Bill's thoughts. They rushed through the water separating the two men like air bursting from a ruptured tank. *An accident of birth, brother. That's all that separates you from me.*

And then Bill's finger squeezed on the trigger. A burst of compressed air as the spear launched. Davis had already begun to turn back toward the surface. The air was there, just a few feet away. He could see the white hull of the Solorio's boat. He stretched out his hand. If only he could...

A hammer blow slammed into the back of his skull.

Blackness.

Chapter 18

The other diver rushed toward Wes with a knife in one hand and his other grabbing at Wes's mask. Wes flinched and rolled. The knife slashed just in front of his face. The other hand tried to get a grip on his mask, but failed. Wes grabbed

the man's arms and rolled with him in the water. Bubbles vented around their masks.

A clear moment and he saw the other's face. A young man, possibly Hispanic, with dark hair. Grim set to the eyes. He was smaller than Wes, but wiry and strong. Could be Tomás, or maybe not. Wes didn't have time to find out, because it was all he could do to keep the knife from his throat and the other hand from his mask.

Becca swam into the fray. She grabbed the man's right wrist and tried to wrench free the blade. Wes tried to break free, but his equipment tangled with the other man's. He slammed into the volcanic rock. The blow knocked the two men apart. Wes fumbled at the pockets on his BC and found his dive knife. It was about half as big as his attacker's.

And then, from over the attacker's shoulder, another diver, dropping quickly into the cave. Also armed with a knife.

Wes and Becca were in serious trouble. Two armed men. Fifty feet of water. Becca swam at one side, struggling with her equipment. She'd lost a flipper. Wes made a quick decision.

He breathed hard and fast. As he did, he popped the straps on his BC and shrugged free of his gear. He tore out the mouthpiece and suddenly was without air. Fifty feet under water with only the air in his lungs.

Wes gave himself sixty seconds. One minute of struggle without air and he'd be spent. Meanwhile, the two men would be breathing from their air supplies. After sixty seconds, Wes would be as good as dead.

He grabbed his tank and BC with his left hand and swiveled them in front of him like a shield, with his knife in the right hand. The second attacker was in the fray now, swiping with his knife.

Wes was twice as maneuverable without the equipment. He still wore his mask, but there was nothing else for the man to grab. All those years on the swim team and his oxygen levels still high made him confident and strong. He ducked around the second man, hooking the shoulder strap of his jacket over the man's head and jabbing down with his knife. His blade slid past the nylon shoulder strap and into the man's shoulder. Wes pulled back the knife and swam free.

The extra buoyancy of Wes's float bladder lifted this man toward the surface as he struggled to free himself. Blood stained the water around him.

Wes turned as the first man grabbed for him. He already needed to breathe. It wasn't yet desperate, but grew urgent, like a slowly building scream. Seconds now, just seconds. He swam for the far wall of the cave, then, when reaching it, somersaulted into a flip turn as a racer did when reaching the wall of the swimming pool. He shoved off, gaining momentum directly toward his attacker. His head barreled into the other man's chest.

And then he was around and on the man's back. His knife slashed. He cut straps. He cut hoses. He ripped off the man's tank. Bubbles saturated the water. The man no longer tried to attack, but struggled to free himself. Wes let him go, now looking desperately for his air supply, which he'd sent off with the other attacker. No sign of either Wes's gear or the man he'd stabbed. Blood filled the water. The second man fled for the surface in a cloud of air bubbles.

And now Wes was in trouble. How long had it been? Fifty seconds? A minute? Seemed both longer and shorter. Where was his mouthpiece, regulator? Air tank? BC?

Spots floated in front of his face and the water darkened. He'd reached the edge of the cave and groped for a way to get himself out, but he was weakening. Fast.

A hand groped at his face and he tried to fight it off. Another hand grabbed his wrist. Too strong. And then he felt the mouthpiece shove into his mouth and he realized it was Becca, sharing air.

He breathed deep and hard. She'd given him her octopus, a secondary regulator attached to the tank by a longer hose for use in emergencies. He'd never had his primary regulator fail, and while he'd always tested it before descents, had never used his octopus to breathe, let alone used someone else's. But it worked perfectly and the two of them floated in the cloudy water of the cave for a good minute. They started to ascend.

He saw a white tip shark swim by and thought about the blood streaming from his attacker's shoulder. It wasn't behaving aggressively, but that was an illusion. How long would it take blood to diffuse through the water and attract more sharks? Five minutes? Ten?

Wes started to tremble and he held onto Becca while he shared her air. Thankfully, she moved slowly, calmly. He fought the urge to swim as fast as he could for the surface.

The water was clear of other divers, including their attackers. Becca looked at her dive computer and they made a stop at fifteen feet to adjust buoyancy and allow their bodies to purge extra nitrogen. They hadn't gone so low or stayed so long as to make a safety stop absolutely necessary. Wes and Becca rose to the surface.

* * * * *

Alan Pardo had once thought Ellen Pilson a handsome woman. Not pretty, really, but attractive in an aristocratic way that belied her presently humble circumstances.

But time had worn down her attractive features. Baggy skin surrounded her sharp eyes, and wrinkles around her mouth gave her a perpetual scowl. The skin on her hands was thin, making her veins stand out.

Ellen sat at the table and sipped ice tea. Two menus sat on the table. She frowned as Pardo took a seat. "You're late."

"I'm worried the police are watching me. I had work in Barre, then took the back roads to make sure I wasn't followed."

They met in a restaurant in downtown Montpelier, a couple of blocks from the capitol building. Legislators and lobbyists occupied the other tables. Montpelier was the smallest state capitol in the country and the downtown was an attractive collection of brick buildings and old stone and clapboard churches. A wooded hill rose behind the gold dome of the capitol building. The restaurant had a nice view of same.

"The police are following you and you thought it was a good idea to contact me?"

"You can thank your son for that," Pardo said. "If Wesley had minded his own business this wouldn't have happened."

The waitress came by. Pardo ordered a beer and the sirloin tips. Ellen ordered a cobb salad with the dressing on the side.

“Leave him out of this. He’s not going to be any more trouble. Wesley’s gone back to Massachusetts.”

Sure he’d gone back to Massachusetts. Via Costa Rica, apparently. But Pardo kept these thoughts to himself. “We need to make some decisions, and we need to make them without your brother.”

“You two have been inseparable for the last twenty years,” Ellen said. “You got into this mess together. And now, what? You don’t trust him anymore?”

“Let me be blunt, Ellen. Your son, that girl at Riverwood, and now the police are poking around. It’s not going to be long before someone stumbles over the secret. When that happens, your brother is going to be screwed. Because if Davis is still alive, the whole deal with Davis’s widow over buying back the Northrock shares is going to unravel. And when Bill goes down, you’re going to go down, too.”

“You think he’d drag me into it?”

“You mean tell the police how you signed off on Davis’s death? I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. He’ll be in jail. He’ll lose everything. And you’ll be cut off.”

Pardo stopped for a moment to let the words sink in. It was the money that motivated Ellen Pilson. Twelve thousand a month to keep her mouth shut, to keep her afloat from the debts of a woman married to a spendthrift. The money to pay for her retarded son’s care.

But to his surprise, she didn’t look alarmed. “I don’t need the money. I mean, I do, but not for long.” “Ah, you’re talking about the company stock?”

“My brother told you about that?”

“He told me how he forged your shares, yes. Don’t look so surprised, Ellen. How hard do you think it is to forge a stock certificate to his own company?”

“But I get dividends. That’s where that money comes from, not from Bill’s personal account. I’ve seen the annual report. My shares are worth almost six million dollars. If my brother is arrested and they liquidate the company, I’ll get my share.”

“Again, he mailed you the shareholder report, and checks that purport to be dividends. I can promise you, however, that you own nothing. He’d have given you six million in cash before he gave you shares in Northrock.” The restaurant was noisy, but he took no chances as he leaned forward and said in a low voice, “Think about it. He shot a spear through his brother’s head. You think he wouldn’t cheat you? After his own father had already disowned you?”

She had nothing to say to this, but he could see her mind working at it. How the other part of the deal was that she sign over a proxy to let Bill vote at the shareholders meeting on her behalf. How Bill had cheated first Davis out of the company and then Davis’s ‘widow,’ Charlotte.

The food arrived and Dr. Pardo started to eat, but Ellen just stared at her salad. “So I’m screwed.”

“You’re not screwed if you play your cards right.”

“What do you mean?”

Pardo gave an inward smile. She'd already sold out one brother; faced with the betrayal of the other, she'd repeat the exercise if shown the rewards. "First things, first. We've got to get rid of your brother. Davis, I mean."

He didn't mention the shocking discovery that Davis was still alive and aware in there and that he'd found a way to communicate. That Rosa had told Dr. Pardo before making a hasty attempt to run away with the crippled man. That Pardo and Bill Carter had tried to blind Davis and that Pardo had decided they needed to take more rapid, permanent steps.

"You mean, kill him?"

"Davis is already dead." He took a bite of his sirloin tips, washed it down with beer. "He died the moment your brother shot him. Unfortunately, Bill turned craven and you followed his lead. He could have easily expired during the flight to the United States, and nobody would have known the difference. Or a hundred times these past five years. None of this lying would have been necessary."

"Except for the big lie, of course." Her voice had an edge to it, and was alarmingly loud. "That you and my brother would have murdered him."

Pardo gave a shushing motion with his hand. "Whatever. The end result is that he's brain dead, legally dead before we even left Costa Rica, and yet here's his corpse, just waiting to be discovered."

"And you want to finish the job."

"Exactly. Let's clear up the messy loose ends. I'll give Davis something to put him down. Something hard to trace, that will send him into organ failure. Or make his heart stop. Chad Lett will die, nobody will care or investigate. A middle-aged, profoundly retarded and bedridden resident isn't expected to live long. It's mercy, Ellen. Imagine the hell his life is. He *wants* to die. Or would, if he weren't brain dead."

"But if you're right," she said. "About Bill cheating me, I mean. How is killing Davis going to help? Bill will be off the hook. He might just cut me off altogether."

"Not if we blackmail him."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Go on." She picked up her fork for the first time and took a bite of her cob salad, and with this motion, Pardo knew he'd won her over. The rest was just details.

"There are two of us. One of him. We didn't shoot the spear gun, he did. We'll both testify under oath, won't we, that he talked about killing his brother off for good."

"But we'd go to prison, too. Even if we manage a plea bargain."

"Sure, but not for murder. We weren't there when the spear gun was fired, we just helped him cover it up. I don't know what the charges would be, but with a plea bargain, I promise it would be something minor. Maybe a five year sentence, with parole after a year or two."

"You have no idea. You're just guessing. And I'm not going to prison," she added.

"You won't have to. Bill is a coward. Shooting his brother was the only brave thing he did in his life. When Davis didn't die, he started backtracking. We concocted this elaborate plan so that Davis would be dead and yet not dead at the same time, when it would have been easier just to finish the job. Once Bill had control of Northrock, that was enough."

That was true, and yet not true at the same time. Bill had balked from finishing his brother. But he'd kidnapped Rosa, he'd shot his own nephew with a stun gun, and later ordered the boy's murder.

"He'll cave," Pardo said, "once he sees we're together. What choice will he have? So you'll take your six million—this time in cash, deposited to your account—and then you'll be rid of him forever."

"What about you? What do you get out of this?"

"I get my land back. The land the leftists stole. The land that's now a ruin because the *campesinos* didn't know what to do with it. Turns out it's for sale. Four million dollars. Would have been worth twenty, thirty million if they hadn't ruined it."

"So it's just about money?" she asked. "You're stabbing your best friend in the back for a few million dollars?" She asked the question with no sense of irony.

"Are you in, or not?"

He could see her consider the angles, wondering if there was a way she could turn this conversation against Pardo, and work out a deal with her brother instead. But Pardo wasn't here on a whim; he'd thought this scenario through several times over the last five years. The reawakening of Davis Carter, presumed brain dead, had turned into a happy coincidence.

"I'm in," she said. "With one condition. You leave Wesley out of this. No matter what else you do, I don't want you touching him."

"He's already out of the picture," Dr. Pardo said. "Probably sulking in Massachusetts over this imaginary thing with his brother. Give him some space. Maybe a week or two. Then, I guarantee it, he'll be over the whole thing."

This was the tricky part. She'd find out, of course, what had happened with Wesley in Costa Rica, but by then it would be too late. Just like Bill, she'd be in too deep to retaliate. And Pardo would be out of the country, in an El Salvador once again run by business interests—and back in control of the finca. Untouchable. After that, Bill, Ellen, and the whole Carter family could go to hell for all he cared.

"Nothing will happen to Wes. I promise."

* * * * *

Wes and Becca broke the surface and popped out their mouthpieces. "Holy shit," Wes said.

"Calm down," Becca urged. She'd been the one stunned underwater, as Wes had torn off his BC—god, that took balls of steel—as if he was at the bottom of a swimming pool instead of fifty feet underwater. But now he was breathing hard and she didn't like his frightened tone.

She hiked her mask to her forehead and tried to ride high in the waves. "We're alright, Wes. They're gone. You handled them."

"I was lucky. And you saved my ass down there."

"Only after you saved us both." She worked at re-inflating her BC to keep her afloat.

Wes backed away and treaded water. He still didn't look altogether well. Becca had her BC figured out and now looked around for the Solorio's boat. Nowhere in

sight. "That's not good," she said. They were close enough to the island that gathering waves lifted them and pushed them gradually toward shore.

"What do we do now?" Wes asked.

"We don't see a boat in a few minutes, we're going to have to brave those rocks and see if we can make it to land." She eyed the rocks doubtfully. Looked like a good way to get oneself bashed to pieces.

"So it was Ernesto and Tomás down there," Wes said. "They must have come after us, then sped off in their boat. That first guy was strong. Must have been Tomás. I think I cut him hard."

Becca wasn't convinced. "But where was the Solorios' gear? I didn't see anything on the boat. And those guys had dive skins. If that was the Solorios, they'd have had to change, check their gear, and come right down."

"We were down twenty, thirty minutes before we saw them. They had time."

"Yeah, I guess so." A wave washed over Becca's face and she wiped at her eyes.

"Come on, Becca. Someone tries to kill us and then we come up and the Solorios are gone. You sure you're not giving them the benefit of the doubt because they seem nice? Because they seem trustworthy?"

"Only you didn't tell Ernesto until we were on the boat about your uncle's dive. He seemed surprised. And we didn't say anything about Rosa."

"Maybe they adlibbed," Wes said. "They got talking once we went down and decided we'd done something to Rosa and they were going to come do something about it." There was doubt in his voice. "If not, where the hell are they?"

"Someone could have followed us out and chased them off. They attacked us, swam for the surface and drove off in their own boat."

"What about that yellow speedboat?" he asked. "The one off starboard when we were coming out? Think it was following us?"

"Yeah, maybe. Looked like it was circling around the other side of the island, but it might have backtracked."

A wave lifted and separated them. Wes swam back to her side. "One way or another, I'm going to pay a visit to Ernesto Solorio when we get back to Agujitas."

"Assuming we can get out of here." Becca spotted something in the direction of the mainland. "That looks like a boat, there." A largish boat, drifting in the waves a couple of hundred yards away. White against blue. She saw fishing poles.

"Think we can trust them?" Wes frowned suddenly and bent as if fiddling with his flippers. "Something just bumped me. Did you see that shark when we were coming up?"

"No." And a good thing, too. She'd had enough to worry about without freaking out about sharks.

"Probably nothing, but I want to have a look."

They pulled on their masks and ducked their heads into the water. All the schools of silvery fish, all the colorful reef dwellers and big, lazy swimmers, now gone. Only sharks. White tips, maybe twenty in all.

Wes and Becca came up at the same time. She didn't like the worried look on his face. "Not good," he said. "Not with that blood. Remember what I said about white tips?"

"Yeah."

"Well, forget about the boat. We'll have to brave those rocks."

Chapter 19

The sharks grew insistent as Wes and Becca swam for shore. Becca fought down her terror. Each time they nudged her legs with their snouts, she kicked wildly. Stupid. At best, wasted energy. At worst, it might encourage the sharks to think she was injured prey.

Wes was a strong swimmer. She'd seen it underwater and again now. He could have easily swam for shore, still some distance away, and left her with the sharks. Instead, he held up for her.

"Just keep moving," Wes said. Voice calm again. He fumbled with the straps on her BC, and when she gave it over, thinking that he'd drop it, was surprised to see him put it on. He said, "Bernd's already going to be pissed without losing all *your* gear, too."

And it was his measured words, the way he was thinking about mundane details like returning the gear rather than swimming in pure terror that calmed her. He wasn't worried about the sharks—or at least, he was going to heroic lengths to assure her that he wasn't—and she shouldn't either. She forced herself to be calm and ignore the bumps.

And sure enough, the sharks left them alone a few minutes later, as Wes and Becca left the dive spot behind and the blood in the water. Instead, Wes and Becca fought with the surf pounding against the ring of volcanic boulders that protected the approach to the island. The waves lifted them, carried them forward. They struggled toward the south and an empty stretch of beach at the edge of forest.

Becca was exhausted by the time they cleared the rocks. Wes told her to relax on her back. He hooked her under the chin and scissor-kicked his way into the shallows. From there, they let the surf carry them to the beach. It was all Becca could do to drag herself from the water and she collapsed just beyond the line where surf and sand met.

Wes pulled off Becca's BC and tossed it higher onto shore. They stripped off their flippers. Wes had also lost one. Becca rolled onto her back, enjoying the warm sun and the cool breeze.

And she started to laugh. A moment later and he was laughing with her. It was nervous laughter, mixed with the sudden release of tension.

"Ah, good times," she said with a touch of irony. "Attacked underwater. A swim in shark infested waters." She felt jubilant. She'd faced danger and survived. "Notice how they're always infested? Never shark stuffed waters, or shark plagued waters."

"Sharks, thick as flies," Wes offered. "Shark encrusted? Pregnant with sharks?"

"How about, so many sharks they blotted out the sun?"

"They just don't have the same ring to them," Wes said.

"No, I guess not." Becca climbed to her feet a couple of minutes later. "What now?"

"I think there's a ranger station on the island somewhere. Our best bet is to find a trail, follow it, and see if we can find the place. The island can't be that big."

Becca considered. "We're going to have a hell of a time explaining ourselves. Without calling in the police or something, I mean."

"I'm not ready for that," Wes said. He rose to his feet and they walked across the sand, lugging the remaining gear. "You know, you can't go wrong by playing the stupid tourist card. You might get in trouble, but people will believe you."

"So what are you thinking?" They walked along the edge of the forest, looking for a trail.

"How about this?" Wes said. "We went diving, then convinced the boat owner to drop us off to spend the night on the island."

She responded as if she were talking to the ranger. "What do you mean that's against the rules? We had no idea. Really? How were we supposed to know the island is a protected sanctuary? Anyway, he couldn't bring the boat in too close, and well, something, something, and the end result is we lost some of our gear."

"All that sounds better than telling the truth and bringing the police into it before we know anything," Wes said.

They found a trail. It was steep, and with rocks and jutting roots to make a barefoot hike painful and difficult. It was out of the sun, thankfully, but the air was hot and humid. The sea water didn't evaporate so much as be replaced by their own sweat.

Becca said, "About not knowing anything. That's not totally true. We know we can't trust the Solorios."

"Assuming they were the other divers," Wes said.

"And even if they weren't, they left us behind. And we know that your uncle didn't suffer nitrogen narcosis. He must have died in some other way."

"Damn suspicious," Wes said. "Whatever, I'm going to get it out of them one way or another."

The forest was alive with sound: birds, lizards racing across the dead leaves, animals in the canopy overhead, running water out of sight. They had to push aside vines and branches and take their steps with care. Within minutes, sweat stung Becca's eyes and pooled along the inside of her dive skin.

"I have got so much sand up and down my dive skin it's not funny," Wes said. He set down Becca's tank to shake at his dive skin.

Becca had the same problem. They'd crawled the last several feet through the sand kicked up by the surf, then lay down on dry land. Over time, the sand had worked up to her crotch.

The sound of running water grew until they came to a stream running next to, and occasionally over, the trail. Then there was a waterfall, about twelve feet high, spilling into a cool, clear pool. They scooped up water to drink. Avoiding stomach bugs took a back seat to extreme thirst.

Wes slipped into the water and did a shimmy to get water down his dive skin to wash out the sand. Becca wore her bikini underneath hers and simply slipped out of the damn thing and climbed into the water. It was blessedly cool.

She swam to the waterfall. "You sure we have to go back?"

"Of course." He swam to her side and they treaded water together. "The Solorios know what happened to my uncle. They were there, they must have seen." He did

a breast stroke toward the shallows and she came over to stand next to him. The water came just above his waist, a little higher on her.

“I’m not talking about the mainland. I’m talking about going back to the U.S.” As soon as she said it, she felt the weight of her job and the pressures of Riverwood on her shoulders. What about that failed inspection, anyway? The state would write up a list of remedies, and—and she wasn’t going there right now. “I’m only half joking. We can get a beach house of our own, maybe open a little dive shop...”

Wes lifted his left eyebrow. “We?”

Becca stopped. It was a careless remark and worse, she remembered her clumsy handling of the other night when Wes had been about to kiss her and the even clumsier moment after she’d climbed into his bed. She’d told herself that going to his room was about being scared, or talking, but had reexamined her motives in the morning and realized that she’d been giving him a second chance to try something.

She blew it off. “Yeah, that’s pretty cliché. Expats move to paradise and open a business. Cater to foreigners like themselves, while hiring the locals for a dollar an hour.”

“And price the locals out of the real estate market at the same time,” he added. Then, in a quieter voice, “What are you doing, Becca?”

“Doing? That we stuff? That’s called banter, Wes. Maybe even flirting. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It doesn’t mean anything to you. Is that what you mean?”

“Listen, Wes. We just about got killed back there. And yeah, that was kick-ass how you took care of those guys. If I were someone else, I’d say it was pretty hot. Not to mention that stuff with the sharks, and the way you carried my vest and tank.”

He looked genuinely confused and sank halfway into the water. “What does that have to do with anything?”

She laughed, and regretted it at once for sounding more dismissive than she meant. “You know what I’m talking about. We’ve got a little danger going. We’re sitting in a pool underneath a waterfall. Oh, and I’m already half-naked and you’re wearing a dive skin you could slip out of in about two seconds—probably should slip out of to wash the sand out of your ass. Of course you want to kiss me.”

But Wes wasn’t pulling away, he was drawing closer. She had to look up to meet his gaze and found herself caught in its intensity.

He said, “All that’s true. But two weeks from now we might be sitting on the couch at Riverwood, surrounded by residents in wheelchairs and wearing those silly half-scrubs with name tags and guess what? I’ll be fantasizing about being right here, only you wouldn’t be arguing with me, you’d be kissing me and my hands would be in your hair, your hands on my back, and your legs would be wrapped around my waist so our bodies could be closer.”

“Ooh, you’re good.”

And then he *was* kissing her. Somehow, while she sat there, stunned, because Andrew had never talked to her like that, he had leaned down and kissed her. And he’d hooked his hand around her head so she couldn’t pull away. She didn’t *want* to pull away.

Andrew, that spineless fool. Moved across the country to break up with her. And still, he hadn't been able to do the deed, not by phone or by email. Only when she had her plane tickets in hand, the arrangements all made for a ski vacation at Tahoe. Only then had he blown her off.

Wes was nothing like that. He knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted to take care of his brother, to find out what happened to his uncle. People had threatened him, then tried to kill him and he had taken care of them. Kicked their asses, in fact.

Becca pulled away at last. She was breathing hard. She'd already hooked one leg around his waist, just as he'd imagined, and now she extracted it. "God, this is so wrong."

"You keep saying that. Is it the age difference? It's just four years and if I don't care, why should you?"

"No."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend," she corrected.

"I mean, is it too soon?"

"No. I mean, yes, it's too soon. But it's not just that."

"Then what, Becca? You just don't like me that much?"

She laughed at the intense look on his face. He returned a tentative smile. "Wes, you're just not serious about this. I can tell. It's a vacation fling. Another time, another place, I might go along. Could be fun. But yeah, I'm still hurting. And that cuts down on the horniness, you know."

Wes nodded and then waded toward the edge of the pool. "I'm sorry, Becca. For pushing. I misread you. But I'm not apologizing about the vacation fling thing." He shook his head. "That's not me. I thought you'd know that by now." He climbed out of the water and picked up the gear. "Because I'm a direct kind of guy, I'm just going to say that yeah, I'm interested. Costa Rica, Vermont, wherever. I'm putting that out there if you ever want to do anything with it."

Becca picked up the flippers, and followed, at a loss for a snappy comeback. There was absolutely nothing wrong with Wesley Pilson. He was everything that she'd wanted from Andrew.

And it occurred to her that maybe the problem wasn't Wes, or even Andrew, the problem was herself. It was a sobering and depressing thought.

* * * * *

The ranger, a man named Nelson Palomar, looked irritated as Wes told their story in a mix of English and broken Spanish. A few sentences of fluent, Costa Rican-accented Spanish and the man might grow suspicious. As it was, he seemed to believe every word Wes told him. Probably seen it before.

Thing was, tourists everywhere proved adept at getting themselves in trouble. The wounds, as often as not, were self-inflicted. As such, why wouldn't the ranger think they'd washed ashore without boat, bedding, or brains?

Palomar gave them a lecture, which amounted to, "wise up, losers," said he would take them to the mainland when he took the boat to Agujitas that evening, and waved the park entrance fee since they obviously wouldn't be doing any more

barefoot hiking. He didn't even press too hard for the name of the local imbeciles who had agreed to drop two tourists on the island.

It was dusk when Palomar's boat pulled into the dock at Agujitas. Wes could see the Land Rover, still parked where he'd left it. They thanked Palomar, who couldn't resist giving them one final lecture about how easy it was for the stupid or unwary to kill themselves in Costa Rica. They did their best to look sheepish.

Once the ranger disappeared in the direction of the pulpería, Wes pulled Becca aside. He found a place in the shadows, partially hidden by a palm tree and watched the town and docks for anything suspicious. A couple of boys played soccer by the fading light. A man rode by on a horse, holding the reins of a second, riderless horse. Two men tended to their fishing nets while another fished off the docks with a young girl.

"Can't be hard to find the Solorios," he said. "Just wanted to make sure nobody was waiting for us."

"What do we do when we find them? Tell them what we know? Accuse them of attacking us?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "We're stuck here anyway, since I left the car keys in my shorts on the boat. And I'm not leaving here until I find out what the hell happened out there."

He palmed Becca's dive knife, then stowed the dive gear beneath the Land Rover. Wes tried the boys playing soccer first. Of course they knew the Solorios, the oldest boy said. In fact, they lived in the house with the painted red door, just down that street. He pointed.

Barefoot and still wearing dive skins, they followed the boy's directions. "Come with me to the door," Wes told Becca. "But keep an eye on the street. Warn me if you see anything funny."

The house was blue, apart from the red door, and tucked between two fruit trees. Laundry stretched on a line across the yard and a table and chairs sat on a small, but neatly swept stone patio. Light spilled from inside. A radio blared music.

A man leaned against the outer wall of the house, smoking a cigarette. It was Ernesto's son, Tomás. Wes stepped into the yard and approached quickly. Tomás looked up, started, and dropped his cigarette. But before he could move toward the house, Wes was in his face. He grabbed the man's shirt in one hand and threatened with the dive knife in the other. Tomás babbled in Spanish.

Wes grew enraged as the memories of the underwater attack and the swim from the sharks came flooding back. He gave Tomás a shake. "*Cállate, pendejo.*" He continued in Spanish. "Call your father. Do it, right now."

Tomás called for his father. Ernesto gave his own start when he saw Wes and Becca, then turned as if to retreat into the house.

"You don't get out here right now I'm going to shove this knife into Tomas's belly," Wes said. "Come on. Slowly, too."

The older man stepped slowly onto the porch with hands in plain view. Wes took stock of both men. Neither suffered a visible wound. Wes had stabbed someone down there, but it wasn't one of these two.

Becca rested her hand on Wes's wrist. "Wes," she said in a low voice. "Take it easy. We don't need more enemies."

Wes nodded and forced himself to release some of the anger. He relaxed his grip and stepped back a pace, then lowered the knife into a non-threatening position. "Getting attacked puts me in a bad mood," he said in Spanish.

"It wasn't our fault," Ernesto said. "What happened is—"

"Wait a minute," Wes said, thinking he could play Tomás's ignorance of English to his advantage. "Start over. In English."

The older man switched to English. "We are just waiting. Two men came in a boat." His earlier fluency had devolved to a thicker accent and uncertain grammar. He repeatedly licked his lips.

"Yeah? Then what?"

"I don't pay much attention. I thought maybe they come to ask for gas for their boat. Or to ask if we see dolphins. But they had a gun. They tell us to go back."

Wes turned to Tomás and said in Spanish. "Tell me what happened."

Tomás looked at his father, who nodded. Tomás repeated what his father had said. The two stories matched. He had to assumed that Tomás hadn't hidden his English skills in the same way that Wes had hidden his Spanish.

"And you got back here," Wes said in Spanish. "And you called the police, right? And whoever would be responsible to come get two lost divers off Isla del Caño?"

An uncomfortable silence. "No," Tomás answered. "But we did go back later, when we thought it was safe. Circed the island, looking for you."

"Who were those men?"

"We don't know."

"Ticos? Americans?" Wes asked.

"Spanish speakers," Ernesto said. "But they didn't have Costa Rican accents. Mexico, maybe?"

"Not Mexicans," Tomás said. "We get telenovelas on TV and they don't talk like that. But my father is right. They weren't Ticos."

Becca tapped Wes on the shoulder and nodded at the knife. He handed it over and the two men visibly relaxed. Wes looked to the older man. "Where's your daughter, Ernesto?"

The two men shot each other looks. "My daughter? Do you know her?"

"Rosa was Becca's coworker."

Again, silence.

"She's gone. Never told anyone where she was going."

"What do you mean, she's gone?" Ernesto asked. "Where?"

"No idea. Could be that someone wants to hurt her."

"Impossible. He promised."

"Yeah, well he was a liar," Wes said. "Unless Rosa came back to Costa Rica. Did she?"

"No, she's still in the United States. She called a couple of weeks ago," Ernesto said.

"Papá," Tomás said. "But you tried to call last week. And her phone..."

Wes said, "It was disconnected, right? Rosa moved out suddenly. Or someone wanted to make it look that way. Did you know she quit her job without telling anyone? Becca says Rosa wouldn't have done that. She was a good worker."

"She is a good worker," Ernesto said. "A good girl. Where is she? What happened to my daughter?"

“Maldita sea. I don’t know what happened. That’s why we’re here. To find out if Rosa is okay and find out what happened to my uncle.”

Ernesto switched to English and tried again with Becca. “Where is my daughter? Please, tell me.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

Wes switched to English. “We’ll tell you everything we know. But first you’ve got to tell me how my uncle died. Was it an accident or did someone kill him?”

“Nobody kills him,” Ernesto said. “Because he doesn’t die on that dive.”

It was like Javier told them back at the house. “Then where did he die?”

“I don’t think he died anywhere. They send a—how do you say?—helicoptero.”

“They sent a helicopter?”

“He was alive when he left here. And I hear later that he is still alive, that they fly him back to United States.” He turned to his son and said in Spanish, “I’m going to tell him everything, yes?” Then, back at Wes, “He is shot here, in the back of the head. There was an arrow sticking out of his head when he came onto the boat.”

“Like a spear gun?”

“Yes, a spear. The other man said it is accident, but I don’t know.”

Wes imagined a fishing spear lodged in the skull. And he thought he knew who this other person was, but he needed confirmation. “The other man. You know his name?”

“His brother. A man named Bill.”

“Oh, god,” Becca said. “Wes.”

The confirmation came as a blow. Uncle Bill had shot his own brother with a spear gun.

“So what about Rosa?” Becca asked Ernesto. “How is she involved?”

“The brother wants us to keep quiet. I am afraid. My son is afraid. He was rich American and maybe he says that it is our fault. But this man, your...tío, right?”

“My uncle, yes. My Uncle Bill.” The words tasted bitter in his mouth.

“Your uncle said he will give us some money. He was warning us and also telling us that that Rosa can go to school in the United States, to be doctor. You know, that is her dream, to be doctor.”

“So you sold him out, is that it?”

Ernesto shook his head. “Sold out? I don’t understand.”

“You took some money and let Bill kill my Uncle Davis.”

“Poor man like me, with poor family, we don’t always choose what happens. You understand?”

“Right, I understand,” Wes said. “And meanwhile Rosa is missing, because you trusted her with my Uncle Bill, who, apparently, tried to kill his own brother.”

Ernesto and Tomás tensed at this. Whatever else these men where, they were worried about Rosa and that made them dangerous.

“Wes,” Becca said in a warning voice.

Wes acknowledged her warning with a nod. To Ernesto, he said, “You’ve got the things we left on the boat? Here? Good, why don’t you go inside and get them and then we’ll tell you what we know about your daughter, Rosa. I promise, we’ll do everything we can to help.” He switched to Spanish. “But be straight with us. I’m not messing around.”

Ernesto sent Tomás for their things, then took the chairs on the patio and arranged them. The three of sat down and Tomás soon joined them.

“Please, tell me about my daughter. Please.”

Wes kept the edge in his voice. “You have to finish, first. Tell me everything that happened that day and how Rosa got involved.”

Davis and Bill Carter had called from Puerto Jiménez. They’d hired the Solorios on two other occasions, diving at Maranenco Rock and Campanario. This time they wanted to spear fish. Ernesto and Tomás had played cards on deck while the two men dived. After about a half hour, Bill had come to the surface, agitated, babbling in Spanish and English about an accident with the spear gun and holding his older brother, who floated face down with a spear imbedded in the back of his skull.

To everyone’s surprise, Davis was still alive when they hauled him onto the deck. Ernesto performed mouth-to-mouth while his son raced toward shore. Davis survived the trip to shore and they sent Rosa to radio for help. A helicopter came and carried the two men to the hospital at Neily, near the border with Panama. Last Ernesto and Tomás had seen, Davis Carter was still alive.

Wes stopped them to repeat everything for Becca in English. He turned back to the men and addressed them again in Spanish. “Was there a woman?”

“You mean Davis’s wife?” Ernesto asked. “She wasn’t on this dive.”

“Davis said she’d flown back to the States,” Tomás said.

“But what about Rosa?” Wes asked. “Did she go with the helicopter?”

“No, what happened is that a few days later a doctor came, said he was from the hospital in Neily. Said the family had hired him to clear up loose ends in Agujitas.” Ernesto looked troubled. “I asked him what he meant. He said it had been an accident—anyone could see that—but that there were people who’d cause trouble for the family if they found out. It was wrong, but... but we went along.”

“You have to understand,” Tomás broke in. “There are no opportunities here. My sister is such a smart girl and a hard worker. She speaks very good English. What can a girl like her do in a place like this? Clean hotel rooms for tourists? Marry some fisherman and give him eight children?”

“So we worked out a deal,” Ernesto said. “The Carter family and this doctor would help Rosa go to the United States to study medicine. We didn’t want any money, just an opportunity for Rosa. And we’d keep our mouths shut. If anyone asked, we didn’t know the Carter family and we didn’t know what had happened to Davis Carter.” He lifted out his callused hands in a gesture of surrender. “And that’s all we know.”

Wes filled in Becca on the rest of the story. When he turned back to Ernesto, he continued in English so that she could help him with the details. “Now it’s our turn. We’re going to tell you what we know about Rosa. But I don’t think you’re going to like what you hear.”

“Something happened to her?” His voice tight, worried.

“Yes,” Becca said grimly. “I am afraid so.”

The man put shaking hands to his temples. “*Ay, Dios mio. Ay, mi hijita.*”

Chapter 20

Wes felt shaken by what he'd done to the Solorios. He'd left Ernesto weeping, broken. Tomás agitated, pacing across the patio. They'd sent Rosa to the United States to attend medical school. Instead, the girl had taken a job as an aide in a center for the mentally retarded and as far as either Becca or Wes knew, had never taken so much as a single class. And now she was gone. Her apartment, deserted. Her personal belongings, abandoned. Nobody had heard from her and Wes and Becca had every reason to believe she'd fallen afoul of someone trying to cover up Davis Carter's death.

In the street, Wes wrestled with his own turmoil. This horrible secret his family was hiding. Uncle Bill had shot Uncle Davis in the back of the head with a spear gun. They'd flown him out of Agujitas in a helicopter to a hospital in Neily and then what? Back to the United States to die? Why? And why had his mother agreed to hide the secret?

Wes and Becca studied the Land Rover again before approaching, watching the houses and the shadows, and the people entering the pulperia and then leaving again with bags of vegetables or a loaf of bread. At last, Wes popped the door and they inspected the interior before loading their stuff, changing quickly from their dive skins and into real clothes, and driving north, out of town.

"My mom has to know," he said. "That's how she's involved. She knows that Bill killed Davis. But why would she cover for him?"

"I'm sorry, Wes," Becca said. She put a hand on his forearm as he shifted, then left it there for several seconds after he returned his hand to the steering wheel. "Just keep thinking clearly. You can't get muddle-headed because it's your mother."

"You're right, but... it's my *mom*."

They drove in silence. It was black on the road, with no other cars. A peccary scurried through the cone of light cast by their headlights. A few minutes later, something else shambled by on the right shoulder. About five miles out of town, Wes stopped the car and stepped into the night. He could hear no other cars and see no other lights. Just frogs, birds, and the buzz of insects. Within seconds of stopping, moths, gnats, and hundreds of other bugs swirled around their headlights.

Becca came out to stand by him. "Talk to me, Wes."

"It has to be about money. That's all my mom thinks about."

"She married your dad, though. And you said he was poor. That he couldn't keep a job and racked up debt."

"Yeah, it's funny. It's like my mom never thought about money until she needed some. Then she never thought about anything else. As for why she married my dad?" He shrugged. "Grandpa Carter wanted all his kids to work for Northrock. Give their lives to it like he had. So my mom goes off to school at the college her dad chose, in the major he had picked. Accounting. And she meets my dad, you know, who is full of energy, but scattered. And of course, Grandpa doesn't

approve. So she breaks up with him before she graduates and comes home to work for Northrock.

"There was this big project in Maine. A flooded road that needed to be rebuilt in the winter. I'm hazy about details, cause Mom doesn't talk about it much, but she screwed up somehow. There's a big fight and my Mom went back to my dad. They eloped to Niagara. Really pissed off my grandpa."

"And that's when he cut her off?"

"Right. I don't think she'd thought it through. Dad said she acted like money didn't matter, because she'd always had plenty of it. Bet that changed in a hurry."

"Seems pretty harsh on the part of your family," Becca said.

"It wasn't just them. I think Grandpa would've taken her back. But my mom's proud. And my dad, he didn't help with the money. What is it they say? If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging? So the theater fails and he buys a radio station. Somehow borrows a bunch of money and then it goes under, too. My mom was trying to pay for nursing school and working crazy hours and my dad is talking about opening a used bookstore and teaching himself to play the guitar. Totally oblivious to our money troubles. And my mom, I swear she would have turned to prostitution to pay the bills, if she'd thought there'd be takers."

"I'm sorry, Wes."

"The weird thing is she can be fiercely loyal. She visits Eric two or three times a week. She never left my dad even though it was his fault she couldn't get her head above water. So it's crazy that she'd go along with this."

Becca said, "We've got to keep going. We need a plan. And one that doesn't involve standing in the dark getting swarmed by bugs."

"We can't go back to Casa Guacamaya. Whoever those two guys were, they knew how to find us. They've got to know about the beach house."

"But we've got to. All our stuff is there. I don't care about the clothes or luggage, but what about our passports, money, that sort of stuff? I don't even have my plane tickets."

"I do," he said. "I'm paranoid, so I carry that stuff with me."

"I'm paranoid, too, and that's why I don't." She gave a wry smile. "I always hide it somewhere in my room. Sorry."

"That's just bad luck. Don't worry about it." He thought for a moment. "So what if we go back and wait for them to come to us? We can lure them in, set up trip wires or some kind of booby trap."

"This isn't Home Alone," she said. "They might come with guns. They might just set the house on fire with us in it. Or they might be waiting for us already. And what about Javier? We going to bring him into this?"

"He might be the one who told people we were here."

"Maybe. You willing to take that chance? The guy's got a wife and kids. You want to put them in the crossfire?"

"Well, no," he said. "I sure as hell don't want to hide, either."

"If you're going to have a showdown, do it in Vermont. Where you can trust the law. Where your uncle will have to think twice about coming after you because he'll be at risk, too. Instead of just hiring people down here to do the work for him."

"Any ideas?"

“Can we get in the car first? Something just flew up my nose and there’s a bug the size and volume of a Japanese Zero circling my head.”

“Right,” he said, going back to the Land Rover. They started up again.

“What’s that road we pass on the way to Casa Guacamaya, just before the last river?” Becca asked.

“Off to the left? There’s a bar called La Brisa. It’s maybe a quarter mile north of the house.”

“Do they have beach access?”

“Sure,” Wes said. “What’re you thinking?”

“Say we park the car at the bar, then walk up the beach, come to the house from that direction instead of the road. All those trees, it’ll be dark. We could scope out the house and see if it’s safe.”

“That’s better than the booby trap idea,” he admitted. “Okay, so we come from the beach, decide it looks okay, then run in and get our stuff. What then? Find a place to stay in Puerto Jimenez?”

“I don’t know. The town’s not big enough to hide in. Maybe go to the other side of the golfo?”

Wes said, “How about this? We swing through Puerto Jimenez just long enough to drop off what’s left of the gear at Tropical Adventures. Leave it on the front porch with a note. We’ll get our stuff, then drive to Golfito. Hang out there until our flight leaves the day after tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

Wes turned his mind back to what had happened to his uncle. A few minutes later, he said, “I feel like we’ve got all the pieces, but I don’t know how they fit together. Why would Bill bribe the Solorios to cover up the accident? And then convince Charlotte that her husband had died in Costa Rica instead of the United States?”

“That’s the easy part,” Becca said.

He turned his attention from the road, confused by her confidence. “What do you mean?”

“The point is, your Uncle Bill thought he’d killed his brother. Maybe an accident, maybe not. Doesn’t matter, either way. Thing is, Davis didn’t die. The Solorios called for help. Davis made it to shore and he made it to the hospital. Still alive. According to Javier, they flew him home in an air ambulance. Are you sure he died?”

It was simple and obvious. “My god, you’re right. He’s still alive!”

Wes hit a pothole, hard. He’d lost attention and was driving too fast and now he almost veered off the road while Becca gripped the dash. When he fought the car under control, the tire was thumping, rapidly deflating. He stopped the car with a curse and stepped into the night air for a second time. He glumly inspected the flat tire, then opened the back and rooted around for the jack and tire iron. He loosened the nuts holding the spare tire to the back of the Land Rover and took it down. Becca got out to help. And predictably, it started to rain.

“Pura vida,” Becca said.

Wes dropped to his knees to get the jack in place before the ground turned to mud. His mind worked just as quickly. That speech by Uncle Bill at Northrock, about building roads, the Roman Empire, and all that crap. And what was Uncle

Davis doing with Grandpa Carter's company? Getting sidetracked with this alternative energy stuff, according to Aunt Charlotte. And Davis had told Javier Lopez he planned to hook up every house on the Osa Peninsula with solar power.

The rain came down harder, but Becca stood by his side, holding the nuts and then bolting the flat tire to the back door while Wes put on the spare. They returned to the car a few minutes later, anxious to cross the rivers before the rising water cut them off. Thankfully, the spare had been an actual tire, and not the donut they foisted onto rental cars in the United States.

"So my uncle tried to kill his brother. Or maybe it was an accident. But he didn't die here and let's say for a minute he survived once they got him to the United States. My mom knew, because she was down here, but maybe they kept it hidden from my Aunt Charlotte. Just thinking aloud here."

"Go on."

"My Uncle Bill gives Charlotte some ashes. Must have paid people off down here besides the Solorios—that doctor, for one—to pull it off. The thing that doesn't make sense is this. If Uncle Davis is still alive, then where is he?"

"He was shot in the back of the head with a spear gun," she said. "Sounds like a brain injury to me. Might have even lost oxygen for awhile."

"That's what happened to Eric when he was born. Got the cord wrapped around his neck and turned out brain damaged. Well, you've probably read my brother's history."

"Yes, I have," Becca answered with a nod. "And that's exactly what I'm thinking. Your uncle was in a coma somewhere. Maybe he still is. He's not dead, but they told everyone he is, and there's no way he can contradict them."

It made sense. "Only I don't understand where..." And then he did understand. It explained Rosa, his mother, why he'd seen Uncle Bill at Riverwood. He turned to Becca, blinking, even as she pointed for him to keep his attention on the dark, muddy road. "Becca. Don't you see? He's at Riverwood. My uncle is one of the retarded people on Team Smile."

"Jesus." A pause. "It's got to be Chad Lett. He's the only one of the three men who would be the right age."

Had to be. Wes hadn't recognized his uncle, but the man in the bed was rigid and aged by his brain damage. And diminished in height and muscle. The spark was gone from his eyes, since there was no intelligence in there anymore. But now that Wes knew, he could see it. Yes.

"We've got to get my uncle out of there. We can take him to my Aunt Charlotte."

"Didn't you say she's engaged to marry someone else?"

"We'll deal with that. Whatever happens, she'll help us with Davis and with the police. But we've got to get to him before my uncle finds out we escaped that dive and comes for Davis himself. And that means we've got to get back to Vermont, now. We'll call the airline in the morning and pay whatever it takes to get on tomorrow's flight."

* * * * *

Dr. Pardo held his telephone with trembling hands. A roaring sounded in his ears, and a confusion, like he'd suffered a blow to the head. "What did you say?"

"I said that David is dead," James Pardo repeated. The voice was distant, one of those long-distance connections that you didn't hear much anymore, but the landlines on the Osa Peninsula left much to be desired.

Dr. Pardo sat in his office with a plastic bottle on the desk in front of him, filled with green fluid. Digoxin. In low doses it would regulate the heart's rhythm, in high doses, stop it dead.

"But it can't be. There were two of you. You were armed."

"I'm telling you, David's dead. We went after this Pilson guy. Stupid cabrón was stronger than we thought, and a good swimmer. Nobody told us that."

He filled in details. The two brothers had entered the water together, but David had not stayed with James as he'd been instructed. Impulsive, anxious to find Wesley and Becca on his own. James was alone when he met Wesley and by the time David joined, their target had regrouped and moved to the offensive. As James had fled to the surface, slashed hoses spurting air, he'd seen his brother trapped in an underwater cave, blood clouding around his head. No air came from his regulator.

Pardo tried to speak, but his throat was tight. He'd sent his sons to Costa Rica, thinking their Spanish would give them an advantage. But Pilson had spent so much time in Costa Rica that he spoke Spanish fluently, Bill had said, and now it appeared he was a good swimmer, too.

"And Pilson," Dr. Pardo said. "Is he dead too? You said he took off his tank underwater. Was it deep?" He didn't know as much about diving as did his two sons, but he knew enough.

"Fifty feet, maybe sixty. I don't know," James said. "The girl was with him. I didn't see her swim away. She might have buddy-breathed with him or given him her octopus."

"What does that mean?"

"That means he'd have made it to the surface. Alive."

"Goddamn it."

James said, "David waved a gun at the fishermen before we went down. Once I drove off in our boat, the Americans would have found themselves in the open ocean with nobody to take them back."

"Come on, you said it was near the island. So they swam ashore."

"There were rocks. It wouldn't have been easy."

"You think that matters? This kid took care of both of you. You said he was a strong swimmer. Assume he's alive. Okay?"

"Okay." A pause. Static on the line. "What should I do?"

Dr. Pardo put his hands to his temples. His son dead, and for what? The whole plan was unraveling, and he hadn't yet taken the digoxin to Chad Lett's room to finish the job and get on with extracting the money from Bill Carter. Carter's nephew had been a nuisance. No more. Every minute he was still alive was too long.

"I want him dead. I don't care anymore if you make it look like an accident or a random mugging, or whatever. Go to the beach house and kill them. And if they're not there, you've got their rental car information. Wait until they drop off the car day after tomorrow and then shoot them."

“Sounds risky. There’s a caretaker and his family living next door. And there’s only one way out of Matapalo. If they see me or hear the gun, or come running and see the bodies, then they can radio Puerto Jiménez. The police will have, what? Thirty, forty minutes to set their cars in the middle of the road and wait for me.”

“So kill the caretakers, too. I don’t care what you do, I want Pilson dead. I want them both dead. You owe it to David. Don’t call me until it’s finished.”

Pardo hung up the phone, and sat shaking. Time to finish the Carter family business. Should have been done a long time ago if Bill hadn’t been so weak, so afraid to grab what was his. Then again, if he wasn’t so weak, Pardo would have never dared this doublecross with Bill’s sister. It was how he would get his land back. It would be bittersweet now, with only one son to help him rebuild the finca. He scooped up the bottle of digoxin and rose to his feet.

Anne Wistrom would be going on her smoke break in a few minutes. He’d go down to the nurse station, pull some files, and go over patients’ prescriptions as if looking for negative interactions. He was past due with a couple of the teams. Wistrom would go for her break, Pardo would call in that temp who was working the grave HT position and send her to the far wing on some errand or other. He’d enter Chad’s room, take care of business, then be back in the nurse station by the time the HT and Wistrom returned. After that, he’d work another hour or so and go home. Chad Lett would die in his sleep.

Pardo reached the door just as someone knocked. He froze, then dropped the bottle in the pocket of his lab coat and opened the door. It was Carolina, the Peruvian. What was she doing here? He’d checked; she wasn’t working tonight. And she didn’t have a car, anyway, so how did she even get here from Montpelier since the bus wasn’t running this time of night?

“Alan,” she said.

“Dr. Pardo,” he reminded with a glance down the hall. Not that he expected anyone to be working in the admin wing at 8:00 at night. The afternoon QMRP usually left by seven, the social worker didn’t work on Fridays, and that idiot, Saul Cage, would be long gone. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you, Alan. Right now. It’s very important.” She spoke Spanish with that rural Peruvian accent that bugged the hell out of him. Maleducada.

“Call me tomorrow. I’m busy.”

And then he had a start. What had brought her tonight, anyway? He thought about Rosa. First pregnant, then discovering Chad Lett’s secret.

No, not Carolina. He’d been careful not to repeat the first mistake, and the girl was too dumb to reach the same conclusions as had Rosa. Then what?

Meanwhile, Carolina blinked hard and scrunched her face as if she was about to cry. He forced himself to speak softly as he pulled her inside and shut the door. “I’m sorry. I am really busy.” He looked pointedly at his watch. “I thought I’d be gone by now and I’ve still got a good hour of work.”

“Alan,” she said. “I feel...very bad. About what we’re doing. You know, having relations.”

He leaned back against the desk, feeling a great deal of relief. Was that all? That Catholic upbringing. If Carolina hadn’t been having sex outside of marriage, she’d have found something else to make her twitch and scratch at herself.

“This isn’t Peru,” he said. He was again anxious to get rid of her. “Those sort of things aren’t that important here. Nobody will care whether or not you’re a virgin. Besides, it’s just between the two of us, right? Nobody else knows. Do they?”

“No. I mean, not yet.”

“Let’s keep it that way. What’s the problem?” He rested a hand against her neck, then let it slide beneath her scrub and her bra to rub his finger against her nipple.

She closed her eyes, shivered. But then she pulled away. “I thought maybe we could... I mean, I could call my family and tell them...you know, they are very conservative. Especially my father. He would want me to be, you know, married. Don’t you think we could...”

“Carolina,” he said, keeping his voice softer than he felt. He took her face tenderly in his hands and gave her a gentle smile. “Mi vida. It’s just not the right time.”

“But, why not?”

Because you’re nothing but a cunt to fuck, he thought. And too stupid to know it. God, he’d have taken Rosa Solorio a thousand times over this campesina. But when Rosa had whispered her discovery to Pardo and he’d confirmed that yes, Davis Carter was still alive inside that broken body, he’d known what to do. Don’t push me, Carolina.

“Listen to me,” Pardo told her. “I don’t know what fantasies you’re spinning in your mind. But we’re not getting married. You’re a campesina. Our children—” The word sounded preposterous in his mouth. “—would be campesinos, too. It’s not going to happen. Now, or ever.

“I’m going to give you some money,” he continued. “More than you’re worth, believe me. I want you to get the hell out of here. Find another job, I don’t care.” He fished in his pocket for his wallet without waiting for her answer. “I don’t want to see you—”

He pulled out the wallet, but something dropped to the ground. Carolina bent and picked it up and it took Pardo a split second too long to see what she held. Long enough for her to read the label on the bottle of green liquid. He snatched it back, too roughly, dropping his wallet and scattering money on the ground as he shoved the bottle back into his pocket.

“What’s digoxin?” she asked.

Dr. Pardo had lots of tools. He could plead, he could make false promises. He could deny. He could bring her to orgasm and hope she forgot. But she’d seen the bottle, she might remember it. Might even mention it to someone, who’d mention it to someone else. Someone like Anne Wistrom. And if the nurse found out, on a day when Chad Lett died in his sleep...

He grabbed Carolina and threw her over the desk. His hands found her neck. Carolina tried to scream, but he pressed his thumbs into her windpipe and squeezed. She scratched at his face.

“You stupid little bitch,” he said. He leaned out of reach of her hands which first clutched at the air in front of his face and then pried at his fingers. “You couldn’t leave it alone, could you? You want to know what happened to Rosa? That’s right, I know you’ve been looking for her. I fucked her. And when I was done fucking her, I killed her. Because I don’t have any use for campesina putas.”

Carolina's eyes widened. Her arm knocked the computer mouse off the desk and grabbed at the monitor, as if somehow she'd pick it up in one hand and hit him with it. But already she was weakening, and a good thing, too. The effort to choke her was more than Pardo had counted on. At last, it was done. She slumped to the floor, first to her knees, then landing hard on her face.

Pardo stared at the body, breathing hard. What now? His hand found the bottle of digoxin in his pocket. No, he had to get rid of Carolina's body first. Now was the time to do it, when he could drag her through the exit on the admin side of the building with nobody else down here. He'd prop her against the side of the building and bring his car around, then load her into the trunk. Risky. Very risky. But he couldn't leave her here.

Footsteps sounded outside his door and he froze. Who the hell else would be down here this time of night? And then he remembered his earlier question. How had Carolina come? She didn't have a car and it was too late to take the bus.

A knock.

"Who is it?"

"Where's Carolina?" English with a heavy Spanish accent. It was Yamila, Carolina's Mexican friend. She had a car, didn't she?

"Hold on, we're just finishing up." He blocked the door with his foot, then shot a look over his shoulder at the body.

Yamila spoke in Spanish from the other side of the door, "Carolina? Everything okay in there? Carolina?"

Without thinking, Pardo opened the door and grabbed the startled Yamila by the blouse and dragged her into the room. She was bigger than Carolina, stronger. She fought back like a stray cat cornered by a dog, biting, scratching, hitting, and yowling, too. He pummeled her with his fists. He found the ceramic mug on his desk and bashed it against her face, then got to his feet and started kicking, before falling on her with his fists again.

In the end, he had two dead bodies. One lay almost peacefully on her stomach, as if she'd just fallen asleep in the middle of the floor. The other, battered, bloody, clumps of hair everywhere, bits of her skin under Pardo's fingernails. And there was blood on his coat, too, including, quite possibly, some of his own. Green liquid seeped through his lab coat pocket, which was crunchy with broken glass from the dropper. The digoxin must have burst open during the struggle with Yamila.

Didn't matter anymore. He wouldn't make it to Team Smile's room tonight anyway. Right now he had two bodies to dispose of.

Chapter 21

Fragrant plumeria trees surrounded La Brisa and the soft glow of solar lamps lit the outdoor bar and garden. Even at midnight, there were more than a dozen people drinking, listening to music, talking in loud voices outside the bar or sitting in hammocks beneath the trees. A cool breeze blew off the ocean, waving the palms that marked the edge of the beach.

Wes and Becca parked the car and went to the bar. It was a mixed group, maybe half foreigners, half Costa Ricans, and half women, half men. Becca studied the men to see if anyone paid them particular attention. Nobody looked suspicious.

They'd dropped the rest of the dive gear at Tropical Adventures with a note for Bernd, then drove to Matapalo with the windows down. They saw a single truck coming from the opposite direction but nobody once they passed the last of the farms and reached the rain forest. The rivers ran high, but remained passable.

"What time do you close?" Becca asked the bartender as he poured their drinks. "One-thirty."

They took their drinks into the shadows beyond the solar lamps and then groped their way through the coconut trees to the beach. There was just enough moonlight to help them avoid the largest rocks. The music faded into the background as they followed the beach south. It disappeared entirely as the beach curved to the left, replaced by the sound of the surf piling onto shore. The rain forest formed a black wall to their right.

Becca's anxiety increased moment by moment. She recognized a dip in the trees just as Wes pointed into the darkness. They were here.

"Wes," she whispered, taking hold of his arm.

"Don't second guess yourself," he said. "You were right. It's dark and there's so much noise from animals and the wind that they'll never hear us."

They picked their way to the house, and Becca could see at once that they'd done right to approach from the ocean, instead of the road. A light burned in the kitchen and the shutters were open on that side. Becca could remember shutting up the kitchen and Wes had gone through the house to check lights. They crouched behind a bush to study the house.

"I don't get it," Wes said in a low voice.

"There's someone inside."

"Yeah, but why open the shutters and leave on the light? It tells the whole world you're in there. Maybe it's just Javier."

"At midnight?" she asked.

"That doesn't make sense, does it? But I don't see a car. Why would they hide a car, but leave the lights on? Maybe they came, looked for us, and left."

"That's a big maybe." Becca looked up at the darker upper floors. There was a shutter open up there, too, off the veranda. She thought about the fruit trees that made it necessary to shut those upper floors to keep out monkeys. "All our stuff is up there. If they're downstairs, waiting..."

"I'm not sure I can climb those trees. Not in the dark." Shadows hid Wes's face, but she could hear the frown in his voice.

"I can," Becca said. "It doesn't look any tougher than the oak trees at my grandparents' farm and I've been climbing those since I was a girl. And I'm smaller too. Those branches will carry me better. Come on."

Without waiting to see if he'd object, she kept to the shadows and made her way to the trees in question. The first tree had lower branches, but was smaller; the upper branches wouldn't hold her weight. But she could use the first tree to get to the second, and from there to the veranda.

Wes took her arm as she shed her shoes and whispered, "Forget the luggage. Just get your passport and tickets. And be careful."

She climbed onto the first branch. The bark was smooth and damp with dew. She nearly lost her grip as she climbed to the next branch and then from the smaller tree to the larger. Fortunately, the bark of the second tree was knobby and she gained confidence as she climbed. A bird squawked and flapped away. Something else moved in the branches above and scrambled away as she approached.

Becca stopped when she reached the last branch. She strained for any sounds from the house itself, but heard nothing over the wind, surf, and the animals moving through the property. She stretched, grabbed the railing, and then swung her leg over as she let go of the branch. A moment later, she crouched on the veranda. It creaked as it took her weight.

The door to the interior hung open. Cautiously, heart pounding, she slipped into the house and made her way toward the bedrooms. More creaking underfoot. But there was no answering sound in the house, either upstairs or down.

The light was on in her bedroom. There was nobody in the room, but her suitcase lay upended on the floor. Someone had stripped the drawers from the dresser and strewn her clothes about.

Becca went to the bookshelf, bent and pulled out a broken-spined Rough Planet guidebook to Costa Rica. Tucked inside, she found her passport, her tickets, and two hundred bucks in twenties. Thank god for paranoia.

Quickly, she returned to the veranda and climbed back onto the tree branch. It swayed and she scrambled closer to the trunk where it could better hold her weight. Moments later she was back on the ground.

"You get them?" he whispered.

"Yes. But someone's been in the house." She told him what she'd seen.

"Shit. We've got to warn Javier."

They stayed in the shadow of Casa Guacamaya, just below the open kitchen window as they rounded the house in the direction of the caretaker's property. Becca paused as she passed. A strange, metallic smell came from the open window. She took Wes's arm and leaned up to his ear. "What's that smell?"

Wes stopped. Without warning, he grabbed the lip of the open window and hoisted himself up to look inside.

"No," he said as he came down. Again, "No." His voice was startling after so much whispering.

Wes ran back toward the porch, climbing the stairs two at a time and she could hear him walking through the house and toward the kitchen before she recovered enough to follow. She found him in the kitchen leaning against the counter, hand over his mouth. Staring. Becca followed his gaze.

Maritza Lopez lay on the floor. The right side of her face was a ruin. Blood clotted her hair and formed a pool around her head. Some creeping thing with long, articulated legs probed at the wound. Flies swirled around her head.

An overturned basket lay to one side, surrounded by spilled flowers. Becca could see what had happened. Maritza had brought flowers and surprised someone inside.

“She didn’t do anything,” Wes said. “Why would they—?” His eyes tracked to the fridge where they’d hung Maritza’s pictures. He turned, looking like he was going to be sick.

“Wes,” Becca said, both afraid and horrified. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Wes turned without a word and left the house. He hurried toward the caretaker’s house and Becca struggled to follow him through the dark. They stumbled over another body between the two properties and dragged it toward the light that came from the Lopez’s house. It was Javier, a gunshot wound to his chest. He was still bare footed and without a t-shirt. Dead.

“Oh, god.”

“I’m so sorry,” Becca said. She looked away.

“He must have heard the gun,” Wes said. His voice was thin. “He came to investigate.”

The lights were on at the Lopez house, which was a half-sized version of Casa Guacamaya, and the doors hung open. Wes rushed through, calling in Spanish. There was no answer and no more bodies, thank god. Becca seized on the wide-open back door. “Maybe they got away.”

“You think?”

“They know the area. They ran into the dark and found neighbors. Got help.”

Wes didn’t answer. He just went back and stared at Javier, slumped where they’d set him in front of the Lopez house. Flies buzzed around the chest wound. Other insects emerged from the night to investigate. Wes brought the body inside and covered it with a blanket to protect it from animals. He went back to Casa Guacamaya to do the same thing with Maritza.

“Wes,” she said when she could stand it no longer. “We’ve got to go.”

* * * * *

Wes couldn’t speak as they drove away from La Brisa. He’d wanted to pick a fight with the handful of patrons still drinking and talking loudly around the bar, to scream at the bartender to shut off the damn cheerful music. Instead, they had moved quickly to the Land Rover and drove directly for Puerto Jiménez. The distance passed in a blur.

But as they pulled into the darkened town, Wes emerged from his stupor. “We have to tell the police.”

“That’ll make us suspects.”

Wes said, “We might be suspects anyway. Someone might remember seeing us at the bar and our fingerprints are all over Casa Guacamaya and even the Lopez house.”

“But what if Javier’s son and wife got away? They could clear us. And the Solorios know we were attacked. They could back up our story.”

“They could,” he agreed. “Or they might keep their mouths shut. Again. But even if we’re cleared, we’ll still be—I don’t know—witnesses. Or something. They won’t let us leave the country. Why not go to them, first?”

“But what about Chad Lett? I mean, your uncle?”

In the end, events rescued them from making a decision. As they neared the police station, they saw a car speed off with its lights flashing. Two men loaded a

boy with a bandaged shoulder into the back of an ambulance, accompanied by a thick-set woman.

“That’s Lula Lopez,” he exclaimed. “And that must be Javier’s son. Uhm, Jaime, I think. They’re okay!”

Becca let out her breath. “Thank god.”

There was a tense moment as they passed the station and the ambulance, and Wes wondered if someone would shout for them to pull over. It was after one in the morning and there was little traffic, which made their very presence suspicious. But they passed without notice. Hopefully, the woman or her son had got a glimpse of the attackers and they’d catch the bastards.

They continued through the dark streets of Puerto Jiménez as quickly as they dared, then followed the road north. The idea was to round the top of the golfo toward Golfito on the other side.

“You know what,” Becca said minutes north of town, “let’s forget flying out of Puerto Jiménez.”

“How are we going to get out of here?”

“We’ll call in the morning to change our flight, just like we said. But what if we drop the first leg? Someone might be waiting for us at the airport. Or the police might want to talk to us. Instead, we can drive north and catch the flight directly from San Jose.”

“What about the rental car? We’re supposed to drop it off in Puerto Jiménez.”

“We’ll figure it out,” she said.

He thought for a moment. It was a good plan. “Can you grab that map from the glove compartment? We’re going to need it.”

And so they continued north. After Rincón, heading toward the Interamericana, the road was paved, but it was old paving, Swiss-cheesed with potholes. It was bone-rattling, jaw-shaking driving and they had to zigzag across the road at ten miles an hour to avoid the largest holes. They couldn’t afford another flat tire. Wes looked regularly in the rear view mirror, but the road behind was dark.

With any luck, their attackers wasted time looking for them in Puerto Jiménez, but if they’d guessed Wes and Becca’s plan to abandon their flight from the peninsula and travel by car to San Jose, they’d be expecting the Interamericana. So instead Wes cut to the coastal highway—mercifully paved—and followed it north. Becca fell asleep while Wes continued north, fighting exhaustion.

When he could take it no more, he stopped at a town called Uvita and roused someone at a run-down posada for a room. There was nothing left with two beds, but they had one with a single matrimonial for eighteen bucks. He was so exhausted that it was a surprise that he had a hard time falling asleep.

The room was warm and they slept without blankets or sheets. Light came from the courtyard through the gaps in the threadbare curtains and he watched Becca sleeping, her legs splayed, her breast rising and falling, her dark hair swirled to one side. She was beautiful, really. He reached a hand and touched her face, forgetting for the moment the horror they’d discovered at Casa Guacamaya. At last he fell asleep.

The place looked better once they escaped their shabby room in the morning. There were fruit trees and birds and the posada wrapped around a courtyard where backpackers hung their laundry to dry or relaxed in hammocks or used the

computer to check their email. And there was a free breakfast: bananas, papaya, mango, and toast with coffee. Damn good coffee, too.

Wes bribed the owner into letting him make a long distance call to San Jose where they changed their flight to that afternoon. They'd have to drive like hell to get to the airport on time.

He came out of the office to find Becca filling buckets of water in an outdoor laundry sink to splash over the Land Rover to wash off some of the mud. It was far from clean when she finished, but at least he could see out the front and rear windshields.

They hooked back onto the Interamericana. The highway took them over the spine of the cordillera, including the infamous Cerro de la Muerte—the mountain of death. But it was clear, not wet and cloudy, until they drew close to San Jose, and the road wasn't particularly dangerous, even with trucks passing in the opposite direction and dozens of switchbacks.

They arrived at the airport less than an hour before their flight. Wes had a hurried phone call with an angry person at the car rental place in Puerto Jiménez. He ended up leaving the Land Rover and the keys with a confused person at Hertz, who finally agreed to hold the car until contacted by the other agency. Wes had no time to worry how that would play out. They shoved their stuff into bags and raced into the airport. In the end, they climbed into their seats, tired, dirty, and the last people on the plane, which taxied down the runway minutes later.

"Thank god that's over," Wes said.

"You still owe me a relaxing trip to Costa Rica." She fixed him with a smile, frayed by exhaustion.

He was relieved to see that she hadn't treated him any differently since the second time he'd come on to her. After that bit in the waterfall, where he'd confessed his feelings—and was there anything more deflating than telling someone you liked them and getting nothing in return?—he'd worried that she'd keep him at arms length.

The accelerating plane pushed him back in his seat. San Jose stretched below, and the green, cloudy mountains that bowled around the city. Behind them, the tropics. Ahead, the snow-covered mountains of Vermont. And his uncle, brain dead, warehoused in a long-term care center for the mentally retarded. His wife, engaged to be married to another man. God, what a horrible way to go. Well, he may be dead, if not physically, then mentally, but there was one thing that Wes could give him.

Justice.

* * * * *

Dr. Pardo took care of the bodies. He dragged Carolina and Yamila out the side door one by one, knowing as he did, that he was taking a terrible risk. He stuffed them into the trunk of his car, leaving evidence everywhere. He came back to his office while the bodies stiffened in the trunk, then pilfered cleaning supplies and three rolls of paper towels from the janitor closet. It took an hour to wipe floors, doorknobs, and desktops; janitorial would come in later and clean again.

Once that was done, he returned to his car, intending to drive off, but remembered Yamila's car. He had to get rid of that, first. Someone would see it,

recognize it, and the questions would start sooner than he hoped. Either way, he only had a couple of days before not one, but three missing immigrant women would set the small town of Waterbury on fire. Police would scour every inch of this place, no doubt ask Pardo more hard questions.

He found Yamila's purse in her car and the keys in the purse. Her car was an older Hyundai with a Mexican flag hanging from the rearview mirror and the requisite Virgin of Guadalupe dashboard effigy. He parked it three blocks away on a side street, then stripped out the obvious Mexican stuff and walked back to his Mercedes. He'd come for the Hyundai later. Wipe off his fingerprints. First, he had to get rid of those bodies.

And that was the trick. They'd be found sooner or later. Taking them to his house would put him one search warrant away from murder charges. The best he could think of was to take them into the woods and bury the bodies in the snow, then hope that no one found them before he fled the country.

And then he hit on a better solution. He knew the code to Bill Carter's gate. He'd wait until morning, when Bill left for work, then simply drive in and dump the bodies in Bill's tool shed. Once Davis Carter was dead, he'd tell Bill about Carolina and Yamila. And at the same time, he'd show Bill his other evidence and explain Ellen Pilson's perfidy. He'd tell Bill about the six million dollars apiece that he and Ellen would demand to keep from framing Bill Carter for murder. Let Bill dispose of the bodies.

Pardo entered the dining room the next day after breakfast. Today was Carolina's day off, so someone else was already scheduled to watch Team Challenge. He didn't know about Yamila or whether kitchen staff would be shorthanded.

Team Challenge and Team Smile sat in front of the television while the two HTs took turns collecting Dale as he made his way for the exits.

"Can you wheel Chad Lett into my office?" he said to the two women, not knowing which was responsible for Team Smile. His right hand was in his pocket, rubbing his thumb along the bottle of digoxin. "I want to take a final look at that eye."

"He's in his room. I'll take you." It was the temp, a chubby little girl named Kelly Ann, according to her badge. "His eye is better. The nurse has been washing it about ten times a day and that seems to be clearing it up. I saw it twitching a lot the other night, but it's not as red."

Twitching? Pardo knew what that was and it wasn't twitching. Good thing this girl was too dull to recognize it.

He followed Kelly Ann down the hall, only wondering once he was outside Team Smile's room why Davis would be in his room and not out front, watching TV with the others. The physical therapist had Davis undressed in his bed but for a diaper and was in the process of moving and massaging the man's feet and ankles. He'd work his way from one end of the body to the other and Pardo didn't know if that meant he was just starting or just finishing.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

The man removed the earbuds of his ipod. Like Pardo and the staff dietician, he worked several different care centers and the doctor had lost track of his schedule.

"What's up?"

“Chad Lett has an eye condition. Can you give me a minute or two to check him out?” His fingers worked at the vial of digoxin in his pocket. Push the dropper into Davis Carter’s throat far enough to trigger a swallowing reflex. Repeat until he’d emptied the bottle down the man’s throat.

“Yeah, I saw that last week. Looks a lot better now, though. Wistrom said the eye washes were helping. His eyelid is still twitching, but it’s not as red.”

That twitching again. Pardo’s efforts had brought about the ironic consequence of drawing attention to that left eye. It was only a matter of time before someone came to the same conclusions as Rosa Solorio.

“He was doing it just a minute ago,” the PT said. “Look.”

Only he wasn’t anymore. That eye stared ahead. The eyelid did not move, just the occasional automatic blink.

Of course it doesn’t, Pardo thought as he put a puzzled expression on his face and leaned over the man, as if considering the matter. But you’re not fooling me, Davis Carter. I know what you’re trying to do.

“Anyway, if you could give me a minute,” Pardo said. He removed a pen light from his left pocket, leaving the digoxin in the other.

“Go right ahead. I’ll be working on the feet and ankles for another fifteen minutes here. I’ll just move down and you can do your thing.” And with that he replaced his ear buds and worked at Davis’s feet.

And, naturally, the HT stood over Pardo’s shoulder, watching. So there was nothing left but to make a show of examining first the left eye, then the right. He went to the nurse station and made a notation to Chad Lett’s chart, then went to his office to make doubly sure that he’d cleaned up after the previous night’s ugliness. Unfortunately, it was lunch by the time they wheeled Davis back to the front room, and it turned out the PT would be working his way through the rest of Team Smile in the afternoon. There would be no chance for Pardo to be alone with Davis and it was starting to look odd that he was still in the building. He’d have to come back at night.

His phone rang when he got to the parking lot and was scraping ice from his windshield. It was James.

“Is it finished?” Pardo asked.

“I went to the beach house. The neighbor girl surprised me while I was inside. Caretaker’s daughter, I think.”

“And?” he demanded.

“Girl started to scream. I had to shoot her. I ran into her father in the yard and shot him, too. They’re just campesinos.”

“I don’t care about goddamn campesinos. What about the Americans?”

“The caretaker’s wife escaped. Maybe his son, too, but I think I hit him. I had to hide from the police in the Corcovado last night.”

“But what about the Americans?” Pardo snapped.

“Didn’t see the Land Rover. So I checked the hotels around town and in Golfito, even back toward Drake and Agujitas. Nothing.”

Pardo gripped the phone with mounting rage. Wesley and Becca had killed David. He needed his revenge.

“They’re flying out tomorrow,” James said. “I’ll just wait at the airport and take care of them when they go in.”

“So what if they change their flight? Maybe they’ll leave today.”

“Thought of that already,” James said, “but there are only two flights a day from Puerto Jiménez to San Jose. It’ll be easy enough to catch them.”

“Whatever it takes, hijo.” Pardo forced himself to regain his composure. “Soon we’ll have our land back. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Good, then do it. Do it for your mother. For your grandparents. Do it for David. Whatever happens, you need to take revenge.”

Chapter 22

Riverwood had never looked shabbier than when Becca pulled into the parking lot in her Cherokee. She noted the dark streaks down the brick, the institutional doors, and the rusting drain pipes. The snow was higher than when they’d left, but already it was rotten, darkened by road salt and gravel and melted off the roof into discolored icicles that made the entryway look like a mouthful of coffee-stained teeth. She’d been to Costa Rica and she might as well have traveled to the moon.

Scrub tops in varying states of cleanliness littered the back of her car and she grabbed one for herself and for Wes. They pulled them on as they left the car and walked up the wheelchair ramp to the front door. It occurred to her as she stepped through the front door that she wasn’t sure if she still had a job. She’d heard no official word about the state certification, but didn’t need it. Becca had survived a few near misses; this had been worse. And on her watch. The first necks snugged into the guillotine in any revolution were the lackeys of the previous regime. They’d need to sacrifice someone. Maybe it was her.

“Thank god you’re back,” Saul said, answering that question. He was rushing out of the admin wing. It was ten o’clock at night. She’d never seen him working so late. “I thought you were getting back yesterday.”

“Tomorrow, actually. I’m not back from vacation until tomorrow. It’s the day after that, when I was coming back to work.” She found herself vaguely disappointed to discover he hadn’t fired her.

“Really? I could have sworn...never mind. Cami is on shift and she says she’s down an HT. Someone else didn’t show up for work.” He looked at Wes, eyes drifting to his scrub top. “Hello, are you a temp or a regular HT?”

“An HT. I work with Team Smile.” Wes sounded surprised by the question.

“Wes has been here two years,” Becca lied. “You made him employee of the month, remember?” She gave a side look to Wes, who raised his eyebrows.

Saul blinked and she could see him mentally take a step back. “Oh, sorry, Wes. Of course. I didn’t recognize you. That was good work you did. Very good. Team Smile.”

And she worked for the guy. How much did he make a year? She knew where he lived and saw what he drove. Had to be at least a hundred grand. Probably more like a hundred-fifty.

“Well, if we’re short-staffed, I’d better go straighten things out.”

“Great. I emailed you the list of noted deficiencies from the inspection.”

“I take it we didn’t pass.”

Saul blinked at her. “You mean, you didn’t know?”

Didn’t know and didn’t care. She was shocked to admit it, even if just to herself. Certification measured exactly nothing about the quality of the facility or the staff. She didn’t have to look at the paperwork to know why they’d failed. State had come the day of that snowstorm and she’d spent the morning putting down minor insurrections by the residents who’d been thrown off their schedule. If a snowstorm can make the difference between passing certification and not, then what good was certification?

“Sorry, I was out of the country.”

“Well, still,” Saul said in a shocked voice. “I thought you would have called or something.” He seemed to gain control of his incredulity. “In any event, I’ll need a report on how you’ll manage each bulleted item by, say, tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” she said brightly, even as she wanted to poke him in the eye. She led Wes through the doors and into the lounge.

“I can’t believe he doesn’t remember me,” Wes said. They crossed the dining room and entered the resident wings. “I talked to him for several minutes when I brought my résumé. And my professor even talked to him on the phone.”

“Remember what I said about ‘graduated advancement?’ Saul Cage is what happens when residents graduate from the group home. They become administrators.”

He laughed. “And that list of deficiencies. That sounds fun.”

“It’ll be full of stuff like this,” Becca said. “Noted: Dale continues to flee the building at every opportunity. Cause: Dissatisfaction with level of achievement due to understimulating environment at Riverwood Care Center. Resolved: Provide Dale with a regimen of physical and mental exercises, coupled with increasingly vigorous application of life skills. Responsibility: Rebecca Gull.”

“I hope that’s an exaggeration.”

“Sadly, no.”

The smell of cleaners and soiled laundry filled the air. It pushed aside the memory of flowers and ocean breezes. Welcome home.

Gail Petrov and Anne Wistrom nodded at Becca and Wes from behind the glass at the nurse station. Wistrom took off her coat and gloves and reached for a stack of charts, while Gail shut down windows on the computer. Shift change.

Becca and Wes pushed into the bedroom of Team Smile. It was early yet, and both Jan Trotter and Chad Lett were still awake. Becca flipped on the light near Chad’s bed and held out her hand to Wes. “Let me see those pictures.”

Wes carried a folder of pictures. He’d gone to an internet kiosk during their layover in Atlanta, where he’d downloaded and printed pictures found online. Davis Carter had been a prominent businessman involved in philanthropy and there were many, even though several years had passed since the accident.

“I’m just not sure,” Wes said. “He’s changed so much. Lost tons of weight, for one thing. Why is his eye twitching like that? Looks red, too.”

“He had an eye infection. Doesn’t look too bad now.” Nevertheless, it twitched in a way that didn’t look comfortable. Must hurt like hell.

She looked at the pictures. Here was one with the governor of Vermont, and another breaking ground on a bridge in New Hampshire. Their resolution was mediocre. "If we're right, then it has to be Chad. There's Jan and three men. These other two are too young." She shook her head, imagining what it would be like to end up like this. "Poor guy," she added. "At least he doesn't know what happened to him. He's more or less brain dead."

"Sure," Wes said, "but you can see the way his muscles seize up and the way his face grimaces that he can still feel pain."

In fact, she turned her attention from his twitching eye as she spotted a tremor working its way through his leg. She reached down and massaged at the quivering knot until it went away.

"I've got an idea," Wes said. "Help me roll him over."

They rolled Chad onto his side. Wes sifted through the man's hair, matted into the world's worst case of bed head. Becca picked up the lamp and held it close.

"Yep, it's him," Wes said. He grabbed the lamp with one hand and took her hand with the other. "Feel this."

There was a definite lump where the skull met the spine. Scar tissue. Looking close, she could see it among the hairs, a puckering of the skin. It was there that a spear had penetrated the man's skull. Must have penetrated fairly deeply, in fact, to leave Davis Carter's brains scrambled. It was a miracle of modern medicine that he was alive at all.

"Damn it," Wes said. He stepped back a pace and ran his hands through his hair. "I'd hoped that, I don't know. That we were wrong somehow. That we'd find him somewhere else. Alive. Not like this."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Carter," she said to the man in the bed. "There's nothing we can do for you now but we can get you out of this place and take you somewhere where people still know you."

"And punish the people responsible," Wes added. "Whatever, we're getting him out of here. Take him to Charlotte. And this time, when I call the police, I'll have evidence on hand."

"I'll back you up. You know it."

"But how do we get him out?"

"Here's what we're going to do," Becca told him. "We're going to load him into his wheelchair and wrap him in a blanket. Then we're just going to wheel him to my car. Gail should be gone. Hopefully, Anne's got her face buried in those charts. If anyone sees us, there's no excuse that will sound reasonable. So we'll just go. What are they going to do, call the police? By then we'll have him in the car and at your aunt's house."

"I can see it now," Wes said, as if he'd only been half listening. He was staring at his uncle's face. "It's the nose and the eyes. Like my Mom's and Uncle Bill's. Look, I've got the Carter nose, too."

Becca looked, but still couldn't be sure of the resemblance. But she'd felt the scar and that was enough.

"They're so ruthless," he said. "My Uncle Bill, then my mom, turning on their brother. What kind of person would do that to their own brother?"

"They must care about that company."

“My uncle does, that’s for sure. He’s like my grandpa, not that I remember him much. But I heard stories. The thing is, I don’t get why my mom would go along. Bill and my grandpa shut her out. She was mad at Bill, not Davis.”

Becca lowered the bar on the bed. “I’d love to catch up on your family history, but can we do it later? Right now let’s get him the hell out of here.”

“You know, about that eye,” Wes started. “It’s almost like...”

He suddenly straightened, staggered back a step and crashed into the end table. He grabbed the lamp just as it was about to fall to the floor. “It can’t be. No.” His hands trembled as they put the lamp in place. “Oh my God.”

“What?” she asked, alarmed. She stepped back from the bed. “For god’s sake, what is it?”

“Look at his eye. Look!”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Look at how it’s twitching. Count it.”

Becca turned. She watched, uncomprehending at first. Three fast blinks. Three long blinks. Three fast blinks. Dot-dot-dot. Dash. Dash. Dash. Dot-dot-dot.

“Oh, my god.”

Davis Carter’s left eye was blinking S.O.S.

* * * * *

Ellen Pilson parked in front of the Waterbury Village police station. She had phoned ahead to be sure that Lieutenant Stiles was on duty. The man had called her a few days earlier and they’d spoken for a few minutes about Wes.

Stiles was looking for Rosa Solorio. According to Stiles, Wes had reported Rosa missing and the police had started to wonder if something hadn’t, in fact, happened to the Costa Rican girl.

He’d asked a series of questions. Has Wes been under stress? Acting funny in any way? Did he know Rosa Solorio before he started working at Riverwood?

And, most alarmingly, “Do you or your son have any connection to Costa Rica?”

Not time, she told herself. Not yet.

And so she’d dissembled. No, she didn’t know anything. She’d never heard of the girl. Wes was worried about his brother, Eric, that’s all. Maybe someone said something to him about Rosa and he’d gone to the police because he was trying to be helpful. That’s the kind of boy he was. But anyway, he’d gone back to Massachusetts. So whatever was going on, Wes couldn’t be involved, right?

Ellen stepped out of her car and shut the door. She wore heels and a pantsuit. Tonight was not the night to look like a nurse, just off shift. Tonight she had to look like the daughter of industrialist Elwin Carter. She needed Stiles to think of her thusly, because very soon it would be her word against Bill Carter, the president and principle shareholder of Northrock, and against Dr. Alan Pardo.

That ass, Dr. Pardo. He’d never adjusted to his diminished status in the United States. A doctor, yes, but without connections, a foreigner, with only his two sons as allies. Somehow he thought he could play the Carter family into regaining his land, wealth, and status in El Salvador. He’d coaxed her with money to get her to blackmail Bill.

But Ellen had blackmailed her brother perfectly well on her own. And what Pardo didn’t know was that she’d found her own financial independence. She’d

clawed it from the Carter fortune with such tenacity that she could almost feel it under her fingernails.

And money, much as she'd needed it desperately for so many years, was not her primary motivation. No, something deeper motivated her. Something more compelling, yet demanding patience. Endless, watchful patience. If she'd learned anything from her father it was how to work quietly but surely toward a long-term goal.

Ellen stepped from the chill air and into the warmth of the police station. She stepped to the window to check in with the dispatcher, who spoke into a telephone headset for a moment before disconnecting and turning to address the visitor.

"May I help you?"

"Lieutenant Stiles, please."

"On behalf of whom, please?"

"Ellen Pilson. He called me the other day with some questions about an investigation. I have some information that he might find useful."

The woman called the officer and Stiles appeared a few minutes later. He was a thick man with a strong jaw and a moustache, wearing a uniform. Stiles wore a neutral look as he appraised her. "Mrs. Pilson. Come back, please." He led her to his desk and offered her a seat.

"I hope you don't have any pressing business tonight," Ellen said. She slid across a manila envelope she'd carried tucked under her arm.

Stiles eyed the envelope, but did not pick it up. "Not at the moment. Why?"

"Because I'm here to report a murder."

Chapter 23

Dr. Pardo sat in his car outside Riverwood. The parking lot was dark and still. It was cold and the snow that fell was light and dry and left a glittering, paper-thin layer across the cars. Saul Craig's Lexus was not there. Pardo studied the other cars, and fixed on the forest green Jeep Cherokee. It was the same one that David had followed to Bolton Valley ski resort and tried to run off the road. Rebecca Gull's car.

So Wes and Becca had returned. They'd slipped past James in Puerto Jiménez and somehow taken a flight to the United States without being detected. Fine. These two had killed his son and he would take pleasure in returning the favor. But first things, first.

His hand went to the pocket of his lab coat. He brought out the bottle of digoxin and pulled off the plastic safety wrapper, then unscrewed the lid. He dipped his little finger into the bottle and brought the drop of green, syrupy liquid to his lips. Sweet, cloyingly so. And minty. No wonder the literature insisted on the importance of training parents to keep the medicine away from older children. One could gulp an overdose in two seconds.

Pardo replaced the lid. He would go in, feed Davis Carter the digoxin, then come back and wait for Wes and Becca. He'd take the gun in his glove compartment and force them to drive to a remote spot where he'd take care of them.

Pardo put on his doctor's face. It was confident, authoritative. He would wear it into the building, act like he knew exactly what he was doing, and move aside anyone who stood in his way.

It was that air of confidence that had made Rosa Solorio trust him. Pardo had picked her up at JFK airport in New York City. She'd never been outside Costa Rica and had been overwhelmed by the city, its skyscrapers, and its crowds.

It had been Pardo who had gone to the Solorios to arrange the deal for Bill Carter. Rosa had been skeptical, but like her father and brother had been convinced that the spearing was an accident. What was a little lie to keep a good family out of trouble? Rosa's father and brother had pushed her to take this opportunity. What could a girl like her accomplish on the Osa Peninsula? In the States, in el Norte, she could become a doctor, like Pardo.

In New York, she had fallen under Pardo's control. He had wowed her with the city, fed her good food and too much wine, and then seduced her in her hotel room.

* * * * *

Wes gripped the nightstand with one hand and the edge of the bed with the other. His uncle had been sending an S.O.S. The first time his mind had caught the pattern, it was almost like seeing something out of the corner of his eye. But it had focused his attention like a shock of electricity. And then, yes! He was sure.

Becca stood with her hand over her mouth. Horror written across her face.

He could only stare as his mind raced. Five years in this place. Treated like a vegetable. Like a stroke victim who cannot talk, only paralyzed much, much deeper. He could not control his mouth, his limbs, his muscles in any way except for that twitching eye.

Only nobody noticed that eye, did they?

"Rosa," Becca said, dropping her hand. "Had to be Rosa." Becca was breathing fast and talking faster. "That was the bargain the Solorios made, to send Rosa up here to get an education. Only Bill and your mother gave her a job working at Riverwood and forgot about her. Thing is, she worked with Team Smile more than anyone else in this place. She must have seen that twitching eye. Made contact with Chad Lett."

"She made contact with Davis Carter, you mean," Wes corrected. "Chad Lett is a fiction. He never existed."

"But Rosa was the only one who knew who he really was. My god."

Wes thought about it. "Let's say Rosa went to my Uncle Bill. Told him what she'd discovered. She must have thought it was all an accident. That Bill would be happy to discover his brother was still in there somewhere."

"Only he wasn't."

"Only he wasn't," Wes agreed.

"What are we doing?" Becca said suddenly. She turned directly to Davis. "You must be dying in there."

"Blink three times if you can understand," Wes said.

Davis's left eye twitched three times. Really, more like two and a half times, as the third time was a quiver. The effort must be exhausting.

"Okay," Wes said. "Let's keep it simple. Blink once for yes, zero times for no. Do you understand?"

Blink. Yes.

"Do you know what happened to you?" Wes asked.

Yes.

Wes looked at Becca, then back at his uncle. "Was it an accident?"

No blink, which Wes took as a no.

Becca said, "It's not a simple yes, no question though, is it? How about you blink twice for don't know?"

Yes.

"Yes to the blinking twice for don't know or to the other question?" Wes asked. "Never mind. Was it an accident?"

No.

"Was it Uncle Bill?"

Yes.

"Was he alone, or did someone else help him?" Wes asked.

"That's not a yes, no question," Becca said.

"Sorry. Was he alone?"

No.

Was it my mother?

Don't know.

"And that's not a yes, no answer, either." Becca stood back a pace, rubbing her hands together and looking anxious. "Could be a third person. Look, can't we just get him out of here and ask the questions later?"

"We've got to find out who we can trust, first. Or who Davis thinks he can trust, at least. What if we take him to Aunt Charlotte and find out that she was in on it?" He turned to his uncle. "Was Aunt Charlotte involved?"

No.

Or at least Wes thought he said no. It was hard to be sure when there was no blink. Maybe Davis was too tired to blink every time. His twitches looked more labored now, like the effort to blink out the S.O.S. had exhausted him. For a moment Wes doubted himself. He could show this communication to people and half of them would say it was his imagination, like a ouija board, or those people who typed on behalf of their autistic kids. How could he be sure those twitches were not random? He'd have to repeat the questions multiple times, getting the same answer each time to make sure that Davis was really answering him.

"There has to be a better way," Wes said.

"How about this?" Becca asked. She rummaged through Davis's nightstand until she pulled out a pack of recipe cards. "Look." She held out the cards. They had an English word on one side and the Spanish equivalent on the other side. "We had an HT who was taking Spanish in school. I knew he'd left these in here, but kept forgetting to throw them out."

She searched deeper until she found a pen, then scratched out the words and wrote something of her own. "Here's what I'm going to do," She told Davis. "I'm writing the letters of the alphabet. I'm going to flash through them one at a time.

When you see the letter you want to write, blink once and Wes'll write it down. Blink twice when you reach the end of the sentence."

"That sounds slow," Wes said.

"Yeah, at first. But not as slow as twenty questions. He can tell us what's important instead of us sitting here all night, guessing." Becca worked quickly. A minute later and she had a stack. She handed the pen and another card to Wes, then threw unused cards in the garbage. "We can come up with something better later."

"Okay, Mr. Carter," Becca continued. "You know what's important. Start with the most important thing and work your way down. Try to be brief because...well, you know that. Do you understand?"

Yes.

She lifted the card for A, then put it at the back of the stack when there was no response. Next the B, then the C, and so on. After several letters, Wes started to doubt again. But then she reached the letter I and he blinked. Wes wrote down the letter and Becca flipped the back cards to the front and started over. This time, she flipped faster and was between two letters when Davis blinked.

The letters crawled by, especially when they had a minute or two of confusion when his eye twitched involuntarily. They worked out a code of three twitches for a bad letter and continued. At last, they had the first sentence.

IMALIVE.

Wes couldn't keep the horror from his voice as he read it aloud. "I'm alive."

Becca put her hand against Davis's cheek. It was a touching gesture. "I'm so sorry. God, I'm sorry. I was blind. And stupid. Dumber than any of the people living here."

"Don't beat yourself up about it," Wes said. "You couldn't have known." His throat was tight. Five years in a prison of his own skull. Jesus.

"I should have known," she said. "I'm not here to be Saul Cage's paper pusher, or to shove my head up my ass to the proper depth required by state certification." Disgust filled her voice. "This was my chance to make a difference. And I screwed up."

"No, you didn't. We figured it out. We found him. And you can be damn sure that things will be different from now on."

"Yes," she said, seeming to regain her confidence. "They will be." She turned back to Davis. "Are you ready to continue?"

Yes.

The next letter was a D. Wes was relieved every time the letter came near the beginning of the alphabet. Given enough time they could probably work out a sophisticated system where they sorted letters into common groups and uncommon groups, vowels, letters that started at the beginning of the alphabet or counted back from the end. It might mean more blinking, but it would be faster than this.

The next letter was an R and then there was a bit of confusion where it seemed like his uncle was blinking the end of the sentence, but of course there couldn't be a period there because DR didn't make a sentence. He guessed his uncle was trying to say something about drowning and wondered if they did it long enough if

they'd also work out a shorthand to cut out extraneous letters, maybe even unneeded words.

The next letter was P.

A knock on the door. They froze and turned toward the door as it swung open. Wes stuffed the recipe card into his pocket, together with the pen.

He breathed a sigh of relief. It was just Dr. Pardo, holding a clipboard. The man glanced up from the clipboard with a look of concentration on his face, and then blinked as if he hadn't been expecting to see anyone in the room. "Sorry, I didn't think anyone was in here. The nurse didn't tell me—"

"It's alright," Becca answered quickly. A little too quickly, Wes thought. Her posture was a contrast to Dr. Pardo's relaxed stance. "I've been gone for a few days. I'm just checking out the residents."

"Ah, okay. Well, I just need to check out Chad Lett's eye. He's had this infection."

"Yes, I know. Looks a lot better though."

"That's what I thought," the doctor answered. "Can you give me a minute? I'll come find you when I'm done."

"Of course."

Wes hesitated. He didn't want to leave Uncle Davis alone, not even for a minute. But Becca grabbed his arm and led him out of the room. Dr. Pardo was alone inside with the four residents of Team Smile.

* * * * *

Davis Carter had never felt a greater feeling of elation in his life than when his nephew recognized his S.O.S. And as Becca, one of his favorite people at Riverwood for her gentle way with the residents, came up with the letter system for communicating, he had almost wept with joy.

His first message, the cry that had been on his lips for years: "I'm alive!"

God yes, he was alive. He'd made contact with Rosa and she was gone. Chillingly, horribly abducted that night she had tried to spirit him out of Riverwood. But this was different. He knew it. He just needed to get out a little bit of information and then they would take him to Charlotte, and to the police. And somehow, this nightmare would come to an end. He might not escape completely from the Château d'If, but he'd have a window to the outside world.

And then Dr. Pardo entered the room and Davis's stomach clenched in fear. And—oh, no! Please, no—Wes and Becca didn't see the doctor for what he was.

The Abbé Faria had been quiet during the exchange with Wes and Becca, but his voice was urgent now. "Do something, Davis. Do it quickly."

What? For god's sake, what? What can I do.

But the abbé had no answer. Because there's nothing a starved, diseased prisoner can do when the torturers come.

The doctor dismissed the two and to Davis's horror, they left. Dr. Pardo watched the door shut, then turned to the bed with a smile. "I guess this is it, old friend. It's not how I would have ended it, but you understand, don't you?"

Bastard.

"I can only imagine what's going on in your mind. Maybe nothing. You know, it's occurred to me that this is all a fantasy. Like the campesinos, reading the entrails

of a chicken to decide when to plant their crops. I see that eye twitching and I think maybe it's just my imagination, that you're really dead in there.

His eyes fell on the stack of index cards where Becca had written her letters. He picked them up and thumbed through them before setting them down. "But I don't think so. I think you're still trying to break out, aren't you? And the fact is, I was happy to let you go on living, so long as you stayed quiet. But what's the first thing you're going to tell those two when you figure out your little code? Right. And I can't take that chance."

No, Davis wanted to say. I swear I'll stay quiet. Nobody will ever know. Just don't hurt my eye.

But it wasn't Davis's eye that Pardo had in mind. He lowered the bar and put his arms under Davis's shoulders, then hoisted him to prop against the end of the bed in a partially sitting position. Davis's head lolled to one side. Pardo moved to the nightstand, out of Davis's sight. Sounded like he was opening a container of some kind.

The doctor returned with a dropperful of green liquid. The man held up Davis's chin and pushed the dropper into the back of his mouth. A minty, sweet liquid. It trickled into Davis's throat.

Pardo went back for another dose, then brought it up to Davis's mouth and repeated the procedure. When enough liquid was in Davis's throat, his body swallowed reflexively.

"I won't say it will be a painless death. Depends on whether or not you're asleep. It'll take awhile for your body to absorb the digoxin. We're going to shut down the electrical currents to your heart. It'll seize up, like you're having a heart attack. Eventually, it will stop. You know, the life expectancy of people in your condition isn't particularly high. Don't think anyone will give a second thought. Well, except for Wes and Becca, but they won't be around to ask questions."

Pardo returned for a third dropperful, then a fourth.

Chapter 24

Ellen Pilson knew where to find her brother, Bill. Bids to pour concrete for a new reactor at a nuclear plant in upstate New York were due in two days. Bill was like her father, who had worked almost around the clock in the last few days before placing a major bid. You had to have the numbers just right. Too high and you'd surrender the project to a competitor. Miss one detail and you'd bid too low and lose millions. There were so many variables and so many ways to screw it up. Even after the numbers were perfect, her dad had sifted through them again and again. Bill was the same way.

When she pulled up to the office, she could see the lights glowing in his corner office overlooking the gravel pit. A fantastic view of that ugly scar. Again, it was just like her father.

A Caterpillar articulated haul truck sat on the front lawn in front of the building. It was a curious place to leave a truck, but as she drew closer she saw

that it was not one of the 740 Ejectors that she saw at Northrock's job sites around the state, but an older, smaller model. It wasn't a working truck at all, but one mounted on a poured concrete pad with a plaque that read:

"Moose Hollow Road: February – August, 1983.
Bruce Wiley, Mike Garcia, Harvey Drummond."

She drew her breath at this last name, then walked to the front of the haul truck and looked at the crankcase guard. Dented. Her brother had mounted the very truck from the accident as a monument to the men who had died building the Moose Hollow Road.

Ellen put her hand on the cold metal grill, wondering how things might have turned out differently if she hadn't trusted Bill and parked that equipment on the edge of a mud slide. She'd be the one looking over the bid for that reactor. Bill and Davis would work for her. She'd have been tough, but fair, even with her brothers. And she would have built Northrock into a mighty empire far beyond what even Bill or her father could have dreamed.

She stepped up to the front door, unlockable at this hour only by key card, then rang her brother's cell phone. It was a cold night, the kind that burns into the lungs, but she enjoyed a warm glow spreading through her limbs.

"Yeah? What is it?"

"It's me," she said. "Your darling younger sister. We need to talk."

"Ellen? Can it hold until Tuesday? Got a lot on my plate at the moment."

"I'm standing outside the building," she said. "We need to talk, now."

"I don't have time for this." Irritation darkened his voice.

"I think you do." Again, her voice cheery. "The police are looking for you, Bill. I told them you were at the house. But I'm guessing they'll figure out the truth soon enough. You might have an hour, if you're lucky."

A pause. "Godamnit. What are you playing at, Ellen?"

"I'll tell you. But not over the phone."

Bill came to the doors a few minutes later and led her back to the office. His hands were shaking, rubbing together. He kept clearing his throat. When he got to the office, he turned off the lights, as if afraid that someone else would drive up and know that he was in here. Security lights from the pit found their way into the room, catching his face in shadow.

"The police are looking for me? Don't tell me that Pardo—"

"Yeah, your friend was going to stab you in the back. He was going to blackmail you for a few million dollars. Something about buying back his land in El Salvador."

"I could never trust him again. Not after Costa Rica. Not after the way he turned on my brother so quickly. I mean, I didn't have a choice. I had to save the company. But why did Pardo care? Why wouldn't he have defended his friend?"

"Odd, isn't it?"

Bill turned, apparently missing the irony in her voice. "What did he tell the police?"

"He didn't tell them anything. I said he was going to stab you in the back. But he didn't. I'm the one who told the police, Bill. And I turned over a file with photos,

contact numbers at the hospital in Neily, Costa Rica. I gave them the names of Ernesto and Tomás Solorio, and how to find them in Agujitas. I gave them a copy of Davis's file from Riverwood. I gave them medical records from St. Luke's in Boston. And I gave them this."

She handed over the blow-ups of the burned out trailer near Hancock. Bill looked at them with visible alarm.

"They've probably already sealed off the crime scene. Damn tricky, I've heard, to burn a human body. There are always bone chips, teeth. Other identifiable remains."

Bill was sputtering. "But you...you're guilty too. The police—"

She gave a deliberate shrug. "Sure, I'm expecting hard questions, but I'm guessing a plea bargain will be valuable. And it's not like I killed anyone. What I'm guilty of is keeping my mouth shut too long. They'll forgive that crime. To get to the murderer."

"But why?"

"You think I'd forget? You think that because I was young or that it's been over twenty-five years that I'd forget what you did to me?"

"You're talking about that day at Moose Hollow?"

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. You knew what you were doing. You sent me to park on that mudslide and you knew it was unstable. I've thought about it a million times. The company was mine, and you cheated me."

Bill said, "Why should Dad have given it to you? Because you're the oldest? You couldn't have run Northrock, Ellen. You know it and I know it. For one, you're a woman. Those construction guys never respected you. If you don't have their respect, you've got nothing."

"Go to hell. I could have and I would have. And I would have done just as good a job as you." She shook her head. "But that's not why I'm doing this. I'm doing this because of my son."

"Wes?"

"Eric, you moron. It's your fault he's the way he is."

"My fault?"

She burned at his ignorance. All this anger, all these years of hating her brother, and he was worse than uncaring. He was oblivious. "We didn't have insurance. Did you know that? So goddamn poor that we were fighting the doctors every step of the childbirth to save a few bucks. No epidural, because it's too expensive. If we'd done what we were told—which I would have, damn it, if I could have afforded it—I would've taken the emergency C-section when the doctor told me. Instead, I told him to wait. Because I couldn't afford it."

"That's your fault," Bill said. "Yours and that worthless husband of yours. It didn't take a job at Northrock to give you insurance. One of you needed a job with benefits. Could have been any job."

She knew it. And she'd blamed herself, blamed her husband, Jim, and even blamed Wes for taking so long to be born. But it all came down to the way Bill had sabotaged her at Moose Hollow. Only twenty-seven years old, under the watchful eye of her elderly father, testing her, seeing if she could handle the work. She'd failed and her father's faith in her collapsed. Hadn't everything else been inevitable?

"I'm done arguing," Ellen said. "I've told you what I've done and why. All that's left is for you to squirm like a gaffed fish. Good luck, brother."

"How do you know I won't just kill you now?" Bill asked. "What have I got to lose?"

"Two reasons. First, I don't think you're capable. You couldn't finish off Davis, and you couldn't take care of Rosa when the time came. Yes, Pardo told me you left him to do it. And you wouldn't have the guts to kill me, either."

"This is different." He took a step toward her. "I can kill you right now. Pardo will back me up. Nobody will know any difference, only that you disappeared. Hell, you might even look guilty. Like you ran."

He was nervous, jumpy, but Ellen wasn't afraid. Her hand had slipped into her purse as Bill spoke. Her fingers now wrapped around the handle of a .38 pistol, which she removed. "This is the other reason."

Her voice, so calm. Inside, she was bursting with fierce joy that she'd come back and done this thing. She'd rehearsed this moment so many times in her mind that she knew that if necessary she would lift the gun and shoot him in the head.

Bill stopped, took a step backwards. He stared at the gun. "You'd do that?"

"Oh, happily. You'd deserve it. In fact, I'm almost hoping you make a move. I've practiced with this thing enough. I'm more than a little curious about how well I'll handle it under pressure."

His shoulders slumped as if he knew he were defeated. "But what am I going to do?"

"That's up to you," she said. She allowed a smile, although she felt her joy fading, even in her moment of triumph and revenge. "I know how I handled it, when I was stabbed in the back." She looked out the window at the equipment lit up by the security lights. "But it'll hurt like hell for you, seeing all this stuff sold off. Once you're arrested and I file my claims in court, company business will grind to a halt. No new bids, you can count on that. And any existing clients with half a brain will start calling around. Your competitors will be delighted to pick over the corpse, including poaching your best men."

She pointed to the gravel crusher and separator. "Remember when that guy threw himself into the crusher? Dad said it was his best foreman. Can't remember what that was about. Did his wife leave him or something? Anyway, that'd be a way to go. Over in a few seconds. Might even become part of one of the roads. That's a funny thought."

Ellen turned to go, leaving her brother staring out the window. She felt deflated. No matter what Bill did now, she had taken her revenge. There was nothing left.

When she was climbing into her car, a few minutes later, she heard the crank of machinery coming to life. The conveyor belt crawling away from the crusher. A machine that pulverized stone could do the same with bones.

Chapter 25

Wes and Becca walked down the hall until they were out of sight of the nurse's station, but could still see the door to Team Smile's room. One of the elderly residents shuffled to the bathroom, muttering to herself. Wes saw Becca watching, unable to help herself, to make sure the woman made it to the bathroom and back without help. He remembered her cynical tirades about Riverwood and the futility of working with these people. Her actions belied those words.

"Let me see that card," Becca said.

He handed over the index card where he'd written Davis's message, or the part of it that they'd captured.

"DRP?" she said. "He must be getting tired if he's skipping vowels."

"What does it mean?" Wes asked. "Drop? Drop something?"

"We might have messed up a letter. That P might be an O."

"Which could leave us with 'drown.' He might want to talk about what happened." He thought about that fumbled end of the sentence. "Maybe that bit where it looked like he was saying the end of the sentence was a letter that we missed. Where was that? After the D or after the R?"

"After the R. But we're not going to figure it out with three letters. We've got to get back in there. What's taking Dr. Pardo so long?" She chewed on her fingernail.

"Maybe we should have just told him," Wes said. "We could have shown him how my uncle was blinking, and then we wouldn't have had to sneak him out of here. You think we could trust him, don't you?"

"Yeah, probably. Come on," she muttered. "His eye is fine."

Wes looked down at the card, and suddenly thought of that fumbled double blink that they'd dismissed. Supposing he put it back in there. That would leave DR.P.

He looked up at Becca with a frown and a nervous tickle at his stomach. "Where is Dr. Pardo from anyway? Is that a Persian name?"

"No. You mean you didn't recognize the accent?"

The nervous tickle spread. "It's not much of an accent. Please don't tell me he's from Costa Rica."

She looked from the door to meet his gaze and her own frown deepened. "No, I think it's El Salvador. He... wait. You don't think—"

Wes lifted the card to show her. "Put a period between the DR and the P."

"Dr. Pardo."

It made sense, now. Wes had seen his uncle and Pardo walking down the hall that day. And who was that doctor anyway, who'd made arrangements with the Solorios? Uncle Bill would have needed a doctor again, when they'd flown Davis via air ambulance to the United States. Someone to declare him dead and create false medical records for Chad Lett. Pardo, a doctor and a Spanish speaker, could have made things happen in both Costa Rica and the United States.

Wes and Becca started toward the door to Team Smile's room. But at that moment it swung open and Pardo came out. His hand was in his pocket. He looked and met their eyes and reversed course, headed in a swift walk instead toward the west wing exit.

"Stop him," Wes cried. Pardo ran. Anne Wistrom stared from the nurse station, eyes wide, as he and Becca chased the doctor. Wes caught the man by the

shoulders as he reached the doors. Pardo turned with a snarl and slammed his fist into the side of Wes's head. He fell back, ears ringing.

"You son of a bitch," Wes said, grabbing again. The man stumbled through the doorway and down the stairs with Wes holding his lab coat. They tripped and landed sprawling in the snow. Both men came up swinging.

And then Becca joined them, grabbing Pardo's right arm and holding it while Wes swung glancing blows. One of them finally connected with Pardo's nose and a shock rolled through Wes's arm. Blood streamed down Pardo's face onto his white coat and the snow.

Ann Wistrom burst through the doors. She was a tall woman, strongly built, and she dragged Becca back from the doctor. "What the hell are you doing?"

Pardo tried to reach his feet, but Wes grabbed him around the legs and pulled him down again.

"Stop the doctor," Becca said. She tried to free herself from Wistrom.

Wes was almost spent, but Pardo couldn't land any of his own blows, either.

"What are you talking about? Why?" Wistrom's voice was hysterical.

"He's euthanizing residents," Becca cried.

Wes got on top and leaned in with his elbow, pressing into Pardo's throat. Pardo panted. Blood trickled from a cut on his face.

"You're out of your mind," Pardo said. "I was checking his eye, you idiots."

Wistrom let go of Becca who threw herself on top of the doctor's kicking legs. A moment later and the two of them had him pinned in place.

The nurse studied something on the ground. She bent to pick it up. It was a bottle of medicine. "This is digoxin." She looked at Pardo. "And it's empty. Were you giving this to one of the residents?"

"Digoxin? What does that mean?" Becca asked.

"That's not mine," Pardo said.

"Like hell it isn't," Wistrom said. "I saw it fall out of your pocket." To the others, she said, "A whole bottle of this stuff is lethal. It'll stop your heart. We need an ambulance right away."

"We'll hold him here," Wes said. He rummaged through the man's lab coat, but only found a pair of keys. The fight had left him wiped out. "And call the police too. Hurry."

Becca lifted herself partially and came down on Pardo's groin with her knee. He cried. She said. "That's for Rosa. You're the one who killed her, aren't you?"

* * * * *

Two weeks earlier, Bill Carter had parked in front of the trailer where Dr. Pardo waited for him. The trailer sat propped on cinderblocks, near Hancock at the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest. Northrock was regrading Route 125 over the Green Mountains in the spring; they'd moved a construction trailer that fall to do some preliminary surveying and left it there for the next year's work.

Pardo had driven down earlier in the evening and found it unlocked as Carter had promised. He flipped on the lights in the front room. The inside was bare except for a folding table, a pair of chairs, and a couch. Nothing in the bedroom. The floor throughout was fake wood linoleum, heavily scuffed. The walls, wood

paneling. The trailer held the odor of stale cigarette smoke and it was cold. He returned to wait in his car with the heat running.

The lights from Bill's car had awakened Pardo from a semi-slumber and he stepped into the night air, feet crunching on the snow, to greet his old friend. Bill Carter looked grim. He popped his trunk. And there was Rosa, still alive, her wrists taped behind her back and tape wrapped around her face, covering her mouth. She stared at him with bugging eyes.

Dr. Pardo looked away. "Thought you were going to take care of her."

"I was. Soon as I got on Route 100, I was going to pull over and shoot her. But it took forever until that nurse took her break and I could move my brother back to his room. By the time I got back to the car my blood had cooled. In more ways than one."

"So what? You want to burn her alive?"

Bill made a face. "Of course not. No need to torture her. But I'm wondering if you could take care of her for me."

"After you're gone, of course." Pardo thought of that day at the hacienda and the men he'd shot in the head or hacked to death with a machete. This would be different. He had no stomach for it.

Bill nodded. "Give me a couple of minutes until I get back on 125. Then take care of her and leave her inside when you burn the trailer. This place is so wooded and isolated, nobody will see the fire. And it's dark, so they won't see smoke, either."

Pardo understood more about the decomposition of the human body than his friend. "Doesn't matter if the trailer burns to the ground, Bill, any decent investigator will find bone fragments and teeth."

"Nobody will be up here for two months. I'll make sure the road to the trailer won't be plowed again till spring. Just in case. I'll come up to check out the job site in April, discover the arson, then have my guys clean up the wreckage. We'll haul in another trailer. This piece of junk is worth what? Couple thousand bucks? Why even bother reporting it to the police?"

The two men shook hands on it. Pardo grabbed Rosa under the arms, Bill her legs and they hauled her into the trailer and threw her on the couch. He remembered those campesinos in Peru when the Shining Path guerillas had pulled their bus over and lined them up outside. They'd known they were going to die, yet they hadn't moved a muscle.

Rosa was the same way, now. She watched them, unmoving, as they took cans of gas from Pardo's car and splashed it throughout the interior of the trailer until the linoleum floor was slick and the fumes were so thick Pardo felt nauseous. And still she didn't move, just lay there, trembling, now turning her nose into the couch away from the smell. She was a smart girl. She would understand what they meant to do to her. Hell, they'd spoken aloud.

What was it that made these people incapable of acting? Was it their Catholic upbringing, teaching them they were helpless without God? That whatever happened was His will? Or was it nothing more than cowardice?

They soaked her clothes with gasoline and poured the rest into the couch. A moment later, they were outside and Pardo took deep, cold breaths to clear the

awful smell of gasoline. He got a box of matches from his car and Bill retrieved the gun. He handed it to Pardo. "You'll shoot her before you light the fire, right?"

"Of course."

"You're sure? Because she's not—"

Pardo lost his temper. "You want to be sure? You want to do it yourself? No? Then shut up."

Bill nodded. "Right. Sorry." He returned to his car.

You owe me, Pardo thought as he watched Bill turn his car around and ease his way down the road. Again.

He almost lost his courage as he stepped toward the trailer. He didn't want to kill Rosa. Maybe he could just threaten her, tell her to leave the country or else. That would mean doublecrossing Bill, but he'd half decided to do that anyway.

No, that wouldn't work. Because she'd made that horrifying discovery. Davis Carter was still conscious inside his body. She'd told Pardo, explained how he'd blinked in response to her questions and again. Pardo believed her. And when he'd talked to Bill they'd agreed. They needed to silence Davis before he could communicate with anyone else. Blind him, then kill him, if that didn't work.

Rosa had told Pardo and when he hadn't done anything, had told her, in fact, to keep her mouth shut, she'd gone to Bill Carter. Who would she tell next? And so Bill and Pardo had made a second agreement. They'd make Rosa disappear.

Pardo pushed the box of matches into his left pocket, then lifted the gun with sweaty hands and pushed open the door. Go in, pop, pop. Light the match. He'd be in his car in sixty seconds. But when he stepped into the trailer Rosa was gone. He could still see the indentation where she'd lain on the couch, the cushions slowly rebounding to their previous shape.

Pardo rushed through the trailer. There was a back door in the darkened bedroom, now wide open. He'd seen it when they'd dumped their gas. He'd been so convinced of Rosa's helplessness that it hadn't occurred to him she might try to escape with her wrists and mouth taped.

There were no stairs on this back side, just a drop of several feet. He looked down and was confused to see no mark in the snow where she'd landed. There wasn't much light spilling out, but he'd expected to see footprints, too. Too late, he understood.

Movement behind him. He turned, just as Rosa slammed into him with her shoulder. She hadn't left at all, but had thrown open the door and then waited in the shadows against the far wall. The blow knocked him off-balance and he went flying. He landed in the snow.

Pardo should have run around the far side to catch her coming out the front door, but his mind wasn't working fast enough and he hoisted himself back into the trailer before thinking of it. Several more seconds passed before he found her footprints running at an angle from the front of the trailer into the woods. Pardo ran back to his car to get a flashlight out of the glove compartment.

He followed her footprints through the snow. She crashed through the trees maybe sixty or seventy feet ahead. The odor of gasoline lingered where she'd passed. Before long, he grew confused, having accidentally doubled over on his trail and now started retracing his own footsteps. He stopped, listened. The crashing came from his right this time. He followed.

Rosa moved faster than he'd have expected with her mouth and wrists taped. She headed away from the highway. On a cold night like this, without gloves or a heavy coat Pardo could get in real trouble if he got lost. What about Rosa, wearing nothing but jeans and a scrub top with no flashlight? And that gas soaking her clothes would evaporate and chill her further. Pardo lifted his gun and fired several shots shouting, "I'm going to kill you, bitch."

He listened until he was satisfied that she continued to run away from the road. It was already below ten degrees. It would probably bottom out at ten below before the night was over. Rosa might have an hour or two before she collapsed from hypothermia. Some hiker might find her after the snow melted. Fine. That just meant Pardo had to leave the country by spring. He thought about Bill Carter and how best to extract what he deserved from the man.

Pardo had returned to the trailer and set it on fire. Flames shot into the sky, so hot that he had to keep stepping farther back and snow melted and ran in rivulets down the hill. He got in the Mercedes and drove down the hill, wondering if even now Rosa had collapsed in the snow, gasping through her nose, trying to work free the tape at her mouth.

Chapter 26

The police arrived at Riverwood and arrested Dr. Pardo. An ambulance came for Davis Carter. Wes wanted to go with his uncle, but Lieutenant Stiles insisted he and Becca come to the station to answer questions. Though it was late at night, the place bustled with officers from Waterbury Village as well as state troopers. Stiles interrogated them for two hours before sending them home. They were not to leave Vermont under any circumstances.

They drove straight to the hospital to see Wes's uncle. Paramedics had taken him to Barre, about twenty minutes away, and with the empty bottle of digoxin as guide, had treatment waiting for his arrival. The overdose of digoxin would have shorted out the electrical signals to Davis's heart, but the doctors set him on an IV of digibind, to counteract the digoxin as it hit his bloodstream. They hadn't even needed to pump his stomach.

Wes called his Aunt Charlotte and she was at the hospital forty-five minutes later, dressed in sweats, a t-shirt, and wearing her glasses. Her fiancé, Christopher, came with her, looking slightly more together. Christopher stayed outside while Charlotte cried over Davis, apologizing again and again. Wes and Becca told her about their system with the cards and she set about at once to emulate it.

"What about the fiancé?" Becca asked Wes later, when the two had retreated to the cafeteria for coffee and pastries. "I talked to him for a few minutes and I've got to tell you I liked him."

"I don't know. It's a mess."

And what about Northrock? With her husband declared dead, Charlotte had sold Davis's shares to Uncle Bill, but presumably, Bill would be arrested and charged with all sorts of crimes.

Over the next few days, between talks with his mother's lawyers, the police, and what the newspapers and television media reported, Wes pieced together what was going on with the police investigation.

After Wes's mother confessed her role in faking Davis's death, together with her fear about the murder of Rosa Solorio, the police had moved swiftly to arrest Bill Carter. He had not been at his house, nor at work, though they'd found his car, together with a running gravel crusher at the Northrock quarry. Ellen Pilson thought he might have killed himself. They found the bodies of Yamila Delgado and Carolina Cruz in a shed on Bill Carter's property.

Within twenty-four hours they had charged Dr. Pardo with a host of crimes: murder, attempted murder, conspiracy, unlawful imprisonment, insurance fraud, and medical malpractice being just the beginning. Two days later, they added charges for first degree murder in the cases of Yamila and Carolina.

They filed charges of insurance fraud, unlawful imprisonment, and conspiracy against Ellen Pilson, but Wes's dad told him her lawyers were hard at work on a plea bargain. A warrant was put out for Bill Carter's arrest, even as investigators sifted through crushed gravel for bone chips. More investigators searched the burned out wreckage of a trailer east of Hancock for the remains of Rosa Solorio.

And then, two weeks later, Rosa turned up. Alive. Seems that Pardo had tried to kill her, but she'd escaped and headed home for Costa Rica. But she didn't have a passport, and had been afraid to return to her apartment. Afraid, even, to call her family and tell them she was okay. After hiking out of the mountains and finding someone willing to pick up a cold, hypothermic hitchhiker on Route 125, Rosa used the money on her to buy a bus ticket for Texas. She picked up temporary work in Houston, then crossed into Mexico. The borders in Central America were trickier to navigate, but she'd eventually found her way to Agujitas, where she surprised her no-doubt overjoyed father and brother.

Rosa agreed to return to the United States and testify.

And an investigation flowed in the opposite direction, as well. One of Dr. Pardo's sons washed ashore near Drake, half-eaten by sharks. His other son was the prime suspect in the murder of Javier and Maritza Lopez. He had not used his return flight to the United States and Costa Rican police were still searching for him in Central America. Wes and Becca had spoken several times on the telephone with investigators and might have to fly to Costa Rica to testify if they caught James Pardo.

Back in the United States, as life slowly returned to normal, Charlotte stayed with her fiancé. It was romantic to think of her returning to Davis's side, but she'd made a new life for herself. Christopher was a good man and it was clear she loved him. Wes wondered if she would have left Christopher if Davis had pushed, but he had not. He must have seen what forcing Charlotte to give up Christopher would do to them, what sort of marriage would remain for the two of them in the end.

But still, Wes didn't want to think too hard about what both his uncle and his aunt must be feeling: despair, guilt, regret.

* * * * *

The single-level ranch-style house was not so big as Charlotte's above Stowe, but situated on the west side of the Green Mountains it had a fantastic view across Lake Champlain to the Adirondacks in New York State. Wes thought the view would look even better once the leaves filled in on the trees; right now, they were just budding. Men worked on the roof, installing solar panels.

Wes parked the car and he and Eric walked toward the front door. The long, cold Vermont winter had come to an end and the air was green, cool, and clean. It was only sixty degrees, but sunny, and Wes wore a t-shirt. Eric wore a long-sleeve shirt buttoned all the way to the collar.

Wes had signed his brother out of Riverwood that afternoon. Once things had settled down with the court stuff, he'd tried to move Eric to a place in Burlington, but to his surprise, his brother wanted nothing to do with it. He had friends at Riverwood. Routine. Becca had been right about that all along; Eric's injuries and incidents had been random. Not abuse.

"You remember Uncle Davis, right?" Wes asked.

"Of course, Wussy."

"Well, he's different. Kind of like those people in wheelchairs at Riverwood."

"Okay."

He'd tried to explain, actually, but Eric didn't quite grasp how Davis had been living in Riverwood, but with a different name, and now they thought he didn't need to live there anymore. Mostly, Eric was upset that he wouldn't see his mother for a long time, and complained every time Wes saw him.

Becca greeted him at the door. She wore a black skirt that stopped above her knees and a black top that cut down at the neck to show a hint of cleavage. She looked fantastic.

"Becca!" Eric cried.

She gave Eric a big hug. Another for Wes. "Hi Eric, hi Wussy," she added with a teasing smile. "I'm so glad to see you. Come in."

Wes stepped into the foyer and admired the framed photographs hanging on the walls, mostly dive pictures, but also some of the Vermont mountains during winter, summer, and foliage season. She'd hung another copy of the picture of Wes with the hammerheads and smiled when she saw him admiring it.

"Those are huge," Becca said. "Thank god I didn't see any of those when we were swimming toward the island."

"These are hammerheads. Ours were white tips, which are much more aggressive."

"So you say."

She led him back to the living room. Uncle Davis sat in his chair, facing the back windows, which overlooked a pasture and the foothills of the Green Mountains. Two horses grazed in the pasture. There were men out back, too, building some kind of stone wall that bisected the stream bed.

An audio book played on the stereo. Something with archaic language, filled with French names like Danglars and Villefort. Becca turned it off and turned Davis to face the others.

"What's that?" Wes asked, pointing to the wall going up in the pasture.

“We got a permit to dam the stream and set up a micro-hydro station,” Becca said. “Davis wants to go totally off-grid. Micro-hydro and solar nine months of the year, with a wood boiler in winter.”

“What, no cold fusion power plant?”

A laptop sat on a tray in front of his uncle’s chair, and a few seconds later, a voice answered from the speakers, “Maybe next year.”

“Wow, that’s great,” Wes said. Becca had told him about the system over the phone, but it still surprised him to see it in action. A camera propped atop the laptop screen read tiny flickers in Davis’s left eye as they moved from letter to letter. The software “guessed” words based on a sophisticated algorithm that could learn from past mistakes. Becca said it was 95 percent accurate.

“Everything all settled with Northrock, Uncle Davis?”

“Yes,” Davis said, via his computer. “Northrock gone.” Pause. “Very sad. Dad’s life work.”

“The lawyers finished picking over the corpse last week,” Becca said.

Business had ground to a halt during the legal wrangling. Until Bill could be proven dead, his shares were tied up. Davis had recovered a slight majority once they’d proven he was still alive, but by then, and with the company decapitated by Bill’s departure and Davis’s severe handicap and lengthy absence, Davis had sold it to a competitor based out of Philadelphia before its value could erode further. Even at fifty cents on the dollar, however, Davis had seen money out of the sale, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars.

“Thank you,” Davis said. “You saved my life. In more than one way.”

Wes didn’t know what to say, as any answer sounded wrong as soon as it occurred to him. At last, he said, “You’re welcome.”

“It’s great to see you, Wes,” Becca said, seeming to catch his discomfort. She walked toward the kitchen. “You guys want something to drink?”

“I’m all set, thanks.”

“I want root beer,” Eric said. He stood at the window, rocking, watching the horses. “Two root beers.”

“Is Coke okay?”

“No Coke. No Coke.”

They finally settled on Sprite, then Becca showed them around, finishing with the home theater system built by the former owners. Eric was quite taken with it, even more so when Becca produced his favorite movie, *Ratatouille*. He clapped when the DVD menu came on and wore a big grin at the first glimpse of clown fish.

“Watch the movie, Eric,” Becca said. “I’ve got meatloaf in the oven for lunch. How does that sound?”

“Meatloaf! I love meatloaf!”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Does it have pig snouts in it?” Wes asked.

Eric roared. “Pig snouts!”

“Men,” Becca said. “I swear, you guys never outgrow the gross-out jokes, do you?”

Becca put a hand on Wes’s arm as they walked back to the front room. “I mean it, Wes. It’s really great to see you.”

“You, too.”

He hadn't seen her since the trial and even then, the prosecution had asked that they not spend time together without someone from the district attorney's office present.

Vermont had a death penalty. It was rarely implemented, but the two murdered immigrant women and the attempted murder of a well-known citizen of the state seemed tailor-made for the ultimate punishment. As the evidence mounted against Pardo, the DA had approached with a plea bargain. Pardo accepted consecutive life sentences. Wes's mother pled her way to eighteen months plus probation. She probably deserved more. Wes didn't know what had happened or why she'd gone along, but suspected it had more to do with money or the ugly business with Grandpa Carter than with being afraid of her brother, Bill, as she'd claimed. It was depressing to lose his faith in his mother.

“You figure things out at Harvard?” she asked. She wheeled Davis to the couch, turned him to face it and sat down opposite. Wes sat on the other side of the couch.

“Dr. Sizemore loved my paper. I still have to defend it before the committee to get my credit. My other class... well, Caliari is a jerk, but I might pull a gentleman's C from civil procedures class, if I'm lucky. Got an incomplete at the moment.”

“Cool.”

“So you live here, now?”

“Yeah, I have my own room. And my own kitchen. Someone else comes in and does the cooking and cleaning. Others for PT, massage, all that kind of stuff. There are half a dozen full-time employees, counting me. But that's just a start. You wouldn't believe how hard Davis works. Every morning he's got about fifty things to go over.”

“He's a Carter,” Wes said. “Nobody ever said we didn't know how to work. What're you guys thinking about?”

Becca said, “Just to start, he's working on a petition to collect signatures from fellow sufferers of locked-in syndrome in favor of stem cell research. You wouldn't believe how many there are. And those are just the known sufferers. To find the rest, we're starting an advocacy group to search nursing homes and other long-term care facilities for other people suffering the same condition. Even if you can't move a single muscle, they can give you a CT scan, ask questions, and determine how awake you are.”

“We'll find them all,” Davis said.

“Once that's rolling,” Becca said. “Davis wants to write a memoir. He's already taken calls from people trying to buy his story, but he doesn't exactly need the money, know what I mean? He'd rather tell it in his own way. After that, we're going to concentrate on the alt-energy stuff. We've got a lot of ideas, and the money to do it.”

“What about Rosa?”

“I think we've got that worked out. She's coming back next week on a tourist visa, but we had a meeting last week with Barry Flanders and he's going to pull some strings to get her a green card.”

Flanders was Vermont's socialist senator and a big fan of alternative energy. Wes didn't always agree with the man's politics, but Flanders was a straight shooter who said what he meant and did what he said.

"We're going to get her into UVM," Becca said. "It won't be short or easy, but medical school is Rosa's dream. And I think she'll be a good doctor. We can use doctors."

"Need more doctors," Davis said through his computer. "Sorry, too slow. Redundant."

Becca smiled. "I was just speaking your words, anyway, Davis. Besides, you're twice as fast as before. Couple more months and you'll be completing my thoughts."

Wes looked around, at the bright, high-ceilinged room, at his uncle. And at Becca, her cynicism from Riverwood left behind. It was a perfect set-up for both of them.

"I'm envious."

"How envious?" the computer intoned.

"Sounds a hell of a lot more exciting than law school." He looked Davis in the eyes, something that he still found difficult. With no movement in the face, he had to constantly remind himself that the man was there, always listening and participating.

Becca, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at ease around the handicapped man. She asked Davis, "What do you think? Can he hack it?"

"Maybe," Davis said.

"Can I hack what?"

"We want to offer you a job," Becca said. "Part-time until you graduate. Full-time, after that."

"Always need lawyers, too," Davis said. "You study medical law, right?"

"Yes, that's the angle that interests me. Patient advocacy, specifically."

"Perfect," Davis said.

Together, they explained more. Their plans were ambitious, but Becca seemed supremely confident and in spite of his uncle's near total paralysis and the slow way he had to express his thoughts, there was no question Davis knew what he was talking about.

The slow pace of conversation while waiting for Davis's answer was something else Wes had to get used to. When his uncle finished he said, "I like the idea, but can I think about it?" He looked at Becca. "Maybe you can tell me a little more what you're looking for, specifically."

"Sure, I'll put something together." Becca glanced back and forth between Davis and Wes. "Speaking of thinking about stuff." She stood and wheeled Davis back toward the window, then drew the blinds. Wes could see the man's face reflected off the inside of the window. She whispered something to Davis.

Wes frowned when she returned, not sure what this was about. "What do you mean, thinking about stuff?"

She sat next to him on the couch, closer this time. "About what you said in Costa Rica. At the waterfall."

"Oh. You mean the so-called banter?"

“Wes, it was the wrong time. Okay, so sitting in a gorgeous tropical pool with a waterfall is damn sexy. Yeah, I wanted you right then. I wanted you all over me. In me.”

He glanced toward his uncle. “Uhm, did you forget something? Or someone?”

“Forget about him for a moment.” Over her shoulder, “Sorry, Davis. Just for awhile, okay?” She smiled. “I disconnected his computer.”

“I’m not worried about what he’ll say.”

She ignored him. “So, we’re sitting next to each other on the couch, just like you told me that day in Costa Rica. I’m not wearing a smock, and we’re not at Riverwood, but what I want to know is if you’re still fantasizing about me, like you promised.”

“You have no idea.”

“That’s all the answer I need.” She rose to her feet, pulled off her black top and unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor. And there she stood in her underwear and he wanted her more than ever.

“You love green, don’t you?”

She smiled. “You don’t think they’re hot?”

“Very hot.” He glanced again toward the man in the wheelchair. If he could see the man’s face reflected in the window, then surely Davis could see them.

“Forget about Davis for now, okay?” A smart-ass grin crossed her face. “Beside, I’m just doing my job.”

“What job?”

“My job is to give Davis back his life. Can’t do everything, but I can help him live a little. Vicariously, when all else fails. Believe me, he doesn’t want me to change the channel.” She must have seen the look of doubt on Wes’s face. “You’re okay with this, right Davis?” she asked over her shoulder.

No answer.

“See,” she said. “He’s not complaining.”

“You disconnected his computer, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said brightly. “We’ll have to assume it’s a yes, then.”

Becca straddled his lap and pushed him back into the couch. She leaned close and he could smell her. Her hair brushed against his face and her lips were centimeters from his. “Question, Wes. What were you thinking when I crawled into bed next to you that night at Casa Guacamaya?”

“That you were sexy as hell and I wanted you.”

“That’s what I thought. So what happened?”

He laughed. “You turned me down, remember?”

“Come on, Wes. I was already half-naked when I climbed into bed.”

“You said you were scared, then you started chatting about work.”

It was her turn to laugh. “Fair enough. So, what’s it going to be? Did you change your mind, or do you still want me?”

“And this is a fair question to ask while you’re half-naked in my lap?”

“Of course. See, I have a certain answer I want to hear. I figure the half-naked bit tilts the odds in my favor.”

He’d heard something else in her voice, just a hint, but it was there. Doubt. Fear. Vulnerability. “You’re trembling,” he whispered in her ear.

“I’m nervous as hell,” she whispered back.

“You sure fooled me,” he said.

“Just acting confident because I want to be confident.”

“Well, I’m nervous too,” Wes said. “The answer is yes, I still feel the same. I’ve been thinking about you almost non-stop.” He hesitated, feeling himself swept along in the moment, but afraid of saying too much. “I think I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Becca pulled back. “Do you mean that? Really? I mean, already?”

“You might have noticed that I’m the kind of guy who makes quick decisions. I see what I want and I go for it.”

“I’ve noticed. But, I’m sorry. Can you say that one more time?” Her face was flush, her eyes large.

“I love you, Becca.”

“Thank you.” She kissed him. “Now will you quit messing around and make love to me? Now?”

He answered with his hands, his mouth, and his body. They came together, hands fumbling for clothing, shortly naked. Ratatouille was an hour and fifty minutes, he knew from long, long experience. He wanted every minute of that time.

Epilogue

The gringo looked soft and middle-aged. And dressed like a tourist, in jeans and a t-shirt. He labored his way up the road to the job site with a cloud of dust hanging about his head. José María Rivera mopped his face with his handkerchief and shouted at a couple of men with wheelbarrows to get back to work. He could see fifteen, twenty others who’d set down their shovels, picks, or wheelbarrows to watch the gringo.

“Busco trabajo,” the man said. I’m looking for work.

Rivera was six weeks behind schedule. His engineer had gone to Lima three weeks ago to get married, then never returned, and one of his surveyors had cut himself, developed tetanus, and was in the hospital. His work crews kept threatening to strike. Rivera didn’t need some pendejo—what, maybe a reporter?—slumming for a story about the terrible labor conditions in Peru.

“You’re kidding me. Look at you, gasping for air. What good can you possibly do me?”

“That’s just the altitude, I’ll adjust, and I’ll get in better physical shape.” His Spanish was very good. “I know how to build roads.”

“Yeah? You build a lot of roads in the United States?”

“I built roads that would make this one look like a child’s footpath.”

“That’s no good here,” Rivera said. “We work by muscle and sweat, not machinery. And up here, in the Andes, I lose men every month. These are men who know the mountains. They’ve been swinging a machete or a pickaxe since they were two years old. If it’s that dangerous for them, what’s it going to be like for a fat Norteamericano?”

"That doesn't matter. A road is a road. I'm a civil engineer by training and I know everything there is to know about roads. Everything."

"Yeah? Can you survey?"

"Of course."

"Determine the property of a vertical curve?"

"Anything short of calculus I can do in my head," the gringo said, and it did not come across as a boast.

"How about manage a work crew?"

"Any crew under me will get its work done in half the time."

"We'll see. What's your name, gringo?"

"Call me Guillermo."

"Funny name for a gringo."

"I'm a funny sort of gringo."

And Rivera would be buggered, but the gringo could work. Guillermo rose before the laborers and he did his calculations, graphs, and maps by kerosene lantern after the others had gone to their tents for the night. His work crews didn't double their productivity, they tripled it. He took ten dollars a day in pay, but demanded a fifty percent pay raise for his laborers. Rivera gave it to them. Within two months, the road had stretched five miles toward the remote village of Santa Elena de las Montañas. Another three miles and the driving time from Cuzco would be cut from four hours to ninety minutes.

Guillermo himself never talked about his past. He ate by himself and when the other men got drunk to celebrate their paychecks, and someone pulled out a pan flute and another a guitar, the gringo would sit to one side, his mood as dark and brooding as the mountains that surrounded the camp. Sometimes Rivera overheard him muttering to himself in English. But when he worked, he seemed to forget his past and what had brought him to Peru and Rivera didn't press him.

And then one day Guillermo didn't come up the mountain with the rest of the crew. Rivera drove his pickup into camp, worried that the man was sick or injured, or perhaps had just tired of the job and moved on. The camp was above the tree line, tucked between the mountain and an outcrop of rock to provide protection from the wind. Guillermo had placed his tent outside the outcrop, behind a boulder. It gave him some of the same benefits with more isolation.

As soon as Rivera stepped around that boulder, he knew something was wrong. Guillermo's tent flapped in the wind, its poles down. Papers blew over the edge of the mountain and his clothes lay in the dirt. Rivera approached the tent cautiously. The flysheet flapped up to reveal two protruding legs, one bent at an odd angle. And lots of blood.

Rivera would never learn who had tracked the gringo into the mountains to hack him to death with a machete. Guillermo had a fat wad of hundred dollar bills hidden in the lining of his sleeping bag, but the money was untouched. So were his other possessions. Someone had stripped the gringo's shirt and carved the word "veganza"—revenge—into the man's flesh. Most curiously, the killer had stuffed the heel end of a swim flipper into Guillermo's mouth and there was a flexible black hose wrapped around his neck.

Rivera didn't like what he'd discovered, but it was a lie to say that he felt more sorry for the gringo than for himself. He could not easily replace Guillermo's skills,

yet somehow, Rivera had to keep the project moving forward. And so he ordered his men to bury the gringo's body and divided up the found American dollars to buy their silence. The last thing he could afford was the authorities driving out from Cuzco to look into the death of a foreigner.

Because Rivera still had a road to build. He thought Guillermo would understand.

