

The Longest Night of Rain

Original Story by

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Rick Simon, a private investigator, loses his partner in an explosion meant to kill Sergeant Juan Cortez. Then he's hired by Mrs. Cortez to find the hitman killing her family. Grief and anger drive him through a chase involving the Navarro family and a persistent assassin.

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The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 1 – Everything Goes to Hell

It hadn't rained in weeks. Months, actually. Grass hadn't been green since the spring of 2015, so long ago that none of us could remember its actual color. There were no flowers, and the bushes were a sickly brown. Trees bloomed in the spring and died in the summer; there was no water to keep them alive. We'd had droughts before . . . they were nothing new to California. But this one had gone on so long we'd all gone a little crazy, and according to the weather report, there was no end in sight.

Pools stood empty in the back yard – there was no water to fill them with. Each house received a small ration of water daily, and if you were smart you watered what was left of your garden with it. At least that way you could supplement your food with something homegrown. After the Santa Ana winds started, Mother Nature decided it wasn't hot enough, and the heat index shot up over a hundred degrees. As if we hadn't suffered enough, heat lightning started in the desert, and before we knew it we had almost twenty fires burning from Orange County all the way to San Francisco.

Me, I had somebody out there killing people. It was almost a relief to be searching for something that wasn't climate related. I'm a private detective named Rick Simon, and right now I wished I was anywhere but Southern California. I hear Alaska is nice this time of year.

It didn't matter what I wished, I was here and I was on the lookout for Billy Flatbush, a hitman that was proving to be as elusive as an afternoon shower. He'd already killed four members of the Cortez family, including a police sergeant and my partner. His body count had taken on a distinctly personal flavor. What my employer didn't know was I was ready to find him . . . for free. No matter what the temperature was outside.

Eddie Winchester was my partner, my friend, the nicest person I knew. If you needed the shirt off his back, he'd ask if you wanted the coat, too. We'd been friends since high school. We were roommates in college, and came straight out of there and into the FBI. And when the FBI got too restrictive, we decided to go into business together. We'd been partners for almost ten years, and I wasn't sure I knew how to function without him. Flatbush had seen to it that I was going to have to try. Simon and Winchester, LLC was down one partner, and I wasn't about to go looking for anything except the man that was responsible.

The Cortez family had been bootleggers and gun runners during Prohibition but had converted their operation to a legal business a long time ago. They found their way into politics some twenty years ago, and they stayed there ever since. The youngest of the trio, Manny Cortez, was Governor of California, and the oldest, Diego, was the California Attorney General. Alicia, their sister, was a California State Senator. Diego's car exploded one hot summer night when he was headed home from his office. Alicia's house burned down with her in it. Manny was felled by an assassin's bullet. The police sergeant happened to be their cousin, Juan, and he died leading a raid on a drug house. Eddie was with Juan and might have been collateral damage. I didn't know, and I didn't care. Eddie was just as dead.

Simon and Winchester had been hired by Alma Cortez to find the killer when it appeared the police were getting nowhere. Alma was the matriarch of the Cortez family and tough as nails. I was on my way now to see her, and I knew she wasn't going to be happy. She had one son left and had no intention of burying him like she had Manny, Diego and Alicia. I knew her well enough to know she'd be cognizant of the loss of my partner.

What she lived in wasn't a house, it was a mansion. I had to climb marble steps just to get to the front door, and I was drenched in sweat by the time I got there. Gerald the butler answered the door and he looked cool and comfortable. He would – it was at least twenty-five degrees cooler inside than out here where the real people live.

She was in her office, sitting behind her desk, and looking every bit the grieving businesswoman. She set her pen down on the desk as I walked in and looked me thoroughly up and down. "Richard."

"Mrs. Cortez."

"I understand Edward was killed with Juan in the raid. Are you here to resign?"

"Why would I do that? I still have to make a living, and you still have a boy that needs protection."

"Well, then, good. Juan's death just proves why I have no faith in the police. What are you going to do about protecting Lonnie?"

"I'm going to insist that he move in with me."

Alma Cortez looked at me like I'd grown a second head. "Insist that he . . . oh no, that will never work. He can't move in with you. I need him for too many things."

"Then there's only one other thing I can do. I'll have to move in here." I was absolutely serious. Whether she would take me that way or not, I had no idea. And to my surprise, she did.

"Now, that can be arranged. Yes, I can make that happen. You can pose as his secretary. Or his bodyguard. You can have the bedroom next to his." Alma picked up the phone and buzzed someone. "Have the bedroom next to Lonnie's made up right away."

As soon as she put the phone down I posed a question. "How is Lonnie going to feel having someone with him everywhere he goes?"

"Everywhere?" she asked quizzically.

"Everywhere."

She chortled to herself. "I don't imagine he'll like it very much."

I shook my head. "I don't imagine he will. By the way, where is he?"

Alma picked up the phone again. "Lonnie, come down here. Yes, now. No, it can't wait until later."

In just a few minutes Lonnie Cortez, the last of the Cortez children still alive, came down the steps and deposited himself next to his mother's desk. Lonnie was a tall, skinny kid, maybe nineteen or twenty, with a head full of curly black hair and a look on his face that would get him into the sneering hall of fame. "What?"

"Lonnie, this is Rick Simon. Rick is going to be your bodyguard from now on. He's to go everywhere with you. Everywhere, Lonnie. No ditching him to go party with your friends. Is that understood?"

I expected to hear any answer out of him except the one I got. "Yes, ma'am."

"Where are we going today?" I asked my newest charge. He looked at me the way his mother had earlier, like I had two heads.

"Philosophy class at U.S.C. at one o'clock. Then the library until Political Science at three-thirty."

"And after that?" I asked innocently.

"I don't know yet," came the snappy reply. "Do you have to go dressed like that?"

I didn't see what was wrong with the way I dressed. I had on slacks, a hounds tooth sport coat, a yellow shirt and a tie. Maybe he objected to my tie. "Unless you'd like me to go naked. Take your pick."

Lonnie shook his head. He'd made the right decision. "That's fine."

"Take good care of him," Alma told me.

"I will," I promised. There was no doubt in my mind that Billy Flatbush would make an appearance, and an attempt on Lonnie sooner or later. The most logical place to try that was the campus of U.S.C. My job was to prevent its success and put an end to this job once and for all. If I was lucky I could extract a little personal revenge. Eddie deserved at least that much.

Lonnie was true to his word. I sat in the back of the Philosophy class and tried not to fall asleep; I guess Plato and Aristotle just aren't my thing. When Philosophy was over I followed him to the library, and discovered the latest issue of True Detective. I always read the magazine; it was good for a laugh or two. He almost got away from me when he left for Political Science, but I caught up to him and sat someplace inconspicuous. Towards the end of the class I got to thinking about my days in college, with Eddie and me taking Chemistry, Biology, Engineering, and every other class that had the faintest chance of making us valuable recruits for the FBI. And what did we do with it? Threw it all away for a profession that ended up getting Eddie killed.

Something wasn't right; I could feel it in my bones. I slipped my .45s out of my shoulder holster and slid it into my jacket pocket. As the class ended Lonnie sidled out the back door and was about ten feet ahead of me in the hall when I saw a bright flash and made a leap for the elusive Mr. Cortez. I knocked him to the floor just as the gun went off, and I tried to see where the shot had come from, but at that point there were too many people in the hall yelling and screaming. I got off Lonnie and helped him up. "You weren't supposed to do that," I reminded him.

"I didn't think . . . I mean I . . . what does somebody want to shoot me for?" he stammered out as I brushed him off. He stood there looking at me with a stricken look on his face.

"Because your name is Cortez," I explained. It seemed clear enough to me.

"But I . . . I . . . I haven't done anything."

"Sure you have. You were born. That's enough for some people."

Just about that time the police got there. No wonder his mother didn't want to trust him to their care. I saw Sergeant Donahue and grabbed Lonnie by the arm. He was coming with me. "Sergeant, you missed all the shooting."

"Alright, Simon, what are you involved in this time?" Donahue was about thirty-five, tall and clean-cut, with an intense desire to be Lieutenant Donohue.

"Sergeant Donohue, meet Lonnie Cortez, the last of the Cortez's. Lonnie, this is Sergeant Donahue. You'll probably be seeing a lot of him." I waited. It only took a few seconds for Donahue's eyes to light up.

"So that's why Witherspoon was with Sergeant Cortez. I didn't know you two were working for the family."

"That's the hell of it, Donahue. We weren't. Eddie was there after Colin Murphy, the drug dealer. He was just in the wrong place at the right time."

The Sergeant looked at me for a moment, confused. "But now you are working for them?"

"Yep."

"So give me the lowdown. What happened here? All we got was a call for shots fired."

"Shot fired. I couldn't return fire – junior here was too busy trying to get killed and I, fool that I am, was trying to prevent it."

"I didn't know," Lonnie protested vociferously.

"Did you see Flatbush?"

"No, but I'd wager it was him."

Donahue gave me that look again, and I could see his mind working. I wasn't sure that was a good thing, but at least it would be interesting. "You'll have to come down to the station and give your statements," he decided at long last.

"Fine," I answered. It was probably the first time I'd ever complied willingly. The two men I was with both stared at me; Donahue was perplexed about my agreement, Lonnie was pissed because I had stopped him from escaping to wherever he was going. He might have told mama he wouldn't try to

evade me, but once he was out in the hall moving away from me he had no intention of behaving like he was supposed to.

“Can we take our car and follow you?” I asked innocently. Lonnie drove a brand new Jaguar F-Type and riding in that was preferable to the back of Donahue’s patrol car. To my surprise, Donahue agreed. “But I . . .” Junior started, and I cut him off.

“No, you’re not. We’re following Donahue to the station.”

Lonnie had the good sense to nod in agreement. I don’t know where he’d been headed when he snuck out of his Political Science class, but I’d deal with that later. For the time being, I wanted to know if the police had found anything that could be useful in tracking down Billy Flatbush.

The answer to that was no, they hadn’t. That left me in the dark about the reasons for the ambush at the drug raid. Were they after the Sergeant that was killed, cousin to the Cortez family, or was he just part of the damage inflicted on the police raid? Looked like I had to find out for myself.

We answered all the usual questions at police headquarters, and it was early evening by the time we were finished. I needed to check-in at the office and get some things from my apartment if I was going to follow junior around tomorrow, so I took him home and left orders with Mama that he stay at the mansion and not go anywhere. “I’ll be back,” I threatened, and I guess they believed me.

I got to the office just as Robin was leaving for the night. Robin Short was our receptionist, secretary, part-time operative, and whatever else she wanted to be. She’d been just as upset as I was about the loss of Eddie, and she seemed just as hell-bent on revenge of some sort. I told her when I’d left that morning I was going to see Mama Cortez and not to expect me back any time soon, so at least she’d known I wasn’t out getting my brains blasted out. “Did I miss anything exciting?” I asked as I came through the front door.

“Exciting? Probably not. Jeremy Jones called, he wants to know if you’re going to finish that case Eddie was working on, and Scott Talbet called to tell you he’s found the banker you were looking for. What are your plans for the night?” Robin knew I was looking for Flatbush in my off hours; what she didn’t know was that I wasn’t going to have too many of those for a while.

“Call Jones in the morning and tell him I’ll finish Eddie’s case as soon as I can. And get Talbet to tell you where the banker’s hiding out. From now on I’m baby-sitting Lonnie Cortez, so I probably won’t have much spare-time. Keep a lid on things here, would you?”

“Aye-aye, boss. Anything else I should do? Cooking, cleaning, anything like that?”

I looked at Robin and didn’t know whether I wanted to spank her or kiss her. She’d probably enjoy the spanking.

We’d had to hire someone about five years ago, and that someone was Robin. Blonde hair, blue eyes, somewhere around thirty, she’d turned out to be the mother hen Eddie and I needed. She reminded us

about appointments, picked up our dry-cleaning, and chewed out the cleaning service when they forgot to empty her wastebasket. She was everything two single men could want . . . and she never let us forget it. I won't say she was well-paid . . . she was absolutely spoiled. Last year for Christmas we bought her a new car. Neither of us would know if we were coming or going without her. I didn't know how she would feel about working solely for me, at least for a while. I probably should ask her.

"Uh, Robin, now that Eddie's gone . . . "

"It doesn't make a damn bit of difference, Rick. You still need a mommy." I don't know how she did that, knowing what I was going to say before I said it. I was relieved to hear her answer, though. "Now, I'm going home," she told me, and before I could say anything to discourage her, she was gone. I went into my office and grabbed what I was after, then left and locked the door. I went straight to my apartment, packed a bag and left for my new address. This time I took blue jeans and long sleeve shirts, so at least I'd fit in wherever junior went. And maybe I'd be less conspicuous to Billy Flatbush.

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Chapter 2 – Nothing Breakable

When I got back to the mansion, Mrs. Cortez was still awake, but she was in what might be called a living room. It was the biggest damn room I've ever seen, and she was ensconced on one of the long, luxurious couches. Still all in black, but it was a dressing gown worn under a black robe. I don't know how much she was grieving, but she was certainly playing the part. I took my bag up to my room and laid it on the bed. Junior's door was closed. I went back downstairs to talk to the matriarch herself and that's when I noticed the brandy snifter and two glasses sitting on the coffee table. I don't think they were there when I first came in.

"Did Lonnie give you a report on the gunshot today?" I asked her.

"He did. Pour us both a brandy, would you, Richard?"

I did as asked and handed her glass to her. She took it and drained it in one swallow. "Now pour me a glassful." I had no idea Mama Cortez was a two-fisted drinker. I'd remember that for future reference.

The second glass was more to her liking, and I poured myself one, then sat in a chair next to the couch. "Did he also tell you he tried to slip away from me after class, and if I'd been any slower you'd be planning another funeral?"

"No, he didn't bother to tell me that part. What happened?" she asked in a calm voice.

"He tried to lose me after Political Science. I tackled him in the hall before the shooter could get off a round."

"Was it Flatbush?"

I shook my head. I was still mad that Lonnie had tried to get rid of me. "I don't know for sure. He fired a shot just after I tackled your son and I couldn't see who it was. I assume it was Billy. And after you made such a pretty speech about him not trying to ditch me."

Alma took another swallow of her brandy before she said anything. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Nothing. I don't think Lonnie thought the threat was real until someone shot at him. We'll see what he does from now on." At least, I was hoping the shot had put the fear of the Lord into him.

"What's your next move?" Alma asked.

I finished my brandy and put the glass down. "For now, I'm going out to see what your backyard is like."

Alma laughed. "I'll tell Gerald not to call the police."

"I'd appreciate that."

I got up and went back to the front door. Making sure it was locked (Alma had given me a key earlier in the day), I headed east and followed the long path down to the corner of the house. There I turned south, looking in bushes and clumps of trees, places where someone could easily hide. The house went on forever. You could have put the Staples Center inside of it.

Finally I turned west again, prowling around the pool area and checking the cabana's set up for our aquatic friends. I enjoy swimming, but I prefer it be a little more private, if you know what I mean. I went all the way down to the end of the house, where I encountered a tool shed. It was locked and needed a key to open; the lock looked brand new and didn't appear ever to have been tampered with. One last turn when I got to the corner and I was headed back to the front door, all safe and sound. I unlocked the door and went in, locking it behind me. The lights were off in the living room, and I went up the stairs to my "bedroom." Someone had unpacked my suitcase and hung my clothes in the closet, then turned down the bed. *I could get used to living like this*, I thought, *and you better not* immediately followed.

I took my gun out of my shoulder holster and slipped it under my pillow, then I took off my coat and hung it up. Might as well stay neat. By the time I was down to my underwear, I stopped and slipped between the sheets. They weren't silk, but they were the softest cotton I've ever felt. They probably cost more than I make in a month.

I started thinking about all the things I needed to tell Robin, and when I had a list as long as my arm, I fell asleep. I'm a light sleeper, but nothing disturbed me this night.

XXXXXXX

I was up by 6, found the guest bathroom and took a shower and shave, and went back to my room to get dressed. I was in something more casual today, jeans and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a windbreaker to conceal my shoulder holster. I went downstairs and was rather surprised to find 'madam' in the dining room drinking coffee. "You're up early," I told her as I sat down at the table.

"So are you," she replied, and I poured myself a cup and refilled hers. "Do you eat breakfast?"

"When it's available," I told her. There was no doubt in my mind it would soon be available; I figured I might as well get one meal today, I probably wouldn't get another.

"Scrambled eggs or a Mexican omelet?" Gerald had appeared out of nowhere and was waiting for our answer.

"Omelet," I answered.

"Make it two," Alma ordered. "Did you talk about plans for today with Lonnie?"

"No. I was lucky to find out what he was doing yesterday. How late does he sleep?"

"Until around ten. But then he was in early last night, so he could appear at any time."

As if by magic, junior walked into the dining room. He seemed startled to see me. "Are you still here?"

“Get used to it, kid. I’m gonna be around until we catch Billy Flatbush – or whoever’s trying to plug holes in you,” I told him. His upper lip curled and he was well on his way to a sneer until his mother told him to sit down and shut up.

“You’re a bright boy, Lonnie. What do you think the word bodyguard means?” Alma asked him.

“Alright, I get it. What’s for breakfast?” he asked as a maid came in with the food.

The omelets looked glorious. They were stuffed to the rafters with cheese, sausage, peppers, onion, tomatoes, and whatever else the cook found in the kitchen. And the food was accompanied by hash brown potatoes. Another maid brought us each a toasted Bagel with cream cheese. I was going to have to run around the house several times to work it off. Junior stared at the food enviously.

“Scrambled eggs or omelets,” his mother told him.

“Can’t I have his?” he asked, pointing to my plate.

“No, you may not. Richard was here for breakfast. You came late. Tell Minnie what you want.”

Lonnie looked at my food again, then at Minnie. “I’ll have the omelet, Minnie.”

Minnie nodded and hurried out of the room. I picked up the coffee pot and filled Alma’s cup, then junior’s, then mine. Alma smiled at me. She really was an attractive woman when she smiled. “Thank you,” she told me as I replaced the pot.

“You’re welcome,” I answered out of habit. “What’s on the schedule today, Lonnie?”

“Janelle Milton is coming over today at ten and we’re cramming all day for an exam in two days,” he told me.

“You’re not leaving the house?” I asked, just to be sure.

“No, I’m not leaving the house. We’ll be studying until four or five.”

“Alright, I’m going to the office for a while. And then I’m going to see if I can dig up Flatbush. I’ll be back before five. Don’t go anywhere until I come back. Got it?” Junior nodded as Minnie reappeared with his breakfast. “If you need anything call my private number,” I told Alma as she looked at her phone.

“Is that the 4289 number?” Alma asked me.

“Yes. 424-275-6890 is the office. I’ll always pick up 4289. Robin usually answers 6890.”

“Unless you’re lying dead somewhere,” Junior threw in, just to be funny. At least that’s the way I took it.

“That’s not going to happen,” I replied sternly.

“Lonnie!” Alma sounded very unhappy. In fact she was in Mrs. Cortez mode when she chastised him.

"Sorry," Lonnie mumbled.

I finished my coffee and stood up. I'd eaten about half of the omelet and most of the hash browns. I hadn't touched the bagel. "Sorry, that was a lot of food."

"I'll remember that for dinner," Alma told me.

"Alright, I'll be back later. Don't let anybody in except whatever her name is."

Alma smiled at me, junior didn't even look up. He was too busy inhaling his breakfast. I left and made sure the door was locked, then went around to the garage and fired up the Mustang. She wasn't as young as she used to be, but she still looked sharp and purred like a kitten. I had a garage man that took care of her. Whatever she needed, she got.

Forty-five minutes later I got to the office. I walked in looking through the mail to see if there was anything interesting. "Advertisements and bills. Is that all we get?" I asked to no one in particular.

Robin answered me. "No, sometimes we get coupons for dry cleaning. Speaking of which, I picked yours up before I got to work today. It's on your door."

"Thank you. Did you remember to write it on your expense report? Which you were supposed to turn in to me last Friday."

"Sorry. We were a little busy last Friday," she said in a hushed voice. Last Friday was Eddie's funeral. Damn, I'd forgotten already.

"This Friday is fine." I tried to sneak out of the front office but I heard her call me.

"Rick. We should talk."

I looked at Robin with a sudden lump in my throat. "I know. But I can't do that until I've caught Billy Flatbush."

"Caught him or killed him?"

I flopped down into the chair next to her desk. "Does it matter?" I asked quietly. I was serious. I really wanted to know how she felt.

"No, I guess it doesn't. As long as you're okay with whatever happens, then I am, too." I got back up out of the chair and stood next to her when she said that.

"That's my girl," I told her as I patted her shoulder.

I went into my office and sat down. Everything looked the same as it had a week ago, but nothing felt the same. I picked up the phone and called Sergeant Donahue. "Donahue, this is Simon. What did you get from the crime scene yesterday?"

"We got a shell casing that matched the one we found where Manny Cortez was shot."

"So it's definitely Flatbush we're looking for?"

"I'd say so."

"Look, Sarge, I know you and Eddie were friends. I hope we can have the same kind of relationship that you had with my partner."

"That's gonna take time," the Sergeant told me.

"I've got plenty of that. Keep me in the loop, would you? Junior's sitting at home today, so I'm at the office cleaning up some things."

"Alright. Say hello to Robin for me, would you?"

"Will do," I told him, and I hung up the phone. Was I the only one that wasn't friends with Donahue? It sure sounded that way. I shook it off and picked up the phone again. I hated cell phones and used the office phone as often as I could.

This time I called Benny. We used Benny when we needed to know something on the street. He was usually reliable. "Benny, this is Rick Simon. What have you heard about Billy Flatbush?"

"Nothin' good, Ricky. He's got a contract on the Cortez kids, and he's lookin' to take you out, too."

"Who gave him the contract?"

"Nobody seems to know. Honest, I been diggin' because a what happened to Eddie, and I've come up dry so far."

"Keep looking for me, Benny. You know there's a C-note with your name on it if you find out."

"I'm tryin', Ricky, I'm tryin'."

"Alright, Benny."

Nothing. Everybody had nothing. I threw a pencil across the room and in a few seconds I had Robin standing at my door. "What did you throw?" she asked.

"It wasn't anything breakable." I was prone to throwing things when I got frustrated. Usually something expensive.

"Good, that's an improvement." She sat down on my couch. "What's bothering you, Rick?"

"Nothing. Everybody's got nothing. When is somebody going to have something?"

"You have to give it time." Those were words I didn't want to hear.

"Eddie doesn't have any more time."

"No, but you do. You've got all the time it takes."

I might have all the time it takes, but I didn't have the patience. "I've gotta find this guy, Robin. I can't let him get away with it."

"With the Cortez murders or with Eddie's?"

It was a good question, and I had to be honest. "I don't know. Both, maybe. Junior's nothing to write home about, but Alma's a nice lady, and he's all she's got left. As for Eddie . . ." I picked up the glass ashtray I kept on my desk to remind me that I didn't smoke anymore. Robin was quicker than I was and she reached across the desk and took it out of my hand. I sighed with frustration.

"You've got to find a better way to untie the knots, Mr. Simon," she told me.

"You're right, Miss Short. When you find one please tell me what it is."

She slapped my hand, replaced the ashtray on my desk, and went back out front. Like I said before, sometimes I needed a mommy.

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Chapter 3 – A Misunderstanding

I finally remembered to pass along Donahue's greetings to Robin. She smiled and said nothing, so I knew if there was anything more there I wasn't going to hear it from her. I piddled around and cleared up a few small things at the office, and then I decided to take matters into my own hands. An action that usually gets me in trouble, but I was tired of waiting. I told Robin I'd call in later but I'd see her tomorrow, and I left to see what I could stir up on my own.

I stopped first at Jimmie's, a dive bar down on 85th street that Billy was known to frequent on occasion. I'd known the bartender for a long time, and the best he could do was give me a warning. "All I heard was he had a contract on the Cortez family and he's tired of you doggin' him. You know how he gets." Yeah, I knew how he gets. That wasn't anything new. My next stop was Tiny's, another of Flatbush's favorite places. I heard the same thing there. Then on to the Kitty Kat Club. It was like an old broken record. Flatbush was after the Cortez family, with a side of Simon. Finally I stopped at Set 'Em Up Joe's, and I heard something new. The contract was from an old enemy . . . but they didn't know who. An old enemy, huh? I needed to see Alma Cortez, and hope she had knowledge that would lead me somewhere. I was tired of chasing my tail.

I got back in my car and drove back to the Cortez house. Gerald informed me that madam was napping and didn't wish to be disturbed. I went upstairs to junior's room; the door was closed and there was a lot of giggling going on inside. At least I knew somebody in this house was happy. Temporarily stymied, I went next door to my room to brood.

I paced the floor for a while, going over everything to make sure there wasn't something I'd overlooked. Then I decided to go back outside and check the grounds in the light of day. It was still extraordinarily hot outside, but I was used to it by now. I walked the perimeter, getting a better feel for the house and its surroundings, and found myself once again facing the pool. Going over to the other side of it, I looked up at the house. Junior's room was highly visible, and he and a girl were standing in the window kissing. Where was the best spot to take a shot at that window? One of the cabanas lined up perfectly, and for just a moment I thought I saw movement there. Convinced I was seeing things, I turned my back and started to walk away. I hadn't gone three steps when I heard the click and dashed back to the cabana, trying to draw my gun as I ran.

There was no time to do anything but knock the long-range rifle down as he fired, the bullet hitting the inside of the pool. Flatbush yelled something unintelligible and we struggled back and forth for a few minutes. I finally got my weapon out and I thought I had him, but he hit me with an uppercut that sent me and my gun flying. By the time I recovered both my weapon and my senses, Flatbush was gone. I struggled to look at Lonnie's bedroom . . . he was still visible in the window. Grabbing hold of the cabana pole, I pulled myself to my feet and held on for dear life. I was still feeling the after-effects of the punch. Once I could stand without trying to fall over, I made my way to the back door and struggled to find the key. Before I could the door swung open, and I almost collapsed in Gerald's outstretched arms. "Are you alright, Mr. Simon?"

"I will be, Gerald. Just give me a minute." The room was an eat-in kitchen, with a table and chairs in the middle of the room. I lunged for one of the chairs and dropped onto the seat. Flatbush had hit me harder than I thought.

"Do you need some water?"

"No." Probably three or four minutes passed while I sat there, and when I got up I headed straight for junior's room. The door was still closed and I pounded on it rather indelicately. "Lonnie, open up!"

It took some seconds for him to get to the door and I was just about to pound on it again when he pulled it open. "What do you want?"

"Come with me. I want to show you something." I grabbed him by the elbow and marched him over to the window, right past his little 'study partner,' who was lurking in the vicinity of where we were headed. "What do you see down there?" I asked him as I pointed towards the pool.

"The pool and the cabanas," he answered weakly.

"I was just down there. Do you know what I saw? I saw you, clearly standing in the direct line of fire from the cabana. Do you know why you're not dead right now? Because I happened to be down there when Billy Flatbush decided to shoot you. Your pool was shot instead and mortally wounded. Don't you have better sense than that?"

"Oops."

"Is that all you've got to say?"

"I didn't think . . . "

"That's just it, you didn't think," I interrupted him. "If you keep going the way you're going now it's only a matter of time before your mama is standing at your gravesite weeping. And she doesn't deserve that. Stay away from windows. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Yes."

I marched back out of his bedroom and slammed the door behind me. I went back into my room and looked for something to throw. Fortunately there were a lot of pillows in the room.

My jaw was really doing a number on me, so I went looking for some aspirin and a glass. There were both in the guest bathroom. I swallowed three of the aspirin and drank a water chaser. I felt like Billy hit me with a tire iron. Lying down for a while seemed like a good idea, so I did just that. In just a few minutes I was asleep.

I don't know how long I slept, but I awoke with a start when I realized someone was standing in my doorway. I blinked two or three times and saw that it was Gerald, the butler. "Are you coming down for supper, sir?"

"Is it that time already?" I asked like an idiot. No, Rick, Gerald's just here to annoy you. "Yes, I'm coming down." I got up from the bed and actually felt better. The aspirin had a chance to work and my jaw didn't hurt near as much. I was steady on my feet, too. "Thank you, Gerald."

"You're most welcome, sir."

I followed Gerald down the stairs to the dining room. Alma was already seated, and Lonnie sat on her right hand. "Sorry I'm late. I fell asleep."

"Yes, Gerald was quite concerned about you. Do you want to tell me what happened? Lonnie seems to be strangely silent about it."

"We had a, uh, misunderstanding."

"Did the misunderstanding put a hole in the pool?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it did."

"Do we need to have a talk after supper?" Alma persisted.

"I think that would be a lovely idea," I answered pleasantly.

Minnie brought in a platter of prime rib and a bowl of mashed potatoes. Another maid followed her in with the au jus and broccoli. Water and coffee were already on the table. I was closest to the prime rib and I picked up the platter and held it for Alma. After she had taken what she wanted I set it down and took a piece myself. Alma had started on the mashed potatoes and she passed the bowl to me. We repeated this scenario for the au jus and the broccoli. Junior never said a word, just waited his turn.

When supper was finished junior high-tailed it back upstairs; he probably figured he was safer up there. Alma adjourned to the living room and I followed her. I couldn't help but notice that the dressing gown she wore was a soft peach color. *No more black?* I wondered. At least for the time being.

We got situated – she on the couch and me in a chair, and Gerald brought in a silver tray with the brandy snifter and two glasses. This time the glasses were after-dinner-drink size, and not water glasses like the night before. I poured and we settled in with our brandy.

"Alright, what did Lonnie do?" The tone was that of a concerned mother; nothing else.

My anger had dissipated and I answered calmly. "He did his level best to get himself killed. Do you want details?"

Her lips compressed into a thin red line. "Yes."

"I came back early and decided I needed to see the grounds in daylight. I walked around the back to the far side of the pool and thought I saw something in one of the cabanas. By the time I realized it was a long-range rifle aimed right at your son, who was standing in the window for God and everyone else to see, I jumped for it. It was Flatbush. We fought for a few minutes and then he hit me with an uppercut

that felt like he was using brass knuckles. His gun fired – that’s what shot the pool. My gun and I were disabled. By the time I knew what was happening, Flatbush was gone. I staggered in thru the back door and practically fell over Gerald.”

“Is there more that you haven’t told me?” I didn’t like the look I saw on her face and I hesitated to tell her the rest.

“Uh, yes, and I’m not proud of it.”

“I want to hear it all, please.”

“I made Lonnie open the door and I dragged him over to the window and made him aware of the direct line from the cabana to his window. Then I told him I could see him from the cabana, and he’d be dead if I hadn’t been nosing around on the grounds. I told him to stay away from windows. Then I left.”

“Is that all?” she asked once again.

“No. I went back to my room, took some aspirin and laid down. That’s it. I’m sorry I yelled at Junior.”

“Sorry that you yelled at him? You should have turned him over your knee and spanked him. I might still do it.” She took a sip of brandy. “Are you injured? Do you need a doctor?”

“I’ve got a sore jaw, but nothing I haven’t dealt with before. And no, I don’t need a doctor. But thank you.” Both our glasses were empty, so I refilled them. “I think I scared the bejesus out of him. What are you going to do?”

“Could you see what he was doing in the window?” The concerned mother’s tone was back.

“Not clearly, no.” I had no intention of telling her. That was Lonnie’s question to answer.

She picked up the phone and dialed. “Lonnie. Come down here. Yes, now.”

When Lonnie arrived he still looked like a whipped puppy. “Sit down, son,” Alma told him gently. Maybe she thought he’d been beaten up enough for one day, or maybe it was just instinct that he’d take it better if she didn’t yell. “Are you aware that Rick saved your life this afternoon, again?”

“So he says.” There was still some of the defiant teenager left in the boy.

“What were you doing in the window?”

“You mean he didn’t tell you?” Lonnie cast a glance at me. I wondered if this was how he treated every adult, or if there was some particular aspect of Rick Simon that he couldn’t stand.

“No, he didn’t. Why don’t you?”

I caught another glance from junior, but this one was a lot less hostile. “I was trying to read a map, and the light was a lot brighter over there.” He lied so smoothly, I almost believed him.

"You can't stand in windows, Lonnie. I've already lost your brothers and sister. I can't lose you, too. Please, listen to Rick. He's trying to keep you alive."

"I will, Mother." Lonnie looked over at me with something that resembled respect, and offered me his hand to shake. "Sorry. I'll be more careful."

I don't know if he was sincere or he was just blowing smoke up my ass, but I shook his hand. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, for now, at least. "Is that all?" he asked his mother.

"For now."

I waited until Lonnie had gone back upstairs before I brought up what I'd heard earlier in the day. "Alma, did the Cortez family have any old enemies? I mean back in the bootlegging days? Any that you might have heard stories about?"

"Why do you ask, Richard?" There was a slightly surprised look on Alma's face.

"Before I came back here today I spent some time digging. The only thing I heard of any interest was this was all set in motion by an old enemy. Did the family have any of those?"

She was quiet for a minute, as if thinking. When she finally spoke it was in a hushed tone of voice. "I'm not the person to ask. We need to go see Uncle Carlos."

"You have an Uncle Carlos?" I asked stupidly.

"We do. He's in a retirement home, where he can receive the care he needs. He's the one to ask."

"Do you think he'll know anything?"

"If anyone does, it's Uncle Carlos. The question is, will he remember it."

I knew right away what she meant, and I could only hope that the memory of the old man was sound.

"Can we visit him tomorrow?"

"I'll make arrangements. Around ten is the best time. I assume you want Lonnie to remain at home until we return."

I nodded slowly. "Yes, it's best if he does."

"Alright. I'll be ready by nine-thirty."

Having received my dismissal for the night, I went up to my room and got ready for bed. I took two more aspirins before I got between the sheets. I wasn't sure if I would sleep or not, but, just like last night, I had no trouble drifting off.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 4 – Uncle Carlos

Much to my surprise, I slept until almost eight o'clock. I took a shower and shaved, then got dressed in slacks, a long-sleeved shirt, and a jacket. I argued with myself for almost five minutes but finally decided a tie might come in handy, so I put one on. By the time I got downstairs it was nine-fifteen and breakfast was over. There was still coffee, and I poured myself a cup; the cup and I went into the living room to wait.

Alma came downstairs in a blue business suit with a brightly colored scarf at her neck. Her hair was up on her head, and she looked, once again, like Mrs. Cortez. I joined her in the vestibule, and it was only a minute or two before I heard the car engine. Gerald came in to escort madam into the car, and I trailed along behind like a lost puppy.

The car was a Rolls Royce, of course, and it was disgustingly comfortable inside. Not only that, the air conditioner was cold enough to positively spoil you. Gerald drove about twenty or twenty-five minutes, twisting and turning until we arrived at the gates of Golden Hills Manor, Retirement and Convalescent Home. The gates opened slowly; then we continued down a long driveway to a gigantic front door that looked like it belonged at Medieval Times. The doors opened and a man and two women came out, while Gerald helped madam out.

The man stepped forward and took Alma's hand. "Mrs. Cortez, so good to see you. You, of course, know Mrs. Dempsey and Mrs. Montgomery, the ladies that run our facility."

"Yes, of course. Mr. Norris, this is Mr. Simon, one of my attorneys. Mr. Simon, Mr. Norris is the director of the facility. Mrs. Montgomery is the manager and Mrs. Dempsey is the case manager. You know, of course, that we want to see Uncle Carlos privately. I assume you have arranged that for me?" Alma was once again using her Mrs. Cortez voice. It tickled me the way she assumed her different personas. Mrs. Cortez, Alma, loving and concerned Mother, and frightened Mother were the ones I had seen, and I was sure there were more at her disposal.

So I played the diligent attorney while Mrs. Montgomery led us down the hall to a solarium. There were several chairs in the room, and I held one of them for Alma and got her seated. In just a minute Mrs. Montgomery wheeled in an old gentleman, obviously Uncle Carlos. He must have been close to one hundred; he had a full head of white hair and his eyes looked sharp, but his hands were knarled and his knuckles swollen. Those hands had done a lot of fighting. As soon as Mrs. Montgomery got Carlos settled, she locked the wheels on the wheelchair and left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Uncle Carlos, it's Alma."

"Goodness, child, I know who you are." His voice was full of piss and vinegar. "Who's this yahoo?"

I knew where Lonnie got his attitude. "My name's Rick Simon, Mr. Cortez. I'm a private investigator. Someone is trying to kill Mrs. Cortez's youngest son Lonnie, and I'm trying to find out why and stop him. I need to ask you some questions. Would that be alright?"

"Is this what you want, Alma?" in a voice that was a little friendlier than before. Only a little.

"Yes, Uncle Carlos, it would really help a lot if you would." Ah, another persona. Pleading loving niece.

"Alright, I'll give it my best." The old man turned to me. "What is it that you want to know, Simon?"

"Please, Mr. Cortez, call me Rick. How much do you remember from the bootlegging days?"

He thought for a moment before answering me. "Well, it depends. Some things I remember; some things my father told me. What do you want to know?"

"Did the family have any enemies? Maybe somebody that had a vendetta against them?"

"I don't . . . I don't remember anybody. There was Mallard King . . . he and my father were friends at one time; they were pretty fierce competitors, too. But Mallard was killed in one of the last raids conducted on the bootleggers. Then there was Jose Barerra, but no, he was gone, too. I just can't . . . I just can't remember anybody else." I could see that Carlos was struggling, trying to think of somebody, anybody that might have fit the criteria I gave him. I felt bad for him, trying so hard to remember something that happened long ago. Heartless as I am sometimes, I couldn't let him go on torturing himself.

I reached out and clasped one of his hands in mine. It felt almost like rough-hewn wood. "It's alright, Mr. Cortez. That was a long time ago. I'm sure I wouldn't remember, either."

He sighed and looked right at me. "I'm sorry I can't help you, son."

I sat back and watched him as he and Alma began to talk. Obviously, he had great affection for what surely had to be his grand-niece, and she him. It seemed he didn't know of the deaths of Manny, Diego and Alicia; he talked with Alma as if they were still alive. I was glad I hadn't said anything about their murders.

They talked for almost fifteen minutes, but it looked as if Carlos was falling asleep towards the end of that time. Alma got up and opened the door, and in a moment Mrs. Montgomery came and got the old man. They were almost out the door when suddenly Carlos came alive and searched for me. "Rick, Rick?"

I got up and hurried over to his wheelchair, where I squatted on the floor so that he didn't have to strain to see me. "Yes, sir?"

"Navarro. Ramon Navarro. That's who you're looking for."

He'd struggled so diligently to remember the name, but it wouldn't come to him while he was awake. And he'd almost missed the chance to give me the one thing I was after. Ramon Navarro.

"Thank you, Mr. Cortez. It was an honor to meet you." As I stood, I reached down and picked up his hand, then shook it. He looked up at me and smiled. Mrs. Montgomery wheeled him down the hall. I stood there and watched until they were out of sight.

We walked back down the hall in the opposite direction. Mr. Norris was waiting for us at the door. "Was your visit with your uncle satisfactory?"

Alma nodded. "It was, Mr. Norris. Thank you for making the arrangements I requested."

"Any time, dear lady. Any time."

Norris and I nodded at each other and I held the door open for Alma. George had the car right at the door and he helped Alma in, then winked at me and waited until I was in to close the door. "He's a sweet old gentleman," I told his niece.

"He was a mean, vicious son-of-a-bitch," Alma responded. "But that was the only way to survive in those days. And he is a sweet man now. I don't get out here as often as I should. You caught on to his ignorance about my other children?"

"Yes."

"If I'd told him it would have killed him. It almost killed me." She was silent for a minute, then she called out, "Hurry home, Gerald. I need a drink."

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Gerald brought Bloody Mary's to the enclosed porch, where Alma and I had decided to sit. The sun wasn't hitting the room yet, and it was cool inside. She'd changed into a short-sleeve summer dress and taken her hair down off her head, and she looked ten years younger. "Oh, my, that hits the spot," Alma remarked, after she'd taken the first sip of her drink.

"This is nice, but I can't stay all day. Either junior has to come with me or he has to stay here with you for a while. I need to spend some time trying to find out about Ramon Navarro."

"Dear, I suppose I'll have to keep him here. You need to concentrate and I'm sure he'd just drive you crazy."

Maybe not me, I thought. But for sure . . . Robin. "I think that's probably best. In case I have to go someplace I won't have to worry about dragging him with me."

"Is this ever going to be over, Richard?"

"One way or the other, it's only a matter of time. Flatbush is going to make a mistake and I'll get him." I gave that remark too much venom, and Alma looked at me sorrowfully.

"Because of Eddie?" she asked softly.

I chose my answer carefully. "To be completely honest, mostly because of Eddie. But because of Manny and Diego and Alicia, too. And to keep Lonnie safe. You've been hurt enough; you don't need any more pain."

"I appreciate that, but I think you've been hurt, too."

"Yeah, but not in the same way. They were your children."

Alma stared at the ground, and her face clouded over. "I'll never stop grieving for them."

It took me a minute or more before I could say anything. "But life goes on, doesn't it? And we have to go on with it." I treated the drink like it was medicine, something that would stop the stab of pain I felt every time Eddie's name came up. "I have to get to the office. I'll see what I can find on Navarro and be back later. Will you be alright?"

She put on the Mrs. Cortez face and looked up at me. "My friend and I will be fine," she told me, holding up her Bloody Mary.

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It felt good to be in the Mustang; familiar, like an old friend. An old friend that understood all the conflicting feelings I had. I thought I was fine by the time I got to the office, and more than ready to research the elusive Mr. Navarro. "Hey, Robin," I called as I went in the front door. "How's tricks?"

"Tricks and I are just fine," she replied, then looked up at me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Uncle Carlos gave us a name, and I want to see what I can find on him. Anything important I should see?"

"Not a thing. Benny called and said to tell you 'No Dice.' I assume you know what that means."

Benny had come up empty. Good thing Carlos had given us something. "I do. Why don't you go to lunch and I'll catch the phones."

"Now I know somethings wrong." I never sent Robin out to lunch. She just took time whenever she could. She stood there staring at me. Obviously my telltale face had given me away. I'd have to have a talk with him.

"I'm fine," I told her. "Bring me back a sandwich, would you? Roast beef if you can get it."

For once she didn't argue, or try to dig any further. "Okay. I'll be back soon."

I watched her walk out the door and felt relief that she was gone. I desperately wanted to go into my office and throw something, but I knew Robin would be looking for anything I might have destroyed when she came back, and I'd have more explaining to do. So I was a good boy and didn't cost the firm any money. I sat at my computer and typed in 'Ramon Navarro.' There must have been two dozen or more Ramon Navarro's that came up, and I began wading through them.

I was about halfway through when Robin returned. She came into my office and put a brown paper bag and an iced tea on my desk and then scanned the room for broken objects. Finding none, I heard a “Hmpf,” and she left for her desk. “Got that expense report ready for me yet?” I called after her.

“Yes,” and she walked in lazily and set it on the corner of my desk. “I got your roast beef.”

“Thank you. Be sure and add that to the next expense report.”

“Have you found anything yet?”

I shook my head. “Nothing but a shitload of Ramon Navarro’s.” That’s when I noticed she had a brown bag in her hand, too. “Bring your lunch back to the office?”

“I thought maybe we could talk.” She set her bag down and extracted a sandwich. “Like we used to.”

I opened my lunch bag and retrieved my roast beef, then took a bite. It was good, just the way I liked it. I thought we’d gotten the business about talking settled the last time I was here. “I can’t talk when I’m eating.”

Her eyes were shaded, and I knew that look. “You know what I mean.”

“I told you before, no talking until I find Billy Flatbush. Can you just help me until then? For Eddie?”

There was a long pause before she answered, and she sounded resigned to her decision. “Sure. You’re the boss.”

“Thank you.” We ate in silence, and when Robin was finished she went back out front. I kept going through the Ramon Navarro’s. I didn’t find one that dated back to the old days, but I did find a current Ramon – Ramon Luis Navarro, President of Banker’s Trust in Beverly Hills. There wasn’t too much about him on the internet . . . born 1970, married with two children, active in several different charities. Just the right age to be a grandson of the original Ramon. That was all I could find on the computer; nothing about Grandpa Ramon.

That meant my search had been extended, first to the California Department of Public Health-Vital Records. When I was done there I’d visit the Los Angeles Public Library. Looked like I was going to be late getting back to the mansion, and I picked up the phone and called Alma. “Gerald, it’s Rick Simon. Let me talk to Alma, please.” There was a brief pause, then I had Alma on the phone. “Alma, I need to go a couple more places before I come back. Can you handle that?”

“Do whatever you have to, Richard.” I wish she’d quit calling me Richard.

“Good. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Thanks.” We both hung up, and I gathered myself to face Robin. “I’m going to the California Department of Public Records and then the library. Can I bring you back anything?”

Robin sighed, as if happy to hear that I was doing something besides throwing things. Then she smiled.

“Nope, I’ve got everything I need, right here.”

“Good. I’ll call you later.” And with that I was out the door and on to my next adventure.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 5 – Bootlegging 101

I always loved going to the Department of Vital Records. It made Eddie crazy every time he came down here.

Mrs. Murphy was at the window today. “May I help you?”

“I need a birth certificate for Ramon Luis Navarro, born October 6, 1970.”

“Are you a relative of Mr. Navarro’s?” Once upon a time you had to be a relative to get a birth certificate. No more.

“No, Mrs. Murphy. They changed that law a long time ago.”

“Oh, that’s right. Ramon Luis . . . “

“Navarro. Born October 6, 1970.”

It took her almost twenty minutes to find the right one, but when she came back with it I paid the \$5.00 fee and took my birth certificate to the nearest counter. It should have the information I needed on it.

Mother – Luisa Montoya Navarro dob April 23, 1946 Father – Ramon Navarro, Jr. dob May 14, 1944

I went right back to the window. Mrs. Murphy appeared, looking confused. “Weren't you just here, young man?”

“Yes, I was, Mrs. Murphy. But I need another birth certificate.”

“A different one? Who this time?” She still looked confused. I have a habit of doing that to people.

“Ramon Navarro, Jr., born May 14, 1944.”

Another twenty-minute wait. Another \$5.00 fee. Back to the same counter. Once again I found what I was looking for.

Mother – Bonita Sierra Navarro dob June 9, 1910 Father – Ramon Navarro dob July 17, 1909

There was my man, the original Ramon. One more trip to the window. Mrs. Murphy was back.

“Goodness. What do you want now?”

“This is the last one, Mrs. Murphy. Ramon Navarro, born July 19, 1909.”

She must have sent somebody else to search for this one, because it was Mrs. Clark that came back with empty hands. “Hello, Rick. Sorry, there’s no birth certificate. It must have been improperly filed.”

“Nothing? Nothing at all?”

Mrs. Clark gave me a sorrowful look. "That's all I can tell you. Did you need anything else?"

"No, ma'am. That will do it for today. Thanks." I double-checked just to make sure I had the first two certificates and walked away.

I looked at my watch. It was five o'clock, and traffic would make it almost impossible to get to the library now. I decided I'd go tomorrow morning instead, and went back to my car. At last I felt like I was getting somewhere.

I drove back to the Cortez mansion. Gerald met me at the front door, and told me madam was having cocktails in the living room. "What would you like, sir?"

"Do you have any iced tea, Gerald?" He looked the way Mrs. Murphy had looked earlier, confused, so I clarified. "Real iced tea, not the alcoholic beverage."

"I'm sure we do, sir. Do you want anything in it?"

"Nope, just straight tea. Thanks. I'll be in with Mrs. Cortez."

I wandered into the living room to find Alma reading the paper. "Richard, you're back. Was your trip successful?"

"I think so. Take a look at this," and I handed her the birth certificates. She took her time looking them over and handed them back to me when she was finished.

"So there really was a Ramon Navarro."

I nodded my head, trying not to get excited. "Ramon Navarro Senior, Ramon Navarro Junior, and the current Navarro, Ramon Luis. President of Bankers Trust, born in 1970. Ramon Navarro Senior would be the one your Uncle Carlos was talking about."

"Have you found anything about him?" she asked me, and picked up her Martini glass. I saw the olives and assumed it was vodka. That meant she'd probably been drinking all day, yet she sounded perfectly sober.

"Not yet. I was going to the library but it got to be too late. I thought I'd better come back here and find out what Lonnie's schedule was for classes tomorrow. I'll work around that and get to the library when I can."

"I never can remember. You can ask him at dinner, which should be ready soon."

"Are you alright?" I asked, pointing at the Martini glass.

"Oh, that? Just a before dinner cocktail."

Right at that moment Gerald entered with a tall glass of iced tea. I took it from him and said, "Thank you."

"And what about you?" She pointed at my glass.

"That's iced tea. You know, the drink you make with tea bags and a tea kettle?" She looked as if she didn't believe me. "Go ahead and taste it," I said, handing her the glass. She took a swallow and made a face. "I don't lie, Alma."

"That is tea. Yuck! How can you drink it like that?"

"Habit."

Gerald appeared and announced, "Dinner is served." I followed Alma towards the dining room and we were almost run over by Lonnie barreling down the stairs.

"When do you have classes tomorrow?" I asked him.

"I don't have anything until Political Science at three-thirty."

"I'll meet you here at three. Don't leave without me," I warned him.

"I won't," he answered. "I don't want any more lectures."

"Good. There's hope for you yet."

After dinner the three of us went out to the enclosed porch and sat and talked. We touched on a lot of subjects, and I found myself changing my opinion of junior. Once you got rid of the attitude he was bright and funny, and had some interesting ideas. Alma and I relaxed, and eventually, Gerald brought the brandy snifter and glasses. The sun had gone down by that time and it had cooled off outside, making it easier to keep the porch cool. Finally junior went back upstairs and it was just Alma and me. She told me what she knew about the bootlegging days and wove some fascinating tales. Before it got too late we broke up the party and I left for bed, after telling Alma I would see her at breakfast.

I lay in bed and couldn't sleep; I found myself thinking about Eddie. All the things we did together . . . I didn't have anybody to do them with anymore. More importantly, I'd lost my best friend, somebody that I bounced all my crazy ideas off at work, my partner. I knew eventually I was going to find another person to work with, but there would never be another Eddie. Sometime during my ruminating over everything that had happened, I fell asleep.

The next morning I showered, shaved and dressed, then went downstairs to see if there was any coffee. There was, but there was no Alma yet. I poured a cup and wandered into the living room, looking out the windows at the grounds around the mansion. "It's a lovely view, isn't it?" Alma's voice asked.

I turned around and smiled. "Good morning. Coffee's ready."

"I need a cup, after we sat up and talked last night. Let's go to the dining room."

When we got there I pulled out a chair for her. Minnie came in and asked if French Toast and bacon was good for both of us, and we gave it two thumbs up. I poured Alma's coffee and we discussed our

schedules for the morning. I was going to the library; Alma had a meeting to attend. Breakfast came and we ate in silence; halfway through, junior showed up.

“Are you still here?” he asked, laughing. What a change in attitude from the first day I arrived!

“Only until I’m done with breakfast,” I told him. “Remember, stay away from windows and don’t leave this afternoon without me.”

“Got it.”

Almost thirty minutes later I was in the Mustang driving to downtown Los Angeles. It had cooled off somewhat, and the poor car wasn’t straining to try and keep ahead of the heat. I found a parking space and headed inside, paying attention to my surroundings and everyone I could see. I didn’t want to be surprised by Flatbush like I had been at the cabana.

There are times you just can’t find exactly what you’re looking for on the internet, and I expected this to be one of them. I doubt if anyone was interested in Navarro Senior besides me. I went through the first encyclopedia and found nothing besides his date of birth and date of death. I’d just finished writing down the date of death before I realized something that could be important – January 12, 1944. That meant he died before Ramon Junior was born. And he was only thirty-four years old.

I went through three more encyclopedias and found the same thing – date of birth and date of death. One of them finally referenced a book called *The Birth and Death of Bootlegging*. I went looking for it and found it in the True Crime section of the library. Inside was the card that listed the dates the book was checked out. The last date was February 2, 2019. I sat down with the book and found the index. There was a listing for *Navarro, Ramon, page 73*. I turned to that page, immediately.

There wasn’t much, but what was there was a gold mine. Reading it slowly, I went through it three times before striding to the courtesy desk to check it out. You would have bet I didn’t even have a library card, wouldn’t you? While there I asked if I could find out who had checked out the book last. I pulled out my P.I. license and flashed it just long enough that no one was sure what it said. For all anyone knew, I could be FBI. “It might take me a few minutes,” The librarian told me.

“Take all the time you need,” I replied.

Less than five minutes later the librarian came back and handed me a slip of paper. On it was written *Delores Navarro – February 2, 2019*. I checked out the book and returned to the Mustang, heading it once again towards the Department of Vital records. I hoped Mrs. Murphy was off today.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 6 – Doctor, Doctor Give Me the News

I was back at the mansion before Alma. I didn't want to sit in the living room by myself, so I left the book on the coffee table and went to the kitchen by the back door, sitting down with Gerald. "Would you like something to drink, sir?" he asked me.

"Gerald, quit with the 'Sir' and call me Rick. Is there anything back here that I can make a sandwich out of?" Breakfast had worn off a while ago, and I was hungry.

"I'll make you something, s . . .Rick."

"No, you won't. I'm perfectly capable. Just point me in the right direction."

Gerald might have worn a disgruntled look, but he did as I asked and pointed at the refrigerator. I opened it up and found the leftover prime rib. "Do you want to keep the prime rib or can I use that?" I asked my new friend.

"You can use it. The bread is out here in the breadbox."

I grabbed the horseradish and the prime rib and proceeded to the breadbox. "Do you want one?"

"That would be very nice," Gerald answered me with a smile. So I made us each a sandwich and went looking for something to drink.

"Ooh, Diet Coke. And you would like?"

"I'll take a Diet Coke, also, thank you."

I brought the Cokes over to the table and sat down. Gerald and I ate happily, as equals, then we began to chat. "How long have you worked for Mrs. Cortez?" I wondered.

"Oh, it must be ten or twelve years now. Before Mr. Cortez passed on."

"And what was Mr. Cortez like?" I'd already heard more than enough about Mateo Cortez. That he was crude and belligerent, that he respected no man or woman and that he was hellish in business.

"Mr. Mateo was a fair man. He always treated me with respect."

"Has Mrs. Cortez had many suitors since her husband died?"

"Oh, no, she made it plain from the outset there would be no other man to take Mr. Mateo's place." He said it with all seriousness.

"Don't you think that's a bit, ah, unusual?"

"Perhaps. But that's the way she wanted it, so that's the way it was."

"I would imagine that caused less trouble with the kids."

Gerald laughed a little. "They didn't care. They'd just as soon she would have seen other men."

Neither of us said anything for a while, and when I finished my sandwich I stood up. "Gerald, it's been enlightening. And remember, no more sirs. It's Rick."

I picked up what was left of my Coke and took it with me. I was just walking through the dining room and into the vestibule when Alma came through the front door. "Well, I like Gerald, but you're certainly an improvement."

"Thank you," I said, trying not to let the warmth I felt in my neck creep up any further. "How was your meeting?"

"Particularly contentious, but we got everything done. Have you been here long?" Alma asked me.

"Long enough to enjoy a sandwich with Gerald."

"Really? Gerald actually sat down after he made you a sandwich?"

I shook my head. "I made lunch for both of us. My idea, not his."

"Stubbornly independent, aren't you?" She had a smile on her face.

"Yes, ma'am, that's me."

"What did you find out at the library?" She set her purse down on the dining room table.

"Something mildly interesting. And maybe something more." Alma walked into the living room, and I followed her. I waited until she'd gotten seated, then pulled out the piece of paper I'd written Navarro seniors date of death on. I handed it to her and gave her a chance to read it. She was a bright lady; it didn't take her long to figure out its significance.

"Really? Senior was only thirty-four when he died? What else?" she questioned me eagerly.

"He died before junior was born." I let that sink in a minute before I continued. "And I found a book that will give us more information." I picked up the volume from the coffee table and showed it to her.

"*The Birth and Death of Bootlegging*," she read. "Now what?"

"Turn to page 73."

I'm sure she did just what I had done – read the page over several times. Then she let out a breath. "Oh my."

"Turn to the front flap and look at the date it was last checked out."

She did as instructed, then looked back at me. "February 2, 2019. Right before . . ."

“Right before Diego was killed. Know who checked it out?” Another look in my direction – but she said nothing. “It was checked out by Delores Navarro. Ramon Navarro’s daughter.”

“Are you sure?”

I reached into my jeans pocket and pulled out another birth certificate – Delores Navarro’s. “As sure as I can be.”

“This explains a lot, doesn’t it?”

“A whole lot.”

“What’s your next move?” Alma wanted to know.

“I go to another Poly Sci class with Lonnie.” As if he’d heard me mention his name, Lonnie came charging down the stairs, book in hand. I concluded he never walked downstairs.

“Ready?” he questioned.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

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The only thing interesting about Poly Sci was the change in Lonnie’s attitude. He sat somewhere convenient for both of us and didn’t try to ditch me in the hall. And when he stopped to talk to a girl while we were still inside the building, he introduced me. As his friend.

We drove straight back to the mansion, and I had him let me out by my car. “Tell your mother I’ve gone to the office to check on some things. I’ll get dinner someplace before I come back.”

I waited by the Mustang to make sure he got inside safely, then I got in the car and drove to my neglected office. Robin was already gone by the time I got there, and I stopped at her desk to pick up messages and leave her a note. *I’ll be in tomorrow*, I wrote. *I miss your smiling face*. I hope she knew I really meant it.

I locked the front door and went to my desk. I needed some computer time, now that I had further information on Navarro senior. I spent almost an hour there, and I found a few things I didn’t already know. Like what senior’s financial situation was at the time of his death. And if junior was still alive and had fathered any more children. I printed out everything I found and then went back to Robin’s desk to amend the note I’d left. Below what I’d written before, I added: *Please research Ramon Luis Navarro, born October 6, 1970. Find out everything you can about him. Love and kisses, Rick.*

I gathered up my papers and left the office, locking the door behind me. I needed to go back to the mansion and piece everything together. Then I remembered I’d told Lonnie I’d get something to eat before I came back, so I headed for the nearest Del Taco. Tacos were my go-to meal. I ordered three tacos and a Coke at the drive-thru, paid for them and picked them up. As I started to leave the drive-thru some damn fool that wasn’t watching where he was going came racing in the Del Taco lot and hit

me broadside. I hadn't refastened my seat belt and was thrown forward into the steering wheel. My last thought was *my poor car!*

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I heard voices murmuring, but I had no idea who they were or what they were saying. I must have slipped back into wherever I'd gone before because I finally woke up for good some time later. I wasn't in my car, and I tried to reach down and feel something familiar. All I could feel was sheet, and I slowly opened my eyes. Just what I was afraid of, I was in the hospital. I tried to sit up and I felt a hand push me back down, followed by Alma's voice. "You stay right where you are, Richard."

"And where is that?" I mumbled.

"Good Samaritan's Hospital. Your car was broadsided by a teenager."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"It was a he, and he wasn't injured."

"Not the driver, my Mustang." My eyes, along with my head, were clearing, and I could see Alma standing at the bedside looking concerned.

"The police took it. They said it was totaled."

"No. I want her back. I'll get her fixed." I was adamant. Nobody was going to arbitrarily decide my car was totaled. I struggled to sit up again and my head throbbed.

"If you'll promise to lay there and not try to get up I'll have Walton track the car down."

"Walton?"

"My attorney," she answered.

"Now, please, before they try to make scrap metal out of her."

Alma sat down and pulled out her cellphone. I could hear her giving orders. "Yes, I know they totaled it, but the owner wants it back. Just make sure they don't destroy it and have it towed to, wait, hold on." She came back to the bed. "Where do you want to have the car taken?"

"Yancy's Garage. It's on East Colorado Street in Glendale." That was where Jamie worked, and he'd take care of her properly.

She went back to the phone. "Yancy's Garage in Glendale. Just do it, Walton." Alma hung up and came back to the bed, again. "There, all taken care of. Just remember your promise."

"Where's the doctor?" I asked her.

"Lonnie, go get the doctor." That's when I saw junior, standing in the corner of the room. He took off immediately.

"How did you get junior to come with you?"

"He wanted to come. Told me he wanted to make sure you were alright." Well, I wouldn't have expected it of him. Will wonders never cease.

Lonnie returned in a few minutes, and sometime after that the doctor wandered in, looking lost. "Mr. Simon, you're awake!"

"Give me a rundown on the injuries, Doc."

"Now, now, we don't need to do that right at this moment, Mr. Simon." He sounded patronizing, as if I were three or four years old. Time for me to set him straight.

"Doctor, you can tell me what's wrong right now or I can get up out of this bed and yank it out of you."

"Is he always this hostile?" he asked, turning to Alma.

"Doc," I said, snapping my fingers at him, "I'm over here. And you haven't seen hostile yet."

"Alright, alright. You have a concussion and a scalp wound that required seven stitches, a badly bruised chest and a sprained left wrist."

"That's all?"

"That's enough, Mr. Simon."

"Get my paperwork ready, I'm checking out of this motel."

"Rick – " Alma protested.

"Mr. Simon – " the doctor protested.

"Get my paperwork or I'll go AMA." Robin and I sat for two days and nights at Eddie's bedside, hoping and praying that he would pull through somehow. When he died, a part of me died with him. The last place I could stand to be right now was in a hospital.

Alma sighed. "Get his paperwork, doctor. I'm taking him home to my house."

"Thank you," I told her.

It was almost an hour later before I was released, but Alma walked alongside the wheelchair they took me out in, then helped take me the rest of the way to her car when the nurse left me off at the door. My head hurt like hell but I was out of the hospital, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why were you so desperate to get out of there?" she asked once we were on our way.

“Robin and I sat in Eddie’s hospital room for two days and nights. I couldn’t stand to be in a hospital right now.” It must have made sense to her, because she nodded.

“Have you talked to Walton? Has he found my car yet?”

“No, I haven’t heard from him yet. But he’ll find your car. Unless he’d like to be an unemployed attorney.”

I had to suppress a giggle. Alma could be a hard ass when she wanted to be.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 7 – Folded Like a Pretzel

I knew what I wanted to do – I wanted to sit down and put all the information I had into one cohesive piece. The only problem is my head was still throbbing and I couldn't concentrate on anything else. I finally went to bed and tried to sleep, thinking if I got a few good hours I'd be better able to do what I needed to do. I tried, but every couple of hours I'd wake up, having had another nightmare about my Mustang getting smashed.

She was a 1965 Shelby GT 350, white with a black rally stripe across the hood, roof, and trunk. Eddie had helped me restore her, and she was my pride and joy. I knew I was never gonna be able to concentrate on any of the Navarro's until I knew she was in Jamie's hands at Yancy's Garage. I finally got out of bed at five o'clock and took a shower. My head wasn't hurting as bad as it had been last night, and my wrist was painful but manageable. Once I got dressed I made my way downstairs and was surprised to find Alma sitting in the living room with a cup of coffee. "You couldn't sleep either?" she asked me.

"Nope. I kept dreaming about getting hit. Have you heard from Walton yet?"

"Nothing yet. I'll give him until nine o'clock. You're sure you want it back?"

"I'm sure. She's real important to me. I had some papers in the front seat with information about Ramon senior. That's another reason I want her back. Once I've got those I can start putting together a synopsis of what we know so far. I think it will make more sense that way."

"I hope so, because right now all I know is I'm confused."

Gerald appeared out of nowhere with a cup of coffee. "Thank you, Gerald."

"Would you like some aspirin, Rick?" Bless his heart, he remembered.

Alma started to say something and I stopped her. "I told him to call me Rick. And yes, Gerald, some aspirin would be wonderful."

He pulled a bottle of aspirin out of his pocket. "I think you better keep this, Rick. You'll need it more than I will."

"Thanks," I told him, taking the bottle.

"I'll bring you some water." And he was gone to get water.

"Gerald is a good man," I told Alma. Of course, that wasn't anything she didn't already know.

"He's worth his weight in gold."

When Gerald returned with the water he asked Alma, "What time would you like breakfast, madam?"

"I think eight o'clock, Gerald. Is that acceptable to you, Richard?"

"Perfectly fine, Alma."

Gerald nodded and hurried back to the kitchen. I couldn't stand it any longer and finally said something.

"Alma, I wish you would do me a favor."

"Anything."

"Please don't call me Richard anymore. I prefer Rick."

"Of course, Rick." And she gave me that patrician smile.

"Thank you."

"Why didn't you say something sooner?"

I chuckled. I couldn't help it. "I didn't know you well enough."

We sat quietly in the living room for a few minutes, until Gerald returned with a silver coffee pot on a matching tray. He left and I poured us both more coffee. And it was me that broke the silence. "Do you know how old this house is?"

"Douglas Fairbanks had it built in 1920, but he never lived in it. It stood empty until John Barrymore bought it in 1935. After that it passed from hand to hand until Mateo bought it in 1985. He took almost five years to have it remodeled, then I had it done again a few years ago."

"Quite some history. She doesn't look too bad for an old girl."

"Sort of like your car. Is there a story behind that?"

I could feel the expression on my face change, so I turned my head away from Alma. "Eddie helped me restore it." Whatever my face was going to tell her, she didn't need to know.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry." Her voice was soft and gentle, just the kind of reaction I didn't want to get from her.

"I've had her a long time, that's all."

"Of course." The phone rang, and in a minute she picked it up. "Hello? Well, good morning, Walton. No, you didn't get me up. You did? And then? It is? Well, good. Rick will be happy to hear that. Yes, I knew you could, Walton. Thank you." She ended the call and I turned back to her eagerly. "Your car is at Yancy's Garage. Your mechanic will call you later today and let you know how long it will take to get it fixed, and your papers were on the floor of the front seat. You can relax, now."

I let out a breath. "Thank you. Do you have a car I can borrow to go get the papers? Then I can start my synopsis. Maybe we'll have a clear path to Ramon Luis Navarro. And I have Robin gathering information on him."

Now it was my turn. My phone rang and I saw that it was Robin. "Hey, Miss Short. How are you this morning?"

The first words out of her mouth were, "Why didn't you call me last night? Do I have to hear that you were almost killed from Donahue?"

"That's because I wasn't almost killed. I left the hospital three hours later."

"Hospital? You were in the hospital?" I had to hold the phone away from my ear; she was definitely on full tilt.

"Calm down. Didn't Donahue tell you what happened?"

"No, he didn't. Just that you were in an accident and almost killed. So you better be telling me now, or I'll never forgive you." She'd barely calmed down.

"I stopped at Del Taco – "

"I told you that place was going to kill you."

"I stopped at Del Taco and on the way out of the drive-thru I got broadsided by some kid that came racing in the parking lot without looking."

"Oh, no. Why were you taken to the hospital? How bad were you hurt? What about the Mustang?"

"Robin, slow down. I got a steering wheel in the chest and then hit my head. Mild concussion, seven stitches. And a sprained wrist. They took me to the hospital because I was unconscious and couldn't tell them not to." I had to pause for breath. I guess the steering wheel did more damage than I thought. "I don't know how bad the Mustang is, but she got it broadside. They tried to declare her totaled but she's with Jamie now. That's all I can tell you. I'm going over later to see her."

"Rick Simon, if you ever pull another stunt like this again . . . "

"I didn't pull a stunt, Robin. I'm the innocent party here."

"Next time you call me. I don't care if all you've got is a hangnail. You understand?" It didn't matter what I said at this point, just as long as I promised to call. I guess we were both a little touchy about Eddie.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, how soon do you need this information about Navarro?" Finally, she was back to business.

"As soon as you can get it. Take a picture of it and send it to me. And see if you can find any information on his daughter Delores. Anything else?"

"Ralph Turner at Turner Materials wants to know how the investigation is going."

"Shit," I said under my breath. "Call him and tell him I'm still investigating."

"You haven't started yet."

"Yes, I have. Right before we lost Eddie. I'll spend some time on it next week. I swear."

"That's all. Are you coming into the office today?"

"Yes. Maybe. I don't know."

"You better come by so I can see you and make sure you told me the truth about your injuries."

"I'll try. Talk to you later."

"Bye, Rick."

I hung up just as Gerald came in. "Breakfast, madam, Rick."

Gerald picked up our coffee cups and followed us into the dining room. This morning we had scrambled eggs, sausage, hash brown potatoes, toast and orange juice. A veritable feast. The aspirin Gerald gave me had started to work and my head felt a whole lot better than it had at five o'clock this morning. Consequently, I was hungry. I did my best not to overeat, but the food was so good it was hard not to.

When I was finished I asked Alma the question that was originally interrupted by Robin's phone call. "Do you have a car that I can borrow?"

"Oh, of course. You can take mine. It's the red Ferrari."

"Alma, don't you have something a little less expensive?"

Alma laughed. "No, silly, of course not. Gerald, would you get Rick the keys to the Ferrari?"

"Wait, Gerald. Isn't there anything else?" I asked plaintively.

"Madam, there is Miss Alicia's Cadillac."

"Would that be better?" Alma asked.

"If it's alright with you." I didn't know if she had any kind of sentimental attachment to it, considering it was Alicia's car.

"Of course. Gerald." And Alma dispatched Gerald to bring the keys to the Cadillac. He seemed to be gone an awfully long time, and then I heard the sound of a car engine in front of the house.

"I'll be back later," I called out as I went running out the front door. "You didn't have to do that," I told the butler.

"You would never have found it in the garage," was the reply.

"Well, thank you." I got in and put the car in drive, and in just a minute was on my way to Yancy's.

When I got to the garage I didn't see the Mustang anywhere. I parked the Cadillac and went looking for Jaimie. I found him, of course, with his nose stuck under the hood of a car. "Hey, Jaimie."

He came out from under the hood in a hurry. "Hey, man, you're walking around. Considering what the Mustang looks like, I didn't think I'd see you for weeks."

"Oh, God, is she that bad?"

"Well, see for yourself. She's around back."

I walked around back and almost got sick to my stomach. My car had been folded in half, sideways, just like a pretzel. No wonder they wanted to total her. All I could do was pray Jaimie could fix her. While I was there I retrieved the papers I had with the Navarro information on them, then I went back inside the garage. "She looks terrible."

"Didn't you see her last night?"

"No. I hit my head on the steering wheel and was unconscious when they got me out of her. Is she fixable?"

"Well, if it was anybody but you, I'd say no. But if you'll give me the time to do it right, I think so."

On to my next question. "How long do you think?"

"Thirty days."

"Does that include the bodywork?"

"Of course. I've got a brother in the business," Jaimie answered, grinning at me. I was so happy I almost kissed him. "Who has to pay for it?"

"The kid's insurance. He's got to get me a rental car, too."

He turned around and looked at the Caddy. "Whose is that you're driving?"

"A client's. It's a loaner."

"You travel in some pretty fancy circles, my friend."

That made me laugh. "You just have to know the right people."

"Alright, I'll give you a call when it's getting close. And Rick . . . take care of yourself."

"Will do, Jaimie."

I got back in the Caddy and headed for the office. I had to go face the wrath of Robin.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 8 – Knives Out

I pulled into the only parking space available at the office, right in front of the entry door. Robin had a clear view of the Cadillac from her desk. And I heard about it as soon as I got inside. “Nice ride. Who’d you steal it from?”

“It’s a loaner, until I can get a rental car.”

“From your friend Alma?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. As soon as I hear from the kid that hit me’s insurance company, I’ll get a rental.”

“Alright, come over here,” was the next thing I heard.

I walked to her desk and she examined my head. “Stitches?”

“Seven. I told you this morning. And a concussion.” I guess she didn’t listen to me when we talked earlier.

“And how is the wrist?” The question was a little gentler in tone.

“It hurts, but I’ll live.”

“Can I see it, please?”

I gave her my wrist and she poked and prodded until I yelped, “Ouch.”

“Sorry.”

“Did you get the stuff I asked for on Navarro?”

“Here.” She handed me two sheets of paper, filled with data. “I was just getting ready to send it to you.”

“Good girl.”

I took the paper back to my office and sat at my computer. I’d barely gotten the thing booted up when Robin came in and sat down. “I’ve got a favor to ask you.”

“Shoot.”

“I know you asked me to clean Eddie’s office out, and I went in there and tried. I can’t do it by myself. Can you help me?”

I sat there for a minute while we stared at each other. “Sure. But it has to wait until I’ve figured this Navarro/Cortez mess out.”

"Okay. I'll just keep the door closed."

"I see you got his name off the door."

She nodded. "That was the only thing I could do."

"I understand. Maybe it's better this way." It was gonna hurt no matter when we did it, but a little time might help.

"Probably so. Thanks." She got up and turned to leave the room.

"Robin." She turned back around to face me. "You're welcome."

It took me two or three hours to put all the data I had into some kind of timeline. By the time I was finished I had almost four full pages. I didn't hear a word out of Robin the whole time I was working. Once I was sure I had everything I needed, I got up and went to my doorway. "Do you want to get lunch before I leave?"

"Yes, thank you." She stopped what she was doing and grabbed her purse. "I'll be right back." That meant she was going to the Subway Sandwich Shop down at the corner.

"Bring me an iced tea, please."

"Sure."

She walked out the door and turned left. Yep, Subway. I looked down at her desk and saw the picture she had framed. It was the three of us, the day we moved into this office. It seemed so long ago, but it was only four years. Our whole world had changed in that time.

I went back to my office and stopped at the computer. I printed out four sets of the 'report' I'd just finished and put them in my briefcase. The briefcase and I went back out to the front office and sat down to wait for Robin. She was back in just a few minutes, carrying a bag with her lunch in it, and my iced tea. "Are you leaving now?" she asked.

"Nope, not until you've finished eating."

"You really did have a concussion, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. Why do you ask?" I was perplexed as to what she was getting at.

"Because you're too nice."

"Maybe I just . . . oh, never mind."

"What?"

"Maybe I just miss the way it was when the three of us were together," I told her, and instantly regretted it.

"I know," she replied softly. "I do, too."

I got up and picked up my briefcase. "I'm going now." I walked out the door and got in the Caddy before I said anything else. By the time I got back to the mansion I had myself put back together again.

Gerald met me at the door. "Madam is upstairs napping."

That sounded like a good idea, given that I'd been up since five o'clock. "I think I'll do the same," I said, handing Gerald the keys to the car. I trudged up the stairs, set my briefcase down, and laid on the bed, fully dressed. I was asleep in a matter of minutes.

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I woke up slowly, the way you do when you've been really deep in sleep. I knew right away, before even sitting up, that someone had been in my room. Reaching down, I felt for my briefcase. It was right where I'd left it. Very slowly, I rolled over to face the closet. What had been empty before, with a pile of dirty clothes on the floor, now held all those same clothes – clean and hanging up. *Brilliant work, Holmes*, I thought.

Having done my finest detective work in a week, I rolled out of bed. Then I picked up my briefcase and headed for the stairs. I could hear Alma's voice downstairs. "Six will be fine for dinner, Gerald." It was coming from the living room, and that's where I went. "Well, nice to see you up," she laughed.

"Nice to be up," I replied. "Where's junior?"

"Upstairs in his room with Lloyd Barton. That's his best friend from Political Science. They've got a test on Monday. And he promised he would stay away from the window."

I guffawed. I hoped he would stay away from the window, unless he started kissing Lloyd. But then Alma hadn't seen what I saw.

"I have a lot of data for us to go over. Do you want to see it now or after dinner?"

"Oh, let's wait. I'm busy at the moment," and she picked up a Martini glass from the table, which I hadn't seen.

Gerald made his entrance right about now. "Something to drink, Rick?"

"How about a vodka and soda, Gerald?"

"With lime?" he asked.

"Most definitely."

"No Martini?" Alma laughed.

"No. I'm having my vodka in a different form."

"Did you see your car this morning?"

"Yes," I answered, "and it was pitiful. It looked just like a folded-up pretzel."

"Is your mechanic going to be able to fix it?" It didn't sound like an idle question. It sounded like she was really interested.

"He says yes, with the help of his brother, who just happens to own a body shop."

"By the way, Walton called again. You can pick up a rental car at Enterprise."

"Good," I answered, just as Gerald came back with my drink. "Then I don't have to worry about damaging your car."

"One of us can take you over in the morning."

We sat in silence, as we had before, for a few minutes, luxuriating in our drinks. Finally Alma asked, "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing."

"I remember you telling me you didn't lie."

I couldn't help it. She'd walked right into it. "Do you believe everything I tell you?"

Alma burst out laughing. Right now there was nothing of the stern Mrs. Cortez I'd met on my first day here. "Yes, I do."

I shook my head. "I don't know. Something's not right, but I don't know what it is. Why hasn't Billy Flatbush made another attempt, for one thing."

"I thought that was curious, too." I could see her thinking. "Maybe he's got another job."

"No. Flatbush only takes one job at a time. I just can't figure it out." I took a sip of the vodka soda.

"Maybe it will come to me when we go over the information I gathered."

We were saved from further speculation by Gerald. "Dinner is served."

When we got to the dinner table, I saw that there were four place settings. "Junior and his friend?"

Before anyone could answer, there were two thunderous sets of footsteps on the stairs. Lloyd Barton was two or three inches shorter than Lonnie, blonde and blue-eyed. And dressed just as expensively.

"Rick, this is Lloyd Barton. Lloyd, Rick Simon, my . . . uncle."

"Uncle?" Lloyd asked curiously. I certainly didn't look like I was related to the Cortez family. I had dark hair, but that was where it ended.

"By marriage," I explained. Junior looked relieved at my save.

We had a pleasant dinner. Lloyd seemed to be as bright as Lonnie, and he was way more talkative. When the meal was over he thanked Alma for inviting him, then turned to me and stuck out his hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Simon."

We shook as I told him, "Same here, Lloyd."

Once they were gone, Gerald reappeared. "Bring the coffee pot and two cups, Gerald. We'll be in the living room."

I helped Alma with her chair and we went back in the other room. I took two sets of the report out of my briefcase while Gerald brought in the coffee pot and poured us each a cup. "Is there anything else, madam?" he asked.

"Yes, close the living room doors, please."

As soon as we were alone I handed one set to Alma. She put on her glasses and spent several minutes reading what I had compiled. "Fascinating," she murmured at one point. "I never knew any of this."

I shook my head again. "I still get the feeling somethings not right. Does anything stick out to you, or seem off?"

"No, not really. What's bothering you?"

"It's too easy. The information follows too straight a line from A to B. I just can't put my finger on where it goes wrong."

"Maybe you're too close to it. Let's go watch a movie – maybe taking your mind off it will help."

"You have a movie room here?" I had no idea.

"Well, of course. How about Knives Out? I hear it's really good. It's got Daniel Craig and Jamie Lee Curtis."

"Fine by me." And we went off to find the movie room, hoping that would trigger whatever was floating around in my brain.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 9 – Three Little Mice and One Big Rat

“You were right,” I told Alma two hours later. “The movie was good.”

“Has anything come to you yet?” she asked me.

“No, but the nagging feeling hasn’t gone away.”

“Maybe it would help if we went over everything. Out loud, I mean.”

“I’m game if you’re game.” I was willing to give anything a try at this point. Now was when I needed Eddie the most. We’d always been able to bounce things off each other and one or the other of us would figure out what we were missing. Damn it, Eddie, why’d you have to go on that raid with Juan?

“Back to the living room.” Gerald appeared out of nowhere. “Gerald, bring us some brandy.”

I settled into a comfortable chair opposite the couch Alma was getting situated on; Gerald brought in the brandy and left, closing the doors behind him. Alms put her glasses back on and I started. “Ramon Navarro, Sr., born July 17, 1909. Married Bonita Sierra January 1, 1943. Died January 12, 1944. Son Ramon Navarro, Jr., born May 14, 1944. Married Luisa Montoya July 6, 1968, Son, Ramon Luis Navarro, born October 6, 1970.” I stopped to take a drink. “See what I mean? It’s a straight line from Senior to Junior to Luis. It’s too easy.”

“Did Junior have any other children?” Alma asked me.

That thought hadn’t occurred to me. See what I meant about missing Eddie? “I don’t know. I was so busy following the Ramon’s I forgot to check. Do you have a computer?”

“In the office.”

I got up and left the living room, going straight to Alma’s office. Her computer was already on, and I searched for Ramon Navarro, Jr. Not only did he have Luis, he had Santiago, Nicolás, and Valentina. I had more digging to do, and I didn’t want to leave a trail on Alma’s computer. I’d go to the office in the morning and research the other kids. I cleared the internet search on the computer and hurried back to the living room. “You’re brilliant. He had three more. I’m going to the office in the morning.”

“After I take you to Enterprise.”

“Of course. I don’t want you to think I’m an idiot; I’m just so used to having Eddie to bounce things off. And he’s not here anymore. It’s like I lost half of my brain.”

She nodded slowly. “I know. I always went to Diego when I had a problem I couldn’t solve, and he’d help me find the answer. It’s not easy when the person you relied on most is gone.”

“No, it’s not.”

"We still don't know how Ramon Sr. died."

I agreed. "It has to have something to do with the Cortez family. But what happened exactly I haven't been able to unearth as of yet. If I keep running into brick walls we may have to go see Uncle Carlos again."

"Just let me know, and I'll make arrangements."

"I better get this worked out this weekend. I've got to be with Lonnie on Monday for his test," I reminded her.

"I've had enough for one day," Alma told me. "I'm going to bed."

I agreed wholeheartedly. "That sounds like an excellent idea. I'll walk upstairs with you."

We went up the staircase a lot slower than Lonnie came down it. I started to go one way and Alma the other at the top when she stopped me. "Goodnight, Rick, and thank you." She stood on tiptoes and kissed me on the cheek.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"For being such a good man. Sleep well."

"You, too, Alma."

I wasn't a good man. Not when push came to shove. If I was, I wouldn't want to put a bullet into Billy Flatbush so badly. But it was alright if Alma thought I was.

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I was up at seven the next morning and followed my usual routine. Shower, shave, get dressed, go downstairs. There was a coffee pot and two cups on the table, but no sign of Alma. I sat down and poured myself a cup and waited for the lady of the house to arrive. She showed up some fifteen minutes later; I helped her into her chair and poured her a cup of coffee. "How was your night?" I asked.

"Restful. And yours?"

"Peaceful. No nightmares." That was always a plus, when I could get through an entire night without some kind of monster attacking me in my dreams.

"Do you want breakfast?" she asked me.

"It's up to you. I'm not in any frantic rush, if that's what you're worried about."

"Gerald, have Minnie make waffles."

Alma had hit my weak spot. I can eat waffles anytime, anywhere. I must have lit up like a Christmas tree, because Alma looked at me and smiled.

"You like waffles?"

"I love waffles," I told her. "I remember my mother making waffles when I was little. They were so good, and I never got enough of them."

"Is your mother still alive?"

I shook my head. "No. She died in 2001."

"I'm sorry. Do you have any siblings?"

"No, again. I was an only child."

"Ah, then it all makes sense." I must have given her a quizzical look, because she told me, "Eddie was the brother you never had."

"Yes." Minnie interrupted us with two plates full of waffles, and I was glad for the interruption. Alma was too damn close to the truth. And I wasn't here for psychoanalysis.

We dawdled a little over breakfast, with me steering the conversation away from my home life or Eddie. After the third cup of coffee I finally said, "Well, I'm ready to go. How about you?" Alma nodded agreement and Gerald went to get her Ferrari. I might not want to drive it, but I sure didn't mind riding in it.

Alma took me to the nearest Enterprise Rent-A-Car and waited to make sure everything was in order. Walton had arranged it and all I had to do was show a driver's license, sign my name and pick my car. I chose a snappy little Toyota RAV4; Alma left for home and I left for the office.

I deliberately parked right by the front door. For some reason I wanted Robin to see that I had gotten a rental. "Hey, boss," was all she had to say when I walked in.

"No remarks about my car?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nice ride." I never will understand that woman.

I went to my office and booted up my computer. In just a few minutes I had what little information I could find about Santiago, Nicolás and Valentina. Junior must have been married before, because Santiago was born in 1966. Nicolás followed Luis, born in 1972, and Valentina was the baby, born in 1974. Nicolás was a Vice-President at Bankers Trust, working for his brother. Valentina worked as a Claims Adjuster for MassMutual Life Insurance Company. There was nothing about Santiago.

Just as I finished, Robin appeared in my doorway. She had a piece of something in her hand, and it wasn't making her happy. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"We got another invoice for Eddie's car." Eddie had leased a Mercedes, and we turned the car in almost three weeks ago. Because of the circumstances, the lease was voided and we were told the account was

settled and closed. A week later we received an invoice for the next month's lease. I threw it in the trash. Now Robin had another invoice.

"Is it for two months?" I asked her.

"Yes, with a late payment penalty on the first payment."

"Give it to me." I was in no mood for this, and fully intended to tell the leasing company their ineptitude was not appreciated. Robin handed it to me and the first thing I saw was the big red stamp – 'Past Due Notice.' I dialed the phone number on the invoice and listened to it ring. When the phone was answered, I got that "This number is no longer in service" message. I pulled out the notebook I started after Eddie died – all the people and places I had to call. Axel Leasing was listed with a different phone number. I called that number and was told that Eddie's lease had indeed been canceled, and they hadn't sent us any invoices. I went out to see Robin.

"Did this come by regular mail?" I asked her, and she gave me that 'of course it did and you're crazy' look.

"No," she answered innocently, "by courier."

"Do you have the envelope?" She bent over and dug it out of the trash can. There was nothing remarkable about it, but somebody had tried to get us for two months' worth of car payments. Who? And why? Just to aggravate me? Or did they really think we'd just blindly pay it? "See if you can track down this address," and I handed the invoice back to her.

"It's not from the leasing company?"

"Nope," and I went back to my desk. I didn't give any more thought to the bogus invoice. I spent the next hour chasing the Navarro family all over the internet, but I still couldn't find any trace of Santiago. It was time to call Benny, and I dialed his number. "Benny, it's Rick. I need you to find somebody for me."

Benny laughed. "I thought that was your job."

"It is, but I think this one's gone underground. Santiago Navarro."

"Okay. I'll see what I can find."

"Good man." Benny was kind of an all-purpose gopher, but he knew most of the lowlife in the city. I figured if he couldn't find the oldest Navarro brother, I wouldn't be able to, either. I got as much information as I could on Nicolás and Valentina, and then went back to Ramon Luis. He had a son that I'd missed before, Juan Pablo, born in 2000. That made him nineteen. The age when we do many foolish things. Like hire a hitman? I'd gone from one suspect to too many; three little mice and one big rat. Only problem was I didn't know which one was the rat. I had find out just how Ramon Senior died. Maybe I was approaching this from the wrong angle. I needed to talk to Uncle Carlos.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 10 – Uncle Carlos, Redux

I drove straight back to the Cortez house and found Alma in her office. “How fast can you arrange to see Uncle Carlos at Golden Hills Manor?”

“If he’s feeling up to it, we can go this afternoon.”

“Would you call and check? I think your uncle is the one that holds the key to this whole thing.”

“Certainly. Have a seat.” She picked up her phone and called the retirement home. “Mr. Norris, this is Mrs. Cortez. How is Uncle Carlos doing today? Can we come and see him? Oh, he’s not. You did? Do you think he’ll be up to seeing us tomorrow? Yes, please arrange it. We’ll be there early. Yes, thank you.” She hung up and looked at me. “Not good news, I’m afraid. He was having a bad day and they had to medicate him. But we’re set up for tomorrow morning.”

“That’s alright. Whatever’s best for him. I’m going upstairs to work on my computer. I’ll be in my room if you need me.” Actually, I wanted to sit down and read *The Birth and Death of Bootlegging*. I was hoping to find the information I needed in there so we wouldn’t have to disturb Uncle Carlos.

I’m not the world’s fastest reader, and I was only about one-third of the way through the book when Gerald knocked on my door and announced dinner. I left a piece of paper in the book and got up to go downstairs. Alma was quiet at dinner and I didn’t lend much in the way of conversation; my mind was too preoccupied with what I was reading. When dinner was over I excused myself and went back to read some more. “I’ll see you in the morning,” I told Alma, and she nodded at me. I don’t think she was in the mood to talk any more than I was.

I read until almost eleven o’clock and got more than two-thirds of the way finished. The only thing I could find about Ramon Navarro Sr. was tucked away back on page 248. *Santino Navarro was one of the most ruthless of the bootleggers during this era. He died peacefully in his sleep at age ninety-five, but his son, Ramon Navarro, met an untimely end in January 1944 at the hands of an unknown assailant. It was purported his death was retribution for some heinous act committed by Santino at the height of Prohibition.*

I read the paragraph over three times. Could the unknown assailant be Carlos Cortez? The only way I was going to find out was to ask him. Sometime shortly after that I fell asleep, with the book spread open across my chest.

I woke with a start the next morning. I thought at first there was someone in my room; then I realized the noise was coming from Lonnie’s room next door. I sat up in bed and the book fell open next to me. It had perched there on my chest all night. I got up and went to the bathroom; Lonnie must have just taken a shower because it was wet inside. Junior returning to his room was what I heard. I showered, shaved, and went back to get dressed, then hurried downstairs with the book in my hands. Alma was in the living room having coffee. “You’re in a hurry this morning.”

"I want you to read something," I explained as I handed her the book. "Page 248." I pointed out the paragraph when she got to the right page. She must have had the same reaction I did because she read it over several times. She looked up at me at last.

"Uncle Carlos," she breathed, barely audible.

"I had the same reaction," I replied. "Do you think it could have been him? He seemed such a gentle soul."

"He is now, but I heard things about him when he was younger . . . I always thought they were just stories. Maybe they weren't."

Gerald brought me a cup of coffee. I thanked him before Alma could tell him about breakfast. "Omelets, Gerald. Sausage and cheese, preferably. With home fries and orange juice."

"Yes, madam."

"Will you be ready to go as soon as we've eaten?" she asked me.

"Yes, ma'am. All I need from upstairs is my briefcase and a jacket."

Lonnie came downstairs, and for once he didn't run. He must have gone into the kitchen to let Minnie know to make three omelets; then he came back into the living room with coffee of his own. "Are you still going to see Uncle Carlos after breakfast?" he asked no one in particular.

"Yes," I finally answered. Lonnie turned to his mother.

"I want to go with you."

"You don't have to," Alma told him.

"Yes, I do. I'm the one that this idiot is trying to kill, and I want to know who and why." He seemed adamant about going. I took the book from his mother and handed it to him.

"Read this paragraph," I told him.

"This? You mean this is why somebody was after all of us?" He'd barely glanced at the page.

"You've seen that before, haven't you?" I asked.

"Two years ago. In history class. Is that the reason?"

"I think so."

"And you think it was Uncle Carlos?" There was a pleading note in his voice. As if he wanted to know but didn't want to know. He loved the old man; that much was obvious.

"It might have been, or he might know who it was. Either way we have to try and find out."

"Then I'm definitely going."

"Breakfast is served," Gerald announced.

Breakfast was eaten in silence. I'm sure we all had our thoughts about who killed Ramon, Senior. I had a hard time reconciling the murder with the sweet, gentle old man I'd met. But then, Carlos had many years to turn into the man he was now. When we were finished there was no dawdling at the breakfast table, as there had been just yesterday. I excused myself and ran upstairs, slipping on a sport coat and grabbing my briefcase. As I came back downstairs, I could hear Alma explaining to Junior who she'd told Mr. Norris I was. "Does Uncle Carlos know the truth?" he asked.

"I told him."

Lonnie looked me right in the eyes. "Good."

Just about that time, Gerald came through the front door. "Your car, madam."

The three of us filed out, and Gerald helped Alma in. Junior and I followed. Again, the twenty-minute ride and the stop at the gates. As they had before, they opened and we wound our way down the driveway to the Medieval Times front doors. This time only Mrs. Dempsey met us. "We were surprised to see you come back so soon, Mrs. Cortez. And I see you've brought Lonnie with you this time. And Mr. Simon. Follow me, we have the solarium set up for you again."

"Thank you," Alma replied. Back down that hallway, until we arrived at the solarium.

"I'll be right back." And Mrs. Dempsey was gone.

Once again we sat and waited. It took a few minutes longer this time, and then she wheeled in Uncle Carlos. In just a moment she was gone, and the door closed behind her.

Carlos looked up, straight at Alma. "Who are you?"

This was not a good beginning. "I'm Alma, Uncle. And this is Lonnie, your nephew." Not exactly true, but close enough.

I set my briefcase down and squatted down to Carlos's level. "Do you remember me, Mr. Cortez? My name's Rick Simon. I'm a private investigator."

"You, I remember. I gave you a name."

"Yes, sir. Ramon Navarro. I remember."

"No good low-life. Just like his father, Santino." There was plenty of venom in the remark.

"Do you remember what happened to Ramon?"

"I do. He died an ugly death," he answered.

"Did you kill him, Mr. Cortez?"

He was quiet for a minute, and then he shook his head. "No. I wanted to, but my father talked me out of it."

"Who did?"

At that moment he looked at Alma again, and the man I'd met the other day returned. "Alma, sweetie. How are you? And is this little Lonnie? He's all grown up." He looked at me. "Simon. Can't remember your first name."

"Rick."

"That's right. You come back to pick what's left of my poor brain again?" The tone had changed completely. He was the sweet old man.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, pick away, young man."

"Do you remember who killed Ramon Navarro?"

"Of course I do."

"Who was it, Mr. Cortez?"

And then in a voice as clear as day, he announced, "Cock Robin. It was Cock Robin."

My face must have fallen half a mile. "Cock Robin?" I asked him. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. Absolutely positive."

I looked at Alma, but she did nothing but smile at me. I wondered for a moment if she'd lost her mind, too, and she kept right on smiling. The three members of the Cortez family chatted; I grabbed my briefcase and walked back down the hall, then went outside. I would have given anything for a cigarette right about then. I saw Gerald and the Rolls across the parking lot and walked over to the car.

"You look like you could use a drink, sir."

I didn't bother to correct him. "I could, but it's only ten o'clock in the morning."

"I can make you a Bloody Mary if you'd like."

"I'd like very much, Gerald. Extra spicy."

"No problem, Rick." In less than five minutes I had a drink in my hands, and a substitute for the cigarette I really wanted. It was another fifteen or twenty minutes before I saw Alma, and I hurried to open the car door for her and junior.

"Did you have to come out and get a drink?" she asked, laughing.

"I couldn't find a cigarette."

"Something wrong?"

"Cock Robin?" was my question back to her.

"You left before I could explain it to you." She was still laughing.

"I don't think you can."

"Go on, Mom, tell him," Lonnie interjected.

"Okay, I'll bite. Tell me what?" I wasn't expecting the answer I got.

"Cock Robin was Uncle Carlos's pet name for his older brother, Eduardo."

"You mean . . . ?" I started, before Mrs. Cortez interrupted me.

Her tone was now serious. "That's right. Cock Robin was Eduardo Cortez."

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 11 – Ramon Luis Navarro

“But if Carlos’s father talked him out of killing Navarro, why didn't he do the same with Eduardo?”

“Eduardo was wild; he did what he wanted and didn’t answer to anybody, even his father. The only one he seemed to have any affection for was Carlos.”

“Do you know what Santino did?”

“Sort of; Mateo had a history of the Cortez family written. It’s in my office. He asked me not to read it, said it was too brutal. Do you want to see it when we get home?”

“Most definitely.”

Junior spoke up. “It is too brutal.”

“You’ve read it?” Alma asked, aghast.

“Last year. I’d heard all sorts of rumors about the family, and I wanted to know the truth.”

“What happened to Eduardo?” I asked.

“He died almost ten years ago,” Lonnie answered.

“How?” I questioned.

“Heart attack.”

We were still in the limo and I was glad I was sitting down. After I was sure we’d reached a dead-end, trusting an old man’s memory, I’d been almost blown out of the water with the amount of information I’d received in the last twenty minutes. Now I had to read the Cortez family history and check with Robin to see if she’d found any information on Santiago Navarro. And just to be safe, on Nicolás and Valentina. I pulled out the dreaded cell phone and called the office. “Simon Private Investigations,” she purred into the phone.

“When did you start answering the phone that way?” I asked.

“Last Monday. Are you mad?”

“Nope, just surprised. I guess it had to happen sometime. Talk to me about Santiago Navarro.”

“I’d love to, but the only thing I can tell you is I can’t find him.”

“What about Nicolás and Valentina?”

“Them I have information on. Are you coming by the office?”

"I wasn't going to, but I guess I should. I'll be there in about," I checked my watch, "forty-five minutes. Don't eat lunch."

"Why?"

"Because I'm taking you to lunch." I wasn't hungry, but I could stand a quesadilla and another Bloody Mary.

"Who is this really?"

"Your sorry-assed boss. I don't want to drink by myself."

"I knew there had to be a reason."

"Alright, I'll be on my way soon."

"Drive carefully, Rick."

"I've already wrecked a car this week. One per week, that's my limit."

"I'll be waiting."

We'd just arrived back at the mansion and I hopped out of the car. Gerald assisted Alma and then came back down the steps with my keys in his hand. "Let me take the Rolls back to the garage and I'll bring your car back."

I almost laughed. I don't think Gerald could bring himself to say, "Toyota."

"Sure." He was back in less than five minutes and he left the motor running. "Thanks, Gerald. Tell Alma I'll be back in a couple of hours."

He nodded and started up the stairs. I put the RAV4 in gear and took off, towards my office.

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Robin was true to her word. She came out the front door and locked it behind her, then got in my car. She looked particularly nice today, and I told her so. "Stop, stop, I can't stand any more of the new Rick Simon."

"Better get used to it. I'm tired of being a curmudgeon."

"You weren't a curmudgeon. You were just . . . edgy."

"Yeah, an edgy curmudgeon."

Robin burst out laughing. "Where are you taking me?"

"El Torito. Can you stand that?"

"Sure I can. You know I love their salad and quesadilla combo."

I didn't tell her it was Eddie who remembered things like that. "Did you bring the data on the Navarro's?"

We were stopped at a light and she handed me two pieces of paper, folded in half. I slipped them inside my coat, where they'd be safe until I could get them back to the mansion. "And nothing on Santiago?"

"Nothing since he was seventeen years old."

"What was there before that?"

"Petty things. Shoplifting, joy riding, assault, possession of Marijuana. That kind of petty thing."

"And there were no arrests or convictions since then?" I pressed her.

"Not a one. I couldn't find anything about him at all. He seems to have fallen off the face of the earth."

"But no report of death?"

Robin shook her head and her long blonde hair swung back and forth. "Nope, not unless he was buried without notifying anybody."

"Very interesting."

"Thank you, Artie Johnson."

"You've been watching reruns of Laugh-In, haven't you?" She was addicted to those programs.

She blushed and didn't answer just as I pulled into the parking lot at El Torito. I went around to open her door and, as I reached for the handle, I heard a single gunshot. A piece of concrete flew up and hit me in the cheek. "Stay down," I ordered. Now, there are a lot of criminals mad at me for one thing or another, but there's only one that's threatened to kill me. Billy Flatbush. I hadn't seen anyone following us, so I have no idea where he came from. I pulled my gun and shot in the direction I thought the bullet had come from, but there was no returning fire. There was, however, a siren. *Here we go again.*

It took almost two hours to get everything straightened out. Every time I had to use my gun it took forever to convince the police who I was, that I had a concealed carry permit, and that I'd been shot at. While we were waiting for my identity to be verified I could feel something wet running down my cheek. "Give me your handkerchief," Robin ordered, and proceeded to wipe blood off my face.

At last I heard the magic words. "Alright, Simon, we're done here." I took Robin's arm and guided her inside the restaurant.

"Two for lunch?" the hostess asked.

"Yes," Robin and I said at the same time. Once we were seated I asked, "Are you alright?"

"Sure, I watch you get shot at every day. No, I'm not. Do you think it was Flatbush?"

I nodded and wiped more blood from my cheek. "Who else? What do you want to drink?"

"A Marguerite."

When the waitress came I ordered a Marguerite and a Bloody Mary, spicy. When the drinks arrived, Robin ordered the salad and quesadilla combo. "Make it two," I told the waitress. Then I took my cell phone out of my jacket and called Alma. "I've had some trouble but everything's fine. I'll be longer than I thought. Sure."

"Checking in with Mommy?" Robin asked me.

"Just letting the client know when I'll be back."

"I sure wish you were staying at your apartment. You're easier to keep track of."

"Sorry. This is a necessity; you know that," I reminded her.

"I just . . . I'm lonely, in the office by myself."

"I wish I could be there to keep you company."

"It'll be better when you get a new partner."

That stopped me in my tracks. A new partner – I hadn't thought about getting a new partner; I already had a partner. I might find somebody else to work with, but I didn't think I'd ever have another partner. Robin must have seen something in my face, because she tried desperately to do some backpedaling. "I mean when we get somebody else in the office."

Lunch came and I buried myself in it, saving my companion any further embarrassment. I knew she hadn't meant anything by the remark, and she was right – I was gonna need somebody else to work with. I had no idea how to find that person, but I guess I'd figure it out when the time came. But now wasn't the time, any more than it was the time to sit down and have the talk I'd been promising Robin. I had a psycho trying to kill me and junior, and I needed to figure out who had hired him. If I was really lucky I might be able to persuade them to call him off.

We ate in relative silence, Robin chattering on about everything going on at the office – none of which I needed to know. When we were finished I paid the check and we walked to the door. "You stay here and I'll bring the car." I ran outside, retrieved the car, and then drove it up to the restaurant's front door to pick up Robin. There was no sign of Flatbush. Still, I breathed easier when she was strapped into her seat.

I let her out at the door to the office and waited until she was inside before I parked the car. I sprinted to the front door and got inside without further incident. "I'm going to call Benny," I announced before I went to my office.

I was in luck, Benny answered on the third ring. "Benny, it's Rick. Have you had any luck locating Santiago Navarro?"

"Not a bit, Rick. As far as the world is concerned, the man doesn't even exist."

"Damn," I said under my breath. "Okay, call me right away if you hear anything."

"Will do, Rick."

Everything I discovered led me to a dead end. A man doesn't just fall off the face of the earth after he turns eighteen. My computer was at the Cortez house, so I went into Eddie's office to borrow his. It was dark in there, even with the light on, and I opened the blinds to let in some sunlight. The office looked just like it had when Eddie left it the night he died. I shook my head to clear out the cobwebs and found his computer on his desk. I picked it up and took it with me, leaving the blinds open.

I knew all his passwords, so I had it opened and functioning in just a minute. Then I started prowling around all the places I might find somebody that didn't want to be found. No luck. Robin was right; Santiago really had vanished. I still had one more card to play. I called Bankers Trust and asked to speak to the President. When his secretary tried to get rid of me, I said the magic words. "Tell him it's about his brother Santiago and the Cortez family." In something under a minute I was speaking to Ramon Luis Navarro.

"Who is this?" he asked impatiently.

"My name's Rick Simon, Mr. Navarro. I was hired by Mrs. Alma Cortez to protect her youngest son from an assassin named Billy Flatbush."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"I believe the assassin was hired by your brother, Santiago." It was a longshot, I will admit that, but it was a risk worth taking. There was a long moment of silence on the other end before anything more was said.

"What do you want from me?" Navarro asked.

"I want a meeting with you, and I want to talk about Santiago and Santino. How about ten o'clock tomorrow, in your office?"

"Fine," he said at last, and hung up on the call.

Now I had to hurry back to the mansion and spend another night reading.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 12 – Punctured Balloons

“What happened to your cheek?” was the first thing Alma asked me when I got back to the mansion.

“I was hit by shrapnel,” I told her.

“Do you want me to put something on it?”

“No, ma’am. Can I see the book Mateo had written about your family?”

“Certainly. Are you alright?”

“I am. I’ve got a meeting tomorrow at ten with the bank president. To talk to him about his missing brother, Santiago.” I took the book she handed me. Thank God it wasn’t that thick. “I’m going upstairs to read this. If I finish it I’ll be back later.”

I ran up the stairs and settled in on my bed. It didn’t take long to find out what had happened to Ramon Navarro, Senior. He was run through with a pitchfork, and before he died, he was decapitated. Supposedly this was payback for something even more horrible that Santino Navarro had done when he was trying to run the Cortez family out of the bootlegging business. There was no hint of what Santino’s crime was, only that the Cortez family was devastated by it.

Eduardo Cortez was named as the murderer, but he was never arrested and charged. I read another hundred pages but discovered nothing further that I could use tomorrow. There were so many Navarro’s and Cortez’s in the book that I was having a hard time keeping track of them. I looked at my watch. It was seven o’clock and I was suddenly hungry. I got up and went downstairs to find that Alma and junior had just sat down to dinner. Alma smiled at me and told me, “You’re just in time. We set a place for you in case.”

We ate in relative peace, then Alma and I took our coffee into the living room. Junior went back upstairs, and I wondered if he always spent this much time in his room. Once we were seated I began to explain what happened today. “The bullet went astray and caught a piece of the parking lot. That’s what got me in the face.”

“And then the police showed up,” Alma remarked. “Too late to do anything about it.”

“Like they always do,” I added. That wasn’t quite true, but close enough.

“What now?” she asked. “The meeting with Ramon Luis?”

“Exactly. I’m going to confront him with the fact that Eduardo Cortez murdered Ramon Navarro, Sr., Luis’s grandfather, and that he was never brought to justice by the police. Then I have the information that his brother, Santiago, disappeared after he turned eighteen and hasn’t been heard from since. Santiago is probably responsible for hiring the assassin. With any luck I can get Luis to call his brother off. If he won’t, I’ll go to the police with the information.”

"But you don't have any proof for any of that. It's all conjecture."

"Luis doesn't know that. I'm sure I can make a convincing case against Santiago."

Alma looked at me, skeptically. "Do you really think that will work?"

"I don't know, but it's the best chance I've got."

"I guess all I can do is wish you luck," she told me.

"Thanks. I'll take it."

XXXXXXXX

I was up early the next day and listened to part of my stomach grumbling for food while the rest of it just churned in ways I didn't want it to. I did my usual morning routine, but I wore the suit and tie I'd brought with me when I got dressed. I grabbed my briefcase and went downstairs. Alma was sitting at the dining room table drinking coffee and looking glum. I sat down and poured myself a cup.

"Breakfast?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I don't think my insides would take anything else this morning."

When Minnie came in to see what we wanted, Alma just shook her head. I guess her stomach was doing the same kind of flip-flops mine was doing. "What time is your appointment?"

"Ten o'clock."

"How long do you think you'll be there?"

"I have no idea," I told her. "I guess it depends on how hard it is to convince Luis of his brother's guilt."

"I want you to drive the Cadillac this morning."

"Why?" I was curious.

"I want him to know you're successful and not some slimy investigator looking to make a fast buck."

"Right now I don't care what he thinks of me, as long as he believes me."

It must have been important to her, because she asked me pleadingly, "Please."

"Alright, if it means that much to you."

Gerald came by and filled both our coffee cups before I could get to it. I looked up at the tall, graying butler and told him, "Thank you." He nodded back at me. We sat there for another thirty minutes, drinking coffee and talking before junior came downstairs. He looked at the empty table and went straight to the kitchen. When he returned he had a plateful of scrambled eggs and biscuits.

"You'll love this," he told me. "The test on Monday's been postponed."

"Really? That's a shame," and I gave him my best sorrowful look.

"Yeah, I thought you'd enjoy that."

I looked at my watch. Time to go. "Gerald, could you bring the Cadillac around?" I asked.

He nodded and disappeared. I finished my coffee and stood up. "I'll hold a good thought," Alma said.

"You do that." I touched her on the shoulder as I went past her, and she reached up and squeezed my hand.

Gerald got out of the Cadillac and left the motor running. "Good luck, sir," he told me, and I gave him the thumbs up.

It was nine forty-five as I pulled into the Bankers Trust parking lot. I rode the elevator up to the ninth floor and almost immediately came face-to-face with Navarro's secretary. "I'm here to see Mr. Navarro," I told her.

"I'm sorry, he's not seeing anyone today."

I handed her my business card. "He'll see me."

She was gone four or five minutes, and I thought I'd been abandoned. The door to his office was massive and heavy looking. I wasn't excited by the thought of trying to force my way inside. Finally she came out of Navarro's office. "Come in, please." I went through the door and made sure it closed behind me.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't what I got. Navarro was short and on the chubby side; he looked like he ate too much of his wife's cooking. Dark brown hair, almost black, and dark steely looking eyes. "Me. Navarro, I'm Rick Simon. We spoke briefly yesterday." I offered my hand to shake and he ignored me.

"I know who you are. What is it you want?"

"I want to talk to you about the murder of your grandfather, and the vendetta someone has been carrying out against the Cortez family."

"Yes, they have been rather cruelly decimated, haven't they? What does that have to do with me?"

"The youngest of the family, twenty-year-old Lonnie, is being stalked by an assassin named Billy Flatbush," I paused to see what he'd have to say next.

"And?"

"And you have an older brother named Santiago who was in trouble when he was a teenager. He hasn't been seen or heard from since he was eighteen. We believe he's the man that contracted the assassin to murder all the Cortez children. I'm here to convince you to contact him and put a halt to the vendetta."

We sat there for almost five minutes while Navarro studied me. Finally he looked right at me and told me, “We have nothing to talk about, Mr. Simon. I suggest you leave.”

“Mr. Navarro . . . ”

“That’s final, Simon. Get out.”

I threw the last card at him I had. “If you won’t help me I’ll have to take this information to the police.”

With one little sentence, Navarro stuck a pin in every balloon I had. “I couldn’t talk to Santiago if I wanted to. He was killed when he was eighteen.”

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 13 – Late Night

I drove back to the mansion and parked the Cadillac out front. I couldn't go in the house after the build-up I'd given my confrontation with Navarro. I was still sitting in the car when Gerald came out to see what was going on. "Is everything alright, Rick?"

"No, Gerald. Nothing is alright." I dragged myself out of the Caddy and trudged up the steps. I tried to sneak upstairs until I could figure out where I'd gone wrong but Alma was in the living room and she called to me. I forced myself to join her and collapsed into a chair.

"You weren't gone long. How did everything go?" I sat and didn't make a sound. "Rick? Hello, are you there? Rick, what's wrong?"

"Everything," I answered. "Everything I've been thinking, all the Navarro's and Cortez's I've been chasing, it's all wrong."

"What happened?"

"Santiago Navarro is dead."

"What?!" she cried.

"Dead," I repeated. "I don't know where I went wrong, but I sure as hell did."

"Where do you go now?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I searched for the right words, hoping that I wouldn't leave Alma wondering why she'd hired me. Right now I wasn't doing any better than the police. "I have to go back to the beginning and start over. I missed a step somewhere."

We sat there while I did my best to get my shit together. After a few minutes I was ready to begin again, but I couldn't do it here. Too many distractions. "Gerald, please bring my car around." I looked over at Alma. "I'm going back to the office. I'll be in touch." I got up and headed for the front door. Gerald had put the Caddy away and brought my little RAV4 around. "Thanks," I told him as I passed him on the stairs. In just a minute the Toyota was headed toward the office.

I tried to go over the facts while I drove, but I couldn't keep things straight. I needed Eddie in the worst way. I saw things nobody else did, but Eddie put them in logical order. I was hoping Robin could help. When I got to the office I parked and went inside. Robin was just hanging up on a phone call. I tried my new approach. "Hi, how are you?"

"I'm fine. What do you want?" She saw right through my new approach.

"I need your help."

“What kind of help?”

“I’ve run into a brick wall and I’ve got to start over. There’s something I’ve missed, something I’m not seeing, and I need somebody to point me in the right direction.”

She stared at me for about ten seconds before she shook her head. “I’m not the right person. But I know who is.”

“Who? And don’t say Eddie.”

“Sean,” she said firmly.

“Sean? Who’s Sean?” I asked, totally confused.

“Sean Donahue, silly.” Like I was supposed to know that.

“I don’t even know him, Robin. Why would he want to help me?”

“Because he was Eddie’s friend, just like you were, and he wants to know what happened as much as you do. And the police aren’t doing a damn thing about any of it.”

I thought about it for about a minute. “Would you call him for me?”

She nodded and I almost kissed her. I hoped he would say yes – he might be a cop, but he was a bright cop. And I could use that right now.

I walked into my office and sat down at my desk. Eddie’s computer was still sitting there. I booted it up and started looking for Billy Flatbush. I hadn’t gotten very far before Robin came in. “He’ll be here when he gets off at three.”

“Thank you,” I told her. She looked at me, skeptically. “What? I really mean that. Thank you.”

“Is there anything I can help with?”

It wouldn’t hurt for me to run everything past her, and it might help. “Have you got time to sit down and listen?”

“I do,” she answered and gave me her brightest smile.

“Alright. It started . . .” and for the next hour I told her everything I could think of, including the visits to Uncle Carlos, the attempts on junior’s life, a brief history of the Cortez family, a brief history of the Navarro family, and why Eddie was with Sergeant Cortez on the night they were killed. Then I explained everything about Alma and Gerald, the mansion and its history, and the big surprise Ramon Luis handed me just that morning. When I finished, Robin was staring out my window. “Any thoughts?” I asked.

“Where do you start?” she asked me quietly.

“First I thing I have to figure out is how Eddie and Juan got killed. Not blown up in a failed raid on a drug den . . . I know that’s what happened. But I need to know just who was responsible – Colin Murphy or Billy Flatbush.”

“I can give you an answer about that,” a male voice responded. I looked up from Robin to the man standing in the doorway. I almost didn’t recognize him. Sean Donahue looked a lot different out of uniform. He wore jeans and a polo shirt, and his gun was in a holster on his belt . . . just the way I wore mine. If I didn’t know better I never would have taken him for a cop.

“What do you know that I don’t?” I asked as I waved him to a chair.

“It was a hit, alright, but it was Colin Murphy that blew everything up, not Billy Flatbush. Every once in a while the force does something right, whether they mean to or not. Murphy got stopped for a busted taillight, and by the time they were finished with him he’d confessed. He was after the Sarge – as far as he was concerned, Eddie was only a happy accident.”

“Happy accident my ass,” I spit out.

“I’m just telling you what Murphy said. If I had my way, I’d put my hands around his throat and choke the life out of him. But that’s not the way the police operate.”

I was beginning to like Donahue. “You sound just like Eddie and I did when we quit the FBI.”

“We talked about that. We had a lot of things in common.” That seemed to be as far as he was going to go.

“Did you know Santiago Navarro was killed at eighteen?” I asked him.

“I heard that. Him and an unknown party were drag racing on Sunset, and Santiago crashed and burned.”

“I thought he was behind Flatbush. Shows you just how wrong I can be,” I was curious to see what Donahue would answer.

“Eddie used to tell me about the things you saw that nobody else did. The little stuff that would crack a case wide open. I was amazed at some of the items you pointed out to him.”

I nodded. “Yeah, but he’d take what I saw and string it all together. That’s what I’m missing now.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you have, and maybe I can see where you made the wrong turn?”

“Alright, I’ll tell you what I told Robin. It started . . . “ and I went through everything with Sean that I’d told Robin. When I was finished he gave me two or three ideas, things that I’d missed. He wasn’t Eddie, but it was sure better than beating my head against a wall. Somewhere during that long afternoon I concluded that Sean Donahue was alright.

I drove back to the mansion, running some of the things Sean had pointed out through my head, and I began to have an idea. I was going to have to do some quiet digging, but at least I was looking in a different direction.

Alma was waiting for me in the living room. "You left so suddenly. Is everything alright? Did you find something out?"

"Let's just say I have some ideas. I have to investigate before I say anything." She probably wasn't satisfied with that answer, but it was the only one I was willing to give her. I turned around and headed upstairs. I had a lot of computer work to do before I could go any further.

By dinnertime I'd set some wheels in motion. I'd requested a lot of information from several different banks, I'd probed Alma's lawyer Fred Walton's files, and I did a deep dive into Alma's family history. That was enough for this afternoon, and I went back downstairs to have dinner with my employer. I felt lighter, somehow, because I knew that Billy Flatbush hadn't killed Eddie. The drive to murder the murderer was no longer there, and I just wanted to catch him and put him in prison forever for the hurt he'd already caused. Alma didn't have much to say but she didn't seem upset; junior had eaten earlier and his mother and I had a pleasant meal. "Will you join me in the living room for coffee, or do you have more work to do?" Alma questioned me.

"Coffee in the living room sounds good," I told her, and Gerald followed us with a silver tray holding the coffee pot and two cups. He poured and gave one to Alma and one to me.

"You seem calmer than you did before."

I took a swallow of coffee before I answered her. "I am. I found out that Flatbush didn't kill my partner."

"Oh? What happened?"

"It was the drug dealer, Colin Murphy. He was after Sergeant Cortez, and Eddie was there at the wrong time."

"That must ease your mind somewhat," she almost sounded disappointed.

"It does, since I know Murphy's in prison. They're gonna try him for first-degree and second-degree murder. Don't worry; he's already admitted what he's done. He'll never see the outside world again. At least you can have some peace about Juan's death."

"Thank you for telling me. It didn't make any sense to me – why someone would be after my children and Juan, too. Unless it was some crackpot that thought because they all had the same last name . . ."

"I'm sorry about Juan. He was a good cop." I meant it, too. Juan Cortez was a straight shooter, and he never shared any information that he shouldn't have shared. I was sure the police would have promoted Donahue to Lieutenant after Juan died, but for some reason they didn't. Maybe that was the motivation for Donahue's disgruntled sounding remarks to me earlier about the police. And maybe I had just imagined things.

"He loved being a police officer," Alma explained. "Ever since he was a little boy that's the only thing he wanted to be."

"Tell me more about Juan."

We sat there for about thirty minutes while Alma filled me in on Sergeant Juan Cortez's life. It was a real shame that Murphy was such a sleaze. Juan and Eddie should both be alive.

"I need something to cheer me up," Alma told me. "How about we go see a comedy?"

"Got any films in mind?" I asked her.

"Yes. Late Night with Emma Thompson."

"Sounds good to me." I offered her my arm. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, sir." And she finally smiled at me.

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 14 – Dragons and Bourbon

The next morning at breakfast was nothing unusual. It was too soon for me to get any information back from my inquiries yesterday, so I decided to go to the office. “I’m going out for a while. Call me if anything unusual happens,” I told Alma. Then I turned to Gerald. “Do you have the keys for the Toyota?”

“I can go get it for you,” he told me.

“No need. I’ll get it myself.” I took the keys from him and went out through the front door. It took less than five minutes to walk back to the garage and retrieve the RAV4. I sure did miss my Mustang. I wondered if she’d ever be the same.

Less than an hour later (not bad for morning traffic) I was at the office. I parked in front and walked in, a smile on my face. “Good morning, Robin,” I told her cheerily as I came through the door.

She eyed me warily and muttered, “Hello.” I went straight to my office and her eyes followed me all the way in. I looked at the expense reports and wrote us both checks, then set those aside and proceeded to pay the bills that had piled up on my desk. Telephone, electric, cell phones, internet, rent and Robin’s salary. I tacked a one-hundred-dollar bonus on to her check, for having to sit here by herself and man the fort ever since I’d taken the Cortez job. Then I put them all in their envelopes, made sure they were addressed properly, and put the return address on them. I put Robin’s expense check and salary in a white envelope and took the whole pile out to get stamps. “Robin, do you have . . . “

“Stamps?” she finished. “Sure.” I handed her the envelope with her checks and she started to put it away.

“I think you better check that and make sure it’s right,” I told her.

She looked kind of disgruntled and pulled the envelope back out. Two minutes later she was asking me, “What’s that for?”

“That’s a bonus for having to be here all alone since I took this last job. Thank you for handling everything so beautifully.”

She broke into a big smirk. “Who are you?” she asked me.

“I’m the edgy curmudgeon, remember?”

I’d almost left her speechless. Finally she mumbled, “Thank you,” and put stamps on all the bills.

“Are you busy this morning?”

She shook her head. “No, not really.”

“Can you help me clean out Eddie’s office?”

“Are you sure?” she asked quickly.

“I’m sure,” was my just as swift reply.

I opened the door for her and she flipped on the lights. The blinds were still open from the last time I’d been in there. I noticed something I hadn’t noticed before – the room smelled like Eddie. “Do you have any boxes?”

“In the storage room. I’ll get them,” she explained, and disappeared back out the door. I sat down at Eddie’s desk and opened the middle drawer. I was immediately hit in the face by all the little knick-knacks and souvenirs Eddie kept. His FBI badge, a pack of chewing gum, his lighter (Eddie still smoked on occasion), spare business cards, and a note from his mother, written on the first day of Simon and Winchester, LLC I read the note and shook my head. It sounded exactly like Mrs. Winchester.

Tucked way back in the corner of the drawer was a picture of the two of us, taken our senior year in high school. Were we ever really that young? I shook my head and looked up with tears in my eyes as Robin came back with two boxes. “You still want to pack it up?”

“Yes, I do. It’s time. Eddie would be poking fun at us for not doing it any sooner.”

Robin laughed then, a full, deep-throated laugh. “Yes, he would.” She handed me a box and I put everything but the high school picture inside. There were some pencils and pens, but I left them in the drawer. On to the next drawer, the first on the left.

Note pads, scribbled notes, staples and a stapler, and an unopened box of Milk Duds. God only knew how long those had been in there. I threw the Milk Duds away and put everything else in the box. It was more of the same in the other two drawers, just things that you didn’t need right now but found too good to throw out. In the very bottom drawer was a framed picture of Eddie and Cynthia, the girl he was going to marry. Somewhere along the line she’d decided what Eddie did for a living was too dangerous, and she’d broken the engagement. She was at the funeral, with her new husband. She looked despondent.

Then I was left with what was on the desk. An ashtray, a cup warmer, a picture of the three of us at our first office. A framed replica of his P.I.’s license. A miniature dragon that Robin had given him. Eddie loved dragons; he said they reminded him of everything he wanted to be. Strong, independent, the ability to fly at a moment’s notice, and fire-breathing when they had to be. I set the dragon aside with the high school picture. They were both coming to live with me in the office next door.

Robin had started packing the second box. She’d taken his college diploma from the wall, his acceptance letter into the FBI, a photo of his mother and father, both gone now. A letter of commendation he’d gotten from the FBI when he saved my life from a mad-man that was engaged in a killing spree. A paint by number oil painting he’d done as a kid that was better than what most adults produced. His umbrella that still hung hopefully on his coat rack, waiting for that one longest night of rain that we hadn’t seen in months and years. That’s all that was left of my best friend. All his personal effects had been destroyed in the explosion that destroyed him, too.

Robin sat down in a chair and we both looked around the room. Not much to show for a lifetime of memories. Finally our eyes locked and I could see the tears running down her face. "It's not fair!" she cried. "It's just not fair."

"That's the hell of it, Robin. Nobody ever said it would be."

We sat there for a while before she asked, "Is Lolly going to clean out his apartment?" Lolly was Eddie's older sister.

"She's been working on it. I talked to her two days ago. Once she gets everything out that she wants, she's gonna meet us there, to see if there's anything left that we want."

"Oh, God, I can't do that," Robin protested.

"Yes, you can," I told her. "If there's something you want and you don't go get it, you'll never forgive yourself."

"I know, you're right. It just seems so . . . final."

"It is, honey. Eddie's dead. He's not coming back." I stood up from behind the desk and in seconds I had Robin in my arms, crying for all she was worth.

"I . . . I loved . . . him. I loved him, Rick."

"I know, baby, I loved him too."

She shook her head, vehemently. "No. I loved him."

It took me a minute to catch on. "Did he know?" I asked her tenderly.

"I don't know. I told him once, but I don't know if he believed me."

I wrapped her in my arms and rocked her back and forth until I didn't hear any more sobs from her. At last I understood why this had been so hard on her. She loved my partner, and now he was gone. "I'll do everything I can to help," I promised her.

"I know you will. I just, I just couldn't tell you before."

"Come with me," I told her, taking her by the hand and leading her back into my office. I sat her down and gave her my handkerchief, which she made good use of. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Do you still have that bottle of bourbon?"

"I do. Would you like a drink?"

"Please."

I left her in the chair and went back to my desk, bottom drawer right. I pulled out the bourbon and a glass and poured her some. "You want some water?"

She shook her head. "No." She took the glass and drank until it was gone.

"Again?" I asked.

"No. That was enough. Thank you."

I sat and watched her for a few minutes. "Are you alright now?"

She cleared her throat and sat up straight. "Yes. I'm fine." She was far from fine, but at least she wasn't crying anymore.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't know."

"That's the way I wanted it."

"You keep a good secret," I told her.

She chuckled a little. "Just remember that, in case."

"Can I change the subject for a minute?"

Robin nodded. "Please."

"Tell me what you know about Donahue."

"He's thirty five, single, has a nice laugh, and is always friendly and smiling. Everybody that works with him likes him, but for some reason the brass has it in for him. He's been passed over for promotion twice."

"And he hasn't ever told you why he was passed over?"

Robin had a sad little smile on her face. "No, he hasn't ever told me. He's just like Eddie . . . he only tells you what he has to. Why are you asking?"

"Just curious. I haven't ever really gotten to know him."

Before I could say anymore my cell phone rang. "Simon."

"Rick, it's Alma. Lonnie insists he's going out."

"Keep him there, Alma. I'll be back as soon as I can get there." I hung up and turned back to Robin. "Will you be okay if I leave?"

"Go. The client pays the bills."

I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks. I'll come back later if I can."

I ran outside and got in the RAV4, then cranked her up all the way. In twenty minutes I was running up the steps to the mansion. "Is he still here?"

Junior came out of the living room. "Yes, she made me wait until you got back. Like I'm some five-year-old or something."

I glared at him and shook my head. "You don't ever learn, do you, junior?" I thought he'd be fine, but I wasn't about to let him go, just in case. "What's so important that you have to go out?"

"They've scheduled a pop quiz for English Lit and I haven't read the latest chapter. The books in my locker at U.S.C."

I held the door open for him. "Let's go then."

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 15 – Buyer’s Remorse

I drove the RAV4 to U.S.C. in silence. We parked in the student parking lot and I followed Lonnie in to the hall where his locker was located. He opened and took out his English Literature book, then closed and locked the locker. We went back down the hall and across the lot to where we’d left the Toyota. Lonnie got in the passenger side and I got behind the wheel, then we were underway.

In just a few minutes we were back at the mansion and headed up the steps. I heard the click before I saw anything and tackled the last of the Cortez children as the gun went off. The bullet hit one step behind us, and I rushed junior into the house. “I heard a gunshot!” Alma exclaimed.

“Flatbush missed us,” I told her, and it got me to thinking. Billy Flatbush was an expert marksman. Yet he’d missed either Lonnie or myself four times. There were two possible explanations – the man shooting at us wasn’t Billy Flatbush, or missing us was deliberate.

I went upstairs to see if I’d gotten any of the information I’d requested. All of the banking data was there, as well as a copy of Alma Cortez’s will. Now I had to sit down and read over everything. If I was lucky it would only take the afternoon. I started with the bank statements first.

There was enough data there to make me believe that this time I was on the right track. Once I’d gone through Alma’s will I knew I was. I was just about to put everything away when I heard a commotion downstairs – raised voices, doors slamming, objects breaking as they hit the floor, and finally a gunshot. I grabbed my gun and stuck it in the back of my waistband, and slipped out of my room carefully. Junior’s door was open, and he wasn’t in there. I snuck out to the stairs and tried to peak down, but all I could see was Gerald standing there with his hands high in the air.

Finally I heard him – that voice I’d know anywhere. “Alright Simon, I know you can hear me. Unless you want to see all three of these people dead, get down here now.” It was Billy Flatbush. I walked down the stairs as casually as I could, and when I was about halfway down I got a complete picture. As I said before, Gerald was standing almost dead center in the vestibule with his hands in the air. Alma was leaning against the living room doorway, and I could see a trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth down her chin. Junior was standing behind her. They must have both been in the living room and he followed his mother out. Flatbush was in the corner behind the front door; he had a handgun in his right hand and a rifle leaning up against the door.

“How did you get in here?” I asked. “Don’t you know they have pest control in this house?”

“You’re not in the least bit funny. You know that, don’t you?”

“What is it you want, Flatbush? Or should I tell you how this is going to go?”

“First of all, I want you dead,” he all but growled at me. “You’ve been making life tough for me, and I’m through with that.”

"So kill me," I replied. "But I don't think that's all you want."

"No, it's not, smart guy. What else do I want?"

"I think you want to finish the job you were hired to do. Let's see, how much did you get paid to take care of the Cortez family? Half a million up front and the rest when Lonnie got his money from the estate?"

I heard Alma gasp. Lonnie never made a sound, but I noticed he'd stepped out from behind his mother.

"Rick, what are you saying?"

"I'm sorry, Alma, but the reason that Lonnie escaped being hit each time he was shot at is very simple – he wasn't the target. But it had to look like he was. The way you had your will drawn up, if all four children were alive when you died, they each got one-fourth of the estate. If there were only three alive, they got one-third. Two alive left them with half each, and if there was only a single survivor, he or she got it all. You're a bright lady, I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this."

"Oh no, Rick, it can't be. You have to be wrong. Lonnie, tell him he's wrong."

Lonnie walked over and picked up the rifle. "Sorry, Mom, your private investigator got it right." He aimed the rifle at his mother, but turned his head to address me. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to figure it out. We laid a neat little trail for you, and you followed it so well. I don't know what tipped you off, but it's nice to know you weren't as dumb as I thought you were."

"Somebody hinted that I might want to check your bank account. It was easy to follow you from there." Donahue had given me the idea. If I got out of this alive I had a proposal to run past him.

Alma stared at her only remaining child in horror. "You paid . . . you paid to have your brothers and sister killed? What kind of a monster are you?"

Lonnie smirked. "I guess I take after Uncle Eduardo."

"Well, let's stop all the chit-chat and get this show on the road, shall we? You, butler, get over here by the lady of the house."

"Where do you want me to go?" I asked Flatbush.

"You stay right where you are. I'm going to enjoy filling you full of lead." He looked at Gerald, who hadn't moved. "Hey, butler, get over here I said."

Gerald had to walk in front of me to get where Billy wanted him. I had about half a second when Flatbush couldn't see me, and that's when I made my move. I reached behind and pulled my gun, and before anybody could say "Boo" I put three bullets in the hitman. His gun fired as he went down, knicking Gerald in the right shoulder and me in the left arm. Billy looked surprised as he fell. Lonnie was terrified and threw down the rifle. I glanced over at Alma and there was nothing but hatred in her eyes. I almost shot him; then reasoning took over and I didn't think he was worth it.

I bent down to examine Gerald's shoulder and I heard a soft thud from Alma's direction. Madame had fainted. "You alright, Gerald?" I asked as I pulled out my cell phone and dialed 9-1-1. He nodded and then I had emergency on the line. "Yes, I need the police and an ambulance at 763 Mockingbird Lane. And the coroner. Send Sergeant Donahue if he's on patrol, would you? And please hurry. There are people here bleeding." Then I hung up. I know they hate that, but I didn't have time to blather on about what happened when the police would ask me the same questions when they got here.

I made my way over to Alma, lying on the floor. I tried not to drip blood all over her, but it was almost impossible not to. I patted her cheeks and called to her, and she was just starting to come around as the EMT's and the cops got there. Gerald got taken to one ambulance and I got taken to another; as soon as they'd cleaned my wound and wrapped it I declined further medical treatment. I went over to see how Gerald was doing and all he could say was, "It hurts, doesn't it?"

"It does," I told him, "but you're the hero, bud. If you hadn't walked past me, we'd probably all be dead by now." That got a smile out of him.

"Take care of Madame, please."

"I will," I promised, and went back in the house. Lonnie was sitting on the floor, handcuffed. His mother was laid out on the couch, a doctor bending over her. Donahue was coming my way. "You were right," I told him. "The evidence was all in the bank account."

He beamed at me for about ten seconds and then got all stern and official. "Tell me what happened." So I did. He recorded my statement and then switched the machine off. "Congratulations on taking care of Flatbush. That's one s.o.b. that got exactly what he deserved."

"He was gonna kill us all, Sean. I really didn't have any choice in the matter."

Sergeant Donahue grabbed junior by the handcuffs and pulled him to his feet. "Good job, Rick," he whispered to me as he walked past. Then he started reciting Lonnie's Miranda rights to him.

I went over to see how Alma was doing – I know she'd had a hell of a shock. She was sitting up and the doctor had applied a small band-aid right below her mouth. She looked up at me with tears in her eyes. "How could I have given birth to that monster? To have his own family murdered."

"He wasn't finished, Alma. If you start to feel sorry for him, just remember he was going to kill you, and Gerald . . . and me."

"I never did anything but love him, Rick. He took everyone I had in the world away from me."

I shook my head. "Not everyone, Alma. You have two daughters-in-law, a son-in-law, and four grandchildren. And a butler that loves you very much."

"Gerald? How is he?"

"He'll be fine after he spends a few days in the hospital. He's a good man, Alma. You could do worse."

“I know I could. And what about you? What are you?”

I laughed. “I, Madame, am a very dear friend.” And I kissed her hand.

tbc

The Longest Night of Rain

Chapter 16 – Picking Up the Pieces

As I sat in the RAV4 I called Robin on the cell phone. She answered on the fourth ring. “Simon Private Investigations. May I help you?”

“Yes. Stay there. Don’t move until I get there.”

“Rick . . .” she started, but I’d already hung up.

By the time I got there it was starting to get dark, and it had finally cooled off some. Matter of fact, it almost felt like rain. I parked in front and walked in the door – she gasped when she saw my arm. “It’s nothing,” I told her, but she had to examine it to make sure.

“What happened?”

“Do you want the short version or the long version?” I asked her.

“Short version.”

“Gerald got shot in the shoulder, I got it in the arm, Flatbush is dead and junior’s been arrested for first-degree murder and hiring a hitman.”

“Who killed Flatbush?”

“I did. I had to. He was going to shoot Gerald and Alma and me. And I don’t think he had only one bullet in mind for me.”

“How did you figure it out?” the questioning continued.

“I didn’t. Sean Donahue did. He’s the one that set me on the right trail.”

“Alright, I want the long version.” Trust her to change her mind.

“Honey, I’m beat to hell. I need to go home and eat dinner and sleep in my own bed. If I promise to be here tomorrow and give you the long version, will you let me go home?”

“No. We’re going to dinner, and then you can go home and go to sleep. That’s the only way I can be sure you’ll eat. And I’m going to hold you to that promise to give me the long version tomorrow. Deal?”

“As long as we can get a steak somewhere.”

“Outback?” she asked me.

“Outback it is. Can you follow me to my apartment and do the driving after we drop the RAV4 off? I’m afraid I’m gonna fall asleep.”

“No problem. Lead the way, boss.”

I grinned at her. "Deal."

Just this side of twenty minutes later, I dropped the RAV4 in my parking lot and promised it I'd be back, sooner rather than later. I got into Robin's Nissan Pathfinder and closed my eyes. It felt good, not to see the images of Billy leering at me while he pointed his gun, trying to determine what part of me he was going to put his first bullet into, or the look on junior's face when he finally confessed to his mother that he took after his Uncle Eduardo. Or even the quiet trust that Gerald displayed, somehow knowing that I wouldn't let anything happen to Madame. The next thing I knew Robin was shaking my arm, trying to wake me.

"Are we here already?" I asked sleepily.

"We're at your apartment."

"But I thought . . ."

"That's what happens when you do your own thinking," she replied. "Come on, I'm going to put you to bed." It wouldn't be the first time that happened, and I was almost sure it wouldn't be the last. At least this time I wasn't drunk.

With my good arm draped over her shoulders, we got inside and into the elevator. It was a long ride to the eleventh floor, and she almost had trouble getting me started again when the doors opened. I don't remember much after that – the feel of her small hand as she searched for my keys, the tug on my feet as she pulled my shoes off. The next thing that registered was my alarm clock, going off at seven in the morning.

I showered and shaved, and fortunately I was awake before I tried to put a razor to my face. It had been so long since I'd put on anything but jeans and a shirt; it felt strangely odd with a tie and a blazer and a gun on my hip. I went to the kitchen and stuck water in Mr. Coffee, and in less than five minutes I had a cup of the stuff that would keep me going this morning. I didn't have any useable cream in the refrigerator, so I dumped some powdered fluff in the cup and stirred it around. Now that I was home I would have to sit down with the computer and place a grocery order.

I took my coffee to the desk and gave a quick once over to the stack of bills. There were no disconnect notices, so I knew they would wait until tonight. There was a new issue of Time magazine and an issue of True Detective that I'd already seen when I waited for Lonnie in the library at U.S.C. Other than that there didn't appear to be anything of great interest. I looked around for my briefcase and then remembered – it was still at the mansion, along with my computer and some clothes. I sighed. I was gonna have to face Alma today whether I wanted to or not. I finished my coffee and took the cup to the dishwasher, then grabbed my keys from the ashtray by the door and locked the door behind me. When I quit smoking, I cleaned the ashtray and used it to hold everything in my pockets when I came home at night. It was better than throwing away a perfectly good ashtray.

Thank God we had designated parking spaces, or I'd never find my car in the morning. I started the little car and thought about my Mustang; I'd have to go see how Jamie was doing with her. Even though it

was odd driving the RAV4, it felt good to drive to the office, like things were almost back in their normal order again. There was only one thing missing, and I couldn't do anything about that. I parked at the back of the lot and walked down to Subway, where they greeted me by name and asked if I wanted my usual order. I nodded and in just a few minutes I had two breakfast sandwiches and two cups of coffee.

Robin saw me at the door and rushed to open it. "I didn't expect you this early," she told me as I walked in. "How do you feel?"

"Like a train ran over me. How are you?"

"I'm . . . okay."

"Thanks for putting me to bed last night," I told her as I handed her coffee. "I'm not sure I would have made it without your help."

"You owe me a steak dinner," she replied with a grin.

"I won't forget," I promised.

"Yes, you will, but that's alright." The phone rang and she answered it, "Simon Private Investigations. May I help you?" Dead silence, and then, "Yes. Yes, ma'am. He's standing right here." She put the phone on hold and looked at me. "Alma Cortez."

I took the phone from her and she pushed the button. "Yes, Alma. Yes, I do. Okay. I can do that. I have to come by anyway and gather up all my belongings. This morning? Sure. Alright, I'll see you." I handed the phone back to Robin and she hung up the receiver. "I have to go get my computer and my briefcase. And she wants to talk to me about the arresting officer."

"Who was it?"

"Donahue. I asked for him. He knew the most about the case." Pause. "There's something I want to talk to you about. Bring your breakfast and follow me." I walked into my office and she followed. Once we got situated, I tried to get the conversation started. "There's something I've been giving some thought. I wanted to run it by you and hear your feelings on it."

"What?" she asked. Robin never wasted words.

"Sean Donahue."

"What about him?"

"What would you think about him working here?"

"Sean? Where did that come from?"

"I don't know. Interacting with him the last couple days . . . it just feels right, like it could work if we gave it time. Of course, I don't know if he'd be interested . . ."

"I think he'd be interested."

"Is that first-hand knowledge, or woman's intuition?"

"A little of both. He hasn't said anything directly, but I saw the look in his eyes after the two of you talked. Eddie used to have that same look. Like he was excited to be involved in something new." We finished eating, and sat drinking our coffee for a few minutes. "What made you ask me my opinion?"

"It has to work for all three of us, or it won't work at all. You're not just the office manager, you're one-third of this business. I don't want to consider somebody if you don't want them here." I think I'd surprised her by asking her opinion, but what I told her was true. It had to work for everyone.

"If this is the new you . . . I think I like it."

"Besides," I told her grinning, "Simon and Donahue Private Investigations sounds good."

"Oh, you," and she threw her empty paper cup at me, then burst out laughing.

"Alright, get out of here. I have a very important phone call to make."

Once Robin had gone back to her desk I picked up the phone and dialed Donahue's number. I was surprised when he answered. "Donahue."

"Sergeant Donahue, this is Rick Simon. I've got something I'd like to talk to you about. Can you come by when you get off work?"

"Sure," he answered. "Is three-thirty alright?"

That would give me plenty of time to get to Alma's and get my possessions. "That's fine," I told him. "I'll see you then." I got up and walked back into the front office. "Donahue will be here at three-thirty. I'm going to Mrs. Cortez's house to get my computer."

"Mrs. Cortez?" Robin asked.

"Mrs. Cortez."

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I was surprised when I rang the bell at the mansion and Alma answered the door. "Rick, please come in."

I followed her into the living room, where Gerald was reclining on the couch. He looked pretty comfortable there. Alma had all my belongings packed in a box and ready to go. My computer was on top. "I'm truly sorry for the way everything turned out," I told her.

"It's not your fault. Who knew I was living with a psychopath?"

"He's not a psychopath, Alma; he's just a very disturbed young man. I'm sorry I didn't catch on to it sooner."

"You did your job, Rick. You got the man that committed the murders, and you found the person that hired him. I'm grateful to you for your efforts. I'll be happy to pay your bill."

"Thank you. I appreciate your saying that." I turned to the man on the couch. "How are you, Gerald?"

"Much better, thank you, Rick," and he smiled brightly at me. "I just wish Alma would realize she doesn't have to spoil me. I still have a job to do."

I caught the 'Alma' instead of 'Madame.' "No, you don't, Gerald," Alma told him. "You're fired. Now, there's something else I have in mind for you . . ."

I almost laughed at the two of them. They were like kids. I had no doubt that soon they would be Mr. and Mrs. . . . "What is your last name, Gerald?"

"Smith. Gerald Smith."

I looked at Alma. "I expect a wedding invitation."

"Please bring Robin," she requested.

"I shall." I picked up my box and walked back to the front door. "It's been a pleasure being here with you, Mrs. Cortez. Have a long and healthy life."

"I intend to, Rick." She nodded towards the couch. "And thank you."

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At three-thirty I was back in my office. I'd given Robin the long version of what happened yesterday, and she'd taken a package she was mailing to the post office. I heard the front door open and glanced at my watch. Right on time. "Come on in, Sean," I called. He came in, dressed almost like me – slacks, pastel shirt, sport coat, tie. He cleaned up nice, as my mother would have said. We shook hands and I told him, "Have a seat. I noticed you were on desk duty this morning. Is there a story behind that?"

He looked like a most unhappy man. "I'm confined to the precinct until further notice."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't catch either Flatbush or Lonnie Cortez."

He'd given me the perfect opening. I caught my breath and started. "I've got a proposition to run past you. That's if you're interested . . ."

As I laid everything out in front of him, I could hear the rain beating on the roof.

The End