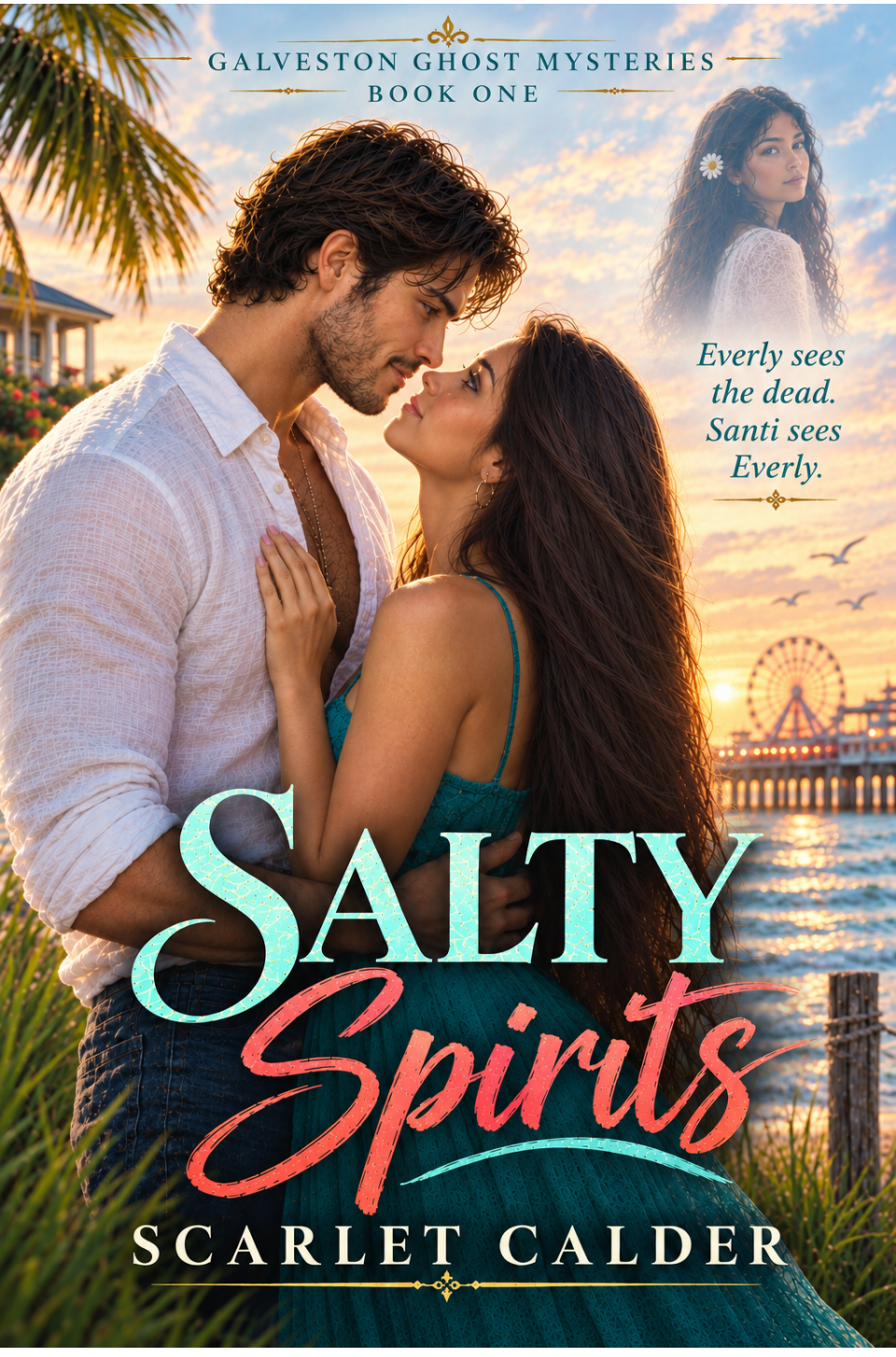

GALVESTON GHOST MYSTERIES
BOOK ONE
Everly sees the dead. Santi sees Everly.
SALTY Spirits
SCARLET CALDER

Salty Spirits

A Galveston Ghost Mystery

Scarlet Calder

Sneak Peek
Chapters 1–7

Galveston Ghost Mysteries
Book One

November 3, 2026

Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

1



The dead never made appointments.

They also ignored bedroom rules.

Bert, the ghost of the building's former landlord, occupied Everly Fox's favorite antique armchair while she chose a blouse. Middle-aged and balding, he sat with his elbows on the armrests, still behaving as though her Houston apartment belonged to him.

Everly held a blue blouse against her cream trousers, then exchanged it for a sleeveless coral one.

"The blue," Bert said. "Lower neckline."

Everly lowered both hangers. His gaze reached her face a second too late. "I didn't ask."

The leasing agent had neglected to mention Bert. Everly had been negotiating the household rules ever since.

She pointed toward the door. "Out. I'm changing."

"I know." Bert remained comfortably seated.

"Then why are we having this conversation?"

Bert recited the rules with a sigh. "No bathroom. Leave when you change clothes."

"The whole room, Bert. Standing halfway through the wall doesn't count."

"That happened once," he said.

“Once was plenty.” She kept her finger aimed at the door until he rose.

He disappeared through the wall. She shut the door anyway.

Once her blouse was tucked in, she called, “I’m dressed.”

Bert’s head appeared through the wall while she fastened a silver hoop.

“You still knock.”

“You’ll want to hear this.” Bert leaned toward her, grinning. “The woman upstairs had her ‘cousin’ over.”

“Cousins visit,” Everly said.

“With flowers. He left this morning in yesterday’s shirt.”

Everly paused with her second earring. “Please tell me you weren’t in her bedroom.”

“Hallway.” Bert drew himself up. “I have standards.”

His eyes dipped toward her blouse. Everly lifted a finger to her own face. “Then have them up here.”

Everly slipped the narrow iron ring onto her finger. The voice dulled, though it didn’t disappear. She’d discovered that trick while working with antiques. It bought her some quiet on days when the dead wouldn’t give her any.

She slid her appraisal binder into her cream leather work tote and settled her vintage rose-pink purse on her shoulder.

“Two bags?” Bert asked.

“One is for work,” Everly said.

“And the other?”

She gave him a sweet smile. “For the pleasure of not discussing everything I own with you.”

Her pug, Matt Damon, waited by the bedroom door. She followed him into the hall, with Bert drifting beside her.

“Where are you going?” Bert asked.

“An estate appraisal on Bolivar. Don’t wait up.”

“I don’t sleep,” he said.

“That sounds like a personal problem.”

At the front door, she glanced back at her blush-and-cream sanctuary. She’d chosen every antique herself. Bert was the one addition she hadn’t asked for.

“Stay out of the bathroom.”

Bert raised both hands. “Sacred ground. I remember.”

“See that you do.”

She loaded her bags into Jared Leto, her light-blue Bronco, and settled Matt Damon in his padded passenger-seat box. By the time they boarded the Bolivar ferry, she was twisting her long highlighted brown hair off her sticky neck and regretting leaving the top down.

Then Matt Damon growled.

Beyond the safety chain stood a barefoot man in dripping clothes. One foot faded before it reached the deck. A ferry worker walked past without a glance.

Everly looked away before the man could catch her watching.

“I see him,” she murmured to the pug. “We’re not making friends.”

The horn sounded. She glanced up as the man raised a wet hand and vanished.

The woman in the next car was staring at her.

“Talking to my dog.” Everly gave her a quick smile. At least that part was true.

Once off the ferry, she drove to the Ashworth house, three stories of glass and cedar shake above the beach. Hydrangeas crowded the front path. She could have killed those in a weekend.

She was heading straight to Beau’s after the appraisal, so she’d asked Mrs. Ashworth whether she could bring her pug. Permission had been granted. Good behavior, unfortunately, was still under negotiation.

She parked on the shell drive, slung her purse over her shoulder, and opened the passenger door. Before meeting her client, she needed the lint roller. Half the dog was on her cream trousers.

Matt Damon spotted a seagull.

He launched himself out of the Bronco before she could catch him.

“Matt Damon!”

Everly hurried after him, sandals slipping on the shell path, purse banging against her hip. She still had the lint roller in her hand.

“Cheese and rice—come back here!”

The gull lifted off. The pug plunged into the hydrangeas.

She bent into the flowers and scooped him up. Damp mulch smeared across her cream trousers as he scrambled against her, and her hair fell over her shoulder.

Straight onto the lint roller.

“Oh, no. No, no.”

She tried to shift the dog under one arm. The roller tugged at her scalp. She stopped, head tipped sideways, the muddy pug pressed against the blouse she had chosen so carefully.

“Miss Fox?”

A woman stood on the porch with a coffee cup. Silver hair swept neatly back, crisp white linen, turquoise earrings. Not so much as a leaf attached to her.

Everly attempted to straighten. Her hair pulled.

“Yes. Good morning. I’m here for the appraisal.”

She had meant to offer her hand. It was holding a lint roller fastened to her head.

The woman set down her cup and came down the steps.

“Hold still, honey.”

Everly stood there while her client gently peeled her hair off the sticky paper.

“I’m usually much more organized than this.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Heat climbed into Everly’s face. Then she caught the woman’s smile.

“Mrs. Ashworth?”

“Bitsy, please. Mrs. Ashworth was my mother-in-law, and that woman was a menace. I’d rather not be confused with her.”

A tall, stooped man appeared in the doorway, wearing a cardigan despite the heat. He surveyed the flower bed, then the pug tucked under Everly’s arm.

“Did she say her dog’s name was Fifty Cent?” he asked at a volume that suggested he considered himself to be whispering.

“Matt Damon, Chester.” Bitsy led Everly back up the steps, then patted his arm. “Go on back to your crossword. I’ve got this.”

He wandered inside, apparently satisfied.

“Don’t mind him,” Bitsy said. “Hearing aid’s been in the shop three weeks. Man’s convinced half the Gulf Coast is speaking in code.”

Everly laughed.

Bitsy stepped aside. “Come in before you melt. I’ve made sweet tea.”

“Let me grab my work bag,” Everly said.

She returned to the Bronco with the pug tucked against her, put away the lint roller, and retrieved her tote.

“No rematch,” she told him, closing the door.

Before she began work, Everly slipped off the ring and tucked it into her purse. The iron dulled more than voices. Without it, she could sometimes sense what lingered around an old object.

Inside, Everly set down her bags and opened her appraisal binder.

She cataloged the silver and photographed a set of hand-painted china, turning each piece carefully to check its marks and condition. Bitsy stayed nearby with her sweet tea.

“Do you need me to stop talking so you can work?” Bitsy asked.

“No. I can read the mark. I can’t get your family’s history from it.”

Bitsy drew her chair closer. Everly turned to a fresh page in her binder. “Tell me what you know about the set.”

A grandfather clock held Everly’s attention longer. She leaned closer to study the carved moon phases, then stepped back for a photograph. Beautiful work, but she’d want a better look at the movement before settling on an estimate.

This was the part she loved: the worn arm of a chair, an old repair carefully made. Evidence that someone had wanted a thing to last.

Occasionally, she felt more than the workmanship could tell her. Warmth lingered around a well-loved rocking chair. An old brooch could leave her with a sadness that didn’t belong to her.

She’d learned to let those impressions pass without putting them in an appraisal report.

By the time they finished that morning’s appraisal work, Matt Damon had settled on the shaded porch steps.

Around noon, Bitsy walked her back onto the porch. Her gaze dropped to Everly's left ring finger.

"You're not married," Bitsy said.

"No, ma'am."

"Boyfriend?"

"Also no, ma'am." Everly nodded toward the pug on the steps. "Just me and him."

"Well, you ought to get yourself over to Galveston. The Hendersons, the Whitmores, the Corderos. All those families, and surely somebody's raised a decent man."

"The Corderos have grown sons. The Whitmores—" Bitsy paused. "No, wait. One of theirs is married now. Or divorced. I'd have to ask."

"Please don't ask on my account." Everly lifted a hand before Bitsy could continue.

"It wouldn't be any trouble," Bitsy assured her.

That was exactly what Everly was afraid of.

Everly shifted her tote higher. "Come on, Mattipoo." She collected him, and Bitsy followed them to the edge of the porch.

"Y'all be careful out there. They're saying there's something brewing in the Gulf."

Everly glanced toward the water. The sky was blue and cloudless. So it had been when the dripping man raised his hand on the ferry.

"I'll keep an eye on it," she said.

She wished she'd looked long enough to know

whether he'd been waving—or trying to get her attention.

2



Beau's house stood on pilings at the end of a shell road, its turquoise-green siding set off by hot-pink shutters and cream trim. String lights looped around the porch railing. Beside the stairs, a wooden sign read GALVESTON OR BUST in letters he'd painted slightly crooked on purpose.

His grass-green, glitter-painted El Camino gleamed below the house. Everly had named it Mark Ruffalo after the actor who played the Hulk. Beau refused to call it anything but Hulk.

Her cousin Beau waited on the porch in a pale pink linen shirt, sleeves rolled neatly below his elbows, and tailored white shorts. His light brown hair, nearly dirty blond, was swept back with just enough care to look effortless. Against his light, perpetual tan, his blue-green eyes looked especially bright.

"There she is!" he hollered before she'd cut the engine. "My favorite little liar."

Everly tipped her face up toward him. "I've never lied to you in my life."

Beau spread his hands. "You told me two weeks ago you'd think about getting bangs. I've been living in suspense ever since."

He came down the steps and pulled her into a hug that smelled of sunscreen and tequila.

"Still thinking," she said.

"Well, think faster." He peered into the Bronco. "And there's Mattalicious."

Everly opened the passenger door, and Beau scooped Matt Damon out of his seat before reaching for her overnight bag with his free hand.

It matched his own, one of the almost-designer bags they'd bought together. Beautiful shape, convincing hardware, and a price that had allowed them to remain enthusiastic about the purchase afterward.

"Still looks expensive," Beau said.

"Then don't tell anyone what we paid," Everly said.

Beau pressed a hand to his chest. "I have a reputation to protect."

Beau headed toward the stairs with the dog and her bag. "Come inside. Tell me everything."

Everly followed him upstairs with her purse and work tote.

Inside, shells crowded the shelves and windowsills, and a disco ball hung in the kitchen. Beau had never explained that particular decorating decision. She had never asked him to reconsider it.

The refrigerator was covered in photographs of the two of them going back a decade. Everly paused at one.

“I should have let you talk me out of that dress.”

Beau glanced at the photograph. “I tried. You said the fringe needed to be seen in motion.”

“It did.”

“And now we have photographic evidence,” he said.

Beau set her overnight bag down and lowered Matt Damon to the floor. The pug headed straight into the kitchen.

Medical journals were stacked beside Beau’s laptop on the counter. Between the beach house, the clothes, and the margaritas, people sometimes forgot he was a pharmacist. Everly had heard enough of his patient calls to know how quickly he could put the theatrics aside when someone needed him.

“You didn’t tell me you were working today.” She nudged the journals with one finger.

“I finished at noon. A man in Amarillo tried to convince me his cardiologist was wrong about his blood thinners because his cousin read something on the internet.”

“An impressive set of credentials.”

“I earned this.” Beau took the tequila out of the cabinet.

Beau brought down two handblown margarita glasses, their broad bowls edged in cobalt blue. Everly loved their satisfying weight and the generous amount of margarita they held.

She reached for her favorite.

“That one holds more,” Beau said.

“I know.”

He slid it toward her. “Family gets the good glass.”

Everly set her bags beside the overnight bag while he mixed their margaritas. He salted her glass generously, exactly the way she liked it, and handed it over.

She followed him onto the back deck, where they could watch the tide come in.

The back porch caught enough breeze to lift Everly’s hair off her neck. Beyond the railing, sunlight flashed across the Gulf, and she could hear the waves breaking along the beach.

Everly settled into a cream wicker chair, slipped off her sandals, and stretched her toes against the warm boards.

Beau glanced down. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“I intend to.”

She tasted lime, tequila, and the generous salt along the rim. For the first time that day, nobody needed an estimate, an explanation, or an apology for her dog.

Matt Damon settled beneath her chair as Beau took the other.

“So,” he said, “tell me about this estate. Was it as boring as it sounded on the phone?”

“Gorgeous house. Beautiful antiques. The wife noticed my empty ring finger and started listing families with available men.”

Beau turned toward her, his interest considerably improved. “Ooh. Names.”

“She hadn’t quite sorted out who was single.”

Beau waved that aside. “A minor detail.”

“She offered to find out.”

“And you gave her your number?” Beau asked.

“She already has my number. I’m beginning to regret putting it on the invoice.”

Beau laughed, and Everly settled farther into the cushion. Bitsy had been perfectly kind. That was the trouble with these conversations. By the time you realized someone was arranging your future, you’d already accepted their sweet tea.

“You know I fully support you marrying rich and letting me live in the pool house,” Beau said.

“You have a beach house.”

“And I’d like options.” Beau lifted his glass toward her.

“You don’t even like rich, snobby people. You said the last one you met looked like she charged admission to her personality.”

“I’d hate it beautifully, from a lounge chair, with a drink in my hand. Don’t take that away from me.”

Everly was laughing when her phone broke in with “Baby Got Back.”

Beau stopped with his glass halfway to his mouth.

“Your sister,” Beau said.

Everly sighed. “My sister.”

She pulled the phone from her trouser pocket. She'd assigned Emberly that song years ago. At the time, they'd thought it was hilarious. Unfortunately for everyone within hearing distance, they still did.

Everly tapped the bull-riding video Emberly had sent. A cowboy clung to a bucking bull for several impressive seconds before being thrown into the dirt. He scrambled up and ran for the fence.

Messages crowded beneath the video. Emberly had apparently watched it forty times and needed Everly's immediate opinion on whether he was husband material or just gorgeous.

"Is he alive?" Beau asked, leaning toward her screen.

"He gets up."

"Promising start."

She typed, Later. I'm on Beau's porch, and set the phone beside her glass.

It buzzed again before she'd taken her hand away.

Beau glanced at the screen. "What now?"

"She says to show you."

"Well, obviously."

Everly handed it over. He watched the video, his margarita forgotten in his other hand. When it ended, he tapped it again.

Beau tilted the screen for a better look. "Oh, those jeans are doing excellent work."

"Please don't encourage her," Everly said.

“I’m supporting her research.” He kept his eyes on the screen.

He began typing.

Everly reached for her margarita. Between the two of them, she expected to receive a wedding invitation before either had learned the man’s name.

By evening, Everly’s glass held a little melted ice and a crescent of salt she’d missed. Beau had finally returned her phone, though Emberly was still sending him messages, too.

The sky softened to pink and lavender. Below the porch, waves folded onto the beach, their steady rush audible whenever Beau paused for breath.

Everly let her head rest against the cushion. She’d laughed enough that her cheeks ached.

Beau came out with another round of margaritas and set hers within reach. The string lights glowed above them.

“This,” Everly said, “was an excellent decision.”

“Coming here or letting me make the drinks?”

“Both.”

He settled into his chair and picked up his phone. For a moment, she watched the water while his thumb moved across the screen.

“Huh.”

Everly glanced over. “What?”

Beau frowned at his screen. “They’ve got something out in the Gulf.”

“Bitsy mentioned that too.”

He opened the weather update. “Says it might not make landfall. Might reach category one if it does.”

Everly lifted her head from the cushion.

“Should we be worried?”

“Girl, it’s September.” Beau’s familiar Texas drawl lengthened the reassurance. “There’s always something out in the Gulf in September.”

Beau set his phone on the table and reached for his margarita.

“Worst case, we get a good storm to watch from the porch. I’ve got candles. I’ve got wine. I’ve got you.”

“That’s not a survival plan, Beau.”

“It’s a vibe, and that’s better.” He said it with such confidence that she nearly let it stand.

She laughed despite herself. Beau lifted his glass toward hers, and she leaned over to meet it with a soft clink.

Beau had more experience with storms on the coast. The update hadn’t sounded urgent, and nothing about the evening felt threatening. Salt air cooled her skin. Matt Damon snored beside her chair. Beau was already telling her about something that had happened at work, using his free hand to demonstrate a woman’s spectacular displeasure.

Her phone lay within reach on the little turquoise table.

She left it facedown.

3



Everly woke to the sound of the porch lights popping.

A sharp electrical snap came from outside, and the faint light around the curtains vanished. For a moment, she lay still, trying to place the unfamiliar room.

Beau's guest bed. Matt Damon against her hip.

Then the house shuddered.

She sat up, clutching the sheet. Wind pressed against the windows with a sustained, rising howl. Something rattled outside, stopped, then struck the siding hard enough to make her flinch.

An emergency alert blared from Beau's room.

Everly pushed the sheet aside and reached for the dog. He came willingly, stiff against her chest. She carried him into the hall, feeling her way along the wall with her free hand.

"Beau?"

"In here!"

His voice came from the front room. She knew his irritated voice, his offended voice, and the one he used when a waiter said they were out of something he'd already decided to order.

This was none of those.

A flashlight beam crossed the floor. Beau stood beside the window in a T-shirt and boxers, his phone in one hand. He barely glanced at her before turning back toward the road below.

Everly stepped closer.

“What’s happening?” Everly asked.

Beau angled the flashlight toward the road.

Water covered the shell and gravel, flowing around the mailbox posts and across the drive. A dark piece of debris swept through the beam and disappeared beneath the house.

Everly moved closer to the glass. She couldn’t see where the road ended anymore.

“They upgraded it overnight,” Beau said. “It wasn’t supposed to get this bad.”

Rain struck the window in a sudden, hard burst. He stepped back, then checked his phone again, holding it close enough that Everly could see his thumb trembling against the screen.

“How long has the water been coming up?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I woke up when the power went.”

Neither of them had been watching. They’d been asleep while the road disappeared.

Everly swallowed and glanced toward the hallway. Her clothes were in the guest room. Her purse and work tote were where she’d left them.

“We need to leave,” Everly said.

Beau looked back through the window.

“Beau.”

“I know.” Beau’s voice was flat.

He lowered the flashlight. She touched his arm, and his gaze finally settled on her.

Everly kept her hand on his arm. “Get dressed. I’ll get my things.”

Everly carried Matt Damon back to the guest room and settled him in his travel bag while she pulled on her jeans and a T-shirt.

She swept her toiletries into the overnight bag, pushed the remaining clothes down around them, and tugged at the zipper. Fabric caught in the teeth.

“Biscuits!”

She pulled it free with fingers that wouldn’t quite steady.

“I can’t find my sandals!” Beau shouted.

“Wear another pair,” Everly called back.

“The tan ones. With the little gold buckle.” Beau sounded as though identifying them might make them appear.

Everly stopped with the bag half-zipped. Yesterday, she would have understood the distinction perfectly.

“Your feet are going to get wet anyway. Find other shoes, Beau. Faster.”

“I’m looking!”

She finished closing the overnight bag. Across the hall, Beau had managed shorts but was searching beneath a chair with his flashlight.

Everly glanced around his room. A pair of navy canvas slip-ons sat beside the dresser, one tipped onto its side.

Everly pointed. “There. Those.”

He swung the flashlight toward them.

“Oh.”

She picked them up and handed them over.

“I may put that on your gravestone.”

Beau looked up. “What?”

“‘Oh.’ Right after I found the shoes beside your dresser.”

A startled laugh escaped him as he shoved his feet into them. Then another gust struck the house.

Both of them went still.

Beau grabbed his bag.

“I’m ready.”

Everly slid her feet into her sneakers and gathered her purse, work tote, and the dog’s travel bag. Beau took her overnight bag with his own.

At the top of the stairs, she stopped.

The flashlight caught water moving between the pilings. It curled around the El Camino’s tires and washed beneath the Bronco. Upstairs, the floors were still dry. Down here, they were running out of time.

“We need to move the cars. Now,” Everly said.

Beau started down ahead of her. She followed with one hand on the railing, Matt Damon pressed against her side. Wind drove rain beneath the porch roof, soaking her T-shirt before she reached the bottom.

The water was warm as it flooded her sneakers and tugged at her ankles. A floating

clump of ants drifted through the flashlight beam. She stepped wide of it, holding the dog's bag higher as she waded toward the Bronco.

Beside her, Beau's navy slip-ons disappeared beneath the surface.

Neither of them said anything about the shoes.

He hurried to the El Camino, shoved his bag inside, and climbed behind the wheel.

Everly heard a click.

Then another.

"Beau?"

He tried again.

Another click. The engine stayed silent.

Everly opened the Bronco's rear door and set Matt Damon's travel bag on the seat before dropping her purse and work tote onto the floor.

Beau still hadn't gotten out.

She waded back to the El Camino and pulled his door open. He sat with one hand on the key, staring at the dashboard.

"Beau. We're taking mine."

"He started yesterday."

His voice nearly disappeared beneath the rain.

She looked past him at the familiar seat, the steering wheel beneath his other hand. He'd been driving this car since he got his license. She couldn't count how many times she'd ridden beside him.

“I know.” She touched his wrist. “But we have to go.”

For a moment, he didn’t move. Then he took the key out.

He hauled their overnight bags from the passenger side while Everly hurried back to the Bronco. She moved his padded car seat to the back, lifted Matt Damon into it, and fastened his harness with wet fingers.

Beau shoved the bags into the back and climbed in beside her.

Everly pulled her door shut. Rain hammered the roof she’d put up before bed. She pressed the brake and pushed the start button.

The engine caught.

She closed her eyes for half a second.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Beau twisted toward the back seat.

“Matt Damon’s secure?”

“Yes,” Everly said.

She shifted into reverse. The headlights swept across the pilings as she backed out, both hands tight on the wheel.

Beau watched the El Camino until she turned onto the road.

The wipers cleared the windshield just long enough for Everly to find the road before rain covered it again.

A gust shoved the Bronco sideways. She corrected, easing off the accelerator.

Beau braced one hand against the dash.

“Little left.”

“I see it.”

She didn’t, quite. The edge of the pavement had disappeared beneath the water, and she was following the strip between the roadside posts.

An oncoming truck emerged through the rain. Its headlights filled the windshield, then swept past, leaving her blinking into the dark.

Beside a shuttered bait shop, a man stood in the flooded ditch.

She caught his face in her headlights, his soaked clothes, one arm raised toward the truck. He waved harder as it passed him.

“Did you see that?” Everly asked.

Beau looked toward her. “See what?”

“The man.”

She eased her foot off the gas. Beau leaned forward, peering through the windshield.

“Where?”

“By the bait shop. He was—”

She glanced toward the passenger window.

The shop was already slipping behind them. The ditch lay empty in the wash of her taillights.

“He was right there,” she said.

She brought her eyes back to the road and tightened her grip.

There was nowhere to turn around that she could see.

Maybe he’d climbed out of the ditch. Gone behind the building to get out of the wind.

She wanted to believe that.

She kept seeing his raised hand.

“The landing’s about three minutes from here,” Beau said.

Everly watched the stretch of road in her headlights. Three minutes. She could do three minutes.

Then the oak fell across the road.

One instant the road was clear. Then branches swept across it, leaves flashing silver in the rain.

“Everly!” Beau shouted.

She hit the brakes and pulled the wheel right.

The Bronco slid. Her seat belt caught hard across her chest as the rear swung sideways, carrying them toward the ditch.

She turned the wheel back. A tire caught the edge of the pavement, jolting them onto the shoulder.

Branches scraped along Beau’s door.

Then they stopped.

Everly held the brake down. Her breath came in short, painful pulls, and she couldn’t make her hands loosen.

The trunk lay across both lanes.

Beau turned toward her. “Everly. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head.

“Say it.” His voice was firm now.

“No. I’m okay.”

Beau twisted in his seat. Matt Damon barked at him, sharp and furious.

Beau let out a breath. “Oh, thank God.”

Everly looked toward the ditch. Between its flooded edge and the oak's outer branches, a narrow strip of shoulder remained.

"I think I can get around."

Beau faced forward.

"Okay."

She eased off the brake.

Twigs dragged across the windshield. She kept the Bronco close to the fallen crown, watching the ground beside it, waiting for the sickening drop of a wheel leaving the shoulder.

"Little more," Beau said. "You've got room."

The last branch bent against his window and slipped free.

She steered back onto the pavement.

Only then did she realize her teeth were chattering, though the air in the Bronco was warm.

They continued toward the ferry landing, leaving the fallen oak behind them. After passing two abandoned cars, Everly spotted the floodlights through the rain.

"There," Beau said.

Everly could see the boat, still at the landing. Cars already filled much of its deck, and a crew member in a rain slicker stood beside the loading ramp, looking straight at her and waving her forward.

She lowered her window an inch.

"Last ferry!" he shouted. "Move!"

Beau's hand closed around the door handle.

"Go, Everly."

She pressed the accelerator.

The crew member kept waving her on, then stepped clear of her path. She lined the Bronco up with the ramp, staring at the wet steel ahead.

Its outer edge had begun to lift, but still met the landing.

“Go!” Beau shouted.

The front tires hit the ramp hard. Everly’s teeth snapped together, and Matt Damon let out a piercing bark as the Bronco lurched up the wet steel and onto the deck.

A second crew member stood ahead of her parking space and thrust both palms toward her, signaling her to stop.

She braked until the Bronco came to a complete stop.

For a moment, she heard only the wipers scraping.

Then Beau said, “Park. Put it in park.”

She looked down at the gear selector and did.

The ferry attendant hurried along the Bronco’s side and shoved a wheel chock behind the rear tire. Behind them, the ramp lifted clear of the landing.

Only then did the ferry shift beneath them. Beyond Beau’s window, the landing began to slide away.

“We made it,” he said.

His voice broke on the last word.

Everly turned toward him. He was looking back at the shore, rainwater running from his hair onto his collar.

She reached across the console and took his hand.

Neither of them spoke as Bolivar disappeared into the rain.

4



Everly shut off the engine. Rain drummed against the roof, and beneath the tires, the ferry lifted and settled. She loosened her grip on the wheel one finger at a time.

Behind her, Matt Damon's barking dwindled to an occasional grumble.

"Hulk hates getting wet," Beau said.

"Mark Ruffalo," Everly corrected.

Beau turned his head. "Everly."

"I named him," she said.

"And I've spent years correcting that mistake." Beau's familiar exasperation was beginning to return.

She looked over. Beau was still watching the shore through the rain, but the corner of his mouth had lifted.

She might have argued further if her bladder hadn't abruptly reminded her of every margarita she'd consumed on his porch. She'd rushed out of the house without using the bathroom. Now that they weren't actively trying to escape rising water, it seemed she had approximately thirty seconds to address that oversight.

"I have to pee."

Beau turned toward her. “Well, we’ve finally found something you don’t need my help with.”

“Don’t get comfortable. The night’s still young.”

She opened her door and stepped onto the deck. Her wet jeans clung to her legs, and her sneakers squelched as she hurried to the rear door.

She clipped Matt Damon’s leash to his harness before unfastening him from his padded seat. Wrapping him in the towel beside it, she lifted him against her chest and kept the leash looped around her wrist.

“Come on. We’re making this quick.”

The rain had eased, though water still dripped from the stair railing. She carried him up to the passenger deck and went straight to the restroom.

Inside, she set him on the towel at her feet, keeping hold of his leash.

A few minutes later, she emerged with him bundled against her again. One crisis resolved. Her clothes were still soaked, her cousin’s car was still sitting in rising water, and she had no idea where they were going to sleep, but at least she could think about those things without crossing her legs.

On her way toward the stairs, she paused at the rail.

She always looked for dolphins on the ferry to and from Beau’s. Sometimes they surfaced beside the boat, close enough to follow the sleek

curve of their backs before they slipped beneath the water again.

Tonight, the lights of Galveston blurred through the rain ahead. Below her, there was only dark water and foam.

Matt Damon began to wriggle inside the towel.

“Hold still,” Everly murmured.

He planted his paws against her forearm and pushed. She bent to lower him before he could launch himself out of her arms.

His feet had barely touched the deck when a gull landed on the rail.

Matt Damon lunged. Everly held on to the leash, but he doubled back around her legs. She stepped over the slack just as he darted between her feet.

Her knee hit first. Then both palms.

For a moment, she stayed on all fours, her backside in the air and her wet hair hanging in her mouth. The leash had one ankle hitched to the other. She couldn’t even fall down properly.

“Cheese and rice.” She spat out a strand of hair. “Matt Damon, I swear—”

A pair of work boots stopped beside her hand.

Of course. A witness.

She tried to bring one foot beneath her. The leash tightened, and she had to put her hand straight back into the puddle.

“Hold on.”

The man crouched beside her and caught the leash near the pug's harness. "Your ankle's caught."

"Yes. I'm enjoying that part."

He lifted the loop clear of her sneaker. She pushed her hair out of her face with the back of her wrist and finally looked at him.

Dark hair, wet and pushed back. Blue eyes. A soaked T-shirt stretched across shoulders that seemed unnecessarily broad under the circumstances. A coil of rope hung over one shoulder.

Of course he was gorgeous.

"How much of that did you see?"

"From the bird."

Wonderful.

His gaze dropped to her hands. "Are you hurt?"

"My knee." She hated admitting it. "And these sting."

She turned her palms up. He looked without grabbing them, then offered his hand.

"Let's get you up slowly."

She took it. His fingers closed around hers, warm despite the rain. She planted her good foot and rose, trying very hard to make this part of the introduction look intentional.

Pain caught beneath her kneecap. Her breath hitched.

His other hand steadied her elbow. "Easy."

She stopped close enough for his wet shirt to brush her arm. The warmth of his hand felt embarrassingly good.

He glanced down at her knee.

“Can you stand on it?”

She tested it more carefully. It hurt, but it held.

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

She looked back up. He was watching her face now, the amusement softened by concern.

“Yes.” Everly met his eyes. “You can let go.”

He eased his hand away but stayed beside her while the ferry rolled beneath them.

Everly bent carefully and scooped the pug against her chest.

The man passed her the leash.

She looped the leash securely around her wrist.

The man shifted the rope higher on his shoulder.

“You two doing okay otherwise?”

“We’re here.”

His smile faded a little. “That bad?”

Everly rubbed her thumb over the wet leash. “We left my cousin’s car under his house. The water was already coming up around it. Then a tree fell across the road.”

“While you were driving?”

“Right in front of us. We got around it, but we nearly missed the ferry.”

His mouth eased into a small smile now that she was standing safely beside him.

"Oh, I saw you come aboard."

Everly looked at him. "Did you."

"Hard to miss. Your tires hit the ramp, somebody shouted, and every head on deck turned."

Wonderful. An audience for both arrivals.

Everly lifted her chin. "I was told to go."

"You certainly did," he said.

"And then I stopped."

"We all appreciated that part." His delivery was so solemn that it took her a second.

She narrowed her eyes. He was enjoying this far too much.

"Was there an announcement, or did everyone just gather to discuss my driving?"

"The crew's been talking about the last car aboard," he said.

Despite herself, she laughed. It hurt a little less than remembering the tree.

"We made it," she said.

His teasing softened. "You did."

The man nodded toward the other end of the deck. Another man stood beside a stack of crates, pulling a strap tight.

"That's my brother, Alex. He works around the terminal. I came down to help him and Dane with the emergency loading."

Everly looked back at the rope over his shoulder. That explained why he'd been out here.

“Santiago Cordero,” he said. “Everybody calls me Santi.”

Cordero.

Of course. Bitsy’s list had apparently followed her onto the ferry.

“Everly.”

His gaze stayed on her face, waiting.

“Fox,” she added, then adjusted Matt Damon higher against her chest. “And this is Matt Damon.”

Santi looked at the pug.

“Matt Damon.”

“The whole name,” Everly said.

A slow smile spread across his face. “Does he answer to it?”

“When it suits him.”

“Like the actor?” Santi asked.

“Yes. There’s a story, but I’ve told it in much better condition.”

“I’d still listen.”

He said it easily, without rushing to fill the silence afterward. Everly looked up at him.

For the first time since waking, she wasn’t thinking about getting somewhere else.

Then a cold trickle slipped beneath her collar and ran between her shoulder blades.

“I’d need dry clothes and something stronger than ferry air.”

“That can probably be arranged,” Santi said.

“Santi!”

Alex stood beside the crates, holding the loose end of a strap.

“Dane needs us to finish securing these.”

Santi raised a hand in acknowledgment, then turned back to her.

“I’d better get back to it,” he said.

“Go. I’ve already interrupted enough.”

“This was a better interruption.”

She felt a smile starting and tried to contain it. Judging by his expression, she hadn’t been particularly successful.

“Thank you,” she said. “For helping me.”

“You’re welcome.”

His attention dropped briefly to her knee.

“Take your time on the stairs. They’re slick.”

“I’ve demonstrated my technique enough for one night.”

“I wasn’t going to say it.”

“You were thinking it.”

His grin returned. “A little.”

He stepped away, then looked back.

“Good meeting you, Everly Fox.”

Her name sounded very nice in his voice. She would have preferred to discover that with dry hair and both knees functioning.

“You too.”

He joined Alex and lifted the coil from his shoulder. Everly watched him feed the rope around the load, his hands moving with practiced ease.

She lingered a moment longer than she needed to, then turned toward the stairs.

5



Everly turned sideways on the stairs, keeping one hand on the slick railing and the dog tucked against her other arm. Each bend of her knee brought a fresh sting. She descended slowly, watching where she placed her feet while wind pressed her wet shirt against her back.

Below, headlights shone across the rain-darkened deck. Engines idled around her, and somewhere near the bow, a crew member called instructions she couldn't make out.

Beau stood beside the Bronco, talking to a passenger in a rain jacket.

"—and he's still under the house. I couldn't even get him started."

The man's reply disappeared beneath the rumble of an engine.

"Since I got my license," Beau answered. "You don't just replace that."

Everly slowed. His hair lay flattened against his forehead, and he'd folded his arms tightly over his soaked T-shirt. She knew he was cold, but she also recognized the way he was holding himself together. The El Camino had carried them through years of late nights, loud music, and plans that seemed excellent until morning.

Leaving it behind had cost him more than she'd had time to think about.

"Beau."

He turned toward her, his gaze dropping to the way she favored one leg.

"What happened?" Beau asked.

"I fell."

"Where?"

"Upstairs. Leash. Seagull. A series of poor decisions."

He stepped away from the Bronco. "Are you hurt?"

"My knee hurts. I can walk."

She shifted her weight to demonstrate and immediately regretted it.

Beau caught her elbow.

"Convincing." Beau kept hold of her elbow.

"It's going to bruise. That's all."

He stayed beside her while she found a comfortable way to stand, then studied her face. She should have known better than to approach him before arranging it into something neutral.

His eyes narrowed.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," Beau said.

"Beau."

He tipped his head, waiting. They'd been doing this since childhood. Usually, whoever broke first supplied enough information to regret it.

Everly gave in. "A man helped me up."

His attention sharpened.

“Ah.” Beau drew the syllable out.

“Don’t.”

He held up his free hand. “I haven’t said anything.”

“You said ‘ah.’”

“And apparently it was very revealing.”

She glanced toward the stairs before she could stop herself.

Beau followed the look. When he turned back, the corner of his mouth lifted, and she was glad enough to see it that she almost forgave what she knew was coming.

“Oh, honey.”

“I fell down. I didn’t get engaged.”

“Well, thank goodness. I’d hate to miss that because I was downstairs in wet shorts.”

A laugh escaped her. Beau smiled properly this time, though his hand remained steady beneath her elbow.

For a moment, standing beside the Bronco with him, she could almost believe the worst of the night was behind them.

An older Black man in a soaked flannel shirt passed between the parked cars. He paused near the stern rail, looked toward the water, then turned back.

Beau lifted a hand.

“Hey, Chubbs. Come say hello.”

Recognition crossed the man’s face. He changed direction and approached them.

“You know him?” Everly asked.

“Sure,” Beau said. “I see him around the beach.”

Chubbs stopped beside Beau, rain dripping from his shirt. Beau glanced down at his own soaked clothes.

“I usually make more of an effort.”

Chubbs looked him over. One corner of his mouth lifted.

“Thank you.” Beau glanced down at himself. “I was hoping nobody would notice.”

Everly smiled and eased her hip against Jared Leto’s door. Her knee was beginning to stiffen.

Chubbs signed something. Beau watched his hands, then shook his head.

“You’ll have to help me with that one.”

Chubbs pointed toward the water, then back toward Bolivar. Beau followed the gesture.

“We came from over there too,” Beau told him. “Left in a hurry.”

Chubbs nodded. For a moment, both men looked toward the shore they’d left behind.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Everly glanced up to see Santi coming down beside another man, the two of them talking as they descended.

“Alex has the docking,” the other man said as they reached the bottom. “Let’s keep this end clear.”

Santi noticed them beside Jared Leto and came over with him.

Everly straightened before remembering her knee.

Beau noticed. Of course he noticed.

"Ah," he said softly.

Everly lowered her voice. "You've used that one already."

"Still useful."

Santi's gaze settled on her. "How's the leg?"

"I got down the stairs without providing another show."

"Good."

His smile lingered before he turned toward Beau.

"My cousin, Beau," Everly said. "Beau, this is Santi."

"The helpful man." Beau offered his hand.

"Beau." Everly put a warning into his name.

Her cousin widened his eyes. "What? You said he helped."

Santi shook his hand, looking amused. "Good to meet you."

"Likewise."

Everly hoped her cousin appreciated the restraint it was taking not to stomp on his foot.

Santi gestured toward the man beside him. "And this is Dane."

"Captain Dane Rivas," the man said, offering his hand to Beau. "Everybody still breathing?"

"At considerable expense," Beau said.

Dane laughed. "Glad you made it."

He had an easy smile and dark eyes that stayed on Beau's face while they shook hands. Beau's answering smile was one Everly knew

quite well. Apparently, wet shorts weren't going to prevent him from making an impression.

Dane turned to her.

"Everly Fox," she said, shifting the dog securely against her before taking his hand.

Dane looked at her. "You were driving?"

"Yes."

"Nice work getting aboard," Dane said.

"I'd have preferred a less memorable entrance."

"You got your people here. That's what matters."

She liked him for that. Beside her, Beau seemed to like him for several additional reasons.

She turned back to Santi. "Have you heard anything about the roads on the island?"

"Not enough to tell you what's clear." His expression grew more attentive. "Where are you trying to get?"

"That's the part we haven't worked out," Beau said.

Everly glanced toward the approaching lights. "We were concentrating on getting here. We need to find somewhere to stay."

"Somewhere with power," Beau added.

She reached for her phone. Getting across the water had felt like the whole plan until now.

"We need a hotel," she said. "Somewhere here."

Beau leaned toward the screen. "And vacancies."

“Preferably,” Everly said. “I understand how hotels work, Beau.”

“I’m establishing our requirements.”

She opened a search, her wet thumb slipping against the glass. Several listings appeared, each with a cheerful photograph of a room occupied by people having a considerably better night.

“I’ll call.”

“Pick one close,” Beau said.

“I’m trying.”

“And make sure they take dogs,” he added.

Everly lowered the phone and looked at him.

“Would you like to do this?”

Beau stepped back. “No. You’re doing beautifully.”

“Then let me get through one phone call before you request room service.”

Santi’s mouth twitched. Everly had almost forgotten he was standing there, which was impressive considering how much she’d noticed him upstairs.

“We don’t need anything fancy,” Everly said.

“We need dry sheets and a working bathroom,” Beau replied. “I’m prepared to admire those as luxury amenities.”

She tapped the first number.

“You might have trouble finding a room,” Santi said.

Everly looked up. “Why?”

“We’ve been hearing they’re booked up around here. People getting out of Bolivar, people who’ve lost power.”

She stared at the cheerful hotel photograph on her screen. Of course. They weren't the only ones who'd arrived wet, exhausted, and without a plan.

"All of them?" Everly asked.

"I can't tell you every hotel's full. But I wouldn't count on finding something close."

Beau leaned toward her phone.

"So much for our extensive requirements."

Everly kept the phone in her hand. "We can still call."

"We can," he agreed. "I'd just prefer not to spend the rest of the night touring parking lots."

"Neither would I."

"My parents have spare rooms," Santi said. "And a generator. You two could stay there tonight."

Everly lowered the phone.

"Your parents won't mind?" Everly asked.

"No. I'll call them."

Beau looked at Santi, then at her.

Everly looked back at Santi. "Do you actually have room for both of us? We don't want your parents hauling out an air mattress in the middle of the night."

Santi answered her directly. "There's room. Separate guest rooms. No air mattresses."

"And the dog?" Everly asked.

"He's welcome too," Santi said.

Santi took out his phone.

"Let me call my dad. You can hear him agree before you decide."

That helped. An actual conversation with the people whose house they'd be entering was considerably more reassuring than a handsome stranger promising spare beds.

Santi tapped his phone and lifted it to his ear.

"Dad? We're almost across. I've got two people with me who had to leave Bolivar. Can we put them up tonight?"

He listened, then glanced at Everly.

"And a small dog."

Whatever his father said made him smile.

"I'll let them know."

He switched to speakerphone and held it between them.

"You're welcome here," his father said, his voice steady and still a little thick with sleep. "Both of you. We've got room."

Everly leaned toward the phone. "Thank you. We're sorry it's so late."

"You got out safely. That's what matters. We'll see you shortly."

Santi ended the call. For a moment, she looked at the dark screen in his hand. The offer had become something she could picture now: a door opening, dry clothes, somewhere to set their bags.

She glanced at Beau.

"One night?"

"One night," he agreed. "I promise to be a delightful houseguest for at least the first six hours."

"You'll be asleep," Everly said.

“Exactly.”

Everly turned back to Santi. “Thank you. We’d appreciate it.”

“Of course.”

Beside him, Dane’s phone buzzed. He drew it from his jacket and checked the screen. His smile disappeared.

It was brief, but Everly caught the way his jaw tightened before he put the phone away.

Santi glanced at him. “Everything okay?”

Dane looked up. “Yeah. Just club stuff.”

His smile returned, though it didn’t quite settle.

“Let’s get everybody ready to unload.”

Chubbs lifted a hand toward Beau before moving back between the cars. Beau returned the wave, and Dane stepped away to speak to a crew member near the ramp.

Santi turned to Everly. “You’ll be off before me. I’ll send you the address. Once you’re clear of the unloading lane, find somewhere to pull over and I’ll meet you.”

She gave him her number. Her phone chimed a moment later.

“Got it.”

“Then you can follow me.”

“Think I can keep up?”

His eyes met hers. “After that entrance? I’m more concerned about you passing me.”

She laughed, and he smiled before heading toward his vehicle.

Everly opened the rear door and settled Matt Damon into his padded seat. She fastened his harness, checked the clip, then eased herself behind the wheel. Beau climbed in beside her.

The door shut out most of the wind. She sat for a breath with her hands resting on Jared Leto's steering wheel, grateful to have a destination.

Outside, the crew prepared the ramp. An attendant removed the wheel chock and moved clear.

When the ferry settled against the landing and the signal came, she was ready.

She drove off without hesitation, following the attendant's directions onto solid ground. Beyond the unloading lane, she found space to pull over.

Beau looked back toward the ferry, then down at the address on her phone.

"Separate guest rooms," he said.

Everly kept her eyes on the lane. "I heard him."

"I'm just saying. If we're making questionable decisions, this one has excellent amenities."

Headlights approached behind them. Santi pulled ahead, waited for her to acknowledge him, then led them away from the terminal.

Everly followed, watching his taillights through the rain.

For the first time that night, she knew where they were going.

6



At 2:12 in the morning, Santi's silver GMC turned into a driveway bordered by rain-battered rosebushes.

Everly followed him in, then eased her foot onto the brake.

"Oh," she said.

Beau lifted his head from the passenger window. "Oh, what?"

Then he saw the house.

Three stories of cream-colored Victorian rose beyond the windshield, with broad porches, tall windows, and a turret reaching into the dark. Palm fronds whipped above the front steps. Warm light shone through the downstairs windows, illuminating carved trim and columns she would have wanted to inspect even if she hadn't spent the past several hours trying to stay alive.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"You could've mentioned the mansion," Beau said.

"He said they had room," Everly said.

Beau stared through the windshield. "He undersold it."

Ahead of them, Santi climbed out of the truck. Somewhere along the drive, she'd privately

named it Sam Elliott. Silver, substantial, carrying a handsome man around Texas—it fit.

He approached her window as she lowered it.

"Everything all right?"

"We're adjusting our expectations," Beau said.

Santi glanced toward the house, then back at them. "Come on. Mom's waiting."

Of course she was. There were lights on, food waiting, people who had stayed awake because two strangers needed somewhere to sleep.

Everly suddenly felt every damp inch of her clothes.

She shut off Jared Leto and reached for her bag. Her fingers fumbled the strap twice before she got it over her shoulder.

Santi opened her door.

"Let me take that."

She handed him the bag, too tired to pretend it wasn't heavy.

Beau came around the Bronco with Matt Damon tucked against his chest. His usual running commentary had quieted on the drive, and now even he looked a little uncertain, standing in wet clothes at the foot of those grand steps.

The front door opened.

A silver-haired woman stood beneath the porch light, wearing slippers and a cardigan pulled over her nightclothes. One hand held the cardigan closed; the other beckoned them forward.

“Santiago, get them inside.” Her quiet voice carried easily down the steps.

“We’re coming, Mom.”

He rested a hand lightly against Everly’s back as they climbed the steps.

“This is my mother, Vanessa. Mom, this is Everly Fox, and her cousin, Beau.”

“Thank you for having us,” Everly said. “We’re sorry to keep you up.”

Vanessa took her cold hand between both of hers.

“Your father told me what happened,” she said to Santi, then turned back to Everly. “You don’t need to apologize. Come inside.”

Her gaze dropped to Beau’s arms.

“And who’s this?” Vanessa asked.

“Matt Damon,” Beau said.

Vanessa blinked, then laughed. The sound warmed her whole face.

“Well, he’s welcome too.”

Everly stepped through the doorway into warm air that smelled of chicken, garlic, and something gently simmering. After hours of wind and rain, the stillness inside made her realize how badly she was shaking.

A broad-built man approached from farther down the hall. His shirt was rumpled, his gray-streaked hair flattened on one side, but his smile was immediate.

“My dad, Ray,” Santi said.

“The voice on the phone,” Everly said.

“That’s me.” Ray shook her hand, then Beau’s. “Glad you made it.”

“Us too,” Beau said, with none of his usual embellishment.

Ray’s expression softened. “We’ll get you fed and settled.”

Vanessa handed Everly a towel. Santi set their bags beside the staircase. Everyone seemed to know what needed doing, and Everly was grateful enough that she nearly cried over the simple kindness.

She looked up instead.

The staircase curved through the foyer beneath a chandelier, its banister polished dark by generations of hands. Original heart-pine floors stretched into the adjoining rooms. Above the doorways, light caught in the ripples of old glass, and carved molding followed the high ceilings.

Everly’s eyes moved from one detail to another despite her exhaustion. So much had survived here. Nobody had stripped the woodwork or replaced those transoms with something easier to clean.

Under other circumstances, she would have had questions.

A great many questions.

Tonight, she just wanted somewhere to sit.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Santi asked quietly.

She glanced at him. “Ask me again after I’ve slept. I’ll probably be insufferable.”

His smile appeared slowly.

A young woman appeared in the kitchen doorway, barefoot, her hair gathered into a loose braid. She had a dish towel over one shoulder and the same blue eyes as Santi, though hers brightened considerably when she spotted Beau.

The young woman looked at Beau. “Well, hi.”

“This is my sister, Josie,” Santi said. “Josie, Everly and Beau.”

“Cousins,” Beau supplied, gesturing between himself and Everly.

Josie smiled. “Good to know.”

Everly glanced at him. Apparently, he had enough energy left for that.

From the sitting room, a young woman with dark hair lifted a hand from beneath a blanket. Her phone rested against her chest.

“My sister Cami,” Santi said. “Cami, Everly and Beau.”

“Hi.” Cami pushed herself upright and rubbed one eye. “I was trying to stay awake.”

“You made it,” Beau said. “I’m barely making it myself.”

Cami smiled.

“We’ll catch up tomorrow,” Santi told her. “Go get some sleep.”

“Everybody was supposed to go back to bed,” Vanessa said.

“I was checking the weather,” Josie told her.

“With your eyes closed?” Ray asked.

Josie gave her father a tired smile. “For a minute.”

Everly looked around at the slippers, the blanket, the tired faces. They had stayed awake expecting them, and now that everyone was safely inside, their weariness was beginning to show.

She knew how they felt. She was relieved enough to cry and too tired to explain why.

Something small bumped her ankle.

Everly looked down.

A tiny dog stood beside her shoe, wrapped in a blue fleece poncho. Only his head and skinny legs emerged, and one ear had folded backward beneath the collar.

He sniffed her wet shoe with considerable interest.

“Chaco,” Santi said. “Come here.”

Chaco ignored him.

“Somebody dressed appropriately,” Beau murmured.

Everly reached for Matt Damon, and Beau passed him over.

“Chaco, mijo.”

An older woman came from the kitchen and scooped the little dog up with practiced ease. She was small, with gray hair swept back from her face and slippers that whispered over the wood floor.

“My grandmother,” Santi said. “Mary. We call her Wela.”

Everly adjusted Matt Damon against her hip. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

Wela looked up at her.

For an instant, her expression changed.

Her gaze sharpened, moving over Everly's face with an attention that felt oddly separate from the introductions around them. Everly waited, uncertain whether she had missed a question.

Then Wela smiled.

"Welcome."

She murmured something in Spanish and adjusted Chaco's poncho.

Everly caught none of the words.

Santi touched his grandmother's shoulder. "They've had a rough night."

Wela nodded toward the kitchen. "Yes. Come eat."

Vanessa was already leading the way toward the kitchen. Josie fell into step beside Beau, asking whether they'd had to leave everything behind.

"Most of my dignity," Beau told Josie. "Although that was in questionable condition before the storm."

Josie laughed.

Everly started after them, grateful that somebody else could carry the conversation for a while.

An alcove off the hall caught Everly's attention. An old ship's wheel hung beside a framed nautical chart, its faded paper marked with fine ink lines and handwritten notes. Beneath them stood a narrow cabinet with a brass telescope resting in its wooden cradle.

“Oh, look at that,” she said.

She moved closer to the chart. The frame had been joined with wooden pegs, and along the lower edge, someone had penciled a date she couldn’t quite make out.

“Is that an original?” Everly asked.

Ray paused beside her. “Been here longer than I have.”

“I’d love to look at it when I’m awake enough to appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome to,” Ray said.

She followed the others.

Vanessa had set bowls around a broad wooden table. Beau was already seated, a towel draped over his shoulders, watching Josie add an amount of shredded cheese to his soup that suggested they understood each other perfectly.

“There’s more if you want it,” Vanessa said, pulling out a chair for Everly.

“This is wonderful. Thank you,” Everly said.

Everly sat carefully, mindful of her sore knee, and lowered Matt Damon to the floor. Santi placed a folded towel beside her bowl and fetched water for him.

The first spoonful of soup was hot enough to make her pause. She blew across the next one, tasted chicken and lime, and realized she was starving.

For several minutes, eating required all the attention she had left.

Around her, the conversation softened. Ray asked Santi about the ferry. Vanessa checked

whether Beau wanted another bowl. Wela sat with Chaco tucked against her side, smoothing the fleece over his back.

Josie covered a yawn with her hand.

"You can go to bed," Vanessa told her.

Josie looked up at her mother. "So can you."

"I'm about to," Vanessa said.

Neither moved.

Everly understood. After so much commotion, sitting somewhere warm felt almost too good to interrupt.

But by the time she set down her spoon, her eyelids were heavy. Across the table, Beau had stopped talking halfway through a sentence and was staring into his empty bowl.

Santi noticed.

"Come on. I'll show you upstairs."

Vanessa rose with him. "The rooms are ready. I put extra blankets on the beds."

Everly thanked her again, though the words felt inadequate. Vanessa squeezed her shoulder before collecting the bowls.

Santi took their bags. Beau followed him toward the stairs, and Everly gathered Matt Damon.

The curved banister felt smooth beneath her palm. She kept her eyes on the steps, saving the rest of the house for daylight.

On the third floor, Santi opened a door for Beau.

"This one's yours."

Beau looked inside, then back at him. “I may need an eviction notice.”

“Good night, Beau,” Everly said.

He kissed her cheek. “Night, Ev.”

Santi led her a little farther down the hall and opened another door.

A bedside lamp lit a four-poster bed dressed in pale linens. The covers had been turned back, and folded towels waited at the foot.

She could have slept standing up. The sight of that bed nearly undid her.

Santi set her bag beside the dresser, then picked up a towel from the foot of the bed.

“Bathroom’s down the hall. My room’s next door if you need anything.”

She reached for the towel. Their fingers brushed, and for a moment neither let go.

She looked up.

His gaze held hers before he released the fabric.

“Thank you,” she said. “For coming over on the ferry. For this.”

“I’m glad you told me you needed somewhere.”

“So am I.”

He stayed beside the bed. With the house quiet around them, she became aware of how close he stood—and how little her exhaustion had done to make him less attractive.

Santi stepped back. “I should let you sleep.”

“Try to get some yourself,” Everly said.

“I intend to be excellent at it.” His smile returned.

He stepped into the hall.

“Good night, Everly.”

“Good night, Santi.”

She closed the door, then heard his shut next door.

For a few seconds, she stood there holding the towel.

Everly set Matt Damon on the bed and gathered her clean clothes.

She took her towel and clean clothes to the bathroom. Warm water stung the scrapes on her palms, but she stayed beneath the spray until the ferry, the rain, and the last of the night’s chill had washed away.

By the time she returned in a white cotton tank and matching panties scattered with tiny pink flowers, the house had quieted. Somewhere below, a door closed. Rain ticked against the window, gentler now.

She hung her damp clothes over the back of a chair and checked her phone.

Ember had sent three messages.

Everly typed, We’re safe. Found somewhere to stay. I’ll call you tomorrow.

She considered mentioning the enormous Victorian house, the family who had fed them in the middle of the night, and the man sleeping one room away.

That would require answers to questions she was too tired to field.

She plugged in her phone and lifted the covers.

A soft knock stopped her.

She waited, one hand still on the sheet.

It came again.

Perhaps Vanessa had remembered something they needed. Everly pulled on her robe and opened the door.

The hall was empty.

Lamplight fell across the runner. Beau's door was closed, as was Santi's. She leaned out far enough to look toward the stairs, then listened.

Nothing.

Someone must have knocked at another room. In a house this quiet, sound could carry.

She shut the door and slipped beneath the covers. Matt Damon stretched against her hip, warm and solid, and she rested a hand on his back.

Tomorrow she could admire the house properly. Tonight, she wanted to sleep.

* * *

Earlier, while Everly and Beau were eating soup, Wela had carried a small bowl with a single egg upstairs.

She paused inside Santi's room, murmured a few familiar words over his bed, and set the bowl beneath it.

The Henderson girl down the road had been looking at her grandson again.

Wela knew the ojo when she saw it.

She smoothed the bedding, satisfied, and went back downstairs.

7



The pressure in Everly's bladder woke her.

"Oh, hell."

She threw back the covers and hurried toward the bathroom, still too sleepy to think beyond getting there.

Her hand was inches from the knob when the door swung open.

Everly jerked back.

"Oh!"

Santi stopped in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame.

For a heartbeat, they stared at each other.

Bare chest. Rumpled hair. Gray sweatpants riding low on his hips.

Her eyes had taken in all of that before her brain supplied the more pressing detail.

She wasn't wearing pants.

She glanced down at her white cotton tank and matching panties, scattered with tiny pink flowers.

Then back at him.

His gaze flicked down, too.

They both noticed.

Neither said anything.

"Sorry," Santi said, stepping back. "I didn't know you were—"

“Bathroom.” She pointed past him. “I need it. Right now.”

He cleared the doorway immediately.

She hurried through, brushing his bare arm with hers, and shut the door.

Only after she turned the lock did she hear him murmur from the hall.

“Well. Good morning.” Santi sounded considerably more awake now.

She closed her eyes.

“Don’t,” she called through the door.

Once the immediate crisis had passed, Everly washed her hands and looked in the mirror.

One cheek bore a pillow crease. Her hair had dried in uneven waves, with a section sticking out above her ear.

She pressed it down.

It sprang back.

Of course it did.

She straightened her tank, then rested her hands on the sink. She had appraised houses in front of rooms full of strangers without losing her composure. Apparently, all it took to undo her was one half-dressed man and a bathroom door.

She opened the door a few inches.

The hall was empty, but light spilled from Santi’s room.

As she passed his doorway, she saw him crouch beside the bed and draw a small bowl from beneath it. An egg rested inside.

Everly stopped. “Why is there an egg under your bed?”

Santi held up the bowl. “Wela. She thinks it helps with the evil eye.”

“And you leave it there?”

“It matters to her.” He set the bowl back beneath the bed and stood.

Everly looked at him for a moment, then turned toward her room. “I’m going back to bed.”

“Everly,” Santi said.

She looked over her shoulder.

He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. “You know you’re not wearing pants.”

“Yes, Santi. I became painfully aware of that in the hallway.”

His mouth curved.

“Just checking.”

She hurried back to her room before he could say anything else, his quiet laugh following her down the hall.

* * *

Sleep came in short stretches after that. Each time Everly woke, she listened to the rain and tried to get comfortable.

A little past five, she gave up.

This time, she put on shorts.

She found her sandals, clipped on Matt Damon’s leash, and took him downstairs. The

house was quiet, the lamps still burning where the family had left them.

Outside, rainwater dripped from the porch roof. The storm had moved on, leaving wet grass and a warm breeze carrying the smell of damp earth.

Everly stayed beneath the porch light while Matt Damon investigated the steps.

“Quick trip,” she murmured. “Then we’re going back to bed.”

He trotted onto the lawn.

A girl stood beneath the live oak at the edge of the yard.

Sixteen or seventeen, perhaps. Barefoot, with long dark hair and a simple dress hanging heavily around her knees. She stood beyond the reach of the porch light, yet Everly could make out her face.

That was the first thing wrong.

The second was the branch visible through her shoulder.

Everly’s fingers tightened around the leash.

She had hoped for a few hours before this part of her life caught up with her.

The girl looked up.

Her eyes met Everly’s, and her expression changed so sharply that Everly felt it in her chest.

Hope.

Not tentative hope, either. The girl moved toward her at once, hands lifting, words spilling out in Spanish.

“Wait.” Everly stepped off the porch. “Slow down.”

The girl kept talking, her voice thin and quick with urgency.

Everly caught a name.

Marcelo.

Then ayuda. Help.

“I can see you,” Everly said quietly. “But I don’t understand much Spanish.”

The girl stopped a few feet away. Up close, she looked younger. Frightened. Her fingers twisted together as she tried again, more slowly this time.

“Marcelo.”

Everly nodded. “Okay. Marcelo.”

The girl reached toward her.

Cold spread across Everly’s bare arms despite the warm air. Beneath it came a rush of feeling—fear, grief, an urgency that made her want to move without knowing where to go.

Matt Damon nudged her ankle.

She glanced down at him, then back at the girl, trying to hold on to the few words she recognized.

Everly went very still.

“Please,” she whispered. “Try once more.”

The girl drew a breath she didn’t need.

Then she was gone.

Everly stared at the empty patch of grass.

Water dripped from the oak. Beyond it, the fence and shrubs stood exactly where they had been before.

“Marcelo,” she said softly.

Nothing answered.

Everly turned back toward the house.

As she reached the porch, movement in a third-floor window caught her attention. Wela stood behind the glass, one hand holding the curtain aside.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Wela let the curtain fall.

Everly looked back toward the tree.

Had she seen the girl?

Or had she watched her new guest talking to an empty yard?

Everly wasn’t sure which possibility she preferred.

She unclipped the leash at the back door. The smell of coffee reached her before she had decided whether to go upstairs.

She followed it into the kitchen.

Santi stood at the counter, pouring coffee. He had put on a shirt, though the memory of him without it was still inconveniently clear.

“Morning,” he said.

“You keep saying that.” Everly’s voice was rough with lack of sleep.

He smiled, then set down the pot. Everly had stopped just inside the doorway, one hand still gripping Matt Damon’s leash.

Santi’s smile faded. “Everything okay?”

She looked down at the leash and loosened her fingers.

“Just tired,” Everly said.

“I imagine you’re still wound up. The storm, getting out of Beau’s house, leaving his car behind—that’s a lot for one night.”

She nodded. It was an explanation she could let him have.

He nodded toward the pot. “Want coffee?”

“Please.”

He filled another mug and brought it to the table. Everly sat, tucking the leash beside her.

Santi fetched the cream and sugar before sitting across from her.

She poured in enough cream to turn the coffee pale, then added two generous spoonfuls of sugar.

He watched her reach for a third.

Santi glanced from the sugar bowl to her mug. “Should I have left more room?”

“Probably.”

“For the cream?”

Everly added the sugar. “The coffee’s mostly there to warm it up.”

His laugh eased some of the tension in her shoulders. She stirred, grateful for the small, ordinary task.

“Glad you found your shorts,” he said.

Everly looked up.

“Glad you found a shirt.”

His smile returned slowly.

Santi leaned back in his chair. “Was that a problem?”

She lifted her mug.

“I’m not discussing this before coffee.”

He glanced into her cup. “Then we may be here a while.”

Everly concentrated on her cup. The warmth had reached her fingers again, but she could still hear the girl saying that name.

Marcelo.

Somewhere in this house, someone might know who he was.

* * *

By breakfast, the kitchen had lost every trace of its earlier quiet.

Vanessa stood at the griddle, sliding pancakes onto a platter while Josie told Beau a story that kept making him interrupt with questions. Each interruption sent her back to the beginning.

“Let her finish,” Vanessa told Beau.

Beau held up his fork. “I’m trying to understand the circumstances.”

“You’re making them worse,” Josie told him.

Everly slipped onto the stool beside Beau. She had gone upstairs to dress, but clean clothes and a brush through her hair had done little for her exhaustion.

Beau glanced at her over his plate.

“You look like hell,” Beau said.

Everly pulled her mug closer. “You’re a wonderful comfort in difficult times.”

“I try.” He reached for the syrup. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

Her mug stopped halfway to her mouth.

Beau noticed.

He set down the syrup and leaned closer.

“Did you?” Beau asked under his breath.

“Keep your voice down,” Everly whispered.

Across the kitchen, Josie resumed her story. Vanessa turned back to the griddle.

Everly waited until their attention was elsewhere, then turned toward Beau.

“I saw a girl outside earlier. A ghost. She spoke to me.”

His expression changed.

Beau kept his voice low. “What did she say?”

Everly glanced toward Vanessa.

“I’ll tell you when we can talk somewhere else.”

He nodded and picked up his fork.

“After breakfast,” Beau said.

Everly lifted her mug, but the girl’s frightened face stayed with her.

Cold touched the back of her neck.

She stopped.

It spread beneath her hair and along her shoulders, raising the fine hairs on her arms. The kitchen was warm from the griddle. A moment ago, she had been considering asking Vanessa whether a window opened.

She turned toward the hall.

The doorway was empty.

Beyond it, she could see part of the cabinet she had admired last night and the dark curve of the old ship’s wheel.

“Ev?”

Beau's voice stayed low.

She set down the mug before she spilled it.

"Do you feel that?" Everly whispered.

He glanced toward the doorway.

"Feel what?" Beau asked.

The cold deepened.

Everly waited, watching the hall. Nobody appeared.

"Never mind," she said.

Beau looked at her arms, then back at her face.

She drew her hands into her lap.

The girl had asked for help. Everly had understood that much, whatever else had been lost between them.

She couldn't promise herself she would ignore her if she came back.

"Cheese and rice," she muttered.

Beau followed her gaze toward the empty hall, then quietly moved her mug away from the edge of the counter.

* * *

Beau waited until Vanessa had turned off the griddle and Josie was carrying plates to the sink. Then he caught Everly's eye and nodded toward the back porch.

She followed him out, bringing her mug. Matt Damon slipped through the door at her heels.

Sunlight caught the water still clinging to the leaves. Everly sat on a dry patch of the top step, and Beau settled beside her.

"All right," he said. "Tell me."

She looked toward the live oak.

"She was standing over there when I brought him out. Sixteen or seventeen, maybe. Barefoot. Long dark hair."

Beau followed her gaze.

"Did she come to you?"

"As soon as she realized I could see her. She looked so relieved, Beau."

Her voice caught on the last word. She took a sip before continuing.

"She spoke Spanish. I asked her to slow down, but I still couldn't follow much. I heard ayuda. Help. And she kept saying Marcelo."

Beau frowned. "Her name?"

"I don't think so. It sounded like she wanted me to find him."

"Did you get anything else?" he asked.

"Fear. Grief. This awful urgency." Everly rubbed her forearm. "The closer she came, the colder I got. Then I felt it again in the kitchen."

He glanced toward the house.

"That's what happened at breakfast?"

She nodded.

"And Wela was watching from an upstairs window when I came back."

Beau turned back to her. "Watching the girl?"

"I don't know if she could see her. She might've just seen me talking to the yard."

Beau considered that.

Everly watched a drop of water fall from the oak.

“I think I’d like to finish my job without getting involved in whatever happened to her.”

“You can ask about a name without committing to anything,” Beau said gently.

“And when they ask why?”

He didn’t answer immediately.

She turned her mug between her palms.

“These people took us in. I don’t want to make them uncomfortable in their own house.”

“You don’t have to tell everyone,” Beau said.

“It only takes one person.”

Beau’s expression softened.

“Meemaw?”

Everly nodded.

Good Southern girls hide their crazy. She had heard it often enough to know exactly how her grandmother would have said it.

“She had reasons,” Everly said.

“I know.” Beau nudged her shoulder. “But I’m sitting here, and I believe you.”

“You’ve had years to get used to me.”

“It’s been exhausting.” Beau’s solemn delivery almost held.

She nudged him back.

He smiled, then looked toward the oak again.

“We start with Marcelo,” Beau said. “Quietly.”

Everly turned toward him. “We?”

“You thought I was coming out here to admire the landscaping?”

“You have a house to worry about.”

“And I’ll worry about it.” Beau met her eyes. “I can manage two things.”

Everly glanced at him. “Three, if we count your hair.”

“My hair is under control. Your dead girl is the current concern.”

Beau’s teasing eased. “Does Santi know?”

Santi’s face rose immediately in her mind: sleep-rumpled in the hallway, amused over his coffee, then suddenly serious when he’d seen her shaking.

“No,” she said too quickly.

Beau turned his head. “That sounded remarkably like a lie.”

“Santi knows I was upset. He doesn’t know why.”

“And you’re not going to tell him because?”

“Because I just met him. Because this is his family. Because he already makes it difficult to remember basic sentence structure, and I don’t need him looking at me like I’m unstable on top of it.”

Beau lifted his mug toward the house. “We’ll be careful. We learn what we can. You don’t promise the girl anything until we know what she wants. And when this gets too big, you tell me instead of doing the brave, stupid thing by yourself.”

Everly looked toward the live oak.

“Fine,” she said. “But we’re not calling ourselves ghost hunters.”

“Agreed. Paranormal research associates sounds much more expensive.”

Despite herself, she laughed.

Inside the house, something struck wood with a single heavy knock.

The sound had come from the front hallway, exactly where the ship’s wheel hung.