

# Category Five



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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

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CATEGORY FIVE

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## Chapter One

### *Bio Bay, Vieques Island, Puerto Rico*



RIGOBERTO SIGHED. ONCE again the trio of gringo college students devolved into a splashing fight, using their kayak paddles to fling arcs of glowing water at each other in the velvety dark. The miracle of bioluminescence, organisms that lit up the water like microscopic fairies, was totally lost on them. Not to mention they clearly weren't taking classes in maturity at their pretentious Ivy League university. Rigo had only just finished high school, but he was about three decades more evolved than these douchey frat boys.

He glanced over the dark bay, the stars of the moonless night reflected in the black surface of the water as if there were heavens above and below. After Hurricane Maria the mangrove trees had been practically stripped clean, but now, nine months later, though they weren't yet tall, they were proud, their roots digging deep beneath the salty water, holding strong. It would take a lot more than a category five hurricane to destroy those trees.

Not that these a-holes would appreciate the magic of the place.

He breathed deep and prepared his "guide voice."



“Gentlemen, if we could get back to the tour . . .” *so I can dump your asses downtown and head to Bananas for a cold beer and an intelligent conversation with my friends.* But he left the second half of his thought unspoken. Insulting tourists didn’t go over well. He’d tried it more than once.

“Yeah, cut it out, you apes!” The leader, Jason, chastised the others with a smirk even though he was the one who had started it.

Rigoberto had met many versions of this kid during his various summer jobs on the island. They always came with an entourage, since, he figured, bullying was no fun alone. He glanced at his watch: 8:15 p.m. Only forty-five minutes more. That’s all Rigo was contracted for. He could survive that long. He sat up straight and returned to tour guide mode. “The tiny island of Vieques was inhabited by indigenous peoples, the Taínos, fifteen hundred years before Columbus set foot in the Caribbean.”

“Indigenous, huh?” the smallest one said, then patted his mouth and did a racist hoot, laughing. But even his Neanderthal friends seemed to recognize how offensive that was and no one laughed with him.

Actually, no. That was giving them too much credit. They just seemed to ignore everything that one said.

*No one would blame me if I strangled them all and left them here. Seriously.*

He twisted in his seat to look back at the group, taking a head count without even thinking. It was something you had to do when running tours. Four. He faced forward.

Wait, what?

He spun his head around and looked over the group. One, two, three. Phew! That was weird, he could have sworn he saw a fourth head. A chill passed over his skin despite the warmth of the evening. This whole trip had him on edge. To top it off, that night the bay looked . . . darker somehow. He was used to

giving these tours in the pitch black since it was the best way to see the dinoflagellates light up, but there was something . . . menacing about the dark. Another shudder ran through him as he felt something brush across the back of his neck. He just needed to finish this tour so he could go back to civilization and shake this creepy vibe. He turned around and continued in a monotone voice since they weren't listening anyway, and they clearly weren't capable of actual learning. "Then, it was taken over by the Spanish, and eventually in 1941, the United States military took over two thirds of the land, displacing residents and, some say, taking advantage of the islanders when they were struggling to recover from many tragedies."

"Hey, watch it, ah-mee-go. My dad was military," Jason said.

"Of course he was." Rigoberto gave him his best and biggest patronizing smile. "So was my father, actually."

"What, like, in the Puerto Rican army?" The hairy imbecile named Steve asked.

Rigo winced. "No, the same military. You do understand that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, don't you?" Okay, so *the tone* was in his voice, the tone his boss had warned him about. *They're assholes, but they come from very important families, so don't give them that superior tone of yours*, he had warned Rigoberto. But sometimes he just couldn't help it.

"Hey, I don't like your tone."

Great, now Jason was channeling his boss. He bit his tongue: he had to deescalate things. He needed this job. High school was over, and it was time to save for college. His family's restaurant had closed in the spring. Winter tourism was nonexistent since they hadn't had power and the palm trees looked like they'd been gnawed on. "I intended no disrespect, of course."

The guy grinned at him. "Of course." Then he went back to lazily running his paddle through the water.

But Rigo knew he wouldn't get off that easily.

Jason proved that by adding, "You do understand that our parents could buy this island out from under you, right?"

*Don't take the bait*, Rigo told himself. *Don't do it*. He kept paddling.

Jason followed with "Oh wait, we already did!" and the group dissolved into uproarious laughter and a round of fist pumping.

As he pushed his kayak through the glistening water, Rigoberto fantasized about hitting them all over the head with his paddle. "Let's continue with the tour, shall we?" Wasn't it enough that the kid Jason's father had helped buy a huge chunk of land out from under the locals to build a monstrosity of a hotel? Now he had to take this abuse? He clenched his teeth tight, the tension spidering up from his jaw into the sides of his skull.

"Why does the water glow like this again?" The one named Steve asked, as if they hadn't already gone over it several times.

Rigo took a deep breath. "As I was saying, the overly salty water of the bay is the perfect environment for the dinoflagellates, the plankton who light up the water when it's agitated—"

"Hey, like you, Steve!" The little whiny one in the last kayak interrupted.

Steve turned around. "Wattya mean?"

"Dino-flatulence! Get it?"

Steve gripped his paddle with his overly hairy hands, his knuckles whitening, and Rigo had this weird feeling things were about to get out of hand. Was Steve going to beat the kid? Was that where the dark feelings were coming from? Rigo watched him carefully—with no plan to intervene, he wasn't stupid.

But then a smile spread on Steve's face and he used his paddle to splash the other guy.

Rigoberto took a deep breath. Lord, his thoughts were dark tonight. But as the group sprayed one another, he realized this

could go on all night. “Okay, okay, why don’t we paddle our way across the bay to the other side where I can show you examples of red, white, and black mangroves.” They moved a few yards, the only sound the dripping of water off their wooden paddles. A rustling sound came from among the greenery that ran along the shore.

“What was that?” Steve whispered, and they all froze, their heads turning nervously, staring into the darkness.

One by one they looked into each other’s eyes and Rigo saw they were all scared. So, it wasn’t just him. But he didn’t hear anything unusual in the quiet night. “It’s probably one of the stray dogs that roam the area,” he whispered. The trio was silent for a few more minutes, listening as they looked around with big eyes. *Just enjoy the quiet*, Rigo thought, his heart rate slowly returning to normal. But the quiet was short-lived.

“Man, this is boring as shit.” Jason threw his paddle down into the water and it hit with a blue glowing splash. Rigo watched it begin to float away and thought there was no way in hell he was going to chase that paddle down. Jason swayed in the kayak, holding his arms across his chest like a petulant toddler. A lot like a petulant toddler. He was certainly compensating for his fear the moment before. He was peacocking, chest out, bravado back in place. But Rigo could see from the dart of his eyes that he was still nervous. “Why do we have to stay in the boats? It’s not like we can’t swim.”

“Except for Kevin,” Steve added.

“I can too swim!” So, the little one’s name was Kevin.

Now the toddlers were arguing. Rigo wasn’t paid enough to babysit spoiled rich white kids, and he really was anxious to put the bay in the van’s rearview mirror. So weird—he was usually more comfortable out here than in town. The edges of his voice got sharper with his impatience. “You can’t swim here because the organisms in the water are very sensitive.”

He ignored the exaggerated whispers mocking his slight accent “Ooh! Very ‘sen-sa-teev’!”

“The chemicals on your bodies—deodorant, sunblock, insect repellent—kill them. We need to protect the delicate ecological balance of the system—”

Jason cut him off. “Ah, I see now. You’re one of those liberal tree-hugging types. Wanna save the planet, and shit.”

*Don’t engage, don’t engage*, the voice in Rigoberto’s head warned. But he’d had enough, so he ignored it. “Don’t you?”

“Don’t I what?”

“Want to save the planet?”

“Nah, man! You can take my Hummer over my dead body!” Fist-pumping again.

“Hopefully that could be arranged.” Rigo said under his breath.

Obviously not quietly enough.

“What did you say?” It was said low, but challenging, like a growl.

But Rigo’s mouth didn’t seem to be under his control anymore. “Actually, it’s narcissistic, entitled attitudes like yours that got us in this—”

He was midsentence when Jason stood in his kayak, trying to reach for Rigo. He stood swaying back and forth as he balanced in the narrow boat as if surprised it was on water. He seemed as if he was distracted by the movement and using it to forget about beating Rigo to a pulp. “Oh, screw you and your dino-shit!” Then he raised his arms over his head and dove headfirst into the water, the blue glow surrounding him as his arms and legs scissored beneath the surface.

Yeah, Rigo was about at the end of his patience.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist we return to the van if this behavior continues.” Great. Now he sounded like his



third-grade teacher, Mr. Rodriguez. He hated Mr. Rodriguez. He looked around for Jason to surface.

But it was quiet. Too quiet. The water calm and glass-like. Where had Jason gone?

“Hey, do you guys see that? Those shapes under the water?” Kevin whispered as he leaned over the side of his kayak and peered into the dark water.

Rigo looked where Kevin was pointing. Did he see something, too? “It’s probably just Jason,” he said quietly, though he wasn’t at all sure it was Jason.

Steve chuckled nervously. “You’re afraid of the freaking wind blowing, Kevin!”

Kevin’s voice was shrill. “No, there’s two! Look! They were around here somewhe—”

A pale hand reached up from beneath the surface, the water dripping from it in black rivulets like blood. Its fingers stretched and coiled and pulled the edge of Steve’s kayak over, dumping the large guy into the water in a pinwheeling mass of limbs.

*Oh good, maybe something will eat him,* Rigo thought, until it hit him that perhaps he was in danger, too.

Kevin screamed in a high-pitched voice, desperately paddling to turn his boat around. “See? See? I told you there were shapes in the water! Human shapes!”

Rigoberto looked at the two abandoned kayaks and began to wonder how long Jason had been under. Was it too long? Was there really something else in the water?

In that moment, two figures broke the surface and pulled Kevin into the water.

And suddenly, Rigo was sitting there alone in the middle of the bay. His heart was pounding as his kayak rocked gently from side to side. Was he next? He grabbed his paddle and, without a sound, placed it just above the water. He could make it to shore if he really booked it, then go get help.

Just then two forms breached the surface with a huge gasp of air and Rigo screamed . . . then recognized Jason and Steve as they shook the water off like large dogs, laughing and sputtering. Rigo was horrified he had actually been nervous for a second there. The splash and *thunk* of the kayak was followed by the cackling of the two other men as Kevin sputtered and shrieked to the surface, all three of them in the water now, probably killing the dinoflagellates with their negativity alone.

Rigoberto felt heat rise beneath his face.

Basta. Enough.

He efficiently turned the kayak around and started for the shore, the welcome silhouette of the van calling to him. For the first time that night, he felt good. He'd leave these assholes to get back to town themselves. He'd retrieve the kayaks in the morning. He'd catch shit from the institute's director, but it would be worth it.

He got out in the ankle-high water, yanked his kayak onto the sand, and secured it, dripping wet, onto the trailer behind the van. He climbed into the driver's seat and smiled big as he turned the key and the engine came to life. "Have a good walk back, assholes!" he yelled out the driver's side window as the van's headlights lit up the road sandwiched between dense foliage. He could still hear the sounds of roughhousing coming from the water as he pulled away. The idiots hadn't even noticed he'd left. "Serves them right." He fiddled with the radio and found a station playing reggaeton. He tapped the wheel along with the beat of Papi Gringo's latest hit, "Tormenta." Perhaps his night could be salvaged.

He was out of earshot when the screaming began.