

Chapter 1

Beck Richards struggled to keep his battered pickup on the bluff and out of the Pacific Ocean. Up ahead the dirt road ended at a sheer cliff. He stopped and studied the coastal sage, searching for a turnoff back to the highway.

"Where are we? I don't recognize this stretch." Beck glanced at Parry Simms, his navigator and best friend. Parry slept soundly. "Hey." Beck punched him in the arm. "Wake up."

Parry yawned and muttered drowsy gibberish.

"You're supposed to be navigating," Beck said.

"Sorry, bro. Tired."

They searched the map for a beach they'd camped at last year, a good place to sleep at night and surf at dawn. But

the contours revealed nothing. With dusk approaching, they decided to camp on the bluff and backtrack in the morning.

Beck studied the empty Baja coastline, sandstone headlands the shade of creamed coffee. The air hung rich with ocean, sage, and burning refuse. A turkey vulture circled overhead in a sinister slow glide. Broken glass littered the ground. He felt uneasy, had a weird sensation of being watched.

They unloaded camping gear, cooked rudimentary burritos, and drank four beers each. Dusk settled over the desert. The sky bled red to black, endless.

After dark, they spread a tarp near the bluff and unrolled their sleeping bags. Beck lay awake staring at the stars and thinking of Elena Garcia. He remembered her smooth skin, brown eyes, vague scent of citrus. How the Spanish rolled off her tongue and over her lips like the strum of a flamenco guitar.

They'd parted three years ago in the Baja fishing village of Bahia del Muerto on uncertain terms. Beck returned home to San Diego and became engrossed in old dramas. They spoke by phone less and less, then not at all the past year. She faded from memory.

Until a few weeks ago.

The letter came on a Wednesday. He'd stood in the kitchen, staring at Elena's name on the envelope, her

lettering neat and meticulous. Purple ink. She'd always used purple ink.

He was at first curious, detached, a little confused. But as memories flooded in he felt nostalgia and then a deep and heavy sorrow. He left the envelope unopened on the kitchen table, couldn't bear to read it. The next day he mustered the nerve but Parry had tossed with the garbage. He tried to call but her number had been disconnected.

For weeks he reminisced. Why had they split up? He couldn't pinpoint a single event or conversation. It had just ... ended. The more he considered it, the more he realized he'd never really gotten over her. With his life growing complicated of late she began to dominate his thoughts. Whether the feelings were true, or just nostalgia to distract from other problems, he didn't know.

But he had to discover what might've been, what might still be. Tomorrow, he'd head south to Bahia del Muerto, track down Elena, and find out if anything remained. Tomorrow, his life could change forever.

One way or another.

The moon floated high and clear in the east, a thick cloudbank muddied the western darkness. As Beck drifted into slumber, he was jerked awake by headlights bumping up the

road. The lights drew closer and stopped a hundred feet from camp.

Beck sat up in his sleeping bag. A knot formed in his stomach. Ten feet away, on the other side of the tarp, Parry snored obliviously.

"Psst," Beck said. "Parry. Hey. Wake up."

Parry moaned and shifted but remained asleep.

The headlights darkened and Beck saw the outline of a pickup truck and the silhouettes of several men standing in the bed. He heard clipped chatter, a hacking cough, a breaking bottle. Then quiet. Seconds passed, no sound or movement from the truck. A breeze ruffled the tarp, waves crumbled on the beach below.

Nothing human.

He heard truck doors open and shut, the squeak of battered shocks. Five men crept into camp, rifles glinting in the moonlight. Beck glanced around, heart pounding. They were alone on the coastal bluff. No place to run. No place to hide. He had to do something, had a few seconds to ward off impending disaster. His mind raced but came up blank. So he cowered in his sleeping bag like a deer hiding in the scrub.

The men circled the tarp. One of them pressed a pistol to Beck's head. The moonlight illuminated a bent nose, face

like leather. His eyes looked hard and distant. He reeked of liquor and desert and filthy denim.

The *bandido* uttered a simple request: "Money."

Beck thought of the Elena journey now at risk and he surged with anger. But it was pointless, impotent, a pathetic defiance thirty seconds late. The *bandido* yanked Beck to his feet and shoved him forward. When they reached his truck Beck removed his wallet from under the seat. The man grabbed it and motioned toward Parry. Beck found Parry's wallet in a duffel bag and handed it over.

The *bandido* pushed Beck to the dirt. He gripped the pistol in his right hand and pinned Beck's shoulder to the ground with his left. Beck's face was just inches from the man's hand and he saw tattooed in the crook of the left thumb and forefinger a snake, coiled and ready to strike, mouth agape and fangs dripping with venom.

From his prone position, Beck caught glimpses of the thieves rummaging through camp. He heard the sound of shattering glass. Parry continued to sleep with the rifle barrel three inches from his head.

Beck thought of Elena. Maybe this was it, maybe he wouldn't see her again. He'd waited too damn long. He'd never seriously considered his mortality until that moment. It had never seemed so close, so utterly possible. And if it ended right now, what had his life amounted to? Lying in the

dirt with the gun pressed against his skull, the answer came raw and sharp: not much. Not much at all.

No more self-delusion, just truth. The reason he'd lost Elena and felt trapped in a pointless life wasn't because of events that had transpired—everyone suffered adversity, after all—but because of the man he was. His body ached from the hard ground but this revelation hurt most of all.

He was a coward.

Just when his thoughts reached a morbid frenzy, when a gruesome death seemed imminent, the rustling around camp stopped and he heard voices trail away, distant commotion, a slamming door. The gun retreated from his neck. The *bandido* kicked him in the ribs and walked off.

Beck lay in a fetal tuck, moaning, watching the red taillights retreat north.

After the truck disappeared, Beck crawled to his feet and caught his breath. His ribs ached. It hurt to breathe. He struggled over to Parry and shook him.

"What the hell?" Parry's voice was thick with sleep.

"Wake up. We were just robbed."

Parry sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Robbed?"

"Yeah."

"By who?"

"How should I know?"

"What did they look like?"

"I don't know," Beck said, recalling the snake tattoo.

"Like thieves."

"What did they take?"

"Our wallets. I'm not sure what else."

They dug through the mess, found a flashlight, and surveyed the damage. Gear was strewn all over, the truck's windshield shattered, the stereo and other electronics gone. Six surfboards remained hidden under the truck unscathed. Beck searched the dashboard where he'd kept a ring Elena had given him. Even after their breakup he'd kept it as a sort of good luck charm. So much for good luck: the ring was gone.

"Dammit," Parry said. "All my cash was in my wallet."

"You didn't have a stash?"

"I forgot."

Beck reached under the dashboard and removed a pouch from behind the glove compartment. "I hid some money."

"How much?"

"Few hundred, give or take."

"You stash any credit cards?"

"No. You?"

Parry shook his head.

"How did you sleep through the whole thing?"

"Beer and burritos, man. Like a sedative."

Beck studied the darkness, afraid of what might lurk there. He wanted to get the hell out. Now. But they'd gotten lost in broad daylight and nighttime navigating on the splintered network of dirt roads and steep cliffs might prove disastrous. Safer to wait until morning.

Or so he hoped.