

Prologue

The hunt had been good.

Lalo Hernandez veered from the trail, scooted through a stand of trees, and crouched behind thick bushes, enjoying the warm noon time sun on his back. It was a beautiful day, making the job all the more enjoyable. He fingered the hilt of the long knife strapped to his waist as he leaned in and peeked between branches laden with leaves that scratched his face.

His prey sat on a flat rock in a small clearing several yards from the main trail, gulping water from a bottle. He wasn't alone, a fact that filled Lalo with a certain excitement. He liked a challenge. Another man sat cross-legged in the grass, a bottle of Dos Equis in one hand and a half-smoked joint in the other.

The possibility of taking them both out crossed Lalo's mind, but his employer had only paid for one hit and disposing of two bodies would be problematic. He shifted slightly as his knees began to ache—the price he paid for longevity in a business where most guys got out, got killed, or went to prison before the aches and pains of old age hampered their ability to get the job done.

He caressed the knife's hilt again, forcing himself to focus. A nice kill before a lunch of gorditas and a margarita would anesthetize his pain quite nicely. Perhaps a siesta with *su mujer*. The two men seemed to be discussing some sort of business deal. He was too far away to hear the details. It didn't matter. Lalo had no interest in their lives, their business, their families. None of it would matter in a few minutes.

Men in his occupation learned to be patient. To pick the right moment.

The crackling of leaves to his right made the skin on the back of Lalo's neck prickle. He sucked in his breath and held it as he slithered deeper into the brush and tugged his black stocking

down over his face. He suspected his victims might see it as a death mask, but really it simply gave him the necessary anonymity.

A woman ducked into the clearing. Tall with the leathery skin of someone who spent a great deal of time in the sun. She marched, arms swinging, head back, straight to the rock. Lalo's prey stood. The other man remained on the ground, sucking on his joint.

The woman got in the prey's face, hands gesticulating. A fight. Lalo swore very softly. He hadn't banked on a crowd at his little party. He slipped the knife from its sheath, the carved handle a nice fit in his hand. The desire to control its power as it plunged into soft tissue and muscle almost overcame him. But not quite.

Another minute. Give it another minute. Patience.

His good luck held. The man whirled and stalked away from the woman, even as her large mouth continued to flap. He walked straight at the brushy area where Lalo had concealed himself. Distaste and anger colored the gringo's face as he picked his way through the thorny underbrush. Lalo curled up tight in his hiding place, the knife ready.

The man picked a spindly live oak and relieved himself. Lalo allowed him the dignity of zipping up his pants before he crept forward. The prey gaped at him, his eyes huge in his white face. Lalo thrust the knife up and up—straight into the prey's chest.

The sensation was everything he'd hoped for. The surprise on his prey's face only added to the intense rush of power that fueled the pumping of blood through his body and accelerated the beat of his heart. The man sagged forward, his hands up as if to ward off an attack. Too late.

“You can't do this—you won't get away . . .” He stumbled, fell to his knees. “My father will . . . my father will get you . . .”

Lalo heard pounding feet and glanced away long enough to see the man and woman fleeing. They'd seen, or they'd heard, or both. He would deal with them later. Right now, he wanted to capture every fleeting second of this kill.

His prey crumpled to the ground, gasping, a wet, gurgling sound. “You won't . . .”

His mouth worked, but the sound petered out. Lalo jerked the knife out and squatted to peer at his prey. The fight drained from the man's face, his mouth went slack, and the fear in his eyes dissipated. His features went flat.

Lalo nodded in satisfaction. His breathing began to return to normal. Time to find a nice out of the way resting spot for the newly deceased. One where he wouldn't be found any time soon, just as Lalo had promised his boss.

But first he needed to do one more thing. He picked up a hand and contemplated the man's wedding ring. Nice, simple, gold band. Neat, clean fingernails too.

The sharp blade worked its magic. Lalo had his trophy.

Chapter One

“Mom worries about everything.”

The irritation in Marco Acosta’s voice made Ray Johnson hide his smile. The boy sounded like an irritable old man, not an eight-year-old. Ray’s amusement faded as he contemplated the reasons Marco had grown up too fast. He edged his way up a narrow spot in the rocky trail and glanced back at Benny Garza. Marco’s foster cousin showed no sign he saw irony in Marco’s complaint. Benny’s mother was in prison, doing time on a drug charge. Marco was lucky to have a mother who cared so much.

“Your mother worries because she loves you.” Ray eased back and adjusted his sunglasses as a cluster of juniper gave way to an open space lit by the early morning sun. “It’s been a rough year for everyone.”

“She’s not going to let me go camping in Big Bend with you.” Marco’s breaths came in puffs between the words. The terrain became more tortuous and the path meandered along a deep ravine. “She doesn’t want me to spend the night away from home.”

Sweat rolled down Ray’s neck and soaked the back of his T-shirt. Susana’s reluctance to let Marco out of her sight was understandable. She’d lost so much already. “I’ll talk to her when we get back. I promise.”

Eying the ground to make sure he stayed on the trail, Ray tightened his stride to allow for the boys’ shorter legs. Marco raised a water bottle to his mouth and drank. His tennis shoe was untied. “You need to tie your shoe, Marco.” The police-officer-slash-Boy-Scout in Ray sprang to attention. His nerves hummed with the realization Marco wasn’t paying attention—to his shoe or the sudden jagged swerve in the path. “Watch where you’re going!”

Marco tripped over the shoelace and stumbled toward the ravine. The water bottle flew. His arms flapped.

Ray flung himself forward. His fingertips brushed the strap of Marco's backpack. The boy glanced back, face startled, eyes wide, his lips a tight O. Then, he disappeared from sight. Ray teetered. The toe of his boot caught in the root of a cedar tree, halting his momentum a split second before gravity kicked in and the weight of his six-foot-four frame dragged him forward. He pitched headfirst into the narrow fissure.

He thrust his hands at bushes and branches but clutched only air. Tumbling, he smacked into rocks. Prickly pear and yucca scratched his face; branches punctured skin.

His head bounced like a soccer ball against the ground. Pain ping-ponged through his skull. He finally landed on his back, arms flung wide, his left foot twisted under his right leg. Noise still rang in his ears.

So much for a relaxing break from an endless parade of murder investigations.

He turned his head, fighting pain. "Marco? Marco, you okay?" He peered through half-open eyelids, sure he could see a hand on the ground a few feet away. It was too big to be Marco's. Flies swarmed where the ring finger should've been.

Ray strained to raise his arm. He reached toward the hand. Purple spots danced in front of his eyes. The light squeezed into narrow pinpoints, then faded to a murky black.

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A panicked voice penetrated the pain. "Mr. Ray! Mr. Ray!"

Small hands patted Ray's face. He opened his eyes to a soft, blue sky dotted with tufts of popcorn clouds. Benny's dirty face filled his vision. He sucked in air and immediately regretted it. The rank odor of decaying flesh made his eyes water and bile burn in the back of his throat.

"What the—" He tried to rise. Pain dug a trench from one ear to the other. He sank back. "What is it?"

Benny leaned in close. Ray heard his agitated breathing and smelled his little boy sweat. The dirt and leaves on his clothes told Ray he'd come down the side of the ravine in a slip-and-slide fashion. "Marco fell on a—a body. You gotta get up. He's dead. It stinks. It stinks bad!"

“Whoa! Easy, Benny, easy.” Ray grabbed his hand. “Are you hurt?”

“No! We gotta get out of here!” Thin features contorted with fear, Benny tugged from Ray’s grasp and darted toward Marco, who knelt a few feet away, his back to Ray. “Come on, let’s just go!”

“Marco, are you hurt?” Ray struggled to get up. A sharp pain in his ankle, coupled with the fierce pounding in his head, made the ground rise and fall. He sank back again. “Marco? Are you okay?”

Marco swiveled around. Tears streaked his face, but Ray saw no blood. His amber eyes wide, his gaze swung back-and-forth from the ground to Ray. He’d lost his cap; leaves clung to his shorts and T-shirt. “I landed on him. I touched him. Somebody cut his finger off!”

Marco’s voice cracked. He pointed. Ray followed the line of his trembling fingers. Three outstretched fingers pointed back, a bloody stub where the fourth should have been. The hand Ray had seen before he passed out belonged to a body, spread-eagle and half-covered by brush.

The man hadn’t been dead long—his features were recognizable—but birds and other animals had begun their work of tearing soft flesh from bone as San Antonio’s early summer heat baked the body. “Move away.” Ray schooled his voice to stay cool and calm. He hated that Benny and Marco had seen this—they’d both had enough tragedy in their lives. First things first: he wanted them away from the scene, then he’d shift from off-duty friend to on-duty police officer once they were calm. “Come over here so I can take a look at you.”

Gaze still on the body, Marco stumbled to Ray, one arm dangling awkwardly at his side. Ray grabbed his thin frame in a hug. “Look at me, Marco. Does your arm hurt?”

Marco buried his head in Ray’s chest. Ray felt a shudder rip through him. “Where does it hurt?”

“My wrist.” Marco held out his swollen arm.

“Can you bend it?”

Marco’s sharp intake of breath answered that question.

“You have to watch where you’re going on these trails.” Ray kept his tone soft. Marco had enough problems without this.

“I was thinking.” Marco’s tone mixed anger and shame. “About stuff.”

“Yeah, about Mr. Ray and your mom.” Benny piped up. Thin face pinched, he’d squatted next to Ray.

“Huh-uh! I was not.” Marco gave Benny a look that said hush up. Benny ducked his head, showing his foster cousin his usual deference.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re gonna be fine.” Ray understood Marco’s preoccupation. Susana was never far from Ray’s mind, either—not since the day the previous year when he’d helped his former partner move his sister from Corpus Christi to San Antonio. “Just give me a minute.”

He touched the back of his head where pain pounded like a jackhammer. His fingers came back bloody. His stomach rocked and his ears buzzed. He considered his options. With his ankle injured, it seemed unlikely he could hike out. And there was the body to consider.

If his cell phone had survived, and he could get a signal, he’d call Samuel, his boss and Susana’s brother. It wouldn’t be a pleasant conversation. Samuel was almost as protective of his nephew as Susana was of her son. “We’ll have to wait for your Uncle Samuel to get the medical examiner and the evidence guys out here, and then we’ll get you to the ER so they can fix up that arm.”

“No!” Marco stopped, his lips pressed together. His skin had turned sickly gray. “Don’t call *Tio* Samuel. He’ll worry. I could hike back to the trailhead and get somebody. Benny can stay here and take care of you.”

“No.” Benny looked offended. “You fell down. I’ll hike. You stay here.”

Red spots flamed on Marco’s pale cheeks. “I’m the oldest—”

“Just hang on, guys, no one’s hiking anywhere alone.” The scene was already contaminated. The medical examiner’s investigator and the evidence techs wouldn’t be happy. He

needed to move the boys as far back as possible. “Marco, go sit by that tree over there. Benny, why don’t you look around, see if you can find our caps? And my sunglasses. Who knows where they ended up.”

Marco stumbled over to the Ashe juniper on the edge of the strip where they’d landed. Benny, hands on his hips in an unconscious imitation of an angry adult, started up the incline in search of Ray’s San Antonio Police Department cap.

After glancing back to make sure they weren’t looking, Ray let his head drop, jaw clenched, and tried to stand. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Giving up, he sucked in a breath through his mouth to avoid the smell and scooted close enough to get a good look at the body.

Blue shirt, jeans, hiking boots. Dried red stains cascaded down the front of the shirt and jeans. Blood. Too much blood for a simple tumble down a hill. The ring finger on the left hand was missing. Theft of a ring or a trophy? A breeze ruffled the man’s sleeve. Ray had the sudden sensation the corpse might raise its injured hand in a macabre wave.

No. This guy would never move again. Ray slid off his backpack and rummaged for his cell phone. It had survived intact, and he had a signal.

Samuel sounded preoccupied. “What’s up? I thought you were hiking with the boys.”

“I am—was.” Ray explained the situation. “The guy’s missing a finger and he’s covered with blood. It wasn’t an accident.”

“We’ll get paramedics up there for you and Marco.” Always the problem-solver, Samuel’s voice bounced around as if he were already moving. “Salvador is next on the rotation—I’ll bring him with me.”

“I can handle the investigation. Just send out Deborah.” Deborah Smith would love telling her colleagues that her new partner had walked off a cliff.

“You’re on vacation—and you’re injured.”

The vacation hadn’t been Ray’s idea. Samuel had insisted. “So? As soon as the paramedics get me fixed up, I want the case. I’m bored with this vacation thing.”

“We’ll talk when I get there.” When Samuel used his boss voice, there was no sense arguing. “I’m on the way. I’ll call Susana after I assess the situation.”

“I should call her—” Ray could already hear that conversation in his head.

“She’s at the hotline center. She won’t answer her personal phone on shift.” Samuel’s voice held a hint of pity. “Besides, I’m her older brother. She’ll just snap at me. You, she’ll chew up and spit out.”

Ray dropped his cell phone into the backpack and stared at the body. He’d tumbled head over heels several hundred yards, injured his ankle, and blacked out in order to find this guy. No matter what Samuel said, that made it his job to find out how the man had ended up at the bottom of a cliff. Dead and missing a finger.