

The Hunter

Awakening

Nicholas Arriaza

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DEDICATION

For my son. You inspire me every day.

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PROLOGUE

Yellow eyes aglow in the pitch black, a beast maneuvers through a cave that has been hidden away for over two hundred years. The stagnant air is thick and heavy and tastes of death. Saliva drips from the creature's razor-sharp canines. Over seven feet tall, it walks upright, its massive, prominent rib cage expanding with each breath. Ripped and stretched, its clothing barely covers the massive creature.

Careful to not leave any marks from its long, hard claws, the beast slides its hands along the cave walls as it makes its way through the narrow corridors, ignoring the beautiful and ancient cave art on either side of the passageway. Its focus is purely on the mission, to retrieve a hidden artifact without leaving a trace.

A hundred yards in, the path opens to a grand excavation. Unlit torches hang from the hollow's walls. In the center sits a massive wood cathedra, hand carved with religious depictions of classic Christian tales, and a large cross. A mummified body sits upon it, shackled, a large, wooden-handled blade protruding from its chest. Though the beast knows

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not to disturb the throne or its inhabitant, it cannot resist. Carefully, it walks toward the cathedra; its curiosity and the allure is too strong to resist. The beast moves in close to examine the man.

Reaching out, it touches the skin; he is well preserved and hard as stone. Looking at the blade, it dares not touch it. The beast positions its massive head within a foot of the man's leathery body and takes a quick whiff. Surprisingly, there is no smell.

The beast shakes its head and returns to its task. Quickly walking through the main area to the far wall, it reaches a large, marble-like stone that stands seven feet tall and five feet wide. The beast extends its massive arms, gripping the sides of the stone. With brute force, it pushes the slab, exposing another, secret chamber.

A loud popping sound explodes from the newly opened area, as the air is sucked into the room, passing in a rush. Lowering its head to get past the lintel, the beast must squat to move around within the room.

A large wooden pulpit stands in the center of the small space. Upon the pulpit sits a leather-bound book, covered in two centuries' worth of dust. As the creature wipes the book, the symbol it has been searching for is exposed. The creature pulls out a small cloth from its waist band, wraps the book in it, and heads out, making sure everything is left exactly as it was. It passes the mummy and walks along the narrow corridor, until it is free of the cave. The beast's heart pumps rapidly, its body wanting more of an adventure, but it knows not to linger or deviate, as the punishment is not worth the risk.

The sky above is covered in clouds, and no light can be seen from the moon. The creature can smell rain in the air. Summoning all of its might, the beast forcefully pushes the large boulder back in front of the entrance, once again concealing the cave. Finding and retrieving the book safely has been its primary concern. It neglects to secure the latches that once held the heavy boulder in place. Pressing hard on the massive boulder, which gave it so much trouble, the beast decides it is secure enough for now. The latches can be secured later. The book must be safely delivered to its new owner.

Nicholas Arriaza

CHAPTER ONE

“Chris? Are you sure you can’t stay home today?” Melisa rises from the bed, mischievously moving the covers and exposing her naked body. “I thought we could have a naked day, spending it in each other’s arms.” She seductively rubs her fingertips along her bare thigh. She can’t remember a time when she felt so attracted to her fiancé.

Chris, pushing his arm through his dress shirt, looks at Melisa in the mirror’s reflection and smiles. “Oh babe, I wish I could.”

“Why do you have to go, anyway? I thought your brother was supposed to handle the meeting?” Melisa rolls her eyes, irritated by the whole situation.

“So did I.” Chris raises his right eyebrow, looking down at his overnight bag. He lets out a soft sigh. Pulling his tie out, he quickly wraps it around his neck, knotting it into a perfect cross knot.

“I don’t get why you asked him, if you knew he was so unreliable?”

“Alex, is young, is all. And my dad asked me to. Said if I give him more responsibility, he’ll start to shape up.” Chris tightens his jaw at his own

words.

Melisa doesn't know his brother, Alex, all that well. But from what Chris has told her in the past, she can't fathom how Chris can continue to allow Alex to work with him. He has six brothers, and Alex was the only brother he complained about.

"Then make him and get back in bed with me." Melisa pats the bed.

"Mel, I can't. I need to meet the inspector."

"I thought you were the boss." Melisa tries to goad him. Chris pauses, as he grabs his blazer off the nearby chair, his knuckles turning white, as he holds it.

"I am," he says softly, turning to her.

"Then?" She shakes her head with attitude looking out the massive floor-to-ceiling window.

"Then nothing. I'm going to take care of my business. Then, I'll come back here. And that will be the end of this conversation about my brother."

"Whoa, I was just playing." She turns back to him. Chris, realizing his frustration is being directed at the wrong person, quickly smiles at Melisa. She tries to hold back the tears. He's never spoken to her in such a way. He was mean, and that wasn't him. Something else is going on.

"Oh babe, I'm so sorry. It's not your fault my brother is such a dumb shit." Chris's voice breaks as he speaks. "I should have never spoke to you that way. I just hate that you are right." He pauses and looks down at the floor. "I hate that my brother continues to challenge me."

"Then do something about it. Stop allowing him to interfere with our life and your business." The tears build in her eyes. She loves Chris so much, and hates to see him being taken advantage of.

"It's not so simple."

"Chris, I don't understand your family. You all seem so close, except for that little shit," she says, while slyly wiping her tears.

"Alex is young. I will get through to him. I know it." Chris looks himself over, adjusting his tie.

"I really hope you do. Sooner rather than later," she says, looking up and down his lean, muscular frame. "You really wear a suit." He is tan, but only lightly. With a quick glance back toward her, he smiles. She dines on his features. His cheekbones are high and well-defined, while his neck is

muscular without being stocky. His short, wavy, dirty blonde hair is perfectly layered. But it is his eyes, his beautiful light blue eyes that she can never get enough of.

“It’s the suit you got me.” Looking into the frameless floor-standing mirror that leans against the wall, he gives himself an approving wink. Standing just shy of six foot two, he has to squat to zip his suitcase closed.

Melisa can’t help but smile. She has always found his confidence alluring. And today he is wearing it well. Melisa turns away and looks out the windows again.

“I know,” Melisa says and wipes a tear. Focusing on the hillside, she thrusts her lower lip out in an exaggerated pout and pulls the covers back over her body. She knows what suit it is. She was happy to spend the money on it. He needed a new suit, so he could handle meetings like this. He is such a hard worker, and she just wanted to help. Now, it just looked like the suit he was wearing to leave her alone, when she wanted him to stay.

“I need to get out of here,” he says, giving himself a final look in the mirror.

“I know.” She smiles but can’t hide the tears in her eyes anymore. She knows how important the meeting is. He worked so hard getting the lease, going against some of the top restaurateurs in the city. Chris thinks he got the lease due to her connection with Mr. McCarthy, her boss. But she knows it was all Chris. He could sell anything, and he never had to lie to do so. He had that “it” factor. He transferred enthusiasm like no one else, his passion undeniable. Chris hated to hear people talk about their passion for something. He believed if you had to tell people you have passion, you had already failed to demonstrate it. When Chris spoke, you couldn’t help but listen.

Seeing her emotion, he moves to comfort her. “You have a career that requires a lot from you. And I’m trying to make a business. Do you realize that if all goes well, we will have three of the hottest bars in Los Angeles?” Chris takes a seat on the bed next to her.

“I know. I guess I’m just feeling a little hormonal is all.”

“How many times have I asked for you to take a few days off, and you couldn’t because you had some deadline, or you were on the verge of a

breakthrough?” Chris can’t stop the feeling he has to defend himself.

“I know.”

“Look, you relax here, and I’ll be home before you know it,” he murmurs as he caringly rubs her back. “Then we can lie in bed all day.” Very lightly, he kisses her covered shoulder. “We can even discuss names. Even though I’m sure we are going to name him after his father,” he whispers into her ear and gently brushes her brown hair away. He softly kisses her earlobe. “Don’t you agree?” he asks as he tenderly rubs her shoulders through the comforter.

“I don’t think I like his father’s name; let’s name him after you,” she teases, playfully bumping her head against his chin.

“Okay, funny guy,” Chris laughs, softly biting at her earring, tugging at it. “I’ll be back in two hours.”

“Don’t worry. I’m over it. I’ll head into the office today. I still have a few reports that I need to finish.” Melisa pushes him away.

“Mel, you will not.” Chris gives her his stern face. “You have finally taken a few days off. You are going to stay here and wait for me.” He focuses only on her eyes. Looking at each other for a moment, Melisa can’t help but laugh.

“Fine,” she says and gets up from the bed. “Did you tell your brothers?” she asks as she saunters across the room, her olive skin glistening under the sun revealing her perfect nude form. Her small baby bump just showing, added to her allure.

“I told Vincent and Aaron; I’m sure they told the rest.” Stopping her movement, she looks back at her man.

“Did they say anything?” she asks.

“What do you mean?” he asks, turning his head in wonder.

“I don’t know, maybe congratulations? Geez.” She continues toward the bathroom.

“Oh, of course they did. They are super excited.” Chris looks away from her when he makes the statement.

“Did they say anything about me getting fat?” Giving a quick shake of her butt, she looks back at him with a smirk. “Who knows how long I’ll have this body; are you sure you don’t want to get one of your brothers to take care of the meeting?” she flirts, softly tapping her firm tush.

“Err,” he growls and buries his face in a pillow. “You know I have to. Don’t be cruel,” he pleads and throws the pillow at her.

“You made this bed, now you have to sleep in it,” she says and scampers off into the bathroom.

“Why don’t you take a dip in the pool and cool off? I’ll be back in time to make you brunch,” he hollers to her.

“What was that?” she asks as she returns to the room. The sun offers Chris a picturesque view of her features. Her cute round nose. Her full dark lips. Her almond eyes seducing him as she gazes back at him. The highlights in her shoulder-length brown hair, which shimmers gold. Her pheromones are calling to him, making it hard to control his animal instinct, and Chris sultrily walks to her; she gives him her back.

“It’s going to be a beautiful day; it’s always perfect after it rains.” He holds her nude body tight. He wants to laugh; she has been trying to be sexy with him the whole morning as he got ready. But, it was when she was acting like herself, that’s when he saw her in that way. “Why not stay home and relax, go swimming?” Turning to face him, carefully not breaking his hold of her, she looks up at his firm, masculine features. “The warm pool water is always exhilarating in the cold mornings. I’m sure the baby will love it.”

“Chris, I love you. I’m not going anywhere,” she whispers. “I’ll be okay, just go to work. I’ll see you later.” She caresses his firm chin. Looking deep into her brown eyes, Chris can’t control himself. His lips meet hers with such power that she lets out a soft moan. The passion is so strong that she can’t resist matching his force. Chris picks her up with his powerful yet gentle hands. Carrying her effortlessly, he takes her to the bed, where he lays her down and looks her over, reveling in her beauty yet again.

Melisa looks up at this man she loves. “Babe,” she says and reaches up and softly touches his face. “Thank you.” Chris turns his head, and raises his eyebrows in wonder.

“What for?”

“Go to your meeting, I know how important it is. You can’t be late.”

“But . . .”

“No, honey. I’m sorry I pushed so hard. I know how important this is. All I wanted was to know you loved me, and you just showed me. Go to

work, I'll be fine." She pushes herself up and kisses him.

"When I get back, we will spend the day in this bed. I promise."

"Oh, yes, we will." She drops back down on the comforter. She watches him pick up his bags. He blows a kiss to her as he walks out the door. Melisa closes her eyes, and falls back to sleep with a smile.

She wakes up an hour later, her body tingling all over with lust; oddly, it's not all directed toward Chris. She can't remember the dream she had but something has made her very excited. She feels her body; it is calling to her. She has never felt like this before, but she has never been pregnant before, either. Getting out from under the covers, she grabs her phone off the nightstand. Two unread messages wait for her. One is from Chris:

*"I'll be home soon. Then we will
continue what we started, I love you.
Please don't go to work."*

The second message is from Dr. Weinstein:

"Mr. McCarthy is looking for you. Please call."

"Fuck!" Melisa lets out. Leaning her head on her shoulder and pushing her hand deep into the mattress, she calls in to the office. "Dr. Weinstein," a throaty-voiced man answers. He is one of the many doctors who work under Melisa. Melisa's job title is Executive VP, Chief Medical Officer, an amazing position for one so young. Dr. Weinstein is among those staff members who do the tasks she doesn't have time for. "Hi Doctor, it's Dr. Castro," she says, trying to hide her annoyance.

"Where are you? Mr. McCarthy has been asking for you," he asks. "He was asking about your email in response to the letter from the FDA. I told him you were still working on it."

"I have the week off," she states. "I sent out a memo," she reminds him.

"What would you have me tell Mr. McCarthy?" he asks.

"Nothing. Transfer me to his line." Rolling her eyes, she shakes her head.

"Of course, hold on. Enjoy your time off," he says and disappears from the line. The sound of a sharp quick tone followed by a ringing comes next.

"Hello," a deep smooth voice answers.

"Mr. McCarthy, it's Dr. Castro."

"Dr. Castro, good morning," the smooth voice says, rolling the "r" of

her name. By the sound of his voice, he is happy to be talking to her.

“Good morning,” she replies, her tone matching his. “I heard you were looking for me?”

“Yes, I have a meeting with the FDA on Thursday and need the preliminary results from the trial.”

“I’m still going over the data. I think we still have some time before we should be talking with the FDA, sir.”

“Oh, I’m a little surprised.”

“When did you make the appointment? I didn’t see it on the calendar,” Melisa asks.

“I made it yesterday. I was having lunch with a colleague and he helped get it for me.”

“I don’t think we should be rushing into anything, but I can get the results mid-day tomorrow.”

“Great, where are you? I didn’t see you on campus.”

“I’m home. I have the week off, but . . .”

“Wait a second,” he interrupts her. “You are on vacation? I’m so sorry to bother you on your time off. I can’t believe I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, it was a surprise to everyone,” Melisa says and lets out a fake laugh.

“When is the last time you took some personal time?”

“Umm, this is the first time since I started . . . That would make it seventeen months.”

“Melisa, my dear, you know how I feel about time off. It’s important to keep fresh.”

“Yeah, I just got caught up in my work.”

“Well. To be honest, I’m a little annoyed. Now I have to move my meetings around. You need to start being more responsible.”

“I’m so sorry . . .” She tries to apologize, thinking he is being serious.

“I’m just kidding. You take the time you’ve earned. No one on this campus works as hard as you. I’m sure those wonderful people at the FDA will be willing to move the meeting to next week, or even later. I just got a little excited.” Melisa can hear the smile he is wearing. “I don’t want to hear that you did any work today.”

“But sir . . .”

“No buts,” he interrupts again. “Now enjoy your time off. I expect you to be well relaxed upon your return.”

“I will try,” she says, laughing with him and ending the conversation. Placing the phone back on the bedside table, Melisa looks around. “Well, now what?” she asks herself. Begrudgingly, she gets out of bed and walks to the large floor-to-ceiling windows. Her home faces a hillside and is not easily accessible by foot, allowing her to stand nude, completely exposed as she stretches and looks out into her well-kept yard and infinity pool.

The early morning sun reflects perfectly off the blue water and ripples across her home. *I should go for a swim*, she tells herself. *You know what; you’ve earned this time off. A quick swim and then shower. And hopefully Chris will be home in time to join me in the shower.* She continues the thought of being able to make love to Chris all day.

Looking through her bikinis, she can’t make up her mind. *I need to start wearing some of these skimpy ones before I get too fat*, she thinks, pulling out a monokini. “Oh my god! Not today, girl,” she says and shakes her head. Stretching out the skimpy elastic fabric, she laughs. She continues to dig through her drawer until she finds her favorite, a Roxy bikini top, with a tropical-style pattern. It reminds her of hand-woven Guatemalan fabrics, but much lighter in color. “Now we’re talking,” she can’t help but say aloud. Looking around, she laughs to herself. *Who cares what you’re wearing. It’s just you.* With that, she spends another ten minutes finding the bottoms to match the top.

She gets dressed in front of her mirror, still laughing off her strange feelings of wanting to be sexy yet understanding that no one is there to see her. Looking her body over in the mirror, she can’t help but admire her figure, caressing the small pot belly showing from the baby growing inside her.

Her mind races with visions of her future. Chris playing with a young boy, teaching him how to play soccer. Going to the beach together. Chris running in the water, holding hands with his son. Watching the man being a father is the sexiest thing she has ever imagined. This feeling of sexuality is almost overwhelming. She can’t remember a time when she felt as turned on or for as long as today. Chalking it up to hormones, she shakes it off and heads for the pool.

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The sun is bright, engulfing the landscape around her. Looking down at the water, she can hear the soft splashing of the ripples hitting the edges of the pool. The blue floor of the pool dances with yellow sparkles of sunlight, which shimmer like fire under the water. The sounds of nature surround her. She can't believe how happy she is. Giddy, she smiles at her reflection. A sense of freedom, almost juvenile in its intensity, comes over her. The urge to just jump in nude strikes her. *God, I haven't done this since college*, she thinks. Looking at her surroundings, she realizes that she has no reason not to indulge herself. Without another thought, she does it. Shucking her bikini, she dives into the water. The rush causes a sudden gasp reflex. Rushing to the surface, she breaks through with a deep breath. Treading water, she pulls her hair back from her face. Feeling the water on her exposed breasts and buttocks makes her tingle in anticipation of Chris's return. She couldn't be happier.

The water is perfect. With every stroke she feels herself becoming calmer, more in tune with a self that she hasn't connected with for too long a time. Her body feels invigorated, almost stronger even than when she was a teenager. Remembering a time when she could hold her breath and swim underwater for two lengths of the pool, she goes for it. Her body responds perfectly; the second lap feels easy and she goes for a third, almost going for a fourth. Not wanting to tempt fate, she races to the surface and gulps in another huge breath.

Reaching the edge of the pool, she pulls herself out easily. A euphoric feeling surrounds her body. The bird song is crystal clear, the perfume from the roses intoxicating, each rose having a different scent. Her nude body shining in the sun, Melisa for the first time in her life feels one with the earth. Wringing out her hair, she looks out and up to the hills. The thought of people being able to see her on the trails above brings a tingle, but her modesty comes back.

She hurries to her bikini and puts it on quickly. Looking around, she just can't be sure no one is looking at her. Her clear eyes take in more beauty than ever before. The roses stand out with an unaccustomed vibrancy. Breathing in deeply, she can't believe the fragrance. How has she not noticed how wonderful these colorful plants are? Standing, looking out at the hillside, she exhales, completely at peace. She closes her eyes and places

her hands on her belly. Listening, she hears a faint sound from high above on the trails. It sounds like a struggle of some sort.

Squinting to sharpen her eyesight, she scans for the source. It's the undeniable sound of someone in pain. Following the lines of the trails, she doesn't see a soul. Then, suddenly, it appears; someone is holding onto the edge of one of the trails roughly a hundred feet above. Focusing, she tries to make out the person. As she watches, he loses his grip and falls, tumbling down toward her.

Screaming, Melisa covers her eyes. She can hear every thud and scrape the man's body makes as it tumbles down the loose gravel of the steep hillside. The echoes are haunting as the man's body crashes through the bushes above her. Then she hears the solid thump of a body falling on her property. Her body moves on instinct, following the main retaining wall, which is lined with long thin horsetail reeds. Finding a section that has been broken, she follows the trail of crushed stalks to the man.

Pushing through the bushes and small trees, she finds him. He lies motionless, his body a mangled mess. A sudden gasp for breath startles her. Head to toe, his body is covered in dried mud, with blood running brightly down the hardened surface. His clothes are mere strips, barely covering his body. Carefully, she moves the foliage, exposing the man. "Sir, I'm here to help. If you can hear me, I'm going to touch you," Melisa calls out.

She carefully places her hand on the man, who lies face down, his hair caked with mud and plastered to his head. His skin feels like old cracked leather, which surprises and confuses her. Even as she recoils from his stench and grotesque appearance, she knows she needs to help. Returning her hand, she carefully moves his limbs.

His neck is in a very peculiar position; she has to move around him in order to check his pulse. She doesn't want to cause more injuries, but needs to get close enough to check his vitals. His body is bent like a pretzel, and she straightens out what she can without affecting his back or neck. Upon feeling her touch upon his neck he moves, turning his head and gasping for air. "Sir, please stay down. You had a horrible fall. We need to make sure you're okay," she tries to explain, using her hand to slow him.

"*Agua,*" he calls out, trying to roll over. With every move, the tattered clothes on his body peel away, exposing more of his physique. His body

slides under her fingers as he rolls. She holds him firmly, keeping him from rising up. Her fingertips touch what could only be an indentation in the center of his chest. Looking down, she sees four large mutilations traveling from his upper left chest down to his lower left abdomen and a large open puncture wound in the center of his chest. But, no blood is coming out it.

Melisa can't believe her eyes. In all her years in medicine, she has never seen such a sight. He twitches suddenly, causing her finger tips to touch the wound, and a strange feeling comes over her. Heat builds inside her. Her mind wanders, and she is transported to another time, a place she has never been before. It's dark except for two torches lighting the area. A man sits in a large chair, arms shackled with spikes stabbing into his forearms. Blood drips down. A man in a long leather overcoat walks up to him holding something sharp in his left hand. Without warning, he plunges the object into the restrained man. His whole body flexes in pain. He looks up in Melisa's direction. His eyes are focused directly on her before he slumps over. A loud howl erupts from behind and frightens her back to reality. She looks around making sure what she heard was from the vision and not real.

The brightness of the day overwhelms her for a moment. Unsure what has just happened, Melisa pulls away from the man's body. Opening his eyes, he stares at Melisa for a moment. "*Chel?*" he asks. His chest wound is gone. His four scars remain. "*Chel?*" he calls out again

"Excuse me?" She is shocked by the man's word. It is almost as if he is calling her by name, but it's one she has never heard before. "You need help; I need you to stay here," she tells him. *Did I imagine the chest wound? Was the sun playing tricks on me?* she wonders. His skin looks hydrated, not as it was just a moment ago. *What was the vision she just saw?* Melisa closes her eyes and counts to ten with controlled breath. Focused, she opens her eyes. She doesn't have time to figure out what she saw or if it was even real. The need is to concentrate on what's real right now.

"*Aqua.*" The man asks again for water, this time looking her in the eyes. She can't believe that his eyes match those of the vision. His topaz eyes stare innocently.

"Water? Okay. But you need to stay here," she tells him. The man just looks at her. "*Espera aqui,*" she states. The man nods gently. As she gets up, the man's face changes; he looks at her belly and reaches up to touch it.

“¿Qué es eso?” he asks, his tone angered. He asks two more times, each with more anger behind it. “What? What is what?” she asks back, confused. She stands to walk away, but the man grabs her arm tightly. “¿Qué han hecho?” he hollers.

“I haven't done anything; I'm trying to help,” she screams at him, breaking away from his grip. She hurries away and back to her house, picking up her robe as she passes the pool. Reaching the back entrance, she has to pull open the heavy slider. Looking back to make sure the man is not following her, she enters, locking the slider behind her.

She can't help but watch the man as he rises. The agony on his face almost causes her to open the door to help again. Thinking better of it, she just watches.

His body quivering all over, shakes growing with every step he takes, the man stumbles through her yard toward her pool. He never looks in her direction; he just moves forward in pain, dropping at the edge. He cups the water with his hand and starts to drink. Melisa is frozen watching the man. He gets up, water dripping from his chin. He looks in her direction. Melisa ducks, not knowing the reflection of the glass makes it hard for him to see her.

He heads to the side of her house. Once he is out of view of Melisa, she dials nine-one-one. She turns to a ten-inch monitor on the wall that activates once she swipes her finger over it and pushes on the button that reads “Cameras,” which in turn displays nine images. The whole exterior of her house is now viewable. Pushing on the screen marked “Orchard,” she sees the man now displayed full screen.

“Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?” The operator startles Melisa.

“Oh, yes. I have a man who has fallen onto my property. He is weak and malnourished,” she explains.

“Is he responsive?” the operator asks.

“Yes, but he is confused and somewhat aggressive,” she reports.

“Did he try and harm you?” the operator asks. “Are you in a safe location? Can you see the man?”

“No...he did grab my arm. But it was not to harm me.” She looks down at where he had grabbed her. She doesn't feel any pain, but a mark is plain to see. She knows it will be a bruise tomorrow.

“Ma’am. Please keep your distance.”

“I am, I have a security camera system. I have been watching him. He is heading toward the street.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes, but I’m fine. I don’t believe he is dangerous. I think he is just lost and in pain.” Quickly, the operator gets Melisa’s information. Melisa is not happy with the way the call is being handled but is relieved when the operator finally informs her that she is sending the police

“Miss. Please stay inside and wait for the officers, they will be there shortly.”

“Please send an ambulance; he needs help.”

“Miss, we will do what's best for the man. Please wait inside until the officers arrive.”

“Look, my name is Doctor Melisa Castro, I will not go outside, but I’m telling you. He needs an ambulance. He rolled at least one hundred feet down the hillside,” she insists. The operator doesn’t take the conversation any further. Melisa hangs the phone up and sees the man is leaving the screen, moving to another area. Quickly changing the display, she now sees him appear on the driveway camera. “Don’t leave, help is on the way,” she says and taps on the frame of the screen with her finger tip.

The man stops his forward movement and looks around in a panic. In obvious distress, he reaches for his head. A faint siren can be heard from outside. Watching the man, she can see it is affecting the man. As the piercing sound comes closer, the man falls to the ground grasping his ears. Melisa can't help herself. Her every muscle is telling her to wait inside, but her moral code will not allow her to. She grabs her cell, puts on her robe and heads outside.

The police arrive a moment before she can reach the man. “Stay right there, miss!” one of the officers orders from outside of her metal gate.

“Then get in here and help him,” she screams, pushing a button on her phone to open the gate.

The man is lying in pure agony. His hands cover his ears, from which small streams of dark red trickle. “Sir, do not get up!” the other officer instructs. They approach with caution, guns drawn.

“He is in pain. Put those guns away,” Melisa yells at the officers.

“How long has he been like this?” the first officer calls out to Melisa.

“He just did that; I think it was the sirens,” she explains. “He had a horrific tumble from the trails,” she adds.

“We’re going to need an ambulance.” The first officer speaks into his shoulder walkie-talkie. The second officer approaches the man and kneels near him. “Holy shit, this guy smells horrible,” he says and backs off. Using his blue gloves, he carefully touches him. “Hey, I’m going to touch you. Do you have any weapons on you?” Slowly he turns the pain-stricken man over. A splatter of dark thick blood pours out of the man’s ear. “Oh shit!” the officer blurts and jumps back. The man starts spitting the same tar-like blood, saying something that no one can understand.

Melisa rushes in to investigate. “Stay back, ma'am,” the first officer orders, but Melisa doesn't listen.

“I’m a doctor; this man is in desperate need of help,” she says as she reaches him. “Give me your jacket,” she orders the second officer, who responds to her firm order. “Come here, help hold his head up,” she continues to direct him. The siren of the ambulance can be heard. “Get them to turn off that siren; this man won't be able to handle it,” she says and looks to the first officer who just stands there. “Now!” she yells and the officer reluctantly obeys.

“*Usted va a estar bien,*” she says, telling the injured man he’ll be okay. The man opens his eyes and locks eyes with her. Melisa continues to stroke his hair. “*Chel, perdóname por favor,*” he is able to push out of his lips before he faints. The dark blood coming out of his ears thins and then stops.

Why is he asking to be forgiven? Melisa wonders. She leans her head to see into his ears. But the thick black residue makes it impossible for her to see inside. She doesn’t want to move his head too much, before they get a brace on it.

“Who’s Chel?” the officer asks her.

“I don’t know.”

The paramedics arrive and, after a brief exchange, Melisa reluctantly allows them to take over. She asks the EMTs which hospital they will be taking him to. Her home sits on the border between two hospitals. The EMT informs her that they can only take him to County, because the other hospital doesn’t take head traumas.

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Melisa watches as they take the man away. The officers take her information and a statement. When everyone has left, she walks back inside. She notices the blood on her robe sleeve. A rush of emotions comes over her. Melisa collapses to her knees and sobs.

Pulling out her phone, she calls Chris. He doesn't answer. She texts him:
“Please come home, I need you.”

CHAPTER TWO

On the other side of the hill, an older man is opening his small shop: “Tobias Hudson’s Rare Antiques.” The sign is faded and easy to miss if you’re not looking for it. As luck would have it, John Sullivan almost did. He was in such a hurry to get to the shop right when it opened he passed the building, but luckily saw the sign in his rearview mirror.

That was an hour ago now. The nervous man in his early twenties has been sitting in his beat-up, red, eighty-seven Volkswagen Golf, getting out every few minutes to see if the man has arrived. The hours of operations state he doesn’t open until nine, but John hoped it would be like other shops, and he would show up early to get things in order.

But, with the shop being what it is, and the old man being Mr. Hudson, he would have no such luck. As any of the neighboring shop owners could tell him, Tobias Hudson would arrive five minutes before opening and leave five minutes after closing without fail. Those same shop owners would also agree that, despite his eccentricities, he knew his business.

Mr. Hudson was truly one of a kind. He had dark skin. His head was shaved, something he did every morning. Standing just under six feet tall,

he retained the broad shoulders of a much younger man. His sense of style was classic, yet unique. Every item of his clothing had a set time and place to be worn. He had clothes for work, clothes for going out, and even clothes for watching movies.

When the lights of the shop turn on, for John to see, it is at exactly the same time he does every morning. John jumps out of his car and hurries into the shop from the parking lot. He carries a small towel-wrapped object tucked under his arm. The bell on the door catches the old man by surprise. “Oh dear, good morning,” he greets the young man. His almost-British accent catches John off guard. “I’m sorry, do you have an appointment?”

“Hi. I have something you might be interested in,” John stammers.

“Oh?” the old man responds. “And what might that be?”

“Here,” John says and clumsily places the towel down. “I got this from my uncle.” He unwraps a dirty, rusty blade. Mr. Hudson notices the nervousness in the man’s trembling hands. John tries to figure out the man’s origins. He knows he’s not English. Maybe somewhere in the Middle East or Africa.

“Your uncle?” the old man replies with a raised eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re in the right place? Maybe a pawn shop would be better for you, my young man. I usually deal with clients who make appointments. I’m not accustomed to random gentlemen rushing in here so early trying to unload items they feel I may be interested in,” he explains without looking up at the man.

John tries to show the old man’s words don’t affect him. “Are you interested?” he asks, putting his hands in his pockets and hiding any uneasiness. The old man walks away to the back office without saying anything.

Trying to look around the corner, John disappointedly covers the tarnished metal object. Picking it up, he puts it to his chest. He recognizes the signs of depression coming on strong. He turns and heads for the door. He had spent over an hour researching a place where he could sell this item.

He didn’t want to go to a pawn shop. Having dealt with them a lot, these past few months, in his mind they are all crooks. He had no desire to allow them to take this amazing gift he had found, and give him nothing in return. They would give him pennies on the dollar, just like they have done

with his other personal items, he kept telling himself.

When he came across the item, he felt it was a sign from God. This old, rusted blade was going to get him out from the rut he's fallen into recently. Get him back on track, back to the confident man he would tell people he is. Reaching the glass door, he opens it but doesn't want to give up. The feeling of hope returns, with thoughts of having been meant to find the blade. Something good was going to come from this, he just knew it deep in his bones.

"Let's have a look at what you have got there," Mr. Hudson calls out, returning from his back area carrying a small box of tools. "Place it over here," he says, pointing to a spot on his display case. There is a magnifying glass with a light on it. John looks up to the sky, thanking God for his intervention.

John watches the old man's hands, trembling softly as the other man works. His care and patience is mesmerizing. John focuses on every delicate move the old man makes, cleaning and revealing the truth about the item. "Do you have any idea what you have here?" the old man asks.

"A blade of some kind?" John answers quickly. "Its old, that's for sure," he jokes.

"A dagger, actually. They call this little beauty a Bollock Dagger," he glances up at John to see if he is paying attention. "You see these two round shapes at the bolster," he says, glancing up at him once more, reading the young man's face. "It's like a pair of bollocks," he laughs, fully aware that John has no idea that bollocks means testicles. "It can also be called the kidney dagger," he goes on, his chuckle continuing at his little inside joke. "Where did you find this? And don't say you got it from your uncle."

"I found it in the hills," he answers.

"When?"

"Is that important?" John spurts out.

"I suppose not." Mr. Hudson deliberately looks up over the rim of his glasses making eye contact with John. "Does anyone know you found it?"

"No." John holds the stare. A bead of sweat falls from his hair line.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure," he replies, trying to match the old man's coolness.

"I can't understand why an item like this would be in the Griffith Park

hills . . .”

“I didn’t say anything about the Griffith Park hills,” John interrupts.

“I beg your pardon, I just assumed,” Mr. Hudson evenly adds, looking the young man up and down.

“Well, please don’t do that.” John clears his throat as he replies.

“I see. Well, we’re done here. You can take your blade and leave my shop now,” Mr. Hudson calmly says while gathering his tools. “Have a good day.”

“What, wait. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude,” John pleads, grabbing the old man’s arm. Mr. Hudson looks down at John’s hand. John quickly lets go. “I’m sorry.” He sees he has over stepped. “Can you please help me?”

“I will only help if you tell me the truth and no longer lie to me. Where did you get this blade?” Mr. Hudson’s stone face isn’t reassuring to the young man.

“I didn’t do anything illegal,” John informs him, a rush of panic causing him to spit as he speaks.

“That’s not my question. I’m no angel; I just don’t want to be tricked. If you’re trying to unload something that can get me in trouble, I promise you, you will get the raw end of this deal,” he explains coldly, causing chills to run up John’s back.

“But I didn’t, okay, you need to understand that,” John hastily continues on about his innocence.

“My dear sir, please tell me where you got this item, or be on your way,” the old man says, taking control with a soothing charm.

“Okay. I’ll tell you.” John adjusts his shoulders; a peace comes over him. He can trust this old man. “I was with my friend early this morning. She and I went for a hike in the hills, and yes it was Griffith Park.” He pauses to collect his thoughts. “I knew that today would be a great day, especially since it rained last night. We met at the bottom around six and got to the top by seven. One of the reasons I like going after it rains, no one else is on the trails.” Telling the story, he over communicates, adding insight into his motives, proving his intentions were innocent.

He goes on for a while, explaining every detail of the trail. “Once we got to one of the peaks we decided to stop and have a snack. It’s my favorite

spot. There are a few trees that fell some time ago, and we can sit there and look out onto the city. It's truly one of the greatest views of downtown Los Angeles. Anyway, as we sat there my friend noticed a boulder lying up against a newly broken tree. The size was massive. At least ten feet wide," he says, stretching out his arms to embellish the story.

"Following the boulder's path of destruction, we found where it came from. At first I thought it was just a cave, but upon further investigation, I knew it was manmade. It was a mine of some kind, or at least that's what I thought then."

"What was it?" the old man asks. John has Mr. Hudson's complete attention.

"Well, after a long debate, Bernadette and I went in . . . My friend is named Bernadette, sorry," he informs the old man. "So, using our phones to light the way, we traversed the mine. Once inside we found that it was incredibly deep. It didn't take long for us to discover it wasn't a mine at all." He pauses. "It was an ancient Mayan tomb."

"A tomb? Mayan tomb?" the old man raises his eyebrow.

"Well, I can't say I know it was Mayan for sure. But I have been to Cancun and it looked just like them."

"Cancun?" Mr. Hudson chuckles. "So it wasn't native American?" Mr. Hudson holds back his smirk.

"I don't know. I guess it could have been," John concedes. "Whatever it was, it was ancient," he adds, frustrated. "Anyway, that's where we found the knife."

"Was it just lying there? Wasn't there anything else?"

"What?" John leans back making distance between him and the old man. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, this blade is an odd item to be in an ancient burial cave," Mr. Hudson explains.

"Oh, well, yeah. There were other items, but I didn't like anything but this."

"And so you took it?"

"Yeah."

"That's fine." He motions for John to place the blade back down on the counter. "And this woman, this Bernadette. Will she want to make claim to