

Prologue

Torredembarra, Spain, 1964—

The Boy heard the scuffle from his bedroom at the end of the upstairs hallway.

His mother and father screamed at each other, not surprising to him as it happened almost daily, though the routine of it seldom masked the pain that tore at his heart.

As usual, he burrowed his small body into the covers and buried his head beneath his pillow, as far into the recesses as he could hide.

Underneath the anger and the angst lurked that other familiar feeling—fear.

“Will he come for me next?” he thought to himself. Quietly, he began to hum.

Chapter One

Altafulla, Spain, 1969—

“He beat me again,” the Boy muttered as he climbed onto his customary perch.

The Old Man nodded, his ancient, twisted hands resting lightly on the tall bamboo fishing pole anchored in the rocks between his feet.

“...For no reason,” the Boy added. ***“It’s not fair.”***

The Old Man nodded a second time.

“I don’t know about fairness,” the Old Man began, in a deep, gravelly voice. ***“It seems to me that all of us are dealt cards, both good and bad. Some learn to play theirs better.”***

Out of habit, the Old Man pulled lightly on the line that stretched flaccid into the purple and black waters of the Mediterranean. Nothing.

“He hit her, too,” the Boy continued. He wondered when he had started calling his father and mother ‘him’ and ‘her.’ It didn’t matter. The Old Man understood. The Old Man understood most everything.

“You must have done something,” the Old Man admonished. ***“You usually do—though even in that, you have a choice.”***

The Boy smirked. ***“After he smacked her, I jumped on his leg,”*** he said. ***“He kicked me away, into the bookcase. When he finished with her, he turned on me with his belt.”***

The Boy spoke with little emotion, as if giving a school history report.

“Stand and pull up your shirt, Boy,” the Old Man stated. ***“I have aloe.”*** The Old Man pulled his *navaja* from the folds of his wide, cloth belt and cut a long strip from the leaf in his bag.

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Gently, he smoothed the plant over the swollen welts on the Boy's back.

The Boy stiffened without a sound.

"He's a wounded bird, that one," the Old Man mused. *"And a poor card player."*

"He shouldn't take it out on me," the Boy complained.

"Nor should you incite him," the Old Man pressed back.

The Old Man had a way of pushing the Boy's buttons without ever making him wrong, exactly, or putting him down. It was almost as if he wanted to challenge the Boy, test him and make him think.

Still, the Boy loved the Old Man more than anyone, and loved Sunday afternoons more than any other day.

The breeze picked up slightly and caused white flecks of foam to crest over the tips of the dark swells that extended from beneath the rocks into an open sea.

"I have a new movie," the Old Man said and the Boy's face lit up in an instant.

"It's about baseball," the Old Man added.

The Boy snapped his neck around. *"What? Baseball? You don't even like baseball. You don't even know how to play."*

The Old Man bobbed his head. *"Not baseball exactly,"* the Old Man corrected. *"Pedro recommended it. He said it was about dreamers, like us—about a guy who had a vision and built a field before he had players because somehow he knew they would come."*

"That's crazy," the Boy snorted.

"Maybe, maybe not," the Old Man contested. *"Sometimes you have to see things in your mind long before they can happen. We'll have to check it out for ourselves, find out what we discover."*

The wind grew progressively stronger and caused the spray to rise high into the sky and sprinkle down on them.

"Can we watch it right now?" the Boy asked after a few moments.

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“After the fishing,” the Old Man answered as the Boy knew he would.

“Why?” the Boy grumbled selfishly. “You never catch anything anyway. In the years we’ve been out here, you’ve never caught a single fish. Why can’t we go?”

The Old Man sighed.

“Ahhh, Boy. That’s where you are mistaken. I had a nice bite earlier. If I keep on fishing, I am sure to catch a great fish. It’s only if I quit that I might fail.”

“Sure,” the Boy muttered with a hint of disgust. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Yes, you will,” the Old Man smiled. “Yes, you will.”

Chapter Two

The Boy heard him grab the iron railing and stumble up the stairs.

“Keep your breathing steady,” the Boy willed himself. *“Maybe he’ll leave you alone,”* he thought without much hope.

His bedroom door opened and the stench of cheap *Priorato* filled his nostrils.

“Get up,” his father ordered. *“I know you’re not asleep.”*

The Boy scrambled down from the top bunk, quickly headed toward the door, in hopes of sparing his little brother huddled below.

No such luck.

“Both of you,” came the command. *“Downstairs.”*

The Boy and his brother took their position on the marble tile in the living room, the Boy closest to his father’s chair to act as a buffer. They stood at attention in their underwear, waiting. A half empty carafe of local plonk squatted on the coffee table next the tumbler that his father used as a wine glass. The Boy knew it had been filled more than once.

“Where was your mother this morning?” he demanded.

“At the market, I think,” the Boy answered.

“You think?” his father continued. *“But you don’t know.”*

“No, sir.” The Boy knew to keep his answers short.

“No, sir’, you don’t know or ‘no, sir’ you don’t think?”

“No, sir, I don’t know, sir.”

The man curled a fat hand around the glass’ rim and held it in his lap.

“Why do you ‘think’? How do you know she got out of bed?” The charade went on.

“We had fresh vegetables at lunch,” the Boy responded. *“Sir,”* he added quickly.

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"Where were you this afternoon?" He picked up his wine, pursed his lips and drained the glass.

"I went to get her medicine at the 'farmacia'."

The Boy's back began to cramp.

"Straight there and back?" The interrogation dragged.

"Yes, sir."

"And you never saw her walk by?"

"No, sir."

The Boy made no expression, gave nothing away. He simply stood, in his boxer shorts, with his arms at his sides.

"Do you think I'm as stupid as you?" The father reached for the carafe.

"No, sir," the Boy said softly.

"What's that?" the father grunted. *"I'm not sure I heard you."*

"No, sir," the Boy repeated a little louder.

"No, sir' I'm not that stupid, or 'no, sir' I'm not as stupid as you."

The father pressed. The Boy held back. To engage him too early would only make it worse.

"No, sir," the Boy said again.

"That's it?" the father uttered, more fact than question.

"Yes, sir." The Boy knew the futility of trying to reason. He knew when to wait and when to provoke. He knew the beating would come shortly and didn't care. The words left far deeper scars.

"You better not lie to me, boy," the father barked.

"No, sir," the Boy parroted.

"Didn't you play 'futbol' in the square?" The father's voice began to get agitated.

"No, sir," the Boy repeated, aware that the end drew near.

"You know you did not come straight back, and you're just not telling me. She said you could, despite what I told you, and you're protecting her like you always do."

The Boy watched the control slip, almost immune. Any moment now...

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“So that’s it—you’re not going to tell me.”

“No, sir,” the Boy mumbled.

“Go get the belt,” the father ordered. “And you better make it quick.”

The Boy ran to his father’s room, passed his mother hooked to her oxygen bottle, opened the top dresser drawer and pulled out the brown leather belt, smooth on one side, rough on the other. He ran back and dropped it on the table next to the carafe.

He stood in defiance, the hatred flashing through his eyes.

“Turn around,” his father commanded.

The Boy failed to move.

His father pushed himself up from his chair, took the belt in his left fist and slapped it into the palm of his right.

“Turn around,” he said again, “or you’ll get it across your face.”

The Boy slowly, purposefully, tauntingly turned and put his hands on the staircase. He spread his legs, braced himself and mentally shut down.

He cried out when the first lash cut his skin—not because it hurt, but because he knew that unless he screamed the beating would go on until he did. Each time the belt bit into his back he yelped. His little brother started to whimper.

“You shut up,” the father yelled, “unless you want me to give you something to really cry about.” He waved the belt in the air.

The Boy sniffled anyway, ignoring the command, part of the game. If he stopped too soon, the beating would go on, even though he felt little pain. Eventually, the father tired, flopped into his throne and drank more wine.

“Go to bed,” he said. “Both of you.”

The Boy and his brother scurried out of the room and up the stairs. When he closed the bedroom door, the Boy put his arm around his younger brother’s shoulders.

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“Don’t worry,” he urged, though the fearful sorrow in his brother’s eyes spoke volumes. “It didn’t hurt. I only pretended to cry so we could go to bed, like I always do. I didn’t want him to hurt Mom.”

The Boy climbed the ladder to his bunk, crawled under the covers, clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

Chapter Three

The Boy marveled at the array of colors that cascaded downward each time he nailed a bulb dead center. Bright swaths of orange, crimson and violet, along with bursts of indigo and evergreen exploded into the sky, giving him his own personal fireworks show on demand.

Oddly, a slight deviation to the right or left caused little more than a pop and fizzle, though clearly the glass broke as he could see the tiny holes from his pellets.

Calmly and without hurry, he strolled through the deserted beachside resort, a ghost town in the heart of winter, and systematically shot out every streetlamp, pausing only to step into the trees at the first sound of a rare vehicle straying into the neighborhood.

He smiled when he scored a direct hit, grunted when he didn't and promised himself with each miss to first pause, hold the gun steady, pull in a shallow breath, aim and squeeze the trigger gently, exactly as his father had taught him.

"At least he's good for something," the Boy thought.

Chapter Four

The Boy flailed his arms in obvious debate.

“That’s easy for you to say, old Man,” the Boy debated. “You can do anything you want. I can’t.”

Instantly the Boy wondered if he had gone too far, if he had crossed the boundaries of respect. He swept his eyes across the sea before him, the lazy, undulating waves that signaled a calm day and waited.

The Old Man tapped his finger on the weathered cane directly above the archaic, equally weathered reel, as he did sometimes before speaking. After a long while, he broke the silence.

“You see that pond of water gathered over by the spout?” The Old Man gestured with his head. The Boy nodded.

“Go to it and put your hand in it,” the Old Man directed.

The Boy glanced at him as if to question, got off his perch and walked across the rocks. He knelt down and placed his palm below the surface of the tepid water and looked up.

“Now take it out,” the Old Man continued. *“What do you see?”*

“What do I see where?” the Boy asked, unable to contain his annoyance.

“In the water,” the Old Man replied calmly. *“What mark did you leave?”*

“I see nothing,” the Boy retorted. *“I didn’t leave any mark.”*

“Exactly.” The Old Man stopped until the Boy returned. *“Most people leave that same mark with their lives—none at all. They chase idle, self-indulgent pleasures, complain about everything and spend their existences addicted to their own importance. In the end, they leave as big mark as your hand did in the water.”*

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The Old Man reflexively tested his line.

“What does that have to do with me?” the Boy queried.

“Only a few wake up, Boy,” the Old Man said with a steady, forward gaze. *“The world is full of people trapped in their own pettiness, people who place another brick on the wall around themselves, a wall of their own making that grows taller and thicker each day with every careless word and deed, until they wake up one day old, tired and resigned to a fate of mediocrity, bitter and full of blame. Let others lead small lives, Boy, not you.”*

The Boy sensed more to come and held his tongue.

“It is easy to destroy and much harder to build.”

The Old Man switched hands on his pole. *“Do you remember the great storm of last winter? What took many men years to construct was brought to the ground in a single night. It is the same with affairs of the heart. What might take a decade to create can be dashed into oblivion with one thoughtless comment, one act without consideration of consequence, one selfish moment. We must all consider what we value most and what we will do to protect it.”*

The Old Man turned toward the Boy and then cast his eyes out to sea. *“I heard about the lampposts,”* he said quietly. *“Just because you didn’t get caught, doesn’t mean that people don’t know who did it.”* The Old Man paused. *“I felt great sadness when I found out.”* He paused again. *“I thought you were better than that.”*

The Boy shuddered involuntarily as the Old Man’s words pierced him to the core like a stiletto. His insides flipped upside down, his teeth ground shut and his face turned into an ugly mask that fought back the swelling tears he fought to prevent. Rage and shame vied for center stage, only to mask the deep, numbing pain that churned within and paralyzed him—all except the renegade tears that snuck down his cheeks and tasted of salt.

To disappoint the Old Man, his best friend—in many ways, his only friend—hurt far worse than the sting of his father’s belt.

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He felt nothing and everything all at the same time, nothing inside, everything outside, the light breeze across his temple, the hardness of the rock below his buttocks, the jagged crags beneath the soles of his feet and mostly, the rhythmic breathing of the Old Man he dared not look at.

The Boy heard the solitary cry of a lone sea gull and watched it land in the dark waves that flowed incessantly, each unique and yet every one the same in their rapid, transient passage, as if they echoed the Old Man's thoughts on the impermanence of things.

Side by side they sat, the Boy in a maelstrom of emotion.

The Old Man stood when a fish struck his bait, let the line run before sharply jerking back on his pole. After a moment, the line went slack. Without words, the Old Man calmly stepped back and resumed his post.

The Mediterranean sun brushed its coppery reflection across the vastness of the sea until an afternoon cloud rumbled across the sky and blocked out the rays.

In an instant, the sun's copper painting disappeared.