

LAST RAYS
OF
DAYLIGHT

a Paul Dodge Novel

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CHRISTOPHER FLORY

 Light Messages
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Last Rays of Daylight: a Paul Dodge Novel

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The characters in this book are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

For Bob.
A kind, generous man,
a pillar of the communit,
always willing to help anyone in their time of need.

Thank you for always being there for me.
I will miss you most of all.

.

CHAPTER 1

THE TEMPERATURE ROSE to over a hundred degrees. Moisture drained from her petite body, ounce by ounce, and her mouth felt like it was stuffed with a wad of cotton. With little room for movement inside the crate, she turned her head from side to side and moved her arms up, down, left, right. Pressed her hands against the top of the container, her wrists bending back until reaching their physical limits.

It was no use. She wasn't strong enough, or the lid was too heavy. Or both.

As her head cleared, she realized she needed to do all she could to keep her muscles from cramping.

She tried to recall how she got into the crate, dimly remembering crying out as rough hands squeezed her arms, pressing them to her sides. And another, clamped against her mouth, muffling any noise trying to escape. Next, the sharp pain of a needle stabbing into her thigh. Time seemed to stop. She had no way of knowing how long she had been out. Hours could have passed. Days, even.

She noticed the men had taken her phone and her watch. They stole her jewelry, school ID, even her shoes. The pain in her leg was unbearable, despite the drugs. She passed out again.

When she awoke the second time, her head pounded and ears rang. Her vision was blurry, and her body had just enough energy to hold her head up and peek through the air hole. Water splashed in through the hole as soon as her face was an inch away, wetting her eye enough to clear her vision for a few minutes.

LAST RAYS OF DAYLIGHT

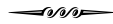
She realized her ears weren't ringing. It was the sound of wind gusting over the container. The noise reminded her of a freight train that used to pass by her house. It vibrated the crate, pushing and pulling, shifting her from side to side, while water continued to splash in through the small air hole.

The noise and shaking stopped. A faint light penetrated the darkness through the air hole and lit her face. It was eerily silent outside except for a groaning sound from above her, where she couldn't see. The noise sounded like old metal hinges. Or a teeter-totter as its riders rocked, one side up, then down, over and over until deafening scraping replaced that sound.

Metal on metal.

Something heavy slipped, or was pushed, off something else made of metal.

Seconds passed. The light from the air hole extinguished as she felt the top of the container crash in on her. The pressure was unbearable. She couldn't move. Tears ran down her cheeks as her lungs sucked in one last gasp of air before her body went limp and her eyes closed for the last time.



As the sun sank into the horizon, it cast a shadow over the starboard bow of *Kelly's Dream*. The last rays of tropical sunlight danced, sparkling like blue diamonds on the tops of the waves.

Dodge leaned against the stern railing as the boat gently rocked in Long Bay's waters just outside Charlotte Amalie in the US Virgin Islands. He held a lime margarita on the rocks, and his free hand was raised above his brow to shade the Caribbean sun from burning his retinas.

The last three months, he'd spent most days fishing from the side of *Kelly's Dream*, a forty-five-foot sailboat. He ate what he caught and sampled different tropical drinks native to his new island home. The days were long and hot, but the breeze at night kept it cool enough to sleep.

Dodge didn't mind the heat. He had spent many a winter in the Northeast. He preferred sweating shirtless, over snow

shoveling while bundled in a heavy winter coat and insulated rubber boots. Snow was something he could live without forever. He heard people, over the years, say they missed the seasons after years in a tropical climate. Many people longed for fall and its vibrant colors. Others missed the spring transformation into new life. The Caribbean had two seasons. Hot and very hot. He preferred the former and tolerated the latter.

With Anna—a woman he rescued from a dirty cop who was holding her hostage and fell hard for last year—Dodge had left the US mainland over seven months ago. The trip had started with no destination in mind. Just raise the sail and keep the sun on your left in the morning, on your right in the afternoon, and the shoreline in sight. Sailing was new to him, and he figured if anything bad were to happen, the closer to shore the better.

After three weeks of slow going, *Kelly's Dream* pulled into port at Key Largo, the first of several inhabited islands that make up the Florida Keys. The boat dropped anchor, and the couple used a dinghy to get ashore at one of the marinas on the island. They had lunch at an outdoor bar which sat next to the hotel used to film the movie *Key Largo*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. The movie was a favorite of Dodge's. Anna had never heard of the film, but said she knew of the actors' names. The revelation made him feel old. They were fifteen years apart and didn't share many interests. But the evening ended like every other: after a few drinks, the two retired to the cabin and made love. He always felt closer to her after sex, causing the doubts to fade for a few days, or a week.

The next stop was over fifty miles west of Key Largo, to the tourist mecca of Key West, which was one of those places where a person could be whatever they wanted. From scuba divers to drag queens, Key West had it all. It was a smaller version of New Orleans. Duval Street served as the epicenter of the island and was the closest thing to Bourbon Street, outside of New Orleans. Most bars and restaurants sat on, or within, a few blocks of the primary thoroughfare.

Resorts and marinas surrounded the island, with the continental United States' southernmost point one block west of Duval, on Whitehead. Vast crowds gathered every night at Mallory Square to watch street performers and view the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico. Dodge and Anna preferred watching from the deck of *Kelly's Dream*. The couple spent three nights there before deciding to move on from the US mainland.

After a week at sea, *Kelly's Dream* docked in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Dodge had planned to spend a week on the island, but the reoccurring sound of gunfire at night echoing across the water reminded him of why he left home. But it scared Anna and made her miss home.

Anna's changing attitude became more apparent the longer the pair stayed. Still, he said nothing. He feared rejection, and part of him was scared to be alone with the ocean's vastness as his only company.

Two more days passed before Anna decided it was time for her leave.

"I miss my friends, and I had a good life," she said. "I know it wasn't perfect, but I liked it."

Dodge didn't know what to say to that. He missed some people back home as well, but he didn't have the emotional attachments that others had to people. A flaw that always held him back in relationships.

He knew Anna loved him, but theirs was a relationship built on lust and personal loss, which isn't an excellent combination for success outside the bedroom. She needed more, and Dodge imagined he did as well.

"Why don't you go home for a few weeks," he said. "When you're ready, I'll get you a plane ticket, and you can come back down, stay for a while, and go back when you get restless."

A last-ditch, half-hearted effort to change her mind.

The couple spent one more night together in a hotel in Old San Juan, each one knowing it was over, but trying to cling to something lost with every ounce of their being. There was passion and even tears before they both fell asleep. In the

morning, a cab came to pick her up for a flight back to the mainland. He had decided not to ride with her to the airport. Anna gathered the few belongings she had acquired, and Dodge watched as the cab pulled away, until its yellow silhouette disappeared down the street.

As he sat on the boat, drinking a bourbon, Dodge watched as flights departed overhead from San Juan Airport, wondering if each plane was the one Anna was on. Was she looking out the small oval window toward the open water, regretting her choice to leave? Would he ever see her again?

Dodge wasn't sure if he wanted to return to his old life as a parole agent, and he guessed his final destination, St. Thomas, would be the perfect place to help him make up his mind.

He pulled the anchor and set a sail for the largest of the three islands that made up the US territory in the Caribbean Sea. The sun was high in the sky, but a massive storm was brewing off in the distance. A once-in-a-lifetime type of storm—one hundred-twenty-knot winds and fifty-foot seas.

Dodge needed to reach the relative safety of the harbor at Charlotte Amalie before the seas turned deadly. It was about a day's sail from Puerto Rico, and the storm was only a few days away. The ocean was already beginning to stir, but the added wind would help speed his journey.

CHAPTER 2

THE MORNING WAS THE SAME as every other morning on *Kelly's Dream*, though the impending danger added some urgency to his actions. Dodge sat on the port side, balancing a plate of eggs and toast on his lap, while coffee sloshed in a cup on the deck beside him as he watched the sunrise over the mountains to the north. The morning was warm and the sun shone bright, but clouds were beginning to pour in from the east, and the Coast Guard was warning pleasure crafts to stay in the harbor until the storm passed.

The thought of staying in paradise bounced around in his head—a decision for another day. For now, he needed food stores, as well as general use items such as toilet paper. He checked the weather report before venturing into town to pick up the supplies on his list.

The area of low pressure that had formed five hundred miles to the East of St. Thomas was now just days from making landfall. He needed to prepare *Kelly's Dream* by anchoring her in the deeper waters of the harbor.

The harbor provided excellent protection from the unpredictable open seas. Still, hurricane winds of a hundred miles per hour could break a vessel free from its moorings, smashing it against rocks or piers. Past storms had reaped havoc on the island and the live-aboard population maintaining residences in the natural harbor. Dodge wanted to be prepared, which included making sure he had a room reserved somewhere in Charlotte Amalie to ride out the storm.

The news was not good. The National Weather Center upgraded the depression to a Level One hurricane. Predictive models showed the storm gaining strength and speed, with the US Virgin Islands falling well within the five-day cone of uncertainty.

Five days could change everything. The storm could lose strength and fizzle out. Or it could change directions and miss the islands. Or worst-case scenario, the storm's power increases and it slams into the tiny Caribbean island as a Category Three or Four hurricane. A Category Three or higher meant he could do little except wait and pick up the pieces alongside everyone else on the island.

Since arriving on St. Thomas, Dodge had made use of a private pier to tie off his dinghy. He paid \$120 per month for unlimited use of the dock. In return, the pier owner filled up the gas tank of his dinghy each time it was tied up to the pier.

The pier manager, Sebastian, walked toward Dodge with a three-gallon, red gas can as he tied the anchor rope to a cleat fastened to the dock.

“Good morning, Mister Dodge.”

“Good morning, Sebastian.”

“Can I fill you up today? A storm is coming, and running out of fuel will make the days after harder to get by. Gas will be difficult to get for a few weeks after the storm because of power outages.”

“How long can power outage last?”

Sebastian bent over with an outstretched hand to assist Dodge from the dinghy, onto the pier.

“No telling,” he replied. “Sometimes it lasts for two or three days. Other times, no power for a week or more.”

Being without power for a week or longer didn't resonate well with Dodge. He checked the fuel tank on the dinghy, though he knew it was full. The inflatable boat was utilized so often, the tank never fell below three-quarters full over the past week. Sebastian made sure of that.

“What about the generator for the boat?” said the pier manager.

Dodge followed Sebastian’s gaze across the bay, toward *Kelly’s Dream*. He remembered topping off the generator’s fuel tank in Puerto Rico, a month ago. The tank held twenty gallons of diesel fuel and burned a gallon every two hours of use. The cool breeze blowing in off the ocean helped support a natural form of air conditioning inside the boat’s cabin, which kept the generator from running all night.

Not wanting to tempt fate, he asked Sebastian if he could have two three-gallon fuel containers to take back to *Kelly’s Dream*.

“I’ll bring the gas cans back tomorrow morning.”

“No problem, Mister Dodge. I’ll put the fuel in the dinghy before you return from the market.”

Dodge nodded and began the short walk across the pier, toward downtown Charlotte Amalie and its open-air markets.

At the end of the pier, Dodge made a left at Veterans Drive, which was the major road running parallel to the harbor’s shores around Charlotte Amalie. The fresh-fish market was a ten-minute walk, covering three-and-a-half blocks from the pier.

Buying his dinner from the morning’s catch was a source of enjoyment. He had become an expert at cooking fish on the small grill mounted to the deck of *Kelly’s Dream*. No spices or marinades needed. Fresh-caught fish had a unique flavor—a flavor lost during freezing and shipping—and that was one of the first things Dodge had learned in his life at sea.

After stopping to buy a coffee from one of the local street vendors, Dodge remembered he needed to visit the ATM to get cash. He had handed over his last twenty to Sebastian. A bank was located one block before the fish market, with an ATM inside the lobby. Dodge used the branch to wire money to and from other accounts when paying the bills related to his house back in the States. He figured that if the coming storm knocked out power, cash would be the only way to make purchases until

they fixed the electrical grid. Being an outsider with no money, needing to rely on others' charity, was not how he envisioned the days following a storm.

The bank operated on island time and didn't open until 10:00 a.m. A line had formed, waiting for the doors to open, and stretched twenty feet from the entrance.

Once inside the bank, Dodge noticed an out-of-order sign taped to the ATM's screen, which forced him to find a line to wait for an available teller. After a five-minute wait, he walked up to the teller who had motioned him to the service window.

"How can I assist you today?"

The teller was a tall woman by the island's standards. She wore a blue dress, with her hair tied back into a ponytail. Her skin was coppery and smooth, not the leathery texture many islanders skin regresses to after prolonged exposure to equatorial sunlight. Dodge found the woman attractive, and she appeared to be close to his age.

"I came in to use the ATM, but it seems to be out of order."

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir. We lost Internet service this morning, and everything is on the fritz. If you need money, I can help you withdraw from your account."

"I don't have an account at this bank, but I have used your services to wire money between banks back home."

"Well, if you have used our wire transfer services before, your other bank accounts are on record. I can have the manager make a call, and we can get your money to you shortly. Will that be OK?"

Top-notch service so far.

"That would be great."

"I'll just need an Id."

Dodge handed over his passport, then watched as her long ponytail swayed side to side as the slim figure retreated to a small office, where a short, fat man sat behind a desk. The man looked at Dodge and shook his head at something the teller said. Then she returned to the customer service window.

“The manager authorized a withdrawal of up to five-hundred dollars from our reserves. We can put the transfer in tomorrow when the Internet is up and running again. Would that be sufficient for you, Mister Dodge?”

“You can just call me Dodge.”

“Dodge, I hope to be of service to you in the future.”

The teller counted out five hundred dollars in tens and twenties, then placed the bills in an envelope and handed it through the slot between the window and the countertop. Dodge smiled as he took the money, and the teller returned his smile. He liked her, but noticed she was not wearing a name tag. He wanted to return so he could get her name, but not today. He had a plan for today, and flirtatious banter was not on the list of pre-storm chores.

It felt good to have a plan again. Dodge left the bank and walked the block to the fish market to buy a piece of whitefish and some fresh vegetables for dinner. He needed to make sure the bilge pumps were working, check the fuel lines, and secure the sail around the mast to keep it from getting damaged in the storm’s wind. Unless the advisory grew worse, he planned to eat dinner and lock himself in the cabin to ride out the weather.

CHAPTER 3

THE STORM PICKED UP SPEED as it entered the warm waters surrounding the one-thousand-mile stretch of the Caribbean islands extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Caribbean Sea. It swept south through less densely populated islands, before changing direction and tearing a path through the ocean channel between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas. The Category Four hurricane raced past with wind gusts up to 125 miles per hour, causing massive damage to the east side of Puerto Rico and the western half of St. Thomas.

Charlotte Amalie, with its large natural harbor, absorbed much of the flood surge, protecting the boats anchored in its waters from being washed out to sea, and the businesses along the shore from being submerged in five feet of water. Electrical power was nonexistent for anyone without generator, and food shortages would surely become an issue if the local power company was not able to restore service within a few days, for the markets and restaurants.

The damage to Charlotte Amalie could not have been worse, like at the airport and its western communities, where the winds tore the roofs off buildings and tossed light aircraft across the tarmac. Entire swaths of the Airport District were now the equivalent of a war zone—pure devastation.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was on the ground within hours after the storm passed. The National Guard cleared the main runway at the airport so food, water, and other supplies could be brought in from the mainland US,

and so medical personnel could evacuate the severely injured.

Dodge was tired after being up all night. At one point, as the heaviest rain band pounded the boat with several inches of rain in a less than a half-hour, he had to use a cooking pot to remove water that had gotten into the cabin, as the bilge pumps could not keep up with the deluge.

After a quick nap Dodge ventured into town to assess the damage to the local area. Though *Kelly's Dream* had survived the event, the small sail, or head sail, had a tear on one of its edges. In his haste to get the two sails stowed and protected from the storm's powerful winds, Dodge hadn't secured the leading edge properly. The constant pressure exerted on the loose fabric by the prevailing winds was more than the stitching could take, causing the double-folded edge to fail. But the error should be reasonably cheap to repair.

Overall, the first-time sailor was lucky. He had avoided any serious damage, and his supplies had weathered the storm.

"Count your blessings," he said to himself.

As Dodge approached the pier, he noticed that Sebastian was not waiting in the yellow plastic chair with a red gas can, ready to top off the dinghy's small tank. In fact, the chair was floating under the dock, tangled in fish netting washed ashore by the storm surge.

He hoped his friend had not been sitting in the chair when it tipped over into the ocean. Sebastian would not have lasted long, as waves relentlessly smashed him against the pier's wooden posts.

A person would survive two to three minutes, max, in those conditions.

As Dodge tied the dinghy to the dock, a glance of the area under the pier for his friend turned up nothing. He decided against pulling on the fishnet because finding a floater tangled in the net's webbing was not an appealing outcome. Nor was waiting for local authorities beside a bloated and decaying body of someone you knew. The police were no doubt busy dealing

with the chaos after the storm, and it could be hours before they arrived.

Dodge believed his friend was still alive.

The pier sustained no visible damage from the crashing waves and strong winds of the storm. The deck's horizontal slats were in good shape, and none appeared to be missing. Seaweed and random bits of garbage the storm carried on its journey across the ocean, littered the shore and the streets. Residents walked the shoreline, picking up debris, and stacked trash bags stretched to capacity, next to the curb for pickup. Dodge imagined the locals believed that keeping the tourist areas clean would keep the economy running, as the tourists were the island's lifeblood.

He took a left on Veterans Drive, heading for the fish market and most of the tourist shops. The bank where he'd met the tall, copper-skinned teller happened to be in the same direction. Dodge had thought of her a great deal over the past few days and wanted to know her name, maybe even go out for a drink or dinner.

He had succumbed to the realization that his relationship with Anna was likely over. He missed her. Sometimes, on his outings to the islands, he would catch a glimpse of a woman walking away, her long, dark hair blowing in the Caribbean breeze, and he would think of Anna.

Just that morning, while the salty air hung heavy in the cabin from the storm, his nose picked up the slightest hint of her perfume, causing his mind to wander. Then reality crept back in, forcing him to face the truth. He knew they would never be together again in that way. It was time to move on, making the idea of not leaving the island more of a possibility for him.

But he was unsure how to broach the subject, or even how to approach the teller. But once he knew her name, it would be more comfortable. He might ask if she could show him the sights, where the best restaurants might be, and invite her to join him for a meal and a bottle of wine. Having a plan was good.

As he meandered on the sidewalk, a black four-door, late-model Ford pulled up beside him, its driver's side window rolled down. The car's occupants wore black suits over white shirts and black ties. Both men donned black sunglasses. Dodge could see the grip of a black Beretta 92F protruding from a shoulder holster under the driver's jacket.

Why don't they just wear a sign around their necks that says, Federal Agents.

The driver said, "Excuse me. Are you, Agent Paul Dodge?"

"Depends on who's asking."

The passenger said, "That's him."

Dodge leaned over for a better view of the car's interior. The man in the passenger appeared to be in charge, and he was holding a photo of Dodge, which he quickly folded and stuck in his pocket.

"I'm at a disadvantage here," Dodge said. "I don't have a picture of you. So why don't you tell me who you are and what you want."

The driver glanced at the passenger, who nodded.

"My name is Special Agent McCaffrey," said the driver. "And this is my supervisor, Agent Williams."

"That's the name part," Dodge said. "Now how about what you want."

He had guessed right about the passenger being in charge. Agent Williams took over speaking for the pair.

"We are part of a joint task force which includes the FBI, DEA, and US Attorney's Office here in the Virgin Islands. The task force has been tracking a group of Trey-Deuce members for the past seven months. They mostly traffic in drugs and low-level stolen property."

"That doesn't sound like a case that would interest the federal government," Dodge said. "Why not leave that to the locals? They would have more knowledge of the players than you, and they're more familiar with the city and surrounding countryside."

“That’s right, Agent Dodge,” said Williams. “Normally the FBI would not be interested in petty drugs and stolen TVs.”

“So, what turned the feds on to this case? And while I’m asking questions, how did you get my name? And how did you find me?”

“We...I mean, I...sent out a nationwide message for assistance in a case the task force recently picked up,” Agent Williams said. “We received hundreds of replies. Most were weeded out as attempts to get overtime or use the opportunity as a vacation to the sunny Caribbean. Then one day, my phone rang. The caller identified himself as a police officer from Virginia. He said he knew the exact person we needed to help us with our case. As luck would have it, that man was vacationing on our very own island.”

He reached into the back seat to grab a file and shook it as he talked.

“This is all the information I could gather on Paul Dodge. The file was impressive. War hero and local legend.”

“You’re too nice,” Dodge said.

“Yes, I am. The file also contains some disturbing facts. A lack of discipline. A tendency to go rogue, and an unhealthy disrespect for authority and chain of command.”

“Don’t believe everything you read.”

“This file reads like a Stephen King novel. But the one common theme through all the chaos is this. You are the best at working the type of case I have.”

A stiffening back forced Dodge to rise. He stretched, then leaned over to see into the car again.

“What kind of case do you have?”

“I can’t read you in until you agree to help us out, Agent Dodge.”

“You have to show me the candy before I get into the van, fellas.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Agent McCaffrey said.

“It means you need me, but I don’t need you. Either give me some details, or I walk. I’m late for lunch.”

The two agents stared at each other. Dodge stood and began walking away toward the fish market.

“Have a pleasant day!”

Agent Williams jumped out of the car and yelled at him to stop. When Dodge ignored him and continued walking, Agent Williams gave chase and grabbed his arm.

“Don’t do that.” Dodge glanced at the hand wrapped around his forearm.

Agent Williams released his grip. “What do you want to know?”

“You have to tell me everything. If I like what I hear, I’ll consider helping you out. If I choose not to assist, I won’t share what we talk about with anyone. You have my word.”

“We can’t talk here in the open.”

“I know a place.”

“How far is it? We can drive if you get in.”

Dodge got into the back seat of the black Crown Vic. “Head to the pier.”

“What’s at the pier?” Agent McCaffrey said.

“My home.”



Dodge and the two FBI agents settled in on the deck of *Kelly’s Dream*. Dodge sat in the captain’s seat, behind the helm, and the agents each squeezed into small camping chairs their host had retrieved from the cabin. Waves lapped against the side of the boat as the last remnants of the storm’s rough seas made their way into the harbor.

The lead agent began discussing the Bureau’s involvement with the Trey-Deuces, letting it slip that Detective Renquest was the person who had recommended Dodge. According to Agent Williams, when Renquest saw the message on the teletype, he immediately thought of Dodge, knowing he was on extended leave and had plans to dock in St. Thomas for a while.

Dodge could almost hear him say, “*Why not send a couple suits his way for a chance to earn some money while on vacation?*”

Dodge was interested, and the money would be nice, but a longing for the thrill of the hunt was what swayed him. He excelled at his job, and he secretly feared he might lose his edge if his talents went unused for an extended period.

Agent Williams wanted Dodge to serve in an advisory role as a consultant. Dodge shot the idea down before they could finish explaining what a consultant role entailed, saying he would only work if he was deputized and given a weapon. The agents argued against the demand, saying the Agency bureaucrats in DC would never approve. The liability alone could break the Department of Justice if a contractor shot a civilian or wrecked a government vehicle.

Dodge floated the idea of signing a waiver, taking responsibility for his actions and releasing the FBI from legal liability. The two agents discussed the idea, and eventually gave in to the demand.

He guessed the FBI would have expected his request. Sending the agents to talk to him without the authority to negotiate would have been a waste of time and resources.

The agents came prepared with a contract, credentials, and a weapon, all locked in the trunk of the black sedan. The contract guaranteed Dodge \$5,000 for two weeks of consultation, which he gladly signed. More funds could be approved if the case lasted longer.

Good deal.

“Now that I’m on board,” he said, “let’s start from the beginning.”

Agent Williams replied, “As I said earlier, the task force has been following a local street gang for a few months.”

“You said the locals are small-time drug dealers. What piqued the Bureau’s interest?”

“We received a tip about a Mexican cartel operative trying to move some cargo to the US from Mexico City. He couldn’t use the highway or waterway systems because the cargo was perishable, and the trip would take too long.”

“So, we aren’t talking about drugs here.”

“No, but we didn’t know what the cargo was. Intelligence chatter put the shipment on the island the day before yesterday. The container was at the port in the inspections area, and we were working with customs to inspect it for contraband.”

“And then the storm hit,” Dodge said.

“That’s right. We sent an agent to the port to check on the cargo container after the storm passed. While searching, he came across something else. Something worse.” Agent Williams dropped his head and looked at the ground.

“So, this has nothing to do with the Mexican cartel shipment you all were monitoring?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“What did he find?” Dodge said.

Agent Williams nodded to McCaffrey, who produced a stack of photos from a black leather briefcase. He handed the pictures to Agent Williams, who passed them to Dodge.

The first picture, taken from about ten feet away, showed a stack of metal containers that had fallen into a pile from the storm wind’s sheer force. The photo revealed twisted steel and shards of broken wood, rendering it impossible to make any deductions about how the containers were arranged before the storm.

The second picture showed the scene from twenty feet away, after the top half of the containers had been removed by a crane. Containers at the bottom of the pile were considerably more deformed due to the amount of weight pushing down on them. The crate on the very bottom had initially been about one-quarter of the size of a standard shipping container. It was now the size of a refrigerator.

“Is there a closer picture of the container at the bottom of the pile?” Dodge said.

Agent McCaffrey motioned toward the stack of pictures Agent Williams had handed Dodge a moment ago. There was a picture taken from only a few feet away. He could make out a hole in the side of the container. The parole agent ran his fingers through his short brown hair as he stared at the photo.

He guessed the hole was originally placed in the middle of the container's side but was now positioned near the top due to the crushing effect from the weight that had landed on top of it.

"What is this hole for?" Dodge moved his long, thin finger to point to the spot in the picture. "I'm no engineer, but I believe the main objective of shipping crate design is to keep the contents dry, by keeping water and debris on the outside."

But before either agent could answer, he saw what looked like faded and smeared reddish-brown paint on one side of the container.

"Please tell me that's paint." His finger still hovered over the photo.

"The substance was dry by the time we uncovered the box from the pile," Agent Williams said. "The techs also mistook it for paint, but a closer examination proved the substance was, in fact, blood."

"Human?"

"The answer to that question is why we came to you."

"There was a person in that container." Dodge shook his head.

Williams nodded. "Yes."

"Was it a child?"

"Yes."

"Is she dead?"

"Yes. And who said it's a woman?"

"It's always a woman. Do we have an ID on the victim?"

"The body is at the medical examiner's office. We had a Bureau doctor flown in this morning from Puerto Rico to assist with the autopsy. DC didn't want to leave this one in the hands of the locals. Dead kids in a custom holding area aren't what the bosses on the sixth floor want to see on the evening news."

Dodge understood how bureaucracy worked. A dead kid made for good headlines, but unfortunate news cycles for the heads of agencies.

"Any findings released yet?"

"The ME pinned the cause of death on asphyxiation. A lack

of oxygen once the other containers collapsed on top of her.”

“What about the blood?”

“The girl, who looked to be around fifteen, had a compound fracture in her left femur. Not fatal, but enough to force her into shock. Add the lack of oxygen to the fracture, and she lived for maybe two to three hours, max. The doc said her death would have been excruciating.”

“I’ll need to see the body.”

“As soon as the medical examiner finishes the autopsy. You could just read the report.”

“That is not how this works. I start with the body, then go to the crime scene. Investigations are a process, and I might see something the ME missed.”

“That’s why we brought in our examiner. To clean up any mistakes by the locals.”

“And who cleans up your mistakes?”

“That’s why I brought you in, Agent Dodge.”

There was something about Agent Williams that Dodge liked.

“Get me copies of everything you have so far, including all the background material on the cartel member identified in the communications, and as much as you can dig up on the Trey-Deuce leaders. I’ll take tonight to look over all the evidence, and we can hit the morgue first thing in the morning.”

“Tell me what you need, Agent Dodge. I have a daughter about the same age as our victim. We need to find out who she is and how she got here.”

“I agree. Get me the information, and I’ll meet you first thing in the morning.”

Dodge and the two agents traveled back to shore in the inflatable. Sebastian was waiting on the dock for him with the small red gas can.

“Filler up,” Dodge said.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Dodge.”

He handed Sebastian a hundred-dollar bill, but the supervisor waived his hands out in front of his body,

determined to refuse the gesture. The man couldn't have much, so if he lost anything, the impact on him and his family could be devastating. Besides, Dodge just received a five-thousand-dollar cash infusion from the FBI. He wouldn't miss the money.

After a few minutes of protesting, Sebastian finally gave in and slipped the bill from out of Dodge's hand and shoved it into the front pocket of his cutoff jean shorts. He smiled at Dodge. Dodge returned the smile and patted his friend on the shoulder, then strolled back to the dinghy to head back to *Kelly's Dream*.