

Pacific Swell

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Prologe

Something bumped the dingy and startled me. I tried to open my eyes, but the blazing sun forced them into a narrow squint. I sat up and pulled myself onto the bench seat of the gently rocking little boat. Shielding my eyes with my hand, I could see the blue sky, flecked with white clouds, and the endless gray-green of the sea.

I leaned over the side, looking for whatever it was that bumped it. I saw nothing but the reflection of my own sunburned face staring up at me. I carefully reached down and grabbed a handful of water and splashed on it. The salt stung my blistered skin and dried, cracked lips. Damn! It hurt like hell, but it revived me, so I splashed more water on my face, resisting the temptation to drink some of it.

By the time I sat up again, my eyes had adjusted to the blazing sun enough that I was able to see without holding my hand to my forehead. I scanned the horizon, swaying back and forth as the dingy bobbed in the gentle swells. Nothing. I looked down at the empty plastic water bottle sloshing back and forth in the salty liquid between my feet. It seemed to be mocking me for not conserving its precious contents more carefully.

I put my elbows on my bare knees and cradled my head in my hand. I wanted to lay down again, but the bottom of the little boat was too wet and uncomfortable. I tried laying across the seat, but my legs hung overboard, my feet only inches from the water's surface and that made me uncomfortable.

I sat back up and scanned that horizon again. There, off to the right, I thought I saw a speck. I leaned over and splashed more water on my face, shook my head and looked again. There was definitely something there. I started to stand to get a better look, but the dingy rolled threateningly and I sat back down.

I watched intently for a good twenty minutes as the dot on the horizon grew into the shape of a vessel. It appeared to be small, certainly not a ship, but obviously bigger than the dingy I was now sitting in. What if it passed too far away for me to be seen? Panic began to set in. I waved my arms frantically. The boat rolled precariously. Be careful, stupid. Sit down. Wait until it gets closer.

I stared at the little speck of hope, praying it someone aboard it would see me, and wondering, if they did, how I'd explain why I what I was doing here, bobbing in the middle of the Pacific ocean.

Chapter One

Los Angeles, Ca, _____ months earlier.

I was on the telephone when the door opened and Gwen Lloyd walked in. She held the door slightly ajar, handle behind her back, a look of apology on her face.

I held up my finger as I spoke into the phone. "Don't worry ... I'll be with you through the whole process ... it's nothing, really ... "

As I listened to my client whine on the other end of the line, Gwen mouthed, "Someone to see you ..."

I pointed to the phone and shrugged my shoulders.

Gwen rolled her eyes, indicating urgency.

I nodded, suddenly embracing the excuse to get off the phone. "I'm sorry, Mr. Suarez, something's come up, I gotta go ... I call you later."

I could tell Gwen was uncomfortable.

I held up my finger again. "No, I swear I'll call ... half-hour, max ... talk to you soon."

I hung up and said to Gwen, "Who is it?"

"A Mr. Ro ..."

There was a knock on the door behind her back. She turned and partially opened the door.

I could hear a man's voice say, "Will he see us?"

Gwen turned and looked at me.

I nodded.

She swung the door open and a man walked past her into my office. He appeared to be in his late forties, thickset, curly dark hair, flecked with gray and neatly combed, blue cotton shirt, open at the collar, tucked into tan dress slacks and draped by a navy sport coat. His face was round and jovial, but his piercing gray eyes projected power.

"You're Johnny Lennox?" he asked.

"Jonathan Lennox ... Mr. ... ahh ... "

"Roban ... Carl Roban."

"Did you have an appointment, Mr. Roban?"

"Carl ... no, I didn't have an appointment, but I need to see you right away."

I stifled my irritation. "Well, I might have a few minutes." Then I waved to Gwen. "It's ..."

Before I could finish, Carl turned and yelled through the open door. "Come on in, Honey."

Gwen stepped aside again and the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, in person that is, walked in. She was slightly taller and clearly much younger than Carl. Dark hair flowed down to her shoulders, framing high cheek bones and dark eyes. Her flawless bronze skin and stunning figure were draped in a sleeveless white shirt and black slacks. A pouty mouth broadened into full, red lips when she smiled, which she did Carl as introduced us.

"Johnny, this is Carmen Escobar."

I stood up and reached across the desk to shake her hand. "Hello, Ms. Escobar."

She placed a soft hand in mine. "Please call me Carmen, Johnny."

Now, when anyone called me Johnny it always grated, but when I heard it come from Carmen it sounded musical, like, Jaawannee.

"Nice to meet you, Carmen." Smiling dumbly, I reluctantly let go of her hand. "Perhaps we should meet in the conference room."

Carl looked around my office. "No, this fine."

"Well, won't you have seat?" I indicated the two leather chairs facing facing my desk.

"Okay, Johnny."

Carl and Carmen sat down.

"Would you like some coffee?" asked Gwen.

"Sure would," said Carl. "Just black, sweetheart."

I cringed slightly, knowing that would piss-off Gwen. I looked at Carmen. "How about you?"

She smiled. "No thank you."

Gwen waited as I starred at Carmen. Finally she said, "Would you like some coffee ... Mr. Lennox?" She only called me that when she disapproved something I did or said.

"Yes ... thank you, Gwen."

She frowned and left, closing the door behind her.

I looked at Carl. "Now, how can I help you?"

"You handle immigration cases, right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said somewhat sarcastically. The very large sign on the door to my offices said, Jonathan Lennox, Attorney for Immigration and Employment Issues. "Do you mind if I ask how you heard of me?"

"A guy I met at Riviera gave me your name."

"You're a member at Riviera?"

"Hell no ... I was at a party there and met Ken."

"Ken?"

"Ken Diedrich."

Ken Diedrich is an auto parts manufacturer, a real asshole, but an A-list client. I had helped Diedrich navigate immigration problems with his employees on several occasions. "Oh yes, Ken Diedrich ... he mentioned me?"

"Yeah. I guess I got a little drunk and I told him about my ..." Carl looked at Carmen, "... our situation ... it was a little embarrassing ... but, anyway ..." he glanced at Carmen again, "... anyway, he said you'd be able to help."

I smiled briefly. "Why don't you tell me a little about your ... situation?"

“Well, we’ve got a little problem here, Johnny ... ”

I waited.

“Carmen is being deported.”

Carmen’s smile disappeared and her eyes fell to her lap.

I looked at Carl. “I’m sorry to hear that. Please, tell me about it.”

Carl launched into a story that, with variations, I had heard often. Carmen had immigrated illegally from Mexico as a child with her mother, Benita Lopez. As Carl’s housekeeper, Benita had somehow obtained a work visa, eventually applying for and receiving permanent residency for both her and Carmen. Three years ago, Benita became ill and returned to Mexico; but the then twenty-year old Carmen elected to stay in the U.S. Last week, Carmen received a letter from the Department of Homeland Security, called a Notice to Appear.

Gwen came in with a tray holding two coffee cups and set it on the desk.

“Thank you,” I said without looking at her.

“Anything else, Mr. Lennox?” she asked.

I could detect the disapproving vibe coming from her. I glanced up at her and confirmed my intuition. Her eyes glared at me beneath a furrowed brow.

“No, that’s all, Gwen.” I smiled to assuage her attitude. “Thanks for your help.”

But her face did not soften. “You’re welcome.”

I gave her a puzzled look and she turned and left.

I waved my hand toward the coffee. “Help yourself, Carl.”

Carl leaned forward and reached for a cup.

“Is it okay if I smoke, Johnny?” asked Carmen.

It wasn't, but I said, "Sure, help yourself."

I watched her fish around in her purse, pull out a pack of Virginia Slims and a butane lighter.

"I wish I could get her to quit that nasty habit," Carl said over his coffee cup.

I reached under my desk and grabbed the waste basket. I stood, walked around the desk and placed it beside her chair. "I'm sorry, I don't have an ashtray in here."

She looked up at me, her lips spreading back into a smile as she placed a cigarette between them. Her dark eyes sparkling. "I hope I'm not causing any inconvenience."

For the first time I could smell her, a heady mixture of perfume, shampoo, and sun tan lotion. "I don't mind ... really," I lied.

She lit the cigarette, smoke wafting up toward me. I retreated back to my chair before the tobacco destroyed the pleasure of her scent. "Now, Carmen, do you have the letter you received from the DHS?"

Carl answered for her. "Of course we do." He reached in his jacket pocket with his free hand and pulled it out. "Here you are." He slid it across the desk.

I picked it up, unfolded it and began to scan it. "So, we're not due to appear at the hearing until the 22nd of July?" I glanced at a calendar on my desk. "That's almost three months to prepare."

"Does that mean you're taking the case," asked Carl.

"Well, there are few more points I'd like clear up."

"Shoot," said Carl.

I looked at Carmen. "What is your relationship to Mr. Ro ... I mean, Carl?"

She smiled briefly. "I am Carl's housekeeper."

"That's it? I mean ... there is nothing ... um ..."

Carl interrupted, "You're asking if we have a relationship ... other than professional, Johnny?"

"Well, yes ... I did hear you call her 'Honey' ... "

Carl looked at Carmen. "This girl ... I mean woman ... has been like a daughter to me ... I love her and I want her to be happy, that's all ... so, now, will you take the case?"

Carmen was staring at the wastebasket. Something was going on between them, but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Well ..."

Carl pulled a checkbook out of his jacket pocket, set it on the desk and leaned forward, "Come on, Johnny, how much to get this party started?"

"It's not just a matter of money ... "

"Then look at this poor girl." Carl waved toward Carmen. "Do you want to see her sent back to Mexico ... alone and friendless?"

I did look at Carmen. She was still looking at the wastebasket. "No, I don't."

"Then you'll take the case?"

Carmen looked up at me and smiled. Better judgement was doomed.

"Yes."

Carl beamed. "Diedrich was right ... you are a good guy."

"Maybe you ought to wait until we solve your problem before you declare that."

"Oh, you'll fix it ... I know," said Carl.

I opened a drawer of my desk and pulled out a yellow legal pad. I poised a pen over it and started asked questions. Half an hour later, I had gleaned that Benita Lopez had originally worked for Javier Ortega, a Mexican citizen and business partner of Carl, who had become a rather wealthy importing products from Mexico that were sold in stores throughout south-central LA. Evidently, Benita was sent to Carl by Ortega as some sort of reward for their business dealings. Carmen was only six when they

immigrated, but she adapted quickly and integrated into the neighborhood, graduating high school and even attended college for a couple of semesters.

I set the pen down and looked at Carmen. "You said your mother returned to Mexico ... when?"

Carmen held up another cigarette. "Do you mind?"

I did, but I nodded anyway. "No, go ahead." I watched her light the cigarette and take a deep drag.

She blew out a cloud of smoke. "She got sick about three years ago ... the doctor said it was a heart condition and that it was serious. She was so afraid she was going to die ..." Carmen's eye's misted over. She took another drag on cigarette. "She just didn't want to die in the US ... she wanted to go home." She paused again, taking another drag. "I begged her not to go ... I told her that the medical help she could receive here was so much better ..."

"I understand ... she just wanted to be on her home soil." I gave her a chance to compose herself, then asked, "But you didn't want to go with her?"

Carmen looked at Carl before answering. "No."

"She's been in America for a long time ... she wanted to stay," said Carl.

Carmen nodded, her lips pouting.

"I see," I said. "And your mother left ... when?"

Carmen looked over at Carl, who answered for her. "Two years ago."

I looked at Carmen and she nodded in agreement.

I picked up the letter and studied again for few seconds. "My guess is that your mother left without applying for an exit visa ... probably thinking she would not be returning ... and after being out of the country for a year, lost her permanent residency status ... her green card ... and since you were her dependent, your fate was tied to her ... when she lost her residency status, so did you."

Carl leaned forward to set his empty coffee cup on the desk. "Is that fixable?"

“Well, we will certainly re-apply for residency status ... one thing that could have big impact on it would be how Carmen entered the US originally ... that could be a problem.”

Carmen frowned. “What if they want to send me back to Mexico.”

“We’ll appeal on the grounds that we are hoping to re-establish permanent residency.”

“How long will that take?”

“A while ... probably several months ... the judge should grant you a bond while we’re waiting.”

Carl reached over and squeezed Carmen’s arm. “See, Honey ... you’ll be all right ... Johnny is all over this thing.”

I gathered a few more details and reassured Carmen, and Carl, that everything would be okay.

“I’ll do a little more research on the case and we’ll meet again before the hearing ... Gwen will call you. In the meantime, don’t hesitate to call me if you have any questions or concerns.”

Carl grabbed Carmen’s hand. “Come on, honey ... let’s go get some lunch.” He looked at me. “Do you want join us, Johnny?”

I was tempted, but better judgement prevailed. “No, thank you.”

They stood up and I followed suit.

Carl reached across the desk to shake my hand. “Well, thanks, Johnny ... I knew you’d be a help to us.”

I shook his hand briefly. “I’ll do what can.”

I held out my hand to Carmen. “Please don’t worry ... I’m sure we’ll be able to solve this issue.”

“ Thank you, Johnny.” She smiled, pausing for second, then she turned to follow Carl.

I watched the door close behind them. I looked at my watch. Damn, better call back Mr. Suarez.



Gwen picked up the waste basket and examined the ashes and cigarette butts it contained. “I’ve never seen you allow anyone to smoke in here before.”

I nodded. “I don’t know what came over me ...”

“Well, I do ... a voluptuous figure, full red lips and sparkling brown eyes.”

I blushed slightly. “Well ... I’ll admit ... I was somewhat intrigued ... “

“Intrigued? You were panting like a dog.”

“All right, Gwen, I get it. You disapproved of my typical male behavior.”

Gwen held the basket so I could see the contents. “I don’t disapprove, John ... I just worry about you.”

I sat up a little straighter in my chair. “Well, don’t ... I’m in complete control.”

She sighed. “If you say so.”

“Well, I do.”