

**Genaro L. Zamora's**

**"The Found"**

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Dear reader,

First off, I give my personal thanks to you for showing interest in my works. It is a fun experience for both you and me to kick back and take part of a story. With that being said, let me tell you, that this is a short tale, different than many other novels that are almost three times longer.

I chose to keep this story as an enjoyable fast paced read in where hopefully, you can visualize it as if it were a movie excluding too many details, fattening the story and making it drag.

This tale is of a darker, suspenseful genre. I hope you enjoy it, and I would love to hear your opinions on it, rather you love, like, or hate it. Your opinion is important to me. So now, let me step out of the way, allow the characters to take the scene, and carry you through a shiver in which you are about to experience.

Hope you enjoy.  
Genaro L. Zamora  
(Niyorco)

*Beneath the moon and upon the earth,  
caw the birds who carry souls.  
Upon the earth, are those who crawl  
and await the call,  
of the caw.  
To find their peace,  
in which they yearn.  
For being doomed,  
and damned their turn.....*

*..... Genaro*

# Prologue

The scream of sirens roused him. He opened his eyes, slow and painful, and could see flashing blurs of red and blue emergency lights come into focus. He could feel something wet trickling up the side of his head. *Blood*, he thought with panic rising in his chest. It didn't make sense though. The world seemed wrong and then he realized that he was still in his truck, strapped into his seatbelt, hanging upside down. Gouts of crimson dripped from his head and pooled on the interior of the truck's roof.

He tried to suck in a deep breath, but the pain was too much. *Broken ribs*, he thought. The way his body jerked and twitched when the truck flipped was a wonder of how he was still alive at all.

"Sir," a voice called. "Sir, are you okay?"

The little strength he had left allowed him to nod slightly.

"Help is on the way! Don't move." This was another voice, he thought. It had a different tremble.

*Motherfucker must've been drunk*. In his mind, he relived the vision of the tiny Honda Civic fly into his lane and slam into the Chevy, sending him and his wife flipping and bouncing out of control. He could almost hear the echoes of crunching metal and shattering glass.

The voice came again. The second one, he was certain. "Don't move, Sir. Help will be here soon."

He didn't care about help, not now. He craned his neck so he could look into the passenger seat. She was unmoving, limp arms splayed above her head, legs pushed into the windshield. He watched her chest to see if it would rise and fall, to show some signs of life. He watched for what seemed like an eternity, but she didn't breathe.

His wife was gone, nothing but a human ball of flesh and bone. As grisly as it was, she looked peaceful, and he told himself that she had died instantly, that she didn't feel any pain.

"Thank you," he whispered through quivering lips. Saying goodbye was too hard. "Thank you for not letting her suffer."

His tears dripped into the pool of blood above his head. Gritting his teeth through the pain, he reached out and grabbed her hand. "I love you, Olivia . . . I promise to always take care of our boy. Always."

# Chapter One

## *Three months later*

Life must endure no matter the depth of the tragedy. Though it seemed impossible at times, and although he sometimes doubted himself, Antonio "Tony" Mendez was doing everything he could to make a normal life for his son. Six-year-old Ricky seemed strong in the face of his mother's death, and others commented on what a strong little trooper he was. Tony knew different. His son's mind had not been at rest since the night of the accident. A father knows.

The fishing trip to the Sabine, a beautiful stretch of Texas river, was meant to help both of them cope with the past while trying to move on with their lives. The calm, flowing water reflected the huge oaks and surrounding shrubs that lined the sides of the river. Tony hoped the river's current would pull away he and Ricky's sorrow, send it downstream and out of their lives. It was a fanciful dream but a man could hope, couldn't he?

A smile creased Ricky's dimpled face every time he felt a tug on his fishing line. Tony hadn't seen that smile in what seemed like an eternity, and it brought a deep grin to his own face.

"I almost caught him!" Ricky would yell whenever he thought he had a nibble on his line. He would then jerk the pole upright, believing he would reel in a huge catch. He hadn't quite managed to snag an actual fish. Ricky had snagged quite a few rocks and branches though, and lost five hooks in the process.

Tony heard a soft sigh followed by an, "Oh, man."

"Another one bites the dust?" Tony asked.

"Huh?"

"Need another hook?" He said.

"I'm caught on something . . . maybe it's a real big fish."

"Maybe," Tony said, grinning. He dug into his tackle box only to find there were no more hooks. He didn't want the fishing trip to end though; he didn't want Ricky's smile to end. "Hold on a minute. Don't break your line just yet."

Tony hurried to his white pickup, another Chevy, and pulled out a pair of hip waders. He would follow the fishing line and retrieve the hook himself. Even if he weren't able to get the hook, he figured that at least Ricky might get a kick out of seeing his father waddle into the river like a duck.

Tony brought the waders back to the riverbank and slipped them on, hoping they would keep him dry. Stepping slowly into the river, he traced Ricky's fishing line. Through the waders, he could feel the cold of the water and the surprisingly strong current pushing against his legs. He looked over his shoulder at Ricky standing on the bank to make sure he wasn't too close to the water's edge.

"Do you see it, daddy?" Ricky asked, kicking the soil at the river's edge with his shoe.

"Don't you go and get wet, your grandmother will have my head," he said. Ricky giggled and Tony smiled, as he continued to follow the fishing line into the water. "I'll find it for you, I promise."

A parade of caws and squawks erupted from the trees across the river. Tony looked up to see more than a dozen of the large black birds as they settled into the limbs of the old oaks and elms. He tried to recall what one called a group of crows, and then it came to him. A murder of crows . . . yes, he was sure that was the term. He had never liked crows. They always seemed too watchful, easily agitated.

As he looked up at them, their eyes seemed to fix on him. He did not like them at all. Not that he really thought they would come after him as if he were an extra in a Hitchcock film. Still, he didn't like them watching him as they did.

Tony suddenly realized that his legs were getting wet; he'd gone in a bit too deep while watching the birds and now the river was sloshing into his waders.

The water was colder than he had thought it was going to be, and as he looked at the fishing line and how it angled even deeper into the river, he knew it was about to get a lot colder. He was going to have to submerge most of his body to get the hook free from whatever rock or branch had snagged it.

He plunged his arm into the frigid water, following the fishing line until he reached the river bottom. Only his head, the arch of his back, and his left arm were above water as he groped and clawed among the stones and tried to free the hook.

"Come on, come one," he whispered as he continued the search. Finally, he felt where the hook had lodged beneath a stone. It wouldn't budge.

Figuring that he was already soaked to the bone, he reached into the water with his other hand and tried to move the stone. He finally managed to wriggle the stone free of the river's muddy bottom and the hook came loose.

Standing up too quickly with the stone in one hand and the fishing line in the other, he nearly lost his balance. His arms spun in wild circles and almost fell backwards into the river. Ricky was laughing, and the crows seemed to be doing the same.

Tony found himself laughing too. He turned to tell Ricky to reel the line in when another sound caught his attention. The constant caw of the crows suddenly turned into shrieks, hideous sounds he did not even know a crow was capable of making. The sound grated on his eardrum like fingers down a chalkboard.

The sound stopped as quickly as it had begun. Tony turned to where the birds had been perched just moments before, but they were no longer in the trees. Instead, he found the crows splayed out on the marshy ground beneath the canopy of the trees. They were all dead.

Tony shivered, and he was sure it was only partially because he was drenched in cold river water. He wondered what could have happened to the crows and hoped that it had not scared Ricky.

As he stood looking at the stiff feathered corpses, the clouds began to blot out the sun. A wind whipped and howled through the trees and then seemed to funnel down the river, sending an even deeper chill through Tony.

Tony looked back to Ricky. The child stood there frozen in place, a statue with wide, unblinking brown eyes. He was not looking at the birds though. His small hand slowly raised and pointed at the stone Tony held in his hand.

Tony looked down at the stone and suddenly realized what had Ricky so scared. He lifted the stone and turned it around in his hand. It was no stone. Instead, he held in his hand a small, jawless human skull. The orbits that once held eyes stared up at him.

"Shit!" He tossed the skull away and dipped his hand back into the icy water, wanting to get the feeling of death and contamination off his skin.

The skull landed near the shore, and Tony watched in horror as Ricky set his pole down and walked over to the skull.

"Ricky," he yelled.

Ricky bent down and picked up the skull. He held it up to his face, looking intently at it.

"Put that down," Tony said. Ricky seemed not to hear, transfixed by the skull. "Put it down!"

Tony sloshed out of the water and to where Ricky was standing, still looking into the skull's empty eyes. He saw gooseflesh begin to rise on Ricky's arms.

"Put it down," Tony said, as he reached out a hand to take the skull away.

"Do you hear the whispers?" Ricky asked. He finally looked away from the skull and at his father. "Do you hear it, daddy? It says, 'help'."

Tony grabbed the skull and tossed it farther up the bank. He knelt in front of Ricky so they were eye to eye.

"You okay?"

Ricky said nothing. It seemed as though he was unaware his father was even there.

"Hey," Tony said. He squeezed Ricky's shoulders gently. "Hey, it's okay. You don't have to be scared of that thing okay. You don't worry about that."

Ricky nodded in silence.

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"My name is Detective Sal," said the burly man as he offered his hand to Tony.

To Tony, Sal looked like the typical, hardened police detective. He was tall, at least an inch taller than Tony's own six feet, and he outweighed Tony by a good forty pounds or more. The smell of cigarettes wafted off the man, and his eyes looked dark and tired. Tony didn't envy the detective's life.

"We've already given our statements to the other officers," Tony said. He just wanted to get Ricky home, where he could be warm and safe and forget the day.

"I know, but I've got a few questions too," Sal said, grinning. "You were just out here fishing, huh?"

Tony nodded. "That's right. I have some time off work and my boy and I thought we'd try to land a few fish. It isn't as if we were looking for something."

"Unlucky you," Sal said. "Must've been a hell of a shock, huh? How's your son."

Tony shrugged. He honestly didn't know how Ricky was doing. The child had been so quiet.

"You see anything strange on your way out here? Anything that struck you as out of place or odd?"

"Just the skull," Tony said. He hesitated a moment and then said, "the birds."

"What birds?" Sal broke out his notepad and pencil.

Tony pointed across the river. "You see those birds over there, on the other side?"

"Dead crows, yeah. What about them? You and the boy get in some target practice before you went fishing?"

"No, nothing like that," Tony said, shaking his head. "It's just . . . God, I wished I was the one that killed them because at least then I would know how they died."

Sal cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Tony took a deep breath. "Well, they were all gathered on the branches there, cawing up a storm. The next thing you know, they let out a . . . scream. Then they dropped to the ground, dead."

"Screamed?" Sal raised his eyebrows, and Tony almost wished he had kept quiet about the crows.

"It sounded an awful lot like a scream, all of them at the same time. They all died at the same time. That's not normal, right?"

The detective turned his head back toward the birds on the far side of the Sabine where the ebony bodies lay motionless. "No, that isn't normal. Maybe they were poisoned. Small farmers will sometimes poison crows to keep them out of their gardens."

"Maybe," Tony said, unconvinced.

"I don't know what I can tell you other than not to worry about it. I can only investigate the skull."

"What happens now?" Tony asked.

"You go home and stop worrying about dead birds," Sal said. "Watch something funny on the television with your family and try not to think too much about that skull. We have some great folks in the forensics department, and we might get lucky enough to match it to a missing person's report, give some family some peace of mind about their child at least."

"Child?" Tony said as a sick feeling started to creep over him.

Sal nodded. "The skull was very small. It's almost certainly a child's skull."

He had held a child's skull in his hands. It made him ill to think about it, and he wiped his hands on his still wet jeans. He wondered if his hand would ever feel clean again.

Tony looked over at Ricky, who was sitting on the tailgate of the truck. He was immediately thankful that he had his boy.

"Go home. Mr. Mendez. If I have any further questions, we have your information."

Tony couldn't wait to get home with Ricky and forget the whole day. He wondered though if it would fade from Ricky's mind so easily.

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Later that night, as Tony sat in the kitchen and drummed his fingers along the rim of a rapidly cooling cup of coffee, he found that he could not do what the detective had told him to do. He couldn't get the thought of that skull out of his brain.

"Not the nice, quiet day you wanted, huh?" said his mother, Flora, as she came into the kitchen. After the accident, she moved in to help look after Ricky and to help with other household chores. Tony had said it was unnecessary, but she had insisted and said she wanted to be able to see Ricky more.

He had to admit that he liked having her around. It was good to hear her comforting voice. She had said that it was only temporary, but her idea of temporary was far different from that of most. In fact, Tony already started building another room that would be hers.

"It sure wasn't the day I imagined," he said.

She placed a plate of peppered meat and rice in front of him. He looked at the food and pushed it around his plate with a fork. All he could think about was the skull and the dead birds. Food seemed unappealing.

"You know," he said, "everything was going great and then . . . bam . . . Ricky's worse than ever."

He got up from the table and peeked through the door into the living room. Ricky sat in front of the television watching *Dora the Explorer*. Tony wondered if Ricky were still thinking about the skull as well. He watched Ricky for a moment more and then returned to the table.

"He was smiling today, Mom," Tony said. "You know how long it's been since he's smiled."

"I know, son," she said. "He'll find his smile again. He did it once."

Tony sighed. "I know, it's just that –"

The volume on the television in the living room suddenly increased. He could hear the local news rambling about the recent finding of a skull in the Sabine.

"What's he doing on that channel?" Tony was up and into the living room in a heartbeat. "Hey, let's turn that off, kiddo."

Ricky sat Indian style on the floor, eyes fixed on the television.

"Off," Tony said, as he reached past Ricky and turned off the television's power button. He looked down at Ricky, whose breathing was rapid, causing his small stomach to bounce up and down. Beads of sweat gathered on his face and glued his dark hair to his forehead. Ricky looked up at Tony. His small eyes suddenly rolled into the back of his head, showing only the whites.

"Help me, da-da-daddy," he said between quick breaths.

Tony reached down for his son and screamed for his mother. "Call an ambulance. Hurry!"

## Chapter Two

Sal took a huge gulp of his lukewarm coffee, black and sugarless, and then pulled another menthol cigarette from his pack of Marlboro's. It was his third in the past half hour. He was taking the frustration he felt about the investigation out on his lungs.

*I hate head cases*, he thought, and then grimaced at his own unintentional joke.

Sal glanced up at the clock on the wall above his desk. It was well past midnight, and he realized that he was getting tired. His eyes felt heavy. He stood up, stretched his arms over his head and then gave his face a few slaps. There was no time to sleep, not on a case like this.

Sal was used to not sleeping, and he was used to spending most of his time down at the station. He liked it the best in the late hours, when fewer people were around to interrupt his thoughts.

With a bit of renewed energy, he sat back down at the computer and continued browsing through the missing persons files. With the little information that he had on the skull there was not much he could do. In fact, he'd only seen the skull briefly, when forensics bagged it at the scene.

The one thing that struck him about the skull was its size. It was small, obviously a child. He wondered how young the child was though. Until he got more information from the lab, it was going to be hard to find a starting point. It was a sad fact, but there were hundreds of missing children reports in East Texas.

His stomach churned when he thought about it. So many missing children . . . so many parents left to wonder what had happened to their babies. He knew that feeling all too well, knew the feeling of being the parent whose whole world vanished.

He took another drag off his cigarette and tried to push away the pain of losing his little Mona. Sometimes the work would help, sometimes he could focus solely on an investigation and his mind would feel at ease. Other times it was bad.

"Shit," he said, slapping the side of his computer monitor as a name came to him. He typed the name into the database. Billy Reynolds, seven years old, went missing on a fishing trip out to Sabine Lake. But that was a good thirty miles through trees and marsh from where the Mendez fellow found the skull and the body would have had to float upstream against the current. It just wasn't possible. Even if a gator had snatched the kid, it wouldn't bring him thirty miles up the Sabine to dump him. Dumping bodies was the kind of thing that only another human being might do.

He stared at the picture on the screen. The kid had dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, a big smile and would have had a nice future ahead of him. It was a damned shame the way the world worked sometimes, a real damned shame.

"It ain't him," Sal whispered. The skull, though he'd only seen it for a second, was far too small to be that of a seven year old. His cop's instinct told him that it was so, and he generally trusted those instincts.

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On the other side of town and only about a mile away from the Sabine River, the St. Catharine's Hospital stood guard over her patients. Saints and angels were carved into the architecture of the building and gave it felt as much a sanctuary as it did a hospital, giving hope and bolstering the faith of the patients inside.

It was a small hospital, only one floor, but it had most of the amenities as its larger brethren. The east wing held the nursery, as well as several patient rooms. Ricky Mendez lay in one of those rooms, pumped full of drugs to reduce his fever and help him sleep.

"We're going to monitor him for the next twelve hours, but I think the worst is over," said Dr. Morrison, as Tony listened. "From the

symptoms you described, it sounds like he had an anxiety attack. Given the day that you've had, it's reasonable."

"Yeah, that's for sure," said Tony, nodding. He rubbed the stubble that was already beginning to sprout on his face.

"Have there been any other incidents recently that might have contributed to this?" the doctor asked.

Tony hesitated. It always hurt to speak about the accident. Speaking the words seemed to make them real, and he hated that.

His mother answered. "Ricky lost his mom in a car accident just a few months back."

"I see," said the doctor. He tapped his hand on his large belly. "I imagine that trauma added to what happened today was just too much. Has he seen a psychologist about his mother's passing?"

"He needs time, and then he'll be okay," Tony said. He did not want to subject Ricky to having his mind probed by a psychologist. It was better, at least in Tony's mind, that Ricky remembered his mother for who she was, not to analyze his feelings. What if the doctor was right though? What if Ricky needed help to find closure?

"I understand," the doctor said. "Well, a nurse will be in to check on Ricky in about half an hour. You can stay in the room with him if you like, but you might want to go home and get some rest."

"We'll stay," Flora said. "If he wakes up he'll want us here."

When the doctor left the room, Tony walked over to Ricky's hospital bed and gently caressed his son's head. It hurt Tony to think of such a small boy with so many terrible things swirling in his little head.

His head was warm, almost hot to the touch. Still, it was not as bad as it had been earlier.

"Maybe he got sick at the river today. Was it cold? Did he get in the water at all?" Flora asked.

Tony barely listened to his mother's words. His hand that rested on Ricky's head suddenly began to get cold. Ricky's head was still hot, but Tony's hand felt as though he had stuck it in a bucket of ice water.

As he was contemplating the sudden temperature shift, he noticed a hum in his ears. It built to a screech, muting out every other sound. He shook his head, trying to shake it away. He wondered if he were getting sick as well.

Tony looked down at Ricky and the boy's temperature rapidly dropped. The heat that had emanated from him a moment before was gone and his flesh turned ice cold. Tony's vision blurred and the room seemed to dim. The humming screech grew even louder.

His vision slowly began to clear and as it did, the room seemed to fade away piece by piece. The walls, floor, and ceiling vanished, followed his mother. Ricky and his hospital bed disappeared next.

Tony found himself standing in the shallows of what appeared to be a river. He could feel the current pushing against the back of his knees. Thick, dark trees with gnarled limbs and twisted trunks lined the riverbanks. Fog undulated around the trees like a serpent. It looked like a hellish version of the Sabine.

His hand, already cold, seemed suddenly colder. He felt something touch his palm and then grasp his wrist. Tony looked down to see a pale hand clinging to him. The arm, covered in deep, gaping wounds trailed into the water. He tried to pull away, but the hand held him in its iron grip. It began to try to pull him down and into the river. Heart racing, he pulled against the dead hand with all his strength and finally he slipped free of the thing's grasp.

He fell backwards . . . and into the metal hospital tray that was behind him. The river scene, the trees and the dead, were all gone. Wide eyed, he looked around the room. Ricky was there in the bed, everything seemed normal. The vision, if that was what it was, had gone.

Flora rushed over to him and steadied him. He had not realized he was shaking until she put her motherly arms around him. He sucked in a deep breath of air.

"What happened?" she asked, patting him on the back as though he were still a child.

"I . . . I think I," he began. He could not find the words to tell his mother what had just happened. She would not understand. Hell, he didn't understand.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"I think I saw a spider," he said. He had never been very good at lying to his mother, and he knew she could see through him.

"Oh. You can tell me when you want to," she said.

"I'm okay, Mom, really. Just tired I suppose."

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Tony insisted that his mother take the chair if she were determined to stay the night. No amount of pleading would send her home to sleep in a real bed. She said she wanted to be with her babies. Tony finally relented. He would then sleep on the floor next to Ricky's bed and pray that nothing like that terrible vision would happen again.

It took an hour or more but he finally fell asleep and promptly drifted into an unpleasant dream. . . .

Above him flickered countless stars and the light of a full moon lit a pathway through an unfamiliar cemetery. The graveyard looked old, filled with weathered tombstones and timeworn wooden crosses. He could hear faint voices in the distance, laughing and whispers mostly. It was impossible to make out what they were saying.

Though his mind told him not to go, his dream body surged forward toward the voices. He walked across the worn pathways of the dead, getting closer to the maddening, whispery voices with each step.

Soon he could see them standing amidst the gravestones, shadow figures oozed upwards out of the ground. Their faces bore no features. The shadow people flickered and winked in and out of existence, almost as though they didn't truly belong even in the dream world. They seemed to be beckoning to Tony, but he could not tell what they wanted.

He passed them, still unable to command his body to stop, and found himself on the bank of the river . . . the damned river.

Tony looked into the dark water, expecting to see the dead hand rise again. He could almost feel it on his skin. The hand never came. He turned around and saw the shadow people had followed him to the river's edge, but they were no longer featureless and no longer completely shadow.

He could see cracked skin and scratches on their faces, but the most disturbing feature was their eyes, or more appropriately, their lack of eyes. Streams of blood poured like tears down their faces, from the holes where eyes should have been.

Floating behind them was a white figure, so bright that Tony could not see it clearly. It seemed to be calling to him though, trying to tell him something.

Tony's eyes snapped open and he was once again in the hospital room. He pulled himself off the floor and looked at Ricky, who was still sleeping peacefully. Was Ricky having these terrible dreams as well? What did they mean? What in the hell was happening to the remnants of his family?

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The sun had not yet risen when Sal returned to the station. He'd gone home sometime around one in the morning, but found that he could not sleep. Instead, he sat in front of the television watching old reruns in an all night marathon of Cops.

Now he sat at his desk and stared at the phone, waiting a call from forensics that might help give him some clue as to where to start with the skull. He knew it was too soon – sometimes forensics could take weeks to get any valuable information. It wasn't like on the television shows that were able to wrap up every little plot point in the span of an hour. Sal hated waiting though, and he knew the media would start hounding him soon.

"Damn, you're here early," said a voice, breaking Sal's train of thought. He looked up to see Jennings, another detective, heading to the desk across from his own. They were working on the case together, but Jennings was cut from a different cloth than Sal, and Sal envied that

sometimes. Jennings could go home to his nice family and forget about a case until he came back to work. Sal could never do that. To him, everything was personal.

"Sleep is for pansies," Sal said, smiling. "So, did you get a full eight hours?"

"Funny . . . and yes, I did. I need my beauty sleep," Jennings said. "So, Sherlock, did you figure out anything on your vigil?"

Sal frowned and shook his head. "Waiting to see if forensics can give me anything else to go on – hard to figure anything out right now. The youngest kid missing in this area is seven, and that skull was a hell of a lot smaller than one belonging to a seven-year-old kid."

"We'll figure it out, we always do," Jennings said, easing himself into his chair. "Just give it some more time."

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Sarah Tully had never been so excited and scared in her short life. She raced to finish her breakfast and head outside. Not even Saturday morning cartoons could keep her inside today. She and some of the older kids were going to see where the police picked up a skull the day before, and nothing in the world was going to keep her away from that.

After swallowing her last bite of cereal and waving to her mother, she was out the door and on her bike. James Castro and the others were already waiting for her at the mouth of the driveway.

"Aren't you gonna be scared?" asked Freddy, another of the boys, when he saw Sarah gliding down the driveway on her small, pink bike.

"Shows how much you know," Sarah said when she reached them. "I don't get scared of stuff like that. I went to a wake last month and saw my dead Uncle Gary."

Freddy shrugged. "Whatever. Just don't expect us to baby you if you get scared."

She ignored him. He was two years older than she was, but he was still in her class, which meant to Sarah that he was not that bright and she could ignore most of what came out of his mouth. James, however, was another story. He was thirteen, a seventh grader, and

probably the smartest person Sarah knew besides her parents. James said he knew right where the cops picked up the skull and that he could take them there. She would always listen to James.

"Is everyone ready?" James said.

One of the other boys, Aaron, spit on the ground, and that seemed to be the signal to start pedaling. They sped down the main roads and then onto the side streets until they reached the road that ran parallel to the Sabine. James stopped everyone and waited for Sarah to catch up. She was pedaling hard and out of breath when she got there. Hopefully, it would not be much further.

Birds chirped loudly overhead, and she could hear the sound of the flowing river in the distance. It was a nice place, and she could not imagine what a skull would be doing there.

"Are we close?" she asked James. He nodded, and rode down a dirt road that led to the river. "It was right down here where they found it."

A shiver went through Sarah, and she could not remember a more exciting moment, except maybe when she got her bike last Christmas. She followed the others down the road.

When they reached the river, they all got off their bikes and began to look around, hoping to find something that the police might have missed, maybe even another skull. The boys were all spending their time searching the riverbank, but something floating out in the water caught Sarah's eye. She could not quite tell what it was at first.

"Hey," she said. "Hey, James, what's that thing?"

She pointed out into the river at the floating object until everyone was looking.

"That ain't a skull," Freddy said.

"Nope," said James. "That's a dead man."

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Sal was in the middle of his second breakfast burrito when the phone rang. He recognized the number that popped up on the caller ID:

forensics. He grabbed it and through a mouthful of egg and tortilla said, "Sal here. Tell me you already got something for me."

"Well, I don't really know what to make of it," said London. "I mean, there are still more tests to run, but . . . ."

"Christ, man, spit it out. Do you have anything for me to go on or not? I'm tired of playing psychic and trying to match missing persons to a skull I know nothing about."

Sal could hear London sigh on the other end, and could almost see the mousy little tech rubbing his temples.

"I can tell you this much. The skull belongs to a small child. No dental records to speak of – we only had upper teeth anyway. This kid was young, Sal, under a year old."

"Shit. The kid was that young, huh?" Sal's stomach knotted. How could someone do that do a child, throw them away like that? He wondered if he would have the self-control not to kill the bastard when they found him. He was not sure.

"Not only that, but that skull had been in the river a long time."

"How long?"

"A very long time," London said. "It's impossible for me to tell just how long right yet, but a long time."

"Gee, London, you've been loads of help," Sal said, his voice loaded with sarcasm. He took a breath. London hadn't done anything wrong. "Sorry, it's just . . . ."

"I know," London said. "It's okay."

Sal hung up the phone. He was still at square one, and chances were the case would grow cold very quickly.

"Hey," Jennings said, "you're never going to believe what happened out at the river."

"Let's see, two bumbling detectives fail to solve a case?"

"Some kids found a body."

"Same place?" Sal asked.

Jennings nodded. "Same fucking spot, man. You know what they say about coincidences in police work."

"Yeah," Sal said, grabbing his coat. "There's no such thing."

## Chapter Three

The calmness of the late morning on the drive to the Sabine was a contradiction from the scene that Sal saw when he and Jennings arrived. Uniformed officers swarmed the area, some helping to keep out reporters who were looking to break the story. Sal was always amazed at how fast the media got to crime scenes, like vultures circling a carcass.

The body lay at the river's edge, waiting for Sal and Jennings to examine it before it was loaded onto a gurney and taken to the morgue. The man's body, slightly bloated, did not look like it had been in the water for very long, although Sal certainly was not an expert in the matter. The top three buttons on his shirt were missing. Could they have been ripped off in a struggle?

He turned away from the body and lit a cigarette, taking a long drag. Then he began to survey the scene, looking for something that the uniformed officers might have missed. Sal was good at seeing the clues that most people would simply overlook.

"I knew I smelled smoke on you earlier. I thought you were going to quit," Jennings said, as he stepped beside Sal.

"I smoke to think. Lay off," he said.

"So when you don't have a cancer stick dangling from your mouth, you aren't thinking? I can see that," Jennings said.

"Eat shit," Sal said, laughing. He turned his head toward Jennings. "Who found the guy?"

"A bunch of kids, said they were out riding but I don't buy it. They were just curious about the skull and figured they would have a bit of an adventure," he said.

"I guess they found it," said Sal.

Jennings nodded. "Why would this guy be out here? The skull has been all over the news. Anyone in their right mind would avoid this place," Jennings said.

Sal thought a moment. "Well, there are a couple of possibilities. Maybe he knew something about the skull and came up to get rid of any other evidence that might be here . . . or he just wanted to go fishing. Check out the gear."

Sal nodded in the direction of a blue tackle box, a Styrofoam cooler, a bucket, and two fishing poles.

"I know that," said Jennings, "but why would he come here of all places?"

"They," Sal corrected. "There are two poles. And he didn't carry all of that shit out here by himself. He was with someone. They must have had a vehicle. Find the other guy or gal and we'll get our answers."

"Yup," said Jennings. "We don't exactly get lucky with our cases, do we?"

"Life is unfair," he answered. "Hey, did the guy have any ID on him?"

"Nothing in his pockets except a waterlogged stick of gum."

Sal walked over to the tackle box and knelt down beside it. "I don't suppose anyone tried looking in here. That's where a lot of folks keep their wallets when fishing – less of a chance of getting it wet."

He opened the tackle box and sitting beneath the tray of lures was a brown leather wallet. Sal opened the wallet and pulled out the man's license.

"So who's our dead guy?" Jennings asked.

"Omar Loya, age twenty-nine," Sal said, standing up and listening to his knees creak and pop. "Poor bastard."

"You sure it's the right guy?"

Sal was sure, but he always wanted a positive identification in matters like this. "Yeah, but let's go look again."

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"What do you think happened to that man?" Aaron asked James as they rode back toward home.

Sarah listened, wanting to hear what James had to say about the matter. As it was she was not so sure how she felt about seeing a dead man so close. It was nothing like Uncle Gary's body, which was nice, clean, and peaceful looking. The man they found was nothing like that . . . nothing like that at all.

"Well, he drowned," said Freddy. "He was in the water, wasn't he?"

Aaron groaned. "Yeah, but how did he drown?"

They all looked to James, who seemed to think for a moment. "It might have been a ghost, you know, maybe a ghost from that skull they found."

"A skull ghost?" Freddy laughed.

Sarah did not laugh though. She thought about it, and if James said it then it just might be true. For all she knew there could be a skull ghost.

"You shouldn't say things like that," Aaron said. He stopped pedaling and pulled his bike off to the side of the road. "Everyone knows that if you talk about a ghost, it might just come back and get you. You better be careful saying things like that."

The others stopped, and Sarah did not know what to think. The last thing she wanted was to see some ghost coming for her in the middle of the night. Even Freddy looked a bit paler after what Aaron had said.

"What are you guys waiting for? We better be getting home," James said.

"Not until you say there ain't such a thing as a skull ghost," Aaron said.

"Are you serious?" James said, straddling his bike.

Sarah hoped he would say it.

"You have to say it," Aaron said. "I've heard about ghosts that come and get you if you show them disrespect. You have to say it."

"But if there isn't a ghost, then how can you show it disrespect?" James asked.

"Well, there might be one, and you have to be nice so that you don't upset it," Aaron said, as though everyone should know such things.

"Okay, there is no ghost," said James. "And if there is, I'm sorry about whatever."

"Not here, you have to go back to the river and say it," Aaron said. Freddy nodded along in agreement.

"The cops are at the river. They sent us home, remember?" James said through gritted teeth.

"Doesn't have to be that exact spot, just down by the river," Aaron said.

"How do you know all this?" Sarah said.

"My grandmother taught me about ghosts and spirits and stuff," he said, puffing out his chest.

"Fine," James said finally. "There's a little turn off just up a ways, I'll say it there if it will make you babies happy."

Sarah felt a burning in her eyes when James had grouped her in with the others and called them babies. She swallowed hard and rode behind the others so they would not be able to see her face.

They reached the worn path, hopped off their bikes and followed James down to the river's edge. The others stood around and watched him.

James rolled his eyes and began speaking. "Okay, ghost, if you exist, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. See, three times a charm."

"Not bad," Aaron said.

"Can we go home now?" Sarah asked. She did not know how much more of the day she could handle. The dead man, then a ghost, and then James called her a baby. She figured that it might have been better if she had stayed home and watched Spongebob.

"Let's go," James said, as they started walking back to where they had left the bikes.

"Wait, listen!" shouted Freddy. "Something's in the woods."

"Stop playing around," said James.

Sarah strained her ears to listen, and then she could hear it too. There was something in the woods, and from the sound of it, the thing was coming straight for them. She looked in the direction of the noise but could see nothing through the bushes and trees.

"Come on, let's go," James said. His voice was shaking.

Sarah could hear whatever it was in the woods getting closer. Then it would stop, as though it might be listening to them, only to start coming towards them again.

"Run!" James screamed.

Sarah was already bolting up toward the path with the bikes. The boys were faster though, and they quickly outpaced her. She could hear the thing getting closer.

Finally, she broke through the woods and saw her bike. The others were already pedaling away down the road. Tears streamed down her face and her hands shook. It seemed to take forever to get the bike upright and climb onto it. She started to pedal.

"Wait for me!" she shrieked as the boys fled. "Don't leave me!"

Something grabbed her by the hair and the back of her shirt, tearing her off her bike, which clattered to the road. She screamed repeatedly as the unseen thing dragged her back into the woods. Her fingernails bent backwards and cracked as she tried to dig them into

the dirt to slow her abductor; thorns and branches tore into her leaving stinging wounds.

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"Hurry," James screamed. He was at the front of the pack, racing away from the thing in the woods.

A shriek echoed through the woods. He stopped and waited for the others to catch up to him; he did not want to be alone.

"She's gone!" Aaron yelled.

James looked over his shoulder at Aaron, with Freddy riding up quickly behind him. But there was no sign of Sarah, only the empty road.

"Where is she?" James asked. He was afraid that he already knew the answer.

Another scream resounded through the trees.

"The ghost got her," Freddy said. "I told her she shouldn't come."

"No . . . she's just playing around, that's all," James said. He continued to look down the road, hoping to see her come pedaling toward them. Instead, he noticed a bunch of crows gathered in the trees alongside the road. Their heads all seemed to be turned toward him, just as Aaron's and Freddy's were.

"What do we do?" Aaron asked.

"You're the expert on ghosts," James snapped.

The crows let out an unearthly sound, a shriek louder than anything James had ever heard before, and then they fell from the trees, thudding into the ground below.

James had seen enough. He and the others started pedaling as fast as they could, leaving little Sarah behind.

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Sal knew that the worst part of being a cop was being the bearer of bad news. Some cops would do it over the phone, tell people that their loved ones would never come home. Sal could not abide by that. He found out about his own Mona that way, because some sniveling

bastard did not want to look him in the eye. He would not do that to another human, no matter how uncomfortable he felt.

Bad news had brought him to house that he and Jennings had just pulled up to out on Fourteenth Street.

"Twenty-six thirty seven," Jennings said, as he parked the car and read off the house number.

"This is the address on Omar Loya's license," Sal said. He finished the last puff of his cigarette and then crushed the remainder on the sidewalk.

The house, a nice little two story with a well groomed front lawn, lay nearly twenty miles away from the Sabine. Sal figured that somebody must have driven Omar out to the river. It sure as hell seemed like foul play was involved. Where was the vehicle? Who was using the second fishing pole? Did any of this relate to the skull, or was it just a macabre coincidence? So many questions and so far, not a single damn answer.

Jennings rapped his knuckles against the simple wooden door and took a deep breath. Sal knew Jennings hated this part of the job just as much as he did. While Jennings might have a few shortcomings, he never shirked this part of his duty, and Sal respected that.

A moment later, a young woman – Sal figured she could not have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five – opened the door. She was small, petite, pretty. Omar had been a lucky guy, Sal thought. Up until he drowned, of course.

Her eyes seemed to linger on the badges they wore on their belts. The look in her eyes, shock and fear, told Sal that, unless she was an Oscar caliber actress, this poor girl wasn't involved in whatever went on at the river.

"Ma'am, are you Mrs. Loya?" Jennings asked.

"What happened to Omar?" Tears started to roll down her cheeks.

"I'm Detective Jennings, this is Detective Sal, we're from the –"

"What happened to Omar?"

"We're sorry to have to break this to you, but . . . we found Omar out at the Sabine," Jennings said.

"Is he, is he dead? Don't tell me he's dead. He can't be dead," she muttered and swayed on her feet.

Sal put a steadying hand on her and led her to the sofa in her living room. "Have a seat; try to catch your breath."

She shook her head violently. "I can't believe this. Was it Juan? Did he have something to do with this?"

Sal gave a sidelong glance to Jennings. Now they were getting somewhere.

"Juan?" Jennings said.

"Juan Suarez," said Mrs. Loya. "He was one of Omar's friends. Well, I guess they were acquaintances more than they were friends. I never liked Juan. He always seemed like he was hiding something."

"He went fishing with your husband?" Sal prompted.

Mrs. Loya nodded. "It was Juan who wanted to go. He insisted that Omar take him fishing, said it would be a great time."

"So they took Omar's vehicle?" Sal said.

She wiped away some of her tears. "Five o'clock this morning. Omar didn't want to go, but he's a nice guy, he didn't want to let Juan down."

"How long did he know Juan?" Jennings asked.

"A few years, I guess. They worked construction at the same place, and then Juan got let go. He'd been down on his luck, so Omar felt sorry for him. He even lent Juan our vacation money last year." She bowed her head and started sobbing harder.

"Did your husband know about the skull found at the river yesterday?" Sal asked.

She nodded. "He knew, and he didn't want to go anywhere near it. He thought there would still be police all over there too, looking for things. He didn't want to get in the way. Juan said he knew a spot a little bit upstream that would be great fishing."

"Juan didn't seem bothered by this?"

"I only heard my husband's side of the conversation on the phone. I was asleep when he left," she said, shrugging.

"If Omar drove, then his vehicle is also missing. We'll put out an APB on the truck and Mr. Suarez," Jennings said.

"So you think he might have something to do with Omar?" she asked.

"Well, we're sure as hell going to find out," Sal said. "He knows something, and I promise you we'll get it out of him."

"Mrs. Loya, could you give us a description of Juan?"

Fifteen minutes later, Sal and Jennings left the Loya house. Sal took a deep breath of the Texas air. At least they had more information than they did an hour ago, and maybe they would be able to figure out if there was a link between Omar, Juan, and the skull. He couldn't see what it might be, but there had to be something.

"Christ, will you look at that? They weren't here when we came in," Jennings said. He nodded toward the lawn.

Sal followed Jennings's gaze and saw them. Two dead crows lay on their backs in the middle of the lawn. He thought about what Tony Mendez had said about the crows down at the Sabine, and then he thought about his own mandate: cops do not believe in coincidences. An involuntary shiver ran up his back.

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Sal settled into the passenger seat of the unmarked and was about to light a cigarette and push away the thought of the dead crows that, rationally, could not possibly have anything to do with his case.

Jennings slid into the driver's seat and was about to start the car when his phone rang.

"Jennings," he said. He paused, listening, and then said, "Are you serious?"

He ended the call and put the phone back in his pocket. "You're never going to believe this twist."

"What's up," Sal said. He could not imagine the case taking any more twists and turns.

"Nine year old Sarah Tully, one of the kids that found Omar's body, is now a missing person."

"What?" Sal shook his head in disbelief. "Does it all tie together?"

"It's too much," Jennings said. "The kid could have just run off."

"She didn't run away, she didn't get lost," Sal said. He could feel heat in his face, the anger rising. Jennings was a good cop, but he didn't know the feeling of losing a child to someone who wanted to hurt her. If this was what happened, then Sal knew the case was about to get very personal, no matter how hard he tried to bury those thoughts.

"Look, Sal, I didn't mean –"

Sal ignored him and thought for a moment. "Maybe this Suarez fellow is a child murderer, killed and dumped the one kid, the one whose skull we found. And then he got excited or nervous when the skull turned up and wanted to go back to the scene to get his jollies or cover up something. Then maybe he found that little girl."

Jennings sighed. "That's about as good a theory as we got right now. We'll try to find Omar's truck and Suarez."

"We've got to find Sarah," Sal said. He was shocked at how close he had come to saying Mona.

"They've already initiated a search party down by the river. I'll get patrol to send cars to Suarez's residence," Jennings said, digging his phone out of his pocket again.

"I'm going to call Tony Mendez, see if he remembers seeing Suarez," Sal said.

"What? Mendez and his kid were there yesterday, before all this happened," Jennings said.

"Not just yesterday. Mendez fishes along the Sabine quite a bit; I thought he might have encountered him in the past."

"Assuming that Suarez is even the guy that did any of this," Jennings said.

"You got a better suspect?"

"I don't like jumping to conclusions," Jennings said. "Even if he had something to do with Omar's death, we got nothing that could pin him

to the skull or the Tully girl's disappearance." Sal could detect a hint of irritation in his partner's voice.

"I got a feeling about this guy. There is something wrong with Suarez."

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After he had Jennings drop him off back at the station, Sal hurried over to the St. Catherine's Hospital. It was only a mile away from the Sabine, and he could meet up with Jennings later.

Sal was surprised to hear that the entire Mendez family was there. According to his phone call to Tony, his son Ricky got sick the night before with a high fever. Though Sal was not a doctor by any stretch of the imagination, he thought that the shock of finding that skull might have something to do with the poor kid's state of mind.

The family had been through a lot recently, the loss of a wife and mother was dreadfully painful.

Sal knew the layout of the hospital well, and made his way past the nursery, which displayed the newborns as if they were puppies waiting to be taken home. He could remember the day he looked at little Mona through that same glass. Turning his face away from the babies, he hurried past and on to Ricky's room.

God, he wanted a cigarette.

Sal found Tony standing next to Ricky's bed, and there was an older woman there as well. She was sitting in the chair next to the bed, her head down in a magazine.

"Hey there," he said as softly as he could, trying to get Tony's attention. Ricky was sound asleep. His face was pale and his forehead beading with sweat.

Tony nodded at him and motioned that they should head into the hallway.

"How is he?" Sal asked.

"The fever went up," Tony said. "He's had chills, and sometimes he coughs like a smoker."

Sal felt his face grow slightly warm. "I'm sure he'll get better. Kids are resilient."

Tony sighed and nodded.

"I'm sorry, but I have a few more questions that I'm hoping you might be able to help me with."

"Shoot," Tony said.

"Yesterday, when you were at the river, you don't remember seeing anyone else, hearing anyone else that might have been upstream or downstream?"

"Like I said before, there was no one but us."

"You don't recall any vehicles on your way to the river?"

"Nothing. Look, I thought we already went over this?" Tony said.

"Well, you said you go fishing out there quite a bit," Sal said.

"Not at that one spot, but up and down the Sabine. I used to go there a lot before the accident."

Sal pulled a photocopied mug shot of Suarez that he had printed out when he was getting his car at the station. The only thing he could find on Suarez was an arrest for aggravated assault and another for public drunkenness. He showed the picture to Tony. "Have you ever seen this guy?"

Tony stared at the picture. "I don't think so. He doesn't look familiar. Is he involved with the skull?"

Sal shrugged. "I think he might be involved in a whole lot of stuff, the skull just being one of them."

"What do you mean?" Tony asked.

"Don't watch the news much, do you?"

"Not lately," Tony said.

"Some kids found a floater in the river this morning, and now one of the kids is missing," he said. "So you keep hold of this picture, and if you remember seeing that guy, or anything else that might be useful, you give me a call."

Tony took the picture and said, "Yeah, of course."

"Thanks," Sal said. "I'm sure your boy will get better before you know it. I'll stop back to check on you folks later."

He turned to leave when Tony said, "I don't like the river."

"What's that?"

"I don't like the river anymore, detective. It doesn't feel right. I know this might sound silly, and I really can't put words to it, but . . . there is something very wrong out there."

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Sal walked down the hallway with Tony's last words ringing in his head. Maybe he was right. He shook the thought away. It made no sense. Cops use logic, and that was how you solve cases – with pure logic and deduction. Well, logic, deduction and sometimes greasing the hand of an informant were how a detective could solve most cases.

Sal was so lost in thought that he did not realize at first that the lights in the nursery hallway had grown suddenly dim. He looked around as the lights pulsed and sent shadows dancing along the hallway. The only sound was the clicking of his shoes on the glossy tile, echoing through the suddenly silent corridor.

A chill seeped into his body and his flesh began to tingle. The temperature seemed to plummet; gooseflesh erupted on his arms, and he could see his breath crystallize in the air. It became difficult to move, as though his whole body were stiffening. In all his years as a cop, he'd never felt anything like this. The air around him felt thick with menace.

The hall was empty. He forced himself to turn his stiffening neck toward the nursery, to see if the infants were there. They were, but they were not the children he'd seen moments before.

The newborns were sitting upright and staring at him, their heads twitching ever so slightly. Their eyes were pure black and far larger than they should be.

A soft glow began to emanate from their chubby faces, and they each raised an arm in unison, pointing their tiny index fingers at Sal. Their lips began to tremble, and he could hear them humming, trying to speak, trying to tell him something he could not make out. Behind them

stood a white translucent figure that looked to Sal to be a child. He thought it looked, or rather felt, like a girl.

"No," he whispered, trying to turn his head away. "No."

He closed his eyes, not wanting to see any more. This was not reality, not to Sal. Things like this could not happen. When he opened his eyes, the hospital was back to normal. The lights were on, the babies were wriggling about in the nursery, and the figure of the little girl was gone. A nurse turned down the hallway and smiled at him as she passed.

Sal took a deep breath and coughed. Now, more than ever, he wanted a cigarette. He hurried out of the hospital and lit up his menthol. He sucked in a deep draught of his chosen vice and then blew the smoke to the quickly darkening sky.

*I gotta get to the river*, he thought. He wanted to get as far away from the hospital as he could.

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Sarah sat at the bottom of the muddy riverbank, soaked up to the waist and shivering in the rapidly cooling air. She folded her arms and tucked them beneath her armpits in an attempt to keep warm.

Looking down at the shirt she wore, her big sister's Texas A&M shirt that she borrowed without permission, was filthy and wet. She missed her sister, missed her father and mother. She wanted them now, prayed that she could go home. But she knew that would not happen. Every time she tried to move, she could hear that voice. Sarah started to cry.

A harsh voice whispered to her in Spanish and then in English. "No," it said. "No crying. Those who cry lose their eyes."

## Chapter Four

Tony stood at Ricky's bedside and watched him sleep. He sifted through the events of the past twenty-four hours, and his mind kept coming back to the river. Inside, he knew there was something wrong about the place, something he'd never felt any other time he'd been out on the Sabine. He just could not figure out what it was.

"Mom," he started, "I have to ask you something, but you have to promise you won't think I'm crazy."

"I knew something was on your mind. You had that look, same as you did when you were a little boy and something was bothering you," she said.

"Have you ever had . . . I guess 'visions' might be the best word."

She tilted her head and looked up at him from the chair. "I take it that was no spider you saw last night."

Tony tried to laugh but found he was not able. There was nothing funny about this.

"Why do you call this thing a vision?" she asked, taking a sip from her coffee. "What happened?"

"I don't know. It just seems like someone is trying to tell me something that I just can't figure out."

"Tell me about the vision," she said.

"It was like this whole room just ceased to exist. It turned into the river. I was back at the river, and there was something in the water. I think it wanted to kill me."

She nodded and was silent for a moment. "I believe in visions, a little. Sometimes I think people might mistake nightmares for visions though."

"Mom, I was wide awake when this happened. You saw me," he said. He chose not to tell her about the nightmare he had with the shadow people and the graveyard.

"I understand, Antonio. Perhaps there is something to what you are calling a vision, and perhaps there is nothing but stress," she said. "Relax, if it was a vision and it was important, I believe it will come to you."

"You think so?"

"If you listen to these visions, your mind will be able to decipher them, eventually. I think your mind just needs more time to comprehend things," she said. "Do you have any idea what the visions might be trying to let you know?"

He shrugged, sighed, and rubbed his hands through his dark hair. "Something bad, something about the river. And I think something about Ricky too."

"Birds," said a small voice.

Tony looked at Ricky's bed to find him awake. His head turned toward the window and he pointed outside.

"What's wrong, Ricky," he said.

"Birds," Ricky said again.

Tony followed his son's gaze. In the distance, he could see small dark forms in the graying sky. Then he noticed they were getting closer. Ricky was right about the birds.

"What's he talking about?" Tony's mother asked.

"Get away from the window, Mom," Tony said, feeling suddenly uneasy. The birds, scores of them from the looks, were getting closer. He glanced back at Ricky. The boy's eyes were closed now, but he still faced the window.

"What are they doing?" His mother began to back away from the window.

"I don't know," he said. The birds continued to get closer and they seemed to be picking up speed. They were crows, their large black bodies easily recognizable now.

"Antonio, I think they're going to hit the window," she said.

She was right.

The birds came at the window fast, scores of them. Tony pushed his mother out of the way of the window and then turned and used his own body to shield Ricky just as the first of the crows slammed into the window. He heard the thuds of their bodies as they slammed into the thick window. It seemed to go on forever, but the glass held and eventually the sounds of the birds died away. He turned his head and saw bloody smears and black feathers matted on the window.

"Why would they do that?" his mother asked. "Why would they do such a thing?"

Tony had no answer. "Mom, draw the curtains so Ricky doesn't see that mess."

She closed the curtains. "I'm worried."

"Me too," Tony said, and then turned his attention to Ricky. "Hey, you okay?"

At first, there was no response, and then Ricky's eyes flashed open, revealing only the whites. His breathing was ragged and spittle dripped from the corners of his mouth. Then he spoke in a voice that was not his. "More will die. More will die. Return the face!"

## Chapter Five

"Everything seems fine now," Dr. Morrison said, as he shined a light into Ricky's eyes. "His fever isn't quite as high as earlier, and I don't have an explanation for what happened. Uh, we're going to have somebody go take care of those birds outside too."

"Right," Tony said. The doctor was no help, but Tony could not really blame him. Whatever was wrong with Ricky was just as much spiritual as it was physical. All the needles and medicines in the world could do nothing to help.

The doctor offered a weak smile and patted Tony's mother on the shoulder as he left the room.

The words Ricky said played over in Tony's mind like a broken record. *More people will die . . . return the face.* When Ricky said 'the face', Tony assumed he meant the skull. Even though nothing in the world seemed to make sense right now, at least that puzzle piece almost fit into place.

When the doctor was gone and down the hall, Tony's mother shut the door. "They won't be able to help him."

"I know. It's something deeper," Tony said.

"The face . . .," she said. "I think it's the skull."

"That's what I'm thinking too."

"Taking it woke something up, a terrible spirit. The skull needs to be put back where you found it."

Tony knew she was right, and he knew that it might be able to help Ricky. But knowing something was a far cry different from being able to do it.

"I don't think I can just waltz in there and ask for the skull back," Tony said. He loved his mother, but he could feel his patience wearing thin.

"What about that detective?" she offered. "You could tell him."

"You want me to tell him that a ghost wants the skull back? Do you know how crazy that would sound?"

She bowed her head. "I know, but I'm scared for Ricky and I'm scared for you. Spirits are nothing that you want to trifle with. When I was a little girl growing up in Mexico, my abuela would tell me stories of ghosts. We have to fix this before more people are hurt."

She was right, again. But Tony was at a loss.

Ricky suddenly began to stir from his sleep. His body began shaking violently, causing the hospital bed to rattle.

"Oh, not again," Tony whispered, as he rushed to Ricky's side.

Ricky sat up and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He pointed a finger at Tony and began to speak again. His voice was little more than a whisper, and again it was not his. It was something else. "Dead . . . Dead . . . Die!"

Tony rubbed Ricky's back and told him everything was going to be okay and that Daddy would make everything right again. Flora gripped her rosary and uttered prayer after prayer.

Just as quickly as Ricky's episode began, it was over. He closed his eyes and eased back into the bed. He looked peaceful.

Tony made up his mind. "Mom, I have to go now. I need you to stay with him."

"Where are you going?" she asked, as he leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"I have to put an end to it," he said. He turned and left the room before she could ask him any more questions.

As he walked down the hospital corridor, he thought about the promise he made to Olivia the night she died. He would always take care of their boy. Always. And he damn well meant it.

## Chapter Six

"We have to find her," Sal said, rubbing his chin. Along the river, he could see flashlights moving through the trees as deputies and volunteers, along with some bloodhounds, combed the woods that were growing darker by the minute. They had been looking for hours, but there was still no trace of the little girl.

"We've got teams on both sides of the river, Sal. We'll find the girl," Jennings said, his voice soft.

"What if she isn't here? What if Suarez took her? They could be anywhere." Sal could feel the panic rising in his chest. It was not a normal feeling for him, but this was hitting too close to home. The incident in the nursery was doing nothing to calm his nerves; not even half a pack of cigarettes had helped.

"We've checked his house, no one's there. Neighbors say they hadn't seen him since yesterday. We don't even know if he's involved in this."

"He could be on the road," Sal said. "Check every motel, hotel, and hole in East Texas."

"I'm ahead of you. We've got a description of the vehicle he might be in, as well as his picture, running on the evening news along with photos of the girl –"

"Sarah," Sal corrected, even though he knew personal attachment to a case could drive a cop insane. "Her name is Sarah."

Jennings nodded. "I know, Sal, I know. We'll find her."

Crickets began chirping, and the sound of a bullfrog in the distance was the only sound for some time. The search parties had moved deep enough into the woods that they were out of ear's reach.

Sal chewed the inside of his lip and felt useless. He wanted to get inside the head of Suarez, to try to figure out where he might go. There

was just not enough information for him to get a good read on the guy though. It was an exercise in frustration.

Static crackled on Jennings's walkie-talkie, a big antiquated thing with a huge antenna. It was ugly, but it usually got the job done.

Sal tried to make out the words between the static.

"Smell . . . bloodhounds . . . track." The voices on the walkie-talkie seemed distant.

"Who is that?" Sal asked.

"Sounds like Jones," Jennings said. "He's heading up the search in the Delta quadrant."

Jennings spoke, loud and slow, into the old walkie-talkie. "This is Jennings. Repeat what you just said, over."

They waited a moment but there was no response. Jennings was about to try to contact them again when the braying of the bloodhounds erupted. The sound came from downstream.

"Might be something," Sal said.

"Might be nothing," Jennings returned.

"Come on, lazy," said Sal, bounding downstream toward the howling dogs.

Sal, with Jennings following closely behind, pushed through the foliage that snagged at their clothes and skin. The gloom seemed to swallow up the light from their flashlights. It seemed that the very trees and darkness wanted to stop them from reaching Jones and his hounds. Ten minutes later, they reached a clearing at the river's edge. Jones and another officer stood with their hands on their hips. When they saw Sal and Jennings, they nodded and headed over to them.

"The dogs picked up her scent," said Jones. "I've got the rest of my team in the woods with them now. It won't be long."

Jones was tall and muscular, far different from the other officer – Sal thought his name was Reed – who was short and rotund. Sal wondered how Reed, who was panting hard, had ever made it through the academy.

Just as Sal began to doubt the dogs' noses, a commotion sounded in the distance. It was the other members of Jones's team, and they were clearly very excited about something.

"We've got something." The voice crackled over the radio Jones held in his hand.

Jones looked at Sal and smiled. "I told you."

The rest of Jones's team was a grassy clearing about a quarter of a mile away, and in Sal's mind, it seemed to take forever to reach them. By the time he got there, he was nearly as winded as Reed. *Thanks a lot*, he thought and patted the pack of cigarette in his pocket.

Half a dozen people and a handful of very proud bloodhounds stood on the edge of the river. Behind them, a small dirt road led through the woods and up to the main road.

At first, Sal could not see what they were looking at out in the dark of the Sabine. Then he followed their flashlight beams into the river and saw it.

The back end of a truck was sticking out of the water so it was just possible to see the glint of blue in the as the beams of light hit it. Dark water sloshed over the bumper, but he could make out the red, white, and blue of a Texas license plate. His gut told him that this was Omar Loya's truck and Jennings quickly confirmed it.

"Those are the right plates," Jennings said. "I memorized the number when I put out the APB."

Reality smacked into Sal like a punch to the face. Why did the dogs trace Sarah Tully's scent to this spot, to that truck? Were they already too late?

"Jennings, get a wrecker to yank that fucker up to land!"

## Chapter Seven

Water gushed out of the truck as the wrecker slowly pulled it back onto dry land. A crowd of police officers and EMTs held their collective breath as they watched Sal and Jennings approach the vehicle. No one wanted them to find that poor little girl this way.

Spotlights from two of the cruisers that had accompanied the wrecked down the old dirt road illuminated the blue truck. To Sal, the harsh lights seemed to give the whole scene an unnatural look. He did not like it. In the distance, he could hear the steady cawing of crows, and he did not like that either. He had always thought they were quiet after sunset, but then again he did not know a hell of a lot about birds.

Sal took a deep breath and held it as he neared the truck. The windshield was cracked and it looked as though the rest of the windows were missing. He told himself that poor little Sarah would not be in that truck, but he had a bad feeling he might be wrong this time.

Breath still held, he peered into the truck, half expecting to see Sarah's drowned body, her bloated face looking up at him. Thankfully, it was empty. But that meant that she and Suarez were still out there somewhere. The only question was where.

"Have this thing towed back to the station garage where we can get a better look at it," Jennings called to one of the other officers. Then he turned to Sal. "What do you think?"

Sal chewed on his lip for a moment and then felt his pocket for the pack of cigarettes that nestled there. They were his comfort; they helped him to think. He stepped away from the river's edge, drew out a cigarette, and lit it.

"Well?" Jennings prodded. "You think Suarez killed Omar and then dumped the truck here?"

Sal sighed. "The front end of that truck hit something; it's all smashed."

Jennings nodded.

"So why is it smashed?"

"Omar could have been in an accident before . . . something that had nothing to do with this," said Jennings.

"That doesn't make since on two counts," Sal said.

"Enlighten me, great one," said Jennings with a roll of his eyes.

Sal smiled. "It seemed like his wife would have told us that the truck had a damaged front end. That seems like an important bit that someone would not want to forget when asked for a description."

"She was distraught. People forget things," said Jennings. "What's your second count?"

"Follow me," said Sal, as he led Jennings about twenty yards up the dirt road. He took out his flashlight and shined it on an oak with thick body. Part of the tree was missing; splinters of it lay on the ground. Sal pointed to the blue paint etched into the side of the tree.

"So he hit the tree on the way down the road? Was he that shook up about killing Omar?" Jennings asked.

"I don't know . . . I'm beginning to think . . ." Sal stopped speaking and shook his head. Suarez was their best and only suspect. He had to figure this thing out.

Jennings sighed. "Even a stupid criminal wouldn't kill someone and then hide their vehicle a couple hundred yards away. If he dumped the truck here on purpose, he would have had to walk out of here. It seems like he would have hidden the truck closer to civilization or kept it until he could get out of state."

"I think this was an accident. I don't think he was trying to hide the truck. He didn't mean to hit that tree, didn't mean to land in the river," Sal said, rubbing the scruff on his jaw line. "Doesn't make sense . . . Omar drowned. Sarah didn't go missing until a bit later, not until *after* the truck would have ended up in the river."

"How do you figure?"

"We were out here with those kids right after they found the body. No one saw or heard the truck. Suarez would have had to remain

hidden. It just doesn't make sense that he would snatch Sarah with so many cops in and out of this area lately." Sal said. Nothing was making sense and it was making his head throb.

"Maybe he was just an opportunistic predator," Jennings said. "He must have had her down here or in that truck. That's where the hounds followed the scent."

That simply did not sit right with Sal. There was something else going on here, something that he could not wrap his head around just yet. He shivered at the memory of the hospital.

"Hey, Sal," Jennings said.

"Huh?"

"You're zoning out. Tell me what you're thinking," said Jennings.

The truth was he really was not sure what he was thinking. It seemed to him that Suarez was fleeing in the truck, trying to get away from something. Where was he now though? Where was Sarah?

"What's going on in that brain of yours?" Jennings asked.

Sal shrugged just as a scream tore through the night, silencing the sound of the croaking frogs. His blood froze and Jennings's eyes widened. No one, not Sal nor Jennings nor the officers down by Omar's dripping truck moved.

"Was that –" Jennings began as the scream sounded again.

"Where's that coming from?" Sal asked, almost to himself. It sounded like a child, a girl. He tried to pinpoint the direction of the scream, but it was impossible.

"Help me!" The voice rang out clear in the dead night. It was closer.

"Come on! Bring the dogs," Sal said as he charged headlong into the woods. He would find the girl, and if Suarez had been the one that took her . . . well, then Suarez might not make it out of the woods. Sal knew he would not be able to control his impulse to kill the bastard, just as he had wanted to kill the one who hurt Mona.

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Tony turned off the engine of his truck and cut off the lights as he sat in the lab's parking lot. The police station was not large enough to house a lab, so they utilized a civilian lab in another building two blocks away.

The parking lot held only a few cars, the last vestiges of employees who were working late. From the looks of things, the lab would be nearly empty. Not that it would help much. He knew that the skull would likely be somewhere in the building, but there was no telling how long it would take him to find it – even if he were able to get past the front desk.

Tony's fingers drummed nervous beats along the top of his steering wheel. *How in the name of God can I do this? It's crazy, pure madness.* Thoughts swam about his mind, images of him being arrested for sneaking into the lab and stealing the skull. What good would that do for Ricky?

He took a deep breath. He had to do this; he had to. If throwing that frigging skull back into the Sabine would do anything to make Ricky better, then he was going to try it no matter the consequences. Conscious be damned.

"Lord, please forgive me," he whispered as he opened the truck door and started walking on wobbly knees toward the lab. He felt as though he might vomit.

He hoped that he could simply act as though he belonged and then walk right into the building. Things in life never work out quite that easily, but he had hope and faith, and a little boy to consider.

Through the glass doors, he could see into the reception area, which was thankfully empty. He gave a tug on the door and it opened.

Beyond the reception desk stretched two hallways, one going right and one going left. Just as he resolved to head to the left, he noticed a woman stepping out of a room and into the hallway on the right. She was alone in the hall.

"Excuse me," Tony said, trying to get her attention. *God, he thought, I have no idea what I'm doing.*

She looked at him, slightly confused. She knew he did not belong.  
"Can I help you?"

The girl was young and petite, couldn't be more than twenty-four or twenty-five. Tony thought she might be an intern and his gut wrenched at what he was about to do. He tried to smile at her but he was sure it came out wrong.

"I do hope you can help me," Tony said. He let his false smile relax. "I need something."

She backed away, obviously frightened. Her eyes scanned left then right, as though she hoped someone would appear to help her.

"We don't keep drugs here, sir. We're not that kind of lab."

"Drugs . . . I don't want drugs," Tony said, taken aback. He must have looked more haggard than he felt.

She shrank further into the wall, and he could see her hand groping for the handle of the door she had just come through.

"Don't do that," he said, gesturing to the door. "I need to get into the forensics lab. I need the skull that was brought in here the other day."

"That's evidence," she said. "You can't just take that."

"I have to," Tony said, growing impatient. He used his height to loom over her. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need the fucking skull."

"I can't –"

He grabbed her by the elbow and held it tight. "Lead the way, and please don't fuck with me. I just need the skull. I promise. Then I'll be gone."

They walked together through the mazelike corridor, seeing no one else along the way. Tony was grateful. After a few twists and turns down the hallways (which he tried to commit to memory in case he had to flee), they reached the forensics area.

"It's in there," she said, gesturing to the darkened lab.

"Turn the lights on," Tony said, as they entered the lab. The fluorescent lights flickered to life and cast an unreal glow over the tables and cabinets in the too white room. "Where is it? Get it for me."

"It's evidence," she said again. "If you take this do you realize the kind of trouble that will follow you?"

He thought about Ricky, lying in bed with his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He thought about his little boy's lost smile. "Give me the fucking skull. That's the last time I'm going to be polite."

She led him past the last table in the room and to a tall, walk-in locker, which she opened. Sitting in what Tony took to be an evidence bag was the tiny skull that had brought him and his son so much trouble. Such a small thing, yet it seemed to hold so much strangeness.

Tony took the skull and looked at the girl. "Do you have a cell phone?"

"Are you going to steal that too?"

"No," I'm going to put it on the table over there," he said, taking her phone. He could not believe he was going to do this. "Step into the locker."

"What?"

"Get in the locker. I can't have you going and getting the police after me just yet. Get in the locker."

"You're kidding."

"Get in," he said. He grabbed her elbow again and guided her into the walk-in locker. "I'll let people know where you are after I've taken care of a few things."

Tony shut the door and locked it, then grabbed the skull. He put it under his jacket and tried to walk out of the building as calmly as possible.

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The sound of the screaming eventually led Sal to the other side of the river. He found a nice shallow area and waded across. Somehow, in the ruckus, he lost track of Jennings and the others. He was alone but could occasionally hear the barking of the hounds in the distance.

This side of the river was not, technically, a part of his jurisdiction. Not that it mattered much to him. All he cared about was finding Mona – *Sarah*, he corrected.

The sounds of frogs and crickets returned to the night. He could hear the occasional slosh of water as an alligator slid from the bank and into the safety of the river. Every once in a while he thought he could hear the sound of a scream or cry in the distance only to realize it was the sound of far off crows. *Don't the fucking things ever sleep*, he thought.

He was about to retrieve his phone from his breast pocket and call Jennings when the sound of something else caught his attention.

## Chapter Eight

Sal stood motionless and listened, waiting for the sound to come again. Every rustled branch and crunched twig caught his attention, but those sounds were not the ones for which he was listening.

The woods had never been a place Sal felt comfortable and now was no different. Every sound the forest made seemed somehow amplified in his head. Well, everything except the sound he strained to hear, the whimpering that he *knew* he just heard.

The snap of a twig beneath his own muddy shoes caused his heart to leap nearly out of his chest. Sal silently chastised himself. He was a cop, damn it. He could not allow himself to be afraid of the forest, especially when there was a little girl out there that needed him.

He took another step deeper into the woods, the small beam from his light barely pushing away the dark. As his foot set down, he stepped on a thicker branch that rolled forward and he found himself

falling. He reached out a hand and tried to grab a tree to steady his body. The rough bark dug into his hand.

"Shit," he hissed as he wiped his bloodied hand onto his jacket. In the next instant, he reached into his pocket for a cigarette. He took a long drag and tried his best to assess the situation. For a moment, he wondered if Suarez would be able to smell the cigarette smoke if he were close. Would that flush him out of hiding?

What could have made that whimpering sound from before? It did not sound human, he was reasonably sure. He waited, took another drag, and strained his ears to listen.

Finally, he heard it again, just a soft whimper. Only this time something else accompanied it, a rustling sound as though someone were pushing away the leaves and debris strewn on the ground.

Images of Suarez burying Mona . . . *Sarah* in a shallow grave of leaves, dirt, and rock filled his mind's eye. He reached beneath his jacket, past the pocket that held his cell, and to the .40 cal tucked snugly into his shoulder holster. Sal eased it from the holster, clicked off his light and let his eyes adjust to the blackness. He then crept forward toward the sounds, which stopped again as abruptly as they started.

It seemed to take an eternity, but he finally made it up a small rise and was able to look to the other side. He could see moonlight reflecting off the Sabine as it bent round a corner. Between him and the river's edge was a small clearing and in the center was pile of leaves and branches. It was just about large enough to hide a small body.

Sal watched for a moment, looked along the outskirts of the clearing for signs of movement. When he saw none, he moved forward cautiously. Sweat eased down the sides of his face and gathered below his neck. He had a terrible feeling about that mound of leaves and what lay beneath.

He knelt at the mound, clicked his light on and stuck it between his teeth, and then started to clear away the debris to see what was beneath. When he found what lay there, he stood up and backed away quickly, nearly dropping the light into the mess in the process.

Sal pulled out his phone and dialed Jennings.

"Where in the hell are you?" Jennings asked. Sal could hear the concern in his partner's voice.

"I found something,"

"The girl," said Jennings.

"No, but I got some real bad news for Jones," Sal said, as he shined his light over the eviscerated bodies of two bloodhounds. Their eyes were missing, as though torn right from their sockets. Some one had just given these poor creatures a makeshift burial, and Sal was sure they were still around. He could feel the menace in the trees.

"Yeah, well, if I see him I'll tell him," Jennings said. He sounded frustrated.

"What are you talking about?" Sal asked, his eyes still scanning the outer edge of the clearing.

"He and his team aren't responding to radio calls. It's like they vanished."

## Chapter Nine

It only took Sal about fifteen minutes to hurry back to Jennings and the rest of the search party. He offered a quick apology about disappearing into the woods and said he lost his sense of direction. Jennings did not look like he bought it entirely, but he did not say anything. The last thing Sal wanted to tell Jennings was that he wanted to be the one to find Suarez just so that, if he did have the girl, he could put a bullet through his skull.

"No one from Jones's crew has responded in the last forty minutes," Jennings said. "We need to get another search party for our damn search party."

As Sal listened to Jennings, a chill crept up back, a chill that he knew well from his years as a uniformed cop. Someone was watching them.

"Keep trying them," Sal instructed a junior officer. Then he turned to Jennings. "Grab some walkie-talkies and we'll head back out to search for the girl and Jones's team."

"I'm worried," Jennings said, as they started up the river. "The way you described those poor dogs, I mean, what if something happened to Jones and his team?"

"I'm sure they're fine," Sal said. "They are full grown cops with guns, big damn guns. One man isn't going to be able to take out that many cops without becoming Swiss cheese."

"Right, one man couldn't, but what if there were more people out there, helping him?" Jennings said.

Sal had to stifle a laugh. "You've been watching too many movies. We're going to find them, all of them including Sarah."

The duo walked for close to half an hour, trying to raise Jones on the radio every few minutes. The only thing they ever got in return was static, except –

"Wait!" Sal said, as Jennings was about to call over the walkie-talkie again.

"What?"

"Listen, in the static. It sounds like a woman's voice."

"You're crazy," Jennings said.

"Shut up and listen."

Sal could hear it, and now Jennings was nodding that he could as well. It was definitely a woman's voice but it was impossible to tell what she was saying. It might just be interference.

"Repeat. Over," said Jennings. They waited and for a moment, there was no response. Then a man's clear, booming voice sounded. It was Jones.

"It's nice to hear from you. Over," said Jones.

"You must have gotten out of radio range. We've been hunting for you for nearly two hours now. Over," said Jennings.

"We've been in range the whole time. Haven't found a damn thing and lost a couple of dogs in the process. Did the dogs come back to you? Over."

Jennings looked at Sal, who shook his head 'no'. There was no use in telling Jones about the dogs yet. They needed him to be able to concentrate on the search, not mourn his poor dogs.

"Give us your position, we'll meet you. Over," said Jennings.

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Jones and the others were only a quarter of a mile upstream. The exuberance of the dogs that Sal noticed earlier in the evening was gone. These dogs seemed skittish, afraid of their own shadows.

"How did the other two get away from you?" Sal asked.

Jones shook his head and shrugged. "It was some weird shit. A thick fog rolled through the trees – even though the weather doesn't feel quite right for fog. Then our lights cut out and the dogs started going crazy. I've never seen a dog act like that. Spark and Bones, that's my missing dogs, they howled and pulled, and got away. The fog just pulled out when we heard you two on the radio."

Sal nodded. He wished Jones had not told him the dogs' names. It was better when they were just dogs. "No more hits on Sarah's scent?"

"Nothing," said Jones.

The little voice in the back of Sal's mind, the asshole voice, he called it, told him that Sarah was probably already dead. Just as he was about to berate his asshole voice, a shout caught his attention.

"Over here!"

Sal and Jennings, accompanied by Jones, walked to Reed who had done all the shouting. *If anyone were within fifty miles, Sal thought, they would have heard that idiot.*

When they reached him, they could see his face in their flashlight beams. His face was ashen, and he looked like he was about to throw up. He didn't say anything, he simply pointed into the bushes.

Sitting on the branches of the bush were two eyeballs, human from the looks of them, with optic nerves still attached.

"Sweet Jesus," Sal said. "What color are Sarah Tully's eyes?"

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His only hope now was that they would be able to find the rest of her. He had no doubt in his mind that those were her eyes. Suarez must be responsible. Who else could it be? Sal wanted to kill him, but not with a bullet. No, a bullet was too good for the likes of Suarez. Sal wanted to tear him apart with his bare hands.

As they stared down at the eyes, which seemed to stare back up at them, a scream ripped through the woods. It was coming from down by the river.

"She can't still be alive, not without her eyes," Sal whispered. He looked around at the rest of the group, and he knew they were all thinking the same thing.

They returned to the river and at first Sal could see nothing but the dark water. Then he saw what appeared to be a log lodged against the shore some twenty yards downriver. It was no log though.

"Get some light over here!" he screamed.

There she was, washed up on the Sabine's muddy side. The Texas A&M shirt was covered in muck and she was missing one of her Nike sneakers. Sarah Tully's small face and eyeless sockets gazed skyward.

"No," Sal whispered. He felt tears and rage welling up in him along with the memories of when they found Mona. "No, we were already through here. How did we miss her? Jennings, how the fuck did we miss her?"

Jennings put a hand on Sal's shoulder. "We'll find the fucker that did this, I promise you that."

Sal knelt down next to Sarah's body and touched her icy hand. She had been dead for hours. She could not have been the one who screamed. Who was it then?

Jennings's radio blared. It was the home base, back where they'd found Omar's body earlier. "We just had a report of someone running up through the woods. Officers in pursuit. Over."

Sal grabbed the radio. "Where are they headed? What direction?"

The radio crackled again before the response came. "Up across the main road, but there isn't anything up there but more woods. We have officers giving chase. Over."

That was not the only thing that was up there, Sal knew. St. Catherine's hospital was also there. His instincts told him that was where the suspect would be going. He did not know why, and he did not know how, but the voice in his head – not the asshole voice from before, but a softer and more insistent voice – told him that was where he needed to be.

## Chapter Ten

Sal left Jennings to take care of the body recovery, while he borrowed a cruiser and sped to St. Catherine's Hospital. He felt that this would be where Suarez, the child killer, would be going. He could not put into words how he knew that, but he felt it in his core.

The hospital was nearly empty, and he saw only one nurse. He gave her Suarez's description and asked if she had seen anyone like that. She shook her head no. He thought for a moment about having them lock down the hospital. It could prevent Suarez from escaping if he were there. But it would also cause a lot of undue panic and confusion. *No*, Sal thought. He would find Suarez on his own.

Sal found himself passing the nursery again, and he struggled to push away the thoughts of what happened in that same hallway that afternoon. He kept trying to tell himself that it never happened.

The little boy, Ricky, was in a room right around the corner from the nursery. Something seemed to be drawing Sal toward that room. Could Suarez be there? Was there some connection he was missing?

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out. "This is Sal."

"We found Suarez," Jennings said.

"What?" He was elated, yet *he* had wanted to be the one to find Suarez, to make him pay. "Where did you pick him up? I guess my instincts must've been wrong. I felt he would come to the hospital."

"He's dead, Sal," Jennings said.

"What happened? Who shot him?"

"No one shot him. We found his body in the river. He's been dead awhile and his eyes are gone too."

*Christ*, he thought as he ended the call. His instincts must be on the fritz. Nothing was making sense. He was back to square one. Who in the hell was doing this?

*Let's see*, he thought. Suarez went from prime suspect to victim. Someone must have been chasing him, which was why he crashed the truck. His eyes are gone, just like poor Sarah. Omar kept his eyes though. What the fuck did it all mean?

He tucked away the phone and turned to head back out of the hospital and down to the river, yet again. Inside the nursery, he saw a woman standing over one of the newborns. Her back was toward him, and at first, he thought she must be a nurse. A second glance told him that something was not right about the situation though.

The lights dimmed again, just as they had earlier in the day. Sal steadied himself, expecting the babies to bolt upright again. The woman, dressed in a frayed dirty gown, swayed back and forth. She moved too quickly, like a sped up film. Her long, dark hair was uncombed, tangled and wet. It held traces of mud, leaves, and grit.

She reached into one of the bassinets and lifted out one of the infants still wrapped in his blue warming quilt. The woman pulled him close to her chest.

*What is she doing?* Sal banged on the glass. "Hey! Police!"

She did not respond. Instead, she just stood there looking at the baby, rocking him in that sped up motion.

"Put the child down!" he ordered.

The baby began to cry. The woman glided toward the door that led into the hallway, moving impossibly fast. He could see more of her now. Her skin was a pale gray and so thin the bones seemed to show through. Her fingernails were yellow and blood encrusted.

As she left the nursery, she still seemed oblivious to Sal's demands for her to stop. He did not bother drawing his gun; there was no way he would shoot while she was holding a baby.

The strange woman turned a corner with Sal close behind her, calling for her to stop. When he came around the corner, she was gone as though she had vanished into nothingness.

"How the fuck . . ." Sal started. The day was getting stranger and stranger by the minute.

"Mr. Sal," said a small voice from behind him.

He jumped nearly out of his skin and spun around to find Ricky standing there in the middle of the hallway. The boy was dressed in his hospital gown and holding the newborn in his hands.

"How did you . . .?" he began.

"The others helped get him back," Ricky said softly. He looked as though he had no real idea of what was happening.

"Others?"

"She wanted it, but they helped get it back. She wants her child."

"Who does, Ricky?"

"La Llorona," he said, his heavy eyes half closed.

## Chapter Eleven

The name alone sent fingers of ice crawling along Sal's body. He could feel the blood drain from his own face. La Llorona, the Weeping Woman. She was a legend that transcended the centuries. The mere mention of her was enough to make children behave. As a child the fear of La Llorona stealing you away in the night was powerful. Most kids in Texas and Mexico knew the story of their own bogeyman, or bogeywoman in this case.

Sal was an adult though, and he did not believe such things. The fear in the child's voice as he croaked the name repeatedly told Sal that Ricky truly thought that it was the Weeping Woman.

*Shit*, Sal thought. *I've seen enough strangeness today that I'm starting to believe.*

"Ricky," said a voice. "I fall asleep for a minute and you go wandering."

It was the kid's grandmother, Sal noted. He wondered where Tony was. He could not imagine him leaving Ricky's side.

A nurse came into the hallway and her eyes widened when she saw the baby in Ricky's arms.

"You're not supposed to take them," she said slowly, giving Ricky a strange look that made Sal want to laugh. She took the baby, gave Sal a dirty look until he flashed his badge, and then returned the baby to the nursery.

"La Llorona," Ricky said again. His voice was a mere whisper.

"I guess you've been telling him stories," Sal said, as he walked back to Ricky's room.

"I've never told him such things," she said. She looked as though she wanted to say something else but then thought better of it. Sal was good at catching those kinds of things.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Come in the room," she said. She helped Ricky back into bed. He closed his eyes and began snoring almost immediately. "Close the door, please."

Sal shut the door.

"Something is wrong," she said.

"You're telling me." He did not bother telling her about the other dead bodies in the river.

"I never told Ricky stories about the Weeping Woman. I know his father never told him those stories either. Detective, I think that maybe she is real."

The logical part of him began to wrestle with everything he had witnessed. He could not believe that all these deaths, all this strangeness were the work of a ghost. It simply *could not be*. Yet it seemed to make more sense than anything else did right now.

"You know the story?" she asked.

"I guess. I heard it when I was kid," he said. "She killed her own children, drowned them, and then felt guilty. She searches for them, weeping and screaming and crying. They say she'll take you if you're bad."

"It's more than just a legend, I think," she said as she walked toward the window. Beyond her, Sal could see the red and blue lights of more emergency vehicles as they were heading to the Sabine to recover bodies.

She turned back to face him, her rosary clutched tightly in her hands. "Ricky makes me think everything might be true. The way he acts, the things he says. Detective Sal, let me tell you the legend as I heard it."

"Okay," he said. He knew he should really be getting back to Jennings to help clean up the mess and continue the search for . . . whatever it was that killed those people. Poor little Sarah.

She cleared her throat. "Years ago in Mexico, there was a woman. Some believe her real name was Maria, but that was lost to time. She was very beautiful and could have the pick of any man she wanted. Maria knew she was beautiful and desired, and she loved this attention. As a single mother, she knew she could always make ends meet with her beauty."

"She was a hooker," Sal said bluntly.

She shrugged. "The legend says that she met a man, a very handsome and wealthy man who wanted her for his own. He showered her with gifts and promised her the world. Maria thought this was the man of her dreams, a husband and father to her children.

"They were together for some time, but he never suggested marriage. He seemed content to get his pleasure from her and never gave her his heart."

"Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free," Sal said.

"Uh, I'm not familiar with that saying," she said.

Sal gave a slight grin. "Never mind. Go ahead with the story."

"Well, one night she asks him why he never offered to marry her. She even wore a new white dress, hoping to give him the hint, you know. He laughed at her though, mocked her cruelly, and told her that he would never marry a woman who already had another man's children. It broke her heart and drove her mad."

"So she went home and killed her own children?"

She nodded. "She drowned them in the nearby river, telling them the whole time not to cry. She could not lose the man that she loved so much. When she went and told him what she had done for him, he was disgusted, called her a murderer and a whore. When she realized what she had done, she returned to the river. The bodies were already washed away in the current.

"She wept and cried and screamed, but nothing would bring her children back. With a final scream, she leapt into the river, vowing to find her children. Legend says that God was so disgusted with what she had done that He cursed her to haunt the river until she found her children."

"You really think these murders have something to do with La Llorona," Sal said. He still could not bring himself to believe any of this was true.

"She became the Weeping Woman. Thousands claim to have seen her. You know the stories. She becomes enraged when she can't find her babies she pulls men to their deaths, tears the eyes out of some of her victims, and tries to take children to replace the ones she lost."

"Wait, she tears out people's eyes," Sal said. Perhaps someone was using the legend as an inspiration to murder these people.

"According to the stories I heard in Mexico when I was young," she said.

"This story took place in Mexico, right? Well we're in Texas. What would a ghost want to travel to the States for?"

"Texas once belonged to Mexico, detective. And at one point, the Sabine River was the border."

"Right," he said.

"When my son and grandson found the skull, perhaps it belonged to one of her children. Perhaps they found it and now she wants it back."

"The skull didn't look that old," Sal said, although he really had no idea how old the skull looked. But it just could not be one of La Llorona's children. Could it?

"I think your killer is a ghost, detective. And I think she will keep killing until she has her children back."

Sal did not know what to say. It made no logical sense whatsoever. Yet it made a hell of a lot more sense than the rest of his day. The Weeping Woman . . . how was he supposed to arrest a fucking ghost? He thought of the missing eyes, the woman in the nursery and his earlier incident in the same hallway.

"Do you know anything about crows?" he asked

She shuddered. "Then you heard about the crows that smashed themselves into the window?"

"No . . . but there have been a lot of crows around lately. Dead crows mostly. What does that mean?"

"In some cultures, people believe that the crows carry away peoples' souls. La Llorona's soul is trapped here, and the birds cannot do their job. I think they die, or go mad from trying."

"What can we do?" Sal asked. But before he could have an answer, the lights in the room flickered and winked out, thrusting them into utter darkness. He could not see a thing, but he felt a cold breeze rush past him. It felt like he had thrust his body into a freezer.

"Ricky!" his grandmother yelled.

Something knocked over one of the trays near Ricky's bed, sending the metal clattering to the floor.

"No," Ricky moaned. "La Llorona."

Through the darkness, Sal tried to grope for the door to let in light from the hallway. He managed to reach the handle and yank it open. The hallway light shot into the room, giving it just enough illumination for Sal to see the thing that now held Ricky in its arms.

She was not the figure of beauty told about in the legends. She was hideous. Her gray, mottled skin and long scraggly hair made her look like the walking dead. The ghost – or whatever it was – held Ricky close. Her fingernails dug into his skin.

Tears ran down Ricky's face, and Sal could hear his grandmother's cries.

Sal looked into the ghost's dark eyes. They seemed to pierce him. "Let him go!"

"Please let my grandbaby go."

The ghost raised her head slightly, and Sal could see tears on her face now. She opened her mouth and shrieked. To Sal, it sounded like a thousand fingernails on a chalkboard all scraping away at once. It was enough to bring him to his knees.

"Mis hijos! Mis hijos!" the ghost screamed.

Sal was frozen. The ghost, dragging Ricky along with her, sped past him and into the hallway. It only took a second for him to recover from that awful shriek, but when he went into the hallway, they were both gone.

## Chapter Twelve

Sal dialed Jennings as he left the hospital and headed toward his borrowed cruiser.

"You find any –" Jennings began, but Sal cut him off.

"Tighten the perimeter. Nobody, I repeat nobody gets in or out."

"Right, nobody in or out. Do you mind telling me what's going on?"

"Ricky Mendez was just kidnaped. Someone took him into the woods."

"Jesus. Give me a description," said Jennings.

Sal could not exactly say that La Llorona, the ghost of a long dead woman, was the culprit, so he gave a cursory description instead.

"A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dirty white dress," Sal said. *And the bitch can scream*, he thought.

He slid into the cruiser and gunned it out of the parking lot. La Llorona would be taking Ricky to the river, he knew that much. But where along the river would they go? He figured he would stop at the nearest spot to the river he could find and go on foot from there. The only trouble was that he would be in the ghost's territory.

## Chapter Thirteen

Tony saw the roadblock ahead and figured it was for him. The local police, along with Sheriff's deputies and a few state troopers blocked the road. Several of the police officers headed into the woods.

*This can't be for me, he thought, not for stealing that skull.* Then he remembered about the missing girl. They must not have found her yet, he concluded.

After he left the lab, he drove to a McDonald's parking lot and thought long and hard about what he'd done and what he had to do next. Hell, he had no idea what was coming next. He felt terrible for the girl he'd put in the locker, but all he wanted to do was get to Ricky. Then he would figure out what to do with the skull that sat wrapped up in his jacket on the passenger seat.

A uniformed officer from the local police came up to his truck and tapped on the window.

Tony rolled it down. "Hello."

"Sir, unless you have an emergency and need to get to the hospital, I'm going to have to ask you to turn around. You can drive through the underpass and that will get you back onto the highway."

"My son's in the hospital," he said. "I have to get to him."

"I'm sure he's fine, but I can't let you through."

Tony was about to plead when he saw the detective that had been working with Sal. He thought his name was Jennings, but he could not remember.

"Can I talk to him," Tony said, pointing to Jennings. "I know him."

The officer sighed. "Detective Jennings, this guy says he knows you."

When Jennings looked at Tony, his face seemed to pale. He walked to the truck slowly. "You're Tony Mendez, right?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "Can you let me through so I can get to the hospital?"

"Could you step out of the vehicle and come with me?"

*Shit*, Tony thought. They must know about the skull and now I'm going to be arrested. His body shook as he got out of the truck. He'd never been in trouble in his life, at least not anything this big.

"What's wrong?" Tony said, hoping he could mask his fear.

"There was a kidnapping at the hospital," Jennings said.

Tony's fear for himself was gone, replaced by a new dread. "Not Ricky."

Jennings just looked at Tony. His eyes told Tony all he needed to know. Whatever was behind the deaths and the skull had taken his boy.

"We have scores of men and women combing this area. We'll find your son," Jennings said.

Tony could detect a hint of defeat in the detective's voice. His words sounded forced.

"I have to get to him," Tony said.

"You should really wait here. We've got a lot of people out there looking."

"He's my son," Tony said, as he spun around and walked back to his truck. The flashing lights of the patrol cars gave the scene a surreal feeling, and Tony felt as though he was not in full control of his body. He was numb.

He grabbed his jacket, which contained the skull, as well as a flashlight from the glove compartment. *Return the skull to the river*, he thought. *If I return the skull, it can end this*. He was not quite sure he believed that, but it was all he had.

Tony looked over his shoulder to see if Jennings was going to try to stop him. The detective just nodded, seeming to understand. Tony nodded back and then leaped off the road and into the high grasses. He ran through the grass to the edge of the woods and toward the Sabine.

He could not lose Ricky, not after he had already lost so much. It would be unfair.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sal had no idea where he was, and he had no idea where to search for Ricky and the ghost other than the river. The woods were quiet; not even the crickets chirped. This was a hunter's realm, and he felt like prey. La Llorona was out there right now, doing God knows what to Ricky. He thought about Sarah's eyes and shuddered.

He lit up another cigarette and tried to banish his childhood fears. Except this time, all the fears and the things that went bump in the night were very real.

As he stood there, smoking and trying to figure out if he was insane, he saw two pinpricks of light in the distance. They were coming toward him fast, and it was only a moment before he realized they were flashlight beams. He could hear voices, police officers by the sound.

"Hey," he called out.

"Jesus, Sal, is that you? I thought I smelled smoke." The voice belonged to Reed.

"Yeah," Sal said.

"What's going on out here, detective?" the other officer, Paulson, asked. "It doesn't seem normal."

Murders, kidnappings, and now ghosts . . . Sal knew he was the last person to have an answer to that question. Instead, he just shrugged.

"We've been all over this area," Reed said. "There's nothing out here."

"Well, we're going to keep searching," Sal snapped. He looked at Reed's round body with loathing. His own lungs burned from all the damn cigarettes, his vice, but he would never stop searching for a child. Never.

"Right, I'm just saying," Reed said, whining.

"Let's get to the river," said Sal. All the legends dealt with the river, all the sightings dealt with the river, and all of the murders over the past twenty-four hours took place on the river. That had to be where the ghost would be. That would be where they would find Ricky. He just hoped that they were in time.

As they neared the river, fog rolled around them. Jones had said something about the fog, something about it feeling unnatural. Sal felt that now. It came in thick, roiling around them, making their flashlights all but useless. He could not even see the ground, but he could hear the flowing river in the distance.

"Fuck," he whispered.

"Did you hear something?" Reed asked.

"Yeah, I just said 'fuck'," Sal growled.

"Something else. I heard it too," Paulson said. "It sounded like something howling."

"Might be coyotes," Reed offered. "My uncle's got 'em all over his property and he doesn't live too far away."

"Hush," Sal said, straining his ears. He was sure that whatever the others heard were not coyotes. *It was probably that bitch's scream*, he thought.

The three of them stood there in the fog listening to the silence. The sound started up again, and just as Sal had suspected it was no coyote. Not even a howl; it was a moan, long and drawn out.

"What the hell is that?" Reed said.

"Sounds like someone crying or something," Paulson answered.

"Where's it coming from?" Reed's voice sounded like it was about to break with fear.

"The river," Sal said. "We need to get to the Sabine."

"This fog's too thick. We'll fall into the river before we see it," said Reed.

"Something's touching my leg," cried Paulson. He backed into the fog until Sal lost sight of him.

"Paulson," Sal called. When he got no response, he called again. "Paulson!"

The name seemed to echo in the fog.

"Let go!" Paulson sounded far away now. "Let me fucking go!"

"Oh, God," Reed said, shrinking closer to Sal. "What's happening?"

"She's taking him," Sal said, as he started heading toward the area where he last heard Paulson's pleas.

"Who's taking him!"

"Come on," Sal said, reaching a hand back to grab onto Reed's shirt and pull him forward.

Their lights did nothing to penetrate the fog, which seemed to be getting even thicker. Every once in a while the gnarled trunk of a tree would peek through the fog, and Sal would be sure it was La Llorona coming to take him away.

Sal could hear Reed breathing heavily behind him. "Relax," Sal said. "Focus on finding Paulson and Ricky."

"We have to call this in," Reed said.

Sal heard him pushing the button on his radio, but there was no one coming through on the other end.

"Fucking radio died," Reed said. "Oh, shit."

"What now?" Sal said, spinning around to face Reed. He'd had enough of the kid's whining.

Reed's eyes gazed up into a tree. "I found Paulson."

Sal turned to see Paulson's body stuffed into the fork of a tree. His back was bent backwards at an impossible angle. His eye sockets were empty and thick streams of blood poured down his face.

Reed started to cry. "He was my friend, my best friend, who or what the fuck did this to him?"

Sal approached the body and looked at the wounds to Paulson's face. He could see scratch marks in the face where she tore out the eyes.

"She clawed them right out," he whispered. "Why the eyes? Hey, Reed, try your radio again. . . Reed?"

He glanced over his shoulder and looked to where Reed had been standing just a moment ago. Reed was gone and only the fog remained. Sal would never see Reed again.

Then a voice seemed to slither into his brain, a voice that he heard earlier when La Llorona took Ricky. *Those who cry lose their eyes.*

## Chapter Fifteen

When Tony could finally hear the flowing water, he knew he was close to the river. The fog that wound its way into the woods had made the going slow and treacherous, and he had fallen on his ass several times. At least he was close now. He could get rid of the skull and hopefully end whatever was happening.

As the fog got thicker, he put on his coat and held the skull in his hands. He would have to be extra careful now – if he fell, he did not want to break the skull.

Tony kept thinking about what his mother said, about that skull being the reason Ricky was acting the way he was. He hoped she was right, and he hoped more that throwing the damn thing back in the river would let him find his boy. He'd never put much faith in spirits before, thought it was all just silly superstition. Now it was the only hope he had left.

Somewhere in the distance, through the milky fog, he heard a scream and then a long drawn out moan. It sent a shiver along every

inch of his spine. That had to be the spirit or ghost or whatever it was that had somehow taken Ricky.

Every fiber in his body told him not to go there, not to go to that voice. His fatherly instinct was far stronger and he hurried toward the sound.

## Chapter Sixteen

As he got closer, he could make out the words in that terrible, continuing moan. It was a female voice, of that he was certain. She kept repeating the same words. "*Mis hijos, mis hijos, donde están mis hijos!*"

*She wants to know where her children are,* Tony thought. Could it really be her? Could it be La Llorona? It made sense to him now. The children, the skull, it all made horrible sense. In his hand, he held the skull of one of her children. That could be his bargaining tool to get Ricky back.

As he moved through the fog, the sound of her wailing, weeping voice grew closer and closer. He was getting close; he could feel it. The air around him felt suddenly colder and he could see his breath in the night air. Keeping the river to his right, he hurried toward the voice as fast as the vision obscuring fog would allow.

"Ricky," he began to yell. His voice trembled and though he knew he was yelling, the fog seemed to swallow his voice. "Ricky, don't worry, daddy's coming."

## Chapter Seventeen

Sal slowly made his way through the fog trying to find Reed, trying to get his cell phone to work, and trying to figure out what he was going to do about La Llorona. His ears perked when he heard Ricky's name called somewhere in the dark.

*Sounds like Tony*, Sal thought. He must have gone back to the hospital and found out, and now he's out here looking for Ricky. Does he know about the ghost? His mother, Flora, must have told him. It was reassuring to hear something beside's the unearthly moan that constantly wound its way through the woods.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and called out. "Tony! This is Detective Sal. Follow my voice."

Silence was the only response he got. Even the groans and terrible cries of the ghost had stopped. Suddenly the feeling of being watched came over him, the same chill that he'd felt earlier when he knew someone was out in the woods watching him and Jennings.

"Tony?" he said again, much quieter this time. He slowly panned the beam from his flashlight around the fog enshrouded woods. "Ricky, hey kiddo is that you?"

A soft, icy whisper oozed its way into his left ear, chilling the side of his face. He felt a bony hand tighten on his shoulder. "My children . . . where are my children?"

Sal wrenched out of her frigid grip and stumbled forward. He caught his balance and continued, running headlong into the woods. He hoped he was going in the direction of Tony's voice, but there was no way to be sure.

After a few minutes of running, he had to stop and catch his breath. He had not been able to rest in hours, and his smoker's lungs did not like all the running he was doing. His hacking cough filled the air. *Way to go*, he thought, *tell her right where you are*.

A small, cold hand suddenly grasped his; it was a child's hand. *Ricky*, he thought, but when he looked down at where the hand was gripping his own, there was nothing. Yet, he could still feel the pressure of someone small holding tight to him.

The invisible hand tugged on him with a child's insistence, urging him forward. The sound of La Llorona's moans in the distance gave him the will to keep going. He had to get to Tony and then they could find Ricky. After that, he did not know what they would do.

The hand guided him forward another fifty yards or so, and then it was gone. He could hear the river again, and he seemed close to it. The ensconcing fog made it impossible to tell though.

He leaned against a tree and panted heavily, listening to the thrum of his own speeding heart. In the fog ahead of him, he could hear someone or *something* coming toward him. The crackle dead leaves being crushed underfoot by whomever it was rushing through the woods filled him with both hope and dread. Was it her? Did a ghost make a sound when they walked? No, he did not think so.

"Tony," he called, drawing his gun. He knew it would not give him much protection from the ghost, but the polymer grip in his sweaty palm seemed to give him strength. His other hand pulled out his flashlight and he clicked it on.

"Detective Sal, have you found him? Have you found Ricky?"

Tony Mendez, looking dazed and bedraggled, stumbled toward him through the fog. Sal could see cuts along Tony's face where branches and briars had done their brutal work.

"You okay?" Sal asked, tucking his gun back into its holster.

"Did you find him?"

"Not yet, but we will," Sal said, even though it was hard for him to believe his own words. "I can't call in for support – my phone's dead. What about yours?"

Tony shook his head. "I left it in the truck. I have to find him. He's all I have."

"We'll get him back."

"Detective, you have to believe me. It's not something human that's taken my son and done all this. It's something worse. I know this sounds crazy but I . . . I think it might be –"

Sal finished Tony's sentence for him. "La Llorona."

"You know!"

Sal nodded. "I think she wants the skull you found. It's one of her children."

"I know," Tony said, lifting the small skull up for Sal to see.

Sal blinked. "How in the hell did you get that?"

"Let's just say that one of the lab techs is going to be pretty pissed off at me," Tony said. He tried to laugh but instead started to cry.

"Ricky."

"Don't do that," Sal said. Images of eyeless faces assaulted his mind. "Don't cry. She doesn't like it when you cry. Plus you have to be strong for Ricky."

"I know," Tony said. "When I was lost in the fog, I thought she was coming for me. I felt a woman's hand grab mine and pull me through the woods. I couldn't let go of it."

Sal's ears perked at this. "A child's hand?"

"No, it was a woman's. It was too big for a kid," Tony said. "I think it wanted me to find you."

*That makes about as much sense as anything else,* Sal thought. *Maybe it was La Llorona bringing us together so she could kill us both and tear our eyes.*

"I think we need to get down to the river," Tony said. "I have something she wants, and I might be able to get Ricky back."

"Let's go," Sal said. If the ghost wanted her children, then Tony might be right. He might be able to give her the skull and get his boy. At least as long as Ricky was still alive.

Together, holding onto one another, they stumbled through the fog and toward the sound of the river. Above the current came yet another sound in the night, a sound that was music to Sal's ears.

"Dad!"

It was Ricky.

"Ricky!" Tony screamed. "Ricky, where are you?"

"I don't know," the child replied, his scream echoing through the trees. "Help me, Daddy!"

They continued to yell to one another, and Sal led Tony toward the sound of Ricky's voice. It was hard to pinpoint in the fog, but eventually they got close enough that it sounded like Ricky was standing right next to them.

"Dad!"

"We're coming," Tony screamed, frantic.

When Sal thought they must be very close to Ricky, he began to shine his light to try to pierce the fog. They were right along the riverbank and the going was treacherous. One wrong move and he or Tony could wind up taking a dip in the Sabine.

Sal swept his light around again and this time he saw a small shaped huddled up next to a huge tree trunk. The shape moved! It had to be him. The way the light played over the child's face, Sal thought he could see hollows where Ricky's eyes were supposed to be. When the boy lifted his head though, he saw that it was nothing more than a trick of the light. He looked scared, but fine.

"Ricky!"

"They said you would come, but I didn't believe them," Ricky said.

"They told me not to cry, so I didn't cry."

Tony ran to Ricky and swept him up in his arms. He squeezed the child so hard that Sal thought Ricky might pop. It warmed him inside, and he tried not to think about Mona and a reunion that would never happen.

"Are you okay, baby boy?" Tony said, as he ran a hand through Ricky's hair.

"We've got to get out of here," Sal said. He did not want to break up the tender moment, but La Llorona was still out there.

"It's too late," said Ricky. His eyes widened and he buried his face in his father's chest.

Sal turned around to see the ghost floating a few feet above the fog. Her long dark hair hung in front of her face, partially obscuring the twisted mask of rage she wore.

"My children," she said. Her mouth opened wide and Sal knew what was coming. She let out a deafening shriek that shook his bones and made every muscle in his body quiver.

"My children," she said. "*My children.*"

She reached out toward Ricky, her arm growing impossible long. Sharp nails raked at the flesh of his arm, and Tony pulled him away.

"My child," he screamed back. "You murdered your own children, you don't deserve them."

She withdrew her arm and began to weep. It was a terrible sound.

"My children."

Sal slowly eased toward Tony and Ricky. He figured he could put himself between them and the ghost and hopefully give them a chance to get away.

La Llorona was too fast though. She surged forward and grabbed Ricky, yanking him clear of Tony's arms. With Ricky clutched between her corpselike arms, she floated out and over the river. She laughed and wept at the same time.

Ricky cried now too, and the ghost grabbed his mouth and screamed, "Those who cry lose their eyes!"

Sal ran forward and started to wade out into the river. "Let him go, take me instead. Let him go."

La Llorona laughed at Sal. "Not a child. You're not my child."

"I have your child, you fucking bitch," Tony said. "You want your child, you give me mine!"

Sal turned and saw Tony standing at the river's edge with the skull held aloft.

"My children," she said. Her voice seemed softer now. "My children."

"Let him go and you can have this," Tony said. "If you don't, I swear I will break it into a million pieces and you will never find rest."

La Llorona cocked her head, as though she were contemplating this. Then she released Ricky, dropping him into the Sabine. Sal dove forward and swam over to Ricky, who was choking and sputtering.

"I've got you," Sal said, as he began to swim back to shore with Ricky held close to him. "I've got you."

He could see La Llorona float gently toward where Tony stood. The two of them stared at one another for a moment until Tony finally handed over the skull.

As Sal carried Ricky out of the River, he watched as La Llorona and her child's skull faded into nothingness. When she faded entirely away, the fog went with her. Sal could see the sun just beginning to rise in the distance.

"Thank you," Tony said, as he took Ricky from Sal's arms. Sal nodded.

"They said you would come for me and that I would be okay," Ricky said, looking up at Sal and Tony.

"They?" Sal said. It wasn't the first time Ricky had mentioned 'they'. "Who? Was there someone else out here with you?"

"My mom and the little girl. They came to help me when the ghost started showing up. They said you would make me safe again and that I didn't need to cry. They said they would help you find each other in the woods."

"The hand . . ." Tony said. "Oh, Olivia."

"Mr. Sal, the little girl said she tried to warn you in the nursery. Didn't you see her?"

Sal thought back to his first encounter in the nursery. It seemed as though someone had been trying to warn him about something. And there was the figure of the small child.

"Was her name Sarah?" Sal asked.

"No, silly," Ricky said. "It was Mona. She said to stop smoking too."

Sal wept freely for the first time in years and it felt good. The three of them watched the sun come up over the Sabine, banishing away all traces of the darkness and horror that had filled their lives.

"I think it's over now," Sal said.

"She got what she wanted," Tony agreed, as he rocked Ricky gently in his arms.

"I thought she had two children," Ricky said.

## Epilogue

James Castro lay in his bed trying to get to sleep. He thought about what his parents had just told him. They let him know that the cops found the little Tully girl, Sarah, down along the river sometime yesterday. She was dead, supposedly killed by some maniac. His parents actually said they were proud of him for hurrying home and reporting the kidnapping to the police. They said even the Tully family was thankful. They were all glad he was okay.

James did not know how he felt. He was certainly glad that he was alive, but the pit of his stomach ached for Sarah. She was just a kid, a good little kid. Now she was nothing, and it hurt. Maybe if they had all stood their ground it would not have happened.

As he lay there, he felt tears begin to trickle down his face. Sarah was so little. He sniffed and cried some more. He tried to stifle his tears but found it difficult.

Outside his window, the wind moaned and howled. He pulled his quilt up to his chin and continued to cry.

"Hush, no cry," said a whispery voice that sounded like it was right in his ear. "Those who cry lose their eyes."