

**THE
LAST
GIRL**

THE LAST GIRL

Δ MYSTERY

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For Flor, may you rest in peace

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CHAPTER ONE

I DROVE OUT to Memories Lounge, an old hole in the wall in the shitty side of town. The place had a decent jukebox and an old Rock-Ola from the seventies that played real 45s when it was operational—a fifty-fifty chance on any given night. The walls were covered in cheap wood paneling and the ceiling tiles were black from decades of cigarette smoke. It was as good a place as any to drink cheap and forget you were unemployed and running out of money fast.

Three months had passed since the layoffs at the *Sarasota Herald*. They were trimming the fat, boosting stockholder profits. I should have seen it coming, but I was too caught up in my own ego—Dexter Vega, superstar investigative reporter. When the list of names came down the pipe in a group e-mail, I was blindsided. Almost knocked me off my goddamn chair.

Not that I'm bitter. I can take it like the best of them. I packed up my shit, waved a middle finger at the publisher, and never looked back.

Memories was never full, and that night, that early, it was almost empty. Just a table of college students and some old guy in a purple polo sitting a few stools from me. I pumped a buck in the jukebox, chose a Johnny Cash tune and Bob Dylan's *Tangled Up in Blue*. Mac, the bartender, had a ball game on the old tube television behind the bar.

I was nursing a Corona, wondering what the fuck I was going to do with the rest of my life. I had given my blood to journalism, and it had stabbed me in the back. When my wife took off with our daughter, she cited my obsession with work as the single reason she could no longer live with me. I hated losing her. I hated losing Zoe.

Halfway through my third beer, this guy marched into Memories, parked himself between me and the old man in the purple polo. Mac gave him a nod. The man just leaned against the bar and stared at the old man.

He looked rough—two days from homeless. Had dirty blond hair and nice blue eyes. Probably mid-thirties. But life made him look older—late forties. I could smell him from where I sat. Foul. Old banana peels and Jack.

He said something to the old man. It didn't look like a conversation. He seemed like the kind who doesn't talk to you—talks at you.

I turned my attention to my own problems. My severance money was running out. Something had to give. And this summer I was supposed to get my kid. Zoe was turning seven, and I had to show her a nice time. Maybe take a short vacation, Busch Gardens or Disney. That shit wasn't cheap.

The rough guy said something to the old man with the polo. I didn't catch it, but then he raised his voice, cussed, and shoved the old man. He pulled him off the stool, threw him back. The old man dropped flat on the floor, arms out like Jesus. I stood. The rough guy pounced on the old guy. Sat on his chest and hammered him twice on the face with his fists. One-two. Then he picked him up like he was trash and shoved him against the wall. The old man bounced back from the wall to the rough guy's arms like he was made of rubber. Then the rough guy pushed him out the door toward the parking lot.

I was right behind them. I know. It was none of my business, and I'm not crazy about old people, especially after living in this town for so many years. But what was I supposed to do?

I'm not a fighter. Five-nine, a hundred sixty pounds, and totally out of shape after a three-month bender. Still, I was angry at the world. I guess I needed something to distract me from my own misery.

Outside, the rough guy had the old man folded over the hood of a beige, late model Lexus 460. He held the old man's head by a fistful of hair at the back and was slamming his face against the bodywork.

I grabbed the rough guy by the arm and threw him back. He fell on the pavement. Not so difficult, but he stood up real quick. Fucker had to be sober as a goddamn stone. He grinned at me, charged—caught me by the waist and dropped me like a pro. I saw stars. He probably would have hammered me unconscious in five seconds if Mac hadn't come out with that Louisville Slugger he keeps stashed under the bar.

The rough guy stared at him, his little blue eyes shining like lights. Then he bailed. Ran off into the dark. Gone.

Mac checked us out. Asked if we were okay, if we needed an ambulance or the cops. I was surprised to see the old man spring back to life despite his bloody nose and lip. He'd taken it good from that asshole. But suddenly, it was like it never happened. He dusted off his pants and stretched out his shirt and ran his hand over what little hair covered his head.

Mac rested the bat on his shoulder and walked back in the bar.

"Thank you." The old man had a pleasant, confident voice with a slight accent that reminded me of the Italian bartender at Caragiulos restaurant downtown.

"What was that about?"

The old man shrugged. "Beats me. People these days, eh?"

"I guess."

He wiped the blood from his lip with the back of his arm and spat. “Probably just angry he lost his job.” Then he smiled. Earlier, at the bar, I would have guessed his age to be in the seventies. But when he smiled, he looked younger, could pass for sixty.

“Please,” he said, “let me buy you a drink.”

He took a step forward. His legs wobbled like they were made of yarn. He leaned against the Lexus for support.

“You okay?”

“Just dizzy,” he said and waved his hand in a circle in front of him. “It’ll pass.”

“Maybe you should go home and get cleaned up.” I pointed at his face. “Put some ice on that lip.” It didn’t look serious, but you can’t ignore a split lip, blood all over his purple shirt.

He touched his face and looked at the blood in his hand. He smiled like a happy grandfather. Crazy, smiling like that after he’d had his face bashed against the hood of a fifty-thousand-dollar car.

“You live far?”

He shook his head. “On Bay Shore. Just over the Trail.”

Blame the humanitarian in me. I mean, that’s why I got into journalism, right? To save the goddamn world. “Come on.” I pointed to my ten-year-old, beat-up Subaru. “I’ll give you a ride.”

His name was Nick Zavala. He lived in a slick house on the bay. It wasn’t one of those new pseudo-Mediterranean McMansions with wide columns, long balconies and red tile roofs. No. His place was a single story, modern deal from the late sixties. It had class. I respected that.

“Why don’t you come in and have a drink with me?” Nick said when he stepped out of the car.

“No offense,” I said. “I don’t swing that way.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t mean it like that. You helped me out of a jam. I pulled you out of a bar. I owe you one.”

Don't ask. I'm not sure what I was thinking. Maybe I was done with Memories for the night. Maybe it was the old man's grin or his eyes or the fact that I was still shaking from the fracas with the rough guy because I'm not a fighter and that monster could have wiped the floor with my face.

I was suddenly very, very thirsty.

Nick's place had the looks of a bachelor pad from the early seventies: sunken living room, shag carpet, and a wall of glass that opened up to a pool. But a thick hibiscus hedge obstructed the million-dollar view of the bay. Still, you could smell the sea, and if you got on your toes and stretched your neck, I'm sure you could catch a glimpse of the ocean.

Nick excused himself and went into the bathroom. Front center, over a long white leather couch was one of those Andy Warhol Marilyn Monroe silkscreens. It was numbered and signed in pencil.

"Warhol gave it to me himself," Nick said when he came back to the living room. "It has a dedication on the back."

People talk a lot of shit. I'm a journalist. I know. But I had the feeling Nick was being straight with me. All the art in the living room had that same quality: sixties and seventies pop art you'd seen in movies and magazines. Most of the rich people in this town decorated their homes with art from one of the local craft fairs: paintings of palm trees, beach scenes, flamingos—or posters you could buy at Target. This guy had the real deal. I'm not an art expert, but I knew enough to recognize a real Jim Dine, a Robert Rauschenberg, and a Peter Max. There was even a strange assemblage by James Rosenquist at the end of the long dining room.

Nick went to the bar. "What's your poison, friend?"

"You got any tequila?"

He smiled. "I have rum."

"That'll do."

“Coke?”

“On the rocks is fine.”

“No,” he said. “Would you like to hit a few lines?”

I turned away from the art and walked to the bar where he was pouring me a rum and preparing himself a bourbon.

I shook my head. “Just the drink, thanks.”

“Sure.”

That’s when I realized he was sizing me up. Measuring my game. I didn’t mind. It’s how it is. But I was curious: a sixty-something-year-old guy who lives in a stylish house on the bay that’s gotta be worth a couple of million with an art collection that’s right out of a museum is hanging out at a shit-hole bar like Memories invites me for a drink and offers me cocaine.

What. The. Fuck.

He handed me a glass and came around the bar, his own drink in his hand. He nodded to the dark sky past the hedge to the bay. “Home sweet home.”

“Must be nice.”

“It is. But nothing’s perfect.”

“You’re telling me.”

He took a long drink and pointed at me with his glass. “You’re Dexter Vega. From the newspaper.”

“Not anymore.”

“I always enjoyed your work.”

“Tell it to the editor,” I said. But it wasn’t as if I would ever go back. Even if they begged me to return, on their knees, offered me a raise—a big one—two extra weeks’ vacation. Never.

“It’s a shit deal, eh?” he said. “To be laid off after . . . how many years?”

“Twelve. And a half.”

He raised his glass. “Their loss.”

I touched his glass with mine and we drank. We moved slowly to the couch, a big white leather divan you probably couldn't even buy in this town. He sat. I remained standing. It's a better perspective when you're in a rich person's house. Always stand. Drink their booze, keep a clear perspective.

"That piece you did on the Sarasota Police covering up after their own. That was some top-notch reporting," he said.

His flattery of my work was nice, but it made me wary. I'm naturally suspicious.

"It took a while to put the pieces together," I said. "But when the puzzle was complete, it was all real clear. Besides, cops are a unique breed. They stick together. But when they smell blood, forget it. Sharks."

He nodded. "So what are you doing now?"

I raised my glass and took a long sip of rum. "Drinking."

He smiled. "Sit, please. Just for a moment."

I sat on the chair across from him. An Eames recliner. Leather. Cool and comfortable.

"I wonder if you could do something for me."

So there it was. Best friends already.

"I need someone to help me find my daughter." His expression was dead serious. His little eyes locked on mine. I didn't like it.

"Is she lost?"

"I'm not kidding, Mr. Vega. She sort of disappeared a few months ago—"

"Sort of?"

He smiled and pointed at my drink. "Need a refill?"

I looked at my glass. "Yeah, but first tell me about your daughter."

"She's a senior at New College. I got an e-mail from one of her professors about her absences. That's how I found out. I called the police. They looked into it, but she's an adult. They couldn't find

anything—how did they put it? Nefarious. So they dropped the case.”

“And her mother?”

“Deceased. When Maya was ten.”

“What about boyfriends?”

“She must have had one. Or some. I don’t know. She wasn’t very communicative about that part of her life.”

“And?”

He smiled in a very friendly way. “You’re an out of work investigative reporter. I need help.”

“You want to hire me to find her.”

Nick nodded. “I can pay much better than any newspaper.”

I glanced at my empty glass and whirled it around so the ice made that pretty tinkling sound. “How about that refill?”

CHAPTER TWO

I DROVE HOME a little drunk and confused. I hadn't taken the gig. At least not yet. I had to think about it. I poured myself a shot of tequila. The last of the good stuff I'd bought in Mexico a few years ago when I was working on a story for the paper about a migrant worker who'd been killed by Sarasota PD for no apparent reason. The paper sent me to Mexico to look for the family. I took advantage of the trip and stocked up on the best tequila I could find.

My place is an old cracker house on Hawkins Court between downtown and Sarasota Bay. I bought it back in the day when I was still married and full of illusion and the neighborhood was derelict and real estate could still be picked up by a working stiff like myself. It was a simple two-bedroom from the days when people built shit by hand. I spent three years remodeling it, which is not a big deal. With wooden houses you don't need a lot of tools and expertise. It's all carpentry. Besides, in these old places nothing's ever perfect anyway. Once you accept that, you can do anything.

I sat out on the front porch. It was a clear night. There was a gentle breeze making its way between the trees and stirring my neighbor's wind chime collection. The frogs and crickets were going at it like tiny engines humming and buzzing at intervals. My cat, Mimi, a twelve-year-old grayish tabby with a few toes missing in the front paws, came out and looked at me for maybe five seconds before she spied a lizard and dashed off to hunt.

This was one of those things I loved about living in Sarasota. My front garden was a forest of native plants: silver buttonwood, cocoplum, beach sunflower, milkweed, red penta, ferns, and a young live oak.

In the last few years the sleepy coastal Florida town I loved so much was quickly turning into a generic condo-land for the rich and famous. All the mom-and-pop restaurants had been priced out of the real estate. Now everything was expensive chichi cafés with outdoor seating, snobby servers with long dark aprons and an I-don't-give-a-shit expression on their faces, five-buck espressos, and every type of chain store and restaurant you can imagine. Sarasota had lost its funkiness. But this part of downtown still had some character left. It was a whole different planet than the suburbs, than Bee Ridge or Fruitville Roads—six lanes of pavement with no trees.

I was thinking of Zavala's job offer. I wasn't sure what to make of the deal. Nick had not put out any numbers. He had been conveniently vague about that. Not that I blamed him for it. Who the fuck was I to take this on?

I had been working on a couple of assignments for *Sarasota City Magazine*, our town's glossy lifestyle of the rich and famous publication. One was a feature on a mansion that had been redecorated by one of our local celebrity designers; the other was about a couple from up north who'd bought into a new condo development on Siesta Key. Both were pure fluff—local masturbation jobs. I hated that kind of work, but it paid. The two gigs would net me about a grand. My deadline was coming up, and I hadn't even begun to write.

I went inside and poured myself another tequila. I put *The Trinity Sessions* by the Cowboy Junkies on the stereo—slow, haunting. Margo Timmins' vocals were like a massage to the brain. I needed that. I'd had one tough month after another and I was beginning

to scrape the bottom of the barrel. The house was a mess, cluttered with thrift store furniture, art from local artists who never made it big, stacks of papers, books, and empty bottles of booze from my latest binge. If my life were a movie, it might look hip. But the truth was sad. This wasn't a home. My life was pathetic. My wife was gone, and I only got to see my daughter during the summers. And all the time in between we barely communicated. But what killed me was that I didn't know how to change that. I didn't know how to enjoy what little time I had with her.

On top of everything I was a few weeks away from having to cash into what little was left of my retirement. I'd have to budget, stop drinking. I had my vintage Scott stereo and a sizable vinyl collection: a lifetime of records, first press albums and special audiophile editions. I could sell it all and survive another month or two. Then what?

I knew one thing for sure: I was not going to look for another newspaper job. I'd been kicked out of the club. I had skills, a reputation, a closet full of awards. What did it get me?

I had to face it. At thirty-nine I was too old and had too much experience in a career that no longer existed. Blogs and gossip journalism had taken over the world. The prospect of working for another paper made me sick to my stomach. And really, my skills as an investigator, writer, reporter, as a person who actually gave a shit about making the world a better place, were useless. Nobody cared.

* * *

The following day I gave Nick a ring and met him at his place midafternoon. He came to the door wearing a Speedo and an unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt and dark Ray-Bans. His brown skin had that glow from sunscreen and sweat, which seems to be

like a uniform for rich Floridians. Buried in his hairy chest was a gold medallion. It had the image of a man on a horse slaying a dragon, surrounded by little red gems. On the bottom corner a part of the medal was missing.

He noticed me staring at his chest and held up the medallion for me to see. "It's St. George. From Italy."

"Looks like someone took a bite out of it."

He laughed. "My grandfather was in the first war. A bullet hit him in the chest and took a part of the medallion. It saved his life."

When we walked inside, I noticed a young lady lying on a recliner by the pool. She was skinny, topless with small breasts.

"Tiffany," Nick said when he saw me checking her out. She turned on her stomach to get the sun on her back. She looked young, like a teenager. But the way she moved her body told me she knew she had something and knew how to use it.

"She's the daughter of one of the neighbors," Nick said and led me away from the window. "They like to use the pool. I don't mind."

"I wouldn't either," I said. With the tall hibiscus hedge and the wall around the garden, the place offered excellent privacy for nude sunbathing.

"A drink?" He was already at the bar.

"I think I'll wait till five."

"You know what they say. It's five o'clock somewhere."

He poured himself a bourbon. I followed him into his study. It wasn't a big room, a little dark and predictable except the shelves were stocked with sexual paraphernalia—sex toys, dildos, leather straps, chains, and all kinds of freaky sexual shit. On the side of his large oak desk was a huge erect penis.

"Louise Bourgeois," he said when he saw me staring at it. "It's an original sculpture. She made it especially for me."

"Why?"

"It's bronze," he said. "Pick it up."

"I'm fine."

He laughed. "Are you afraid of art or afraid of a penis?"

It was as long as a baseball bat with a pair of rough-looking, grapefruit-size testicles at the base. I grabbed the thing and picked it up off the desk and felt its weight. "It feels lethal."

He laughed and offered me one of the chairs. He sat across the desk. "It's how I made my fortune," he said, motioning to the sex toys. "I started out with a small sex shop in Boston's combat zone back in the early seventies. It was okay. One day one of my customers made a joke, how he had to drive all the way to downtown Boston from the suburbs just to buy a cock ring." He tapped the side of his head and grinned. "I paid attention to what he said. Six months later I took out a loan and opened a shop in Woburn. You wouldn't believe the business. Twice what I was getting downtown."

"I guess all the pervs are in the suburbs."

"No, no." He frowned. "Not perverts. That's what everybody thinks. They're just regular people. Everyone loves sex. That's what I figured out. Five years after I opened the Woburn shop, I had three more stores in Newton, Quincy, and Reading."

"Sex sells."

He laughed. "You're telling me, my friend. You're telling me."

He reached to a shelf behind him and offered me a framed photograph of an attractive young lady in a formal gown. She was elegant. Great posture. Strong dark eyes. "That's Maya," he said. "It was taken three years ago during her first year of college. I think she was going to a dance."

"She's very pretty."

"Like her mother."

I put the photograph aside. "What do you think happened?"

He shrugged. "I really have no idea. She's an A student. Brilliant. She's majoring in biology and she's already been accepted at UC Davis for graduate school."

"Did she live here?"

"No. She lived in a house near the college with roommates. She wanted the full college experience." He opened a drawer, pulled out a pad and an agenda, and wrote down an address. "Perhaps it's a place to start," he said.

I looked at the address, folded the paper, and put it in my breast pocket. "You guys didn't have a fight or anything?"

"No." Then he smiled in a way that made me think of people in jail. You ask them how they are or how it is for them and they give you this sad smile—desperate—like it's fine but it's not fine. It never will be.

"We didn't see much of each other," he said. "She had her life, I had mine. She usually came to dinner once a week. We got along but we didn't have much in common." He looked at the shelves where the sex toys were displayed. "I don't think she approved of how I made my money."

"And you say the cops found nothing suspicious?"

"Nothing."

"Do you remember the officer in charge of the investigation?"

"No," he said and looked down at his hands resting on the desk. "First it was a big man in uniform. Then it was a plainclothes detective. Then a woman in uniform." He waved his hands. "Never the same person."

I glanced at Maya's picture and leaned forward, resting my forearms on the desk. "Let me ask you something. Why don't you just hire a private investigator?"

"I tried." He showed me three pink stubby fingers. "I spoke to three. But none of them would take a missing persons case."

“You’re kidding me.”

“They said the same thing the cops said: ‘She’s an adult.’ I said, ‘so find her anyway,’ and they said, ‘no thank you.’”

I leaned back on my chair and sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t do this.”

Nick’s little eyes almost popped out of his face, then narrowed to a squint. “Please,” he said, and reached into the drawer of his desk and pulled out a white envelope. He tossed it on the desk in front of me. “A thousand dollars a week. Plus expenses.”

“Nick—”

“There’s ten thousand in that envelope. It’s all yours. If it takes longer, I’ll give you another ten. If it takes less, you keep it all. A bonus.”

All the journalism in the world had never prepared me for this type of negotiation. But it wasn’t as if I wanted more. Me in my faded khakis and thrift store Hawaiian shirt, two-day stubble, and a tooth in dire need of a root canal.

I had no idea what private investigators charged for this kind of work. I just knew this was a nice chunk of change for an unemployed journalist.

“What if I can’t find her?”

“You will. I know you will.” His face changed again. Suddenly, he was that friendly little old man, the guy I met the previous night at Memories. He frowned, the confidence and power seeping out of him. “You have to. Please.”

I’m an honest guy. Perhaps too damn honest. I couldn’t see how finding someone would take more than a few days. But I wasn’t a fool, either. I was broke. I needed the money. But it was more than that. Give me a mystery, a clue, an idea. That was all it took. Suddenly, I had this burning inside asking me to solve this thing, find out where this girl went. What was she doing? It was what

drove me to journalism in the first place—that insatiable need to solve the puzzle.

I put the envelope in my pocket and leaned over the desk. “When was the last time you saw her?”