

Sasha Tomas & Patrizia Hayashi

A woman with long dark hair, seen from behind, wearing a flowing red dress. She is standing on a beach at night, looking out at the ocean under a full moon. The moon is bright and detailed, showing craters. The ocean has gentle waves. The sky is dark blue with some light clouds.

Dark Waters

A Caribbean Gothic Mystery

Every island has a secret.
Some are worth killing for.

Dark Waters

Sasha Tomas & Patrizia Hayashi

© 2026
Green Bamboo Books
Charlotte, NC



Dark Waters
Copyright © 2008 by Gabriella Hewitt
Copyright © 2026 by Sasha Tomas & Patrizia Hayashi
Edited by Laurie Rauch
Cover by Canva

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: September 2007
First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. print publication: July 2008
Revised Edition, Green Bamboo Books: April 2026

Chapter 1

“M’ijo, are you listening to me?”

Rico swallowed a groan and let his gaze linger a moment longer on the blonde stretched across the sand. She had mile-long legs, sun-warmed skin, and a body that could make any man forget his name if he let himself drift long enough. She offered a different kind of oblivion than the whiskey he’d been crawling into these past several nights.

For a second, he considered staying right where he was, letting the world blur at the edges. Then, with a slow exhale, he pushed the thought of the blonde and everything she promised out of his mind and turned his attention to his unexpected visitor.

Or make that visitors.

The woman dressed in black stood slightly behind, her presence stirring something faint and uneasy in his memory without fully settling into recognition. Her fingers twisted a red cloth over and over, the fabric darkening where her grip tightened, as if she were holding onto the only thing keeping her upright. There was something about her that didn’t sit

right with him, like the stillness that settles before a storm.

The other woman needed no introduction. Hands planted firmly on her hips, foot tapping against the weather-beaten planks of the pier, she stood below his battered boat like an oversized piñata ready to burst at any second.

Forcing a grin, Rico met her gaze. “*Sí, Mami.*”

“Then come down here and give your *mami* a hug.”

He descended the ladder and dropped onto the dock, the wood creaking beneath his weight, then bent to gather her into a tight embrace.

She held him fiercely, longer than usual, as if she were making sure he was still solid beneath her hands. When she finally pulled back, she cupped his face and studied him closely, her eyes searching, measuring. “You’ve gotten thin, *m’ijo.*”

The concern in her voice settled deep in his chest, familiar and unavoidable. It was the same pull that had followed him his entire life, the same reason that no matter how far he ran, he always seemed to circle back. He forced a casual shrug. “I’m fine, *Mami.*”

“You expect me to believe that?” Her gaze sharpened. “Since when do you walk around like this... shirt hanging open, hair in your face, looking like a *borracho*? And take off those sunglasses. I want to see my boy’s beautiful brown eyes.”

Rico slipped off his Ray-Bans and tucked them into his shirt

pocket. “It took time to get here from Miami. I didn’t bother shaving.” It was easier than explaining the truth, which was that his life had been reduced to its bare essentials--the boat beneath his feet and the steady burn of alcohol in his veins. Everything else had fallen away, including things like shaving or caring how he looked.

The trip down the Atlantic had been smooth enough. The small secondhand small sailboat he’d picked up from a colleague had cut through the water like a dream. Granted, the head didn’t always flush, and the sail on the mast was frayed in more than one place. Salt clung to everything. His clothes, his skin, even the air he breathed, but overall, he’d made it to Vieques, the small island off Puerto Rico, in one piece. Behind him, the island stretched out, quiet and watchful, holding onto its secrets the way it always had. Rico had grown up on these shores, yet standing here now, it felt as though the island was studying him in return, measuring what he had become.

A gust of wind rolled in off the water, lifting his shaggy black hair and carrying with it the scent of salt, hibiscus, and something older that lingered just beneath the surface. He scrubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin, suddenly aware of how he must look. It was no wonder his mother called him a *borracho*.

Folding her arms over her ample bosom, his mother gave him a look that once had him and his six siblings scattering in every direction. “Rico Tomás Miguel Lopez, you would tell me if you were in trouble,

wouldn't you?"

For a fleeting moment, the sharpness in her expression softened, and he saw fear flicker through her eyes.

He shook his head. "I'm not in trouble. I just needed some time."

"Then why haven't you come home?"

His jaw tightened. "I am home."

"Ah, *sí*?" she shot back. "Today is Sunday. Gloria came to lunch with her husband and your nieces. Roberto is back from university, and he hasn't seen you in how long? And what about *papi*, you think he doesn't want to see his son? You think we didn't hear you've been hiding out on this floating tin can for a week?"

Rico pressed his lips together. Vieques was small, and gossip traveled faster than the tide. He should have known better. Still, he wasn't about to get into explanations here, not with a stranger standing beside his mother, silently watching.

"And did you forget your manners?" his mother added, gesturing sharply. "Say hello to Maria. You remember Maria Santos? She married your *Tío* Alonso's nephew's cousin on his mother's side. We're practically family."

He didn't bother trying to untangle that logic. Accepting it as fact, he stepped forward and greeted Maria with a kiss to both cheeks. Her skin was warm from the sun, but she felt fragile beneath his touch, like something already worn thin. She said nothing in return, and that

silence settled heavily between them, stirring a quiet unease in his gut.

“What do you think of the town?” his mother said, gesturing with her hand to the storefronts doing a brisk trade at the edge of the marina.

Rico took a moment to really look. New bars, restaurants, and hotels lined the strip, replacing the sleepy familiarity of his youth. Once, only relatives and military personnel had bothered to visit the small island off Puerto Rico. Now strangers filled the streets, drawn by something they probably couldn’t even name. Judging from the blonde he’d been admiring and other strangers he’d glimpsed over the past few days, tourism had declared Isabel Segunda the latest best-kept secret.

“We’ve doubled capacity at the bakery,” his mother continued proudly. “Even added a café. We’re as good as Starducks.”

Rico almost smiled. He didn’t have the heart to correct her. Or maybe she knew exactly what she was saying. With his mother, it was always hard to tell. Which made him wonder, not for the first time, what her real purpose was in coming here. Because it wasn’t just to see him.

“Look, *Mami*, I’m not good company,” he said finally. “I’ll come by the house tomorrow.”

Familia. The word alone settled heavily in his chest. He shrugged it off and turned toward the water, trying to shake the feeling. The forecast had promised sunshine, but a dark cloud slung low on the horizon, pressing closer, shifting the light, told him the weather was about to change.

He longed to get back on his boat. The sea responded in kind, restless beneath the surface. He squinted against the sun glinting off the sea-green ocean and spotted a manatee rolling slowly through the water as boats passed by.

“*Oye?*” Mama jabbed him in the chest with her finger.

“Ow.” He rubbed the sore spot and stepped back, putting space between them. “I’m listening.” He turned his attention back to the women.

The wind picked up again, carrying the scent of salt and flowers, but Maria’s red handkerchief fluttered weakly in the breeze. She looked up at him with sad eyes. Hollowed out by something that had already taken too much.

He knew that look. He had seen it too many times. In his line of work, he came across women like her too often. If he was right, and he hoped he wasn’t, his mother had brought Maria to the wrong person.

A tightness settled in his chest as he turned back to his mother. “What’s the real reason you’re here?”

Mama Lopez planted her feet. She wasn’t a woman easily intimidated. Or one to mince words, as he knew only too well. Mentally, he braced himself for her response.

“Maria’s daughter is missing. She didn’t come home last night. The police think she ran away.”

Damn. He’d been right. In this case, he hated it.

“I’m sorry, *Señora*. I can’t help you.”

Maria rushed forward as if the words had struck her. “*Por favor*,” she cried, the plea breaking in her throat as Spanish tumbled out in a desperate rush. She lifted her hand toward him, and only then did he see that the red cloth she clutched was not a handkerchief, but a worn bandana. “Chita wore this in her hair. She loved it.” Her fingers curled into his shirt as she clung to him, trembling. “She would never run away. Nunca. El chupacabra took her. Other girls have disappeared. One was found by the roadside, her body drained of blood.”

Her voice collapsed into a whisper. “Please, you must help.”

Rico avoided her eyes. Shame pressed hard against his chest as he stepped back, retreating toward the safety of his boat. “I’m sorry,” he could only repeat. The words empty, useless. The ocean stretched out before him, wide and endless, the surface shifting under the weight of the wind. For a fleeting second, he imagined himself back out there, far from this dock, far from this moment, swallowed by open water and silence. He couldn’t do this. Not again. Not even for *Mami*.

Behind him, he heard his mother furiously whispering. Maybe she would leave and take Maria with her and spare him from what he already knew was coming. *Dios mío*, he hoped so. His *madre* didn’t understand what she was asking of him. Neither of them did.

A moment later, a warm hand wrapped around his arm and turned him back. From the corner of his eye, he saw Maria walking slowly down

the pier, her shoulders bowed, the red bandana hanging limp at her side. If his mother had followed her, he might have believed they had given up. But his mother had never been a woman who surrendered. Every Lopez knew that while *Papi's* hands made the bread that fed the town, it was *Mami's* will that kept everything standing.

“You want to tell me why you came back, *m'ijo?*”

Blood. Death. Failure. The memories came fast, sharp, uninvited.

“No.”

Her hand fell away from him, and for a brief moment, he saw the hesitation in her eyes, the question of whether to push or let it lie.

“Don't, *Mami,*” he said quietly. “I don't want to talk about it.”

She let out a long breath. “*Muy bien.* Not now.” Her hand rose again, pressing flat against his chest. “But I will say this to you. You are wounded—”

He started to protest, but she silenced him with a look and the steady pressure of her hand.

“You are wounded here,” she insisted, her voice softer now, but no less certain. “Your soul cries out in pain. A mother knows these things. The bond between mother and child is never broken. You are my firstborn. My pride. Not a day goes by that I do not think of you. Worry for you.”

Rico's fists clenched at his sides. He didn't want to hear this. Not now, not here. But he couldn't make himself walk away.

“Papa and I hoped you would take over the bakery,” she continued, lifting one shoulder in a small, resigned shrug. “But that was not your path. Still, I always knew you would come when *familia* needed you.” Her gaze sharpened. “Maria is *familia*.”

The words settled heavily between them.

“Her husband died of a heart attack. Her son, Pablo, got permission from his army captain to come home for the funeral. That was the last time she saw him. He died in Afghanistan, doing his duty.” Her eyes held his. “You understand duty.”

Rico exhaled slowly. Yeah. He understood it all too well.

“Chita is all Maria has left. There is no one to watch over them now.” She paused just long enough for the words to land harder, “Papa has agreed that if you won’t look for the Chita, then he will.”

Rico’s head snapped up. “He can’t—”

“He will,” she cut in. “He must.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“*Sí*,” she said quietly. “I do. And an honorable man does what must be done, no matter the cost.”

Rico flinched, the words striking deeper than he wanted to admit. “You sound like *Papi*.”

Her expression softened, a small, knowing smile touching her lips. “Of course I do. He is the most honorable man I know.”

The fight drained out of him, leaving behind something heavier.

Inevitable.

“All right, *Mami*,” he said at last, the words settling like a weight across his shoulders. “I’ll look for Chita.” His stomach twisted at the thought of where it might lead, of what it might drag back to the surface.

“But no promises.”

He didn’t make those anymore.

Chapter 2

The overhead fan twirled lazily in the heavy afternoon heat, pushing thick air from one corner of the bar to the other without offering any real relief. Rico sat hunched slightly over his beer, fingers loose around the bottle, letting it sweat against his palm as he watched the room through the mirror behind the bar. The best way to get information was to blend in with the locals. With the sun at its peak, those who didn't go home for the *siesta* sought the comfort of the local bar.

Rico sat quietly, soaking up the atmosphere, making his presence known. He'd been gratified to see one local man nod to him upon entering the bar. His second stop for the day. If there was any place to get the local gossip, this was it.

So far, though, he'd learned little. No sign of Chita. Only whispers and fragmented talk of the legendary el chupacabra—The goatsucker—*island* lore of an elusive creature that sucked.

He had chosen his seat carefully, back to the wall, full view of the

entrance, the exits, the patrons. Old habits didn't fade, no matter how far he ran from them. A week on a boat, a few nights drowning himself in rum, none of that erased what had been carved into him. Policía de Puerto Rico... San Juan Central... that part of him still breathed, still watched, still calculated.

Blend in. Listen. Let the world speak first.

That was how you found truth.

The locals filled the space in loose clusters, their voices low, conversations overlapping in soft currents of Spanish that carried fragments of gossip, daily complaints, and something else... something quieter. Rico had learned to separate noise from signal. Most of what he heard didn't matter. But every now and then, a word would surface.

Disappeared.

Girl.

Sangre.

He took a slow pull from his beer, letting the bitterness sit on his tongue as his mind worked through it. No one said anything directly. No names. No details. Just enough to confirm what he already suspected. Something was happening on this island, and the people knew it. They just weren't saying it out loud.

Instead, they wrapped it in stories.

"El chupacabra..."

The word drifted again from somewhere behind him, followed by a

nervous laugh that died too quickly.

Rico's jaw tightened.

Legends. Fairy tales. Convenient lies. People didn't want to look at what was real, so they gave it fangs, claws, something unnatural.

Something easier to fear than the truth. The only monsters Rico believed in were the human kind.

His fingers brushed the edge of his pocket where his phone rested. The call he had made earlier that morning still echoed in his mind. San Juan Central had responded fast. His partner had pulled what she could, quietly, off-record. Missing girls. Scattered reports. One body found. Drained of blood.

He exhaled slowly through his nose. Not a creature. A method.

Someone is sending a message or hiding one.

Rico lowered his gaze to his beer, but his focus sharpened. The pattern was there. He just had to find it.

The door opened behind him.

The shift in the room was immediate. Conversations faltered, voices lowered, attention pulled toward the entrance like a tide drawn by something unseen.

Rico didn't turn. He didn't have to. The mirror told him everything.

"Damn..." the word slipped under his breath before he could stop it.

Every eye on the place remained glued to the beauty who'd

walked in. Either she was completely oblivious to the looks she was getting or was good at hiding it.

He suspected the latter by the very faint tremble he noted in her hand as she tucked a springy curl behind her ear.

Her choice of clothes also spoke volumes—the cut and style screamed mainland tourist. But from the neck up, she was pure Latina. Olive skin. Wide lips meant for kissing. Eyes that could knock a man to his knees. *Madre de Dios*.

Wild. Untamed curls spilling over her shoulders like they refused to be controlled.

Rico's grip tightened slightly on his beer. Not his problem. He'd learned that lesson the hard way. Still, his gaze lingered. Not just because of how she looked. Because of how she moved. Confident but alert. Shoulders relaxed, but not careless. There was tension in her hand when she tucked that curl behind her ear, just enough to tell him she felt the room watching her.

Good.

She wasn't naive.

"Excuse me," she said to the bartender. "Can you tell me where I can find a mechanic? I'm having car trouble."

She had a low husky voice, with a New York edge wrapped in Spanish rhythm. Not local. Not even close.

Rico's instincts sharpened. Outsider. Alone. In the wrong place.

That rarely ended well.

He watched as the bartender pointed her toward Carlos. “Sí, Señorita. Carlos is the mechanic you want.”

“Great. Where can I find him?”

“Over there,” the bartender waved her towards a table in the corner where four men sat talking and drinking.

“Oh, *gracias*.”

She walked over to the table, her hips in those tight hip-hugging jeans swaying to a beat that had Rico swallowing a bigger gulp of beer than he intended. He didn’t have to hear the conversation to guess what was happening.

The lady wanted her car fixed now, but Carlos wasn’t about to be separated from his meal and gossip. He watched the beauty gesture with her hands. No dice. Carlos went back to his meal.

Rico almost smiled into his beer.

Carlos wasn’t about to leave his food and be gossip for anyone.

The woman came back and slid onto a barstool. “Coca-Cola, please.”

Rico tracked her without turning his head, letting his eyes work through reflections, shadows, and peripheral movement. Then came the inevitable. Rico watched her from the corner of his eye. Some idiot with more ego than sense slid up beside her.

A young guy with bulging biceps snaked an arm around her

shoulder. “Hey, beautiful, how about letting me show you a good time?”

Rico stilled.

One... two... He didn't move. Didn't intervene. But he watched.

Carefully.

“Yeah?” she replied. The woman didn't react the way most would. She didn't flinch. Didn't pull away. Instead, she turned... slow... deliberate... hooked her finger into the man's shirt and pulled him closer until she could whisper in the guy's ear.

Rico leaned forward slightly, interest piqued despite himself.

The shift was instant. The man's face drained of color like someone had pulled the blood straight out of him. He backed off fast, hands up, stumbling over his apology before disappearing.

Rico coughed, covering the laugh that threatened to break loose.

The woman faced the bar again. She thanked the bartender for the Coke and paid him. He saw her lips moving and leaned over to better catch what she was saying. “...swear the next man who lays his dirty paws on me is going to be wearing his testicles for a tie.”

Rico shook his head slightly, amusement flickering through him despite the weight sitting in his chest. Fire. That was the only word for her. Fire and something sharper underneath.

Dangerous in a different way.

The kind that didn't need saving.

The kind that made a man forget he should walk away.
He dragged his gaze back to his beer, jaw tightening.
No.
He wasn't doing that again.
Women like her. They didn't pass through your life quietly. They left marks. And he already carried enough of those.
Still...
His instincts didn't let go. She didn't belong here. This town... this situation... it wasn't something you stumbled into by accident.
He watched as she slid off the stool and asked about a taxi.
"Casa Verde."
The reaction hit the room like a dropped glass.
Rico's eyes lifted immediately, all humor gone.
The bartender crossed himself. Refused her.
Fear. Real fear. Not gossip. Not exaggeration. Something rooted.
Rico stood before he even realized he'd made the decision.
This... this was it. A name. A location. A thread.
And she had just walked out the door with it.
He tossed money onto the bar without counting it and headed out into the heat. The sun hit him hard, sharp against his eyes as he scanned the street.
There she was. Frustrated. Alone. Stranded.
Rico exhaled slowly. "Yeah..." he muttered under his breath. "This

just got interesting.”

“Yo!” Frankie stuck out her thumb. The taxi rolled right past her. The midday sun pelted down on her head as she scanned the block for another cab. Nada. Nothing.

Sweat gathered at her temples and slid slowly down her neck, disappearing beneath the collar of her shirt as she scanned the empty stretch of road again. Nada. Nothing. Not even the hint of movement.

Punta Negra wasn't exactly a hot spot. The southeastern town was a sleepy village on the threshold of the Wildlife Preserves. Once it had been a stopping area for military personnel to pick up groceries and other items, but since the US military pulled out a few years ago, the town had fallen into a lull.

Too quiet for midday. Too still. Like the town was holding its breath.

Frankie exhaled sharply and swiped at a few wild curls that had escaped and were now clinging stubbornly to her damp skin. Another cab appeared in the distance. She straightened, lifted her arm. It drove right past her.

“Unbelievable,” she muttered, frustration snapping through her.

“You're never going to get a taxi like that.”

She turned.

Him.

The man from the bar stepped out into the sunlight as if he belonged there, like the heat didn't touch him. He lifted two fingers to his mouth and let out a sharp whistle. The cab braked immediately, reversing back toward them.

Frankie folded her arms, already irritated at the ease of it. The man on the sidewalk shot her a sly grin.

"Where to, Señorita?" the driver asked.

"Casa Verde." She reached for the handle.

The locks snapped down.

Frankie froze.

"*Lo siento, señorita,*" the driver said quickly, not meeting her eyes.

"That place is haunted."

Before she could protest, the cabbie drove off.

Frankie stared after the taxi, disbelief turning fast into anger.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

A low, deep laugh rolled behind her, warm and entirely too amused.

She spun. "What's so funny?"

But she didn't wait for an answer.

"What's so funny?" Actually, she didn't want to know.

"Forget about it." The last thing she wanted to hear was another stupid story. Talk of witches, evil spirits, and el chupacabra was all she'd heard since setting foot on the island. If the locals were trying to scare her off

the island, they were doing a lousy job. It would take a lot more than children's tales to frighten this hardened New Yorker.

Frankie assessed her situation. She could go back into the bar and bribe someone to take her, or she could trek the five miles on foot. Neither prospect seemed appealing.

Least appealing was the rusting flatbed truck laden with plywood and lumber that sat useless on the side of the road. The lumberyard she had ordered the supplies from had refused to deliver to the plantation. The manager had said it was because the roads were too soft for his trucks, but Frankie suspected it had less to do with the marshy mangroves around the plantation she had inherited and more to do with superstitious nonsense.

She walked back to her truck and tried to start it again. The ignition turned, sputtered, and died.

"Your battery needs to be replaced."

"What?" Frankie leaned out the open window. Trucks this old didn't have air-conditioning.

He was already there, close enough that she caught the scent of salt and something distinctly male, clean, warm, dangerous. Up close, he was worse. Taller than she'd thought. Broader. That easy confidence wrapped around him like a second skin.

"I said..." Six foot tall, give or take an inch, the stranger from the bar walked up to her window. He flashed her a friendly smile, white teeth

contrasting with his deep tan skin. Shaggy black hair curled past his ear, thick and silky, the type of hair made for running fingers through, danced over his eyebrows. “Sounds like the battery. Why don’t you pop your hood and let me take a look?”

Something about the way he said it made Frankie’s stomach contract.

“Are you a mechanic?” she asked warily. Still, she pulled the lever for the hood.

“No,” he said easily, moving in beside her, “but I’m good with my hands.”

Yeah, she bet.

Frankie stepped out, arms crossing as she watched him work. His movements were efficient, focused, like he knew more than he was letting on. Not just some pretty face. That registered immediately. That and the way his muscles moved under his shirt. She looked away.

Tall, dark, and handsome stuck his head in and began to tinker. Frankie got out and went to take a look. “Do you know what you’re doing?” she asked, sharper than necessary.

She heard him laugh, a deep rumble, masculine and sexy, just like the man. “Not really.” He pulled out a glass bulb and gave it a shake. “Looks like this spark plug is shot. A jump start won’t cut it.”

He placed the bulb in her hand and slammed the hood shut.

“Truck’s old. Doubt you’re going to find a replacement on the island. Probably have to order it. Takes a few days more than average for anything to be received in the mail from the mainland.”

He held up the damaged part. “You’re not going anywhere today.”

“Great, just great.” Frustrated, she gave a strangled scream. “How am I supposed to get this stuff home?” Frankie pointed at the lumber sticking out of the back of the truck. “Don’t suppose you have a truck?”

He shook his head.

“Didn’t think so.” She was right back to square one.

“How far you going?”

“Casa Verde.”

He didn’t react the way the others had. No fear. No hesitation. Just a shift. Subtle, almost imperceptible.

“Give me a minute.” The helpful stranger grinned and went into the bar. Frankie stood outside contemplating a new strategy when her mystery man reappeared.

“Got us a truck.”

“Us?” Alarms went off in her head. “I don’t recall me inviting you—”

He cut her off, “Didn’t say you did.” That same easy smile again. “Figured you might need the help loading and unloading this stuff.”

Frankie opened her mouth to argue, then closed it.

True, she did. “Let’s just make one thing clear, buddy. I don’t have

a lot of cash on me, and I'm not the type of girl who repays favors, know what I mean?"

"No problema." He shot her another smile. His gaze dropped briefly, not crude, not rushed, just enough to make heat bloom under her skin. Then, back to her eyes. "Relax," he said softly. "I'm just helping."

Frankie had to wonder about the guy. "Look, um, I didn't catch your name."

"Rico Lopez." He stuck out his hand.

"Frankie Montalvo." She gave his hand a shake. "I just want to make it clear that I appreciate your help and all."

"*Bueno*. Then it's settled." He started to pull wood off the back of the truck.

Frankie couldn't believe this guy. "I'm not sure you understand."

"Look, Señorita. Mi mami always told me to help women, especially beautiful ones." He gave her a wink.

This guy was too much.

A small truck pulled up before she could give Rico a piece of her mind. The driver hopped out and started to load up the back of his truck. Frankie shrugged her shoulders and went to help. Who was she to complain? This was the closest anyone had come to helping her out. So used to doing stuff on her own, she felt slightly uncomfortable, and it must have shown.

“Frankie, don’t worry. Here on Vieques, everyone helps Everyone.”

She wanted to believe him, but her experience this past week since coming here had proven otherwise. Still, afraid to bite the hand that fed her, she kept her mouth closed.

After everything was loaded up, she slid into the front cab, sandwiched between Rico and the driver.

“¿Dónde va?”

“Casa Verde.”

The driver blanched. He stared over her head at Rico. Rico nodded his head. The driver put the truck in gear and mumbled under his breath in Spanish. Even though the dialect was too thick for Frankie to understand, she had a feeling the man didn’t agree. She looked at Rico, who stared straight ahead, his body and face relaxed.

Frankie wondered what she had just agreed to.

Minutes later, she found herself squeezed into the cab of a small truck between him and the driver.

Bad decision. Very bad decision.

The heat inside the cab was unbearable, thick and suffocating. Sweat slid slowly down her chest, settling between her breasts as the truck jolted forward. And then there was him.

Too close.

Every shift of the truck pressed her against him. Every bump

dragged her thigh along his. Solid. Hard. Real.

The truck lurched violently. She pitched sideways. Straight into him.

“Sorry,” she muttered, trying to push herself upright, but his hand came up instinctively, steadying her at her waist.

Her breath caught.

His eyes dropped to her face, dark and unreadable, something flickering there that made her pulse jump.

“No problema.”

Big problem.

Frankie swallowed hard and forced herself back into place, turning toward the window, but there was no escaping him. Not in this space. Not with the heat. Not with the awareness humming just beneath her skin. Frankie sucked in a breath, trying to make herself smaller—like it made a difference—and wondering why she’d never noticed the truck’s definite list to the right. No matter what she did, her legs still rubbed against the guy’s jeans. He might look lean and wiry, but Rico’s rock-hard biceps and muscular thighs told her he wasn’t a guy to mess with.

Frankie dragged in a breath and turned her attention to the scenery. Dense vegetation lined the road. A bird flew up and was soon joined by others. Brilliant colors dotted the landscape.

Beautiful. Frightening.

Nothing like the skyscrapers, traffic noise, and crowds

she'd lived with daily. This would be her home now. Could she

Adjust?

She had to.

The truck swerved, throwing her once again into Rico.

"Don't you know how to drive?" Irritated, she pushed herself back into place.

"Sorry, *Señorita*." A chuckle rumbled from Rico's chest.

Frankie gave him her meanest glare, but it didn't seem to faze him. Crossing her arms in front of her, she stared out the front of the window and willed them to arrive at the plantation.

Her plantation.

It loomed at the end of the drive, pale and worn, the once-white exterior dulled to gray, streaked with age and salt and something darker that clung stubbornly to its surface. The windows stared back, empty, hollow. The roof sagged in places, the porch bowed slightly, as if the whole structure had grown tired of standing.

She still couldn't believe it. Who would've thought that she, Frankie Montalvo, would inherit such a place? She hadn't even known she'd had a grandmother. She'd lost her mom when she was little and then her dad when she was thirteen. Placed in New York's foster care system, she'd assumed it was her against the world. And it had been.

But not anymore. Now, she was a homeowner. Her grandmother's legacy gave her the chance to make her dream a reality. The thought of

settling unsettled her, while at the same time, it gave her hope. Hope for what she still didn't know, but with each passing day and each nail she hammered into the structure, she felt something. Something concrete. And nothing was going to stop her. Certainly not a bunch of superstitious nonsense.

Finally, the driver pulled into the plantation's long driveway. When the manor came into view, she heard Rico suck in a breath and felt him stiffen.

"This is it?" Rico asked, something unreadable in his voice. She saw incredulity in his eyes.

"Yeah," she said, lifting her chin. "Why?"

He didn't answer.

Good. She didn't need his opinion.

"I'm going to fix it," she added. "Turn it into something real."

Casa Verde. Green House.

Unlike what the name suggested, there was very little in the way of greenery. Nothing but a long dirt road led up to the palatial house. The white stucco outside had faded to a dirty gray that would take more than a power wash to remove the mix of saltwater buildup and air-baked dust. The brick porch sagged, the foundation had cracks, the red ceramic Spanish-style roof begged for repairs, and the inside looked even worse, if that were possible. But it was hers, and she hugged that knowledge to her heart.

“Please tell me the realtor gave it to you for free.”

“For your information, I inherited it.” She didn’t care that others saw it as an eyesore. She owned it, and that was all that mattered. “I’m going to turn this place into a home if it kills me.”

She turned to the driver. “Please pull up behind the house. Thanks.”

The driver began muttering in Spanish, his grip on the wheel so tight, she wondered if his knuckles could get any whiter. The truck rolled slowly along the overgrown dirt driveway.

As soon as the truck stopped, Frankie resisted the urge to push Rico out the door or climb over him, wanting out of the truck’s close confines.

“Where do you want this stuff?” Rico gestured to the load, waiting for her to descend from the cab.

“Right over there will do.” She’d need the supplies close enough to the house to use. She didn’t want to have to drag the wood planks farther than necessary.

“So, who do you have doing the work?” Rico asked as he moved to the back of the truck to start unloading the lumber.

“I’m going to do it myself for now.”

“You’re kidding.”

Frankie bristled at the disbelief in his eyes. “Look, what I can’t do, I’ll hire someone. Anyway, it’s none of your business.”

Assuming she could get anyone out here. The driver had pried himself away from the wheel, but she hadn't missed him making the sign of the cross, or the way his eyes darted left and right as if he thought he might be attacked at any second.

Rico didn't seem spooked. He worked smoothly. Efficiently. His lean muscles rippled with each movement. Mesmerized, Frankie watched. He bent over to lay down his load on the ground, and Frankie couldn't help noticing how his jeans molded to his butt. A really nice butt.

"So, how much you paying?"

"Wh-What?" She dragged her eyes up to his face. His eyebrow quirked. Her face flamed.

"How much you paying to fix the house?"

"Why? You thinking of applying for the job?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

Have Rico make-Frankie-drool Lopez here every day? No way. She didn't need the distraction. Besides, he was probably all brawn and no brain. She'd wasted enough of her dating years on guys like that. "I don't think so. Look," she said, waving towards the house, "I'm going to get us some drinks. I'll be back."

She could feel his eyes drill into her back as she hurried towards the house. She'd have to be really desperate to hire Rico Lopez.

Really, really desperate.

Chapter 3

“I’ll get drinks,” she called over her shoulder, already heading inside.

Frankie dawdled over the preparations. She really should go back outside. She at least owed the men some drinks, if not cash. Frowning, she calculated how much the job had been worth. She had just enough cash on her.

The moment she crossed the threshold, the air changed. Cooler. Still. Too still. The sounds from outside, the men, the truck faded, as the house swallowed them whole.

Frankie slowed.

The floor creaked under her weight, long, low, almost deliberate.

“It’s just an old house,” she murmured. Her voice didn’t carry far. The old, faded, crumbling wallpapered walls muffled and absorbed sound.

The kitchen waited, dim and shadowed, dust motes floating lazily

in slanted light. She moved through it quickly, pouring iced tea, slicing lemon, focusing on the small, normal tasks.

She arranged the iced tea onto the chipped tray she'd discovered in one of the cabinets. Slicing up a lemon she'd picked up in town a few days ago, she added it to each glass. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten in a while. The men were probably hungry, too. She'd bought *galletas* on her grocery run. She'd give them a few tea biscuits to go and send them on their merry way.

A creak sounded above her.

Frankie froze.

Her heart slammed hard against her ribs.

The men were outside. She knew that. Still, she moved to the window, checked. They were there. They had almost finished unloading the truck.

So who was upstairs?

Old house. Settling. Wood shifting. She repeated it like a mantra. Didn't believe a word.

Her eyes riveted on the door leading out of the room, she purposefully made her way to it. Firming her shoulders, she marched across the kitchen to the swinging door. Her hand trembled as she reached for the handle. Before she could think better of it, she pushed through the swinging door and into the dining room. Stepping into the empty room, she noted the signs of neglect in the threadbare carpet,

listing the chandelier and cobwebs. The chandelier swayed slightly overhead.

There was no breeze.

Her steps slowed.

The staircase waited. Dark. Silent..

“Get a grip,” she whispered.

The creaking sound came again. Frankie bit her bottom lip. She’d have to go upstairs sooner or later. Better to go now while she has help nearby.

She’d have to go. She could have asked one of the guys to do it, but talked herself out of it. “Forget it. Can’t risk them going back to town and telling everyone that the place is haunted or some other silly story,” she muttered under her breath. “Not a chance.” She’d discovered practically upon her arrival that her grandmother’s plantation had a rather colorful history. If her plans for the place were to succeed, she couldn’t afford to give fuel to further stories.

She climbed. Each step groaned under her weight, the sound stretching too long, too loud in the empty space. At the top, the hallway stretched out before her, dim, shadows clinging to the corners like they didn’t want to let go.

Her bedroom door stood closed.

Had she left it that way? She couldn’t remember. She’d been in such a hurry to get to town and pick up the materials she needed.

“C’mon, Frankie. Just turn the knob.”

Flexing her fingers, she wrapped them around the knob and slowly turned. The door creaked open. Sweat ran from her temples down her neck. Briefly, she squeezed her eyes tight, then opened them.

She pushed the door in all the way and stood on the threshold. Nothing. The air whooshed out of her. The room appeared undisturbed. Exactly as she’d left it this morning. Untouched.

Frankie let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding and stepped inside. She moved to the window. Flicking back the curtain, she saw the men had finished. Rico glanced up, and his eyes met hers. Those eyes should be outlawed. She withdrew and returned her gaze to the room. She really should get downstairs and give them their tea.

Her eyes swept the room one last time for signs of anything out of place. Something niggled at her.

Then she saw it.

The canopy. The bed hangings. Untied. All of them. She’d fallen in love with this room when she’d seen the old-fashioned canopy bed. The hangings were frayed, but they’d represented every princess’s dream she’d ever had as a child. The loose bed hangings shielded the bed from view. She’d left them tied back this morning. Hadn’t she?

“Did I forget?” she whispered to herself.

She’d tied them back. She knew she had.

Her feet moved anyway, slow, cautious, as something pulled her forward. There were no such things as ghosts or monsters. They were stories made up by people with overactive imaginations and too much time on their hands. With each step, she repeated the explanation. Unfortunately, it wasn't bringing a lot of comfort.

Her shirt stuck to her front and back. Her mouth felt dry. And if her pulse shot up any higher, she'd probably blast off.

Her hand reached out. Gripped the fabric. Pulled.

The bed came into view. Empty.

Her nightgown lay in the center.

"See, Frankie," she muttered to herself, "just your imagination running wild." Slowly, she released the breath she'd been holding as she reached for the errant piece of clothing.

Then—

It moved.

"Tostao."

Rico turned to see José, their driver, twirling his finger around his ear. "You think she's crazy? Why?"

José didn't pause a beat as he grabbed another stack of wood and piled it on the ground. "Has to be," he grunted, "to live here. If I'd have known when you offered me fifty bucks for transportation that you were coming here..."

Though José left the rest unsaid, Rico could fill in the blanks. Screams, strange noises, a goat carcass, and a girl's body, both found without a trace of blood inside, and a spooky house—put all the pieces together and throw in some missing girls, and it made for a bad horror movie.

Six girls in total, including Chita. All were late teens, early twenties. All had disappeared while partying at various clubs. Friends assumed they'd gone home with someone else. The police were inclined to believe the girls had simply run away. When one girl had been discovered dead, her body drained of blood, the islanders thought they knew the truth—*el chupacabra* had returned.

Rico's stomach cramped as he thought of what the pattern meant to him.

He dumped the last load on the ground and looked up at the plantation manor. What the hell was this woman thinking? José had it right. She had to be *tostao*. Only a crazy person would consider taking on this fixer-upper by herself. His eyes roamed over the large structure. Was she really staying here by herself? Hadn't she heard the rumors? More likely that in-your-face New York attitude of hers assumed she could handle anything.

Even *el chupacabra*.

Rico shook his head. A movement on the second story caught his eye.

Frankie stood at a window. Her eyes met his briefly before turning back into the room. The curtains falling back into place.

What was taking her so long? And what was she doing upstairs when she'd said she was going to get drinks? He could use a glass of something cold, though it was nearly impossible to escape the heat and humidity.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw José dust off his hands and then nervously check his watch against the darkening sky.

“We go now, yes?”

“In a minute, I want to check on—” but he never finished.

A piercing scream rent the air.

It tore through the thick afternoon air, sharp and raw, cutting straight through his chest like a blade. Every muscle in his body locked for half a second, then instinct took over.

He was already moving.

The world narrowed. Sound dropped away. Heat, exhaustion, doubt, all of it vanished beneath a surge of adrenaline that hit fast and hard.

Danger.

His boots pounded across the cracked ground, up the sagging porch steps that groaned under his weight. The house loomed over him now, even larger up close, its warped wood and peeling stucco radiating a quiet decay that felt older than neglect. The air shifted the moment he

crossed the threshold, cooler, heavier, like stepping into something that had been waiting.

Another scream echoed faintly from above.

Rico didn't hesitate.

He took the stairs two at a time, the old wood protesting beneath him, each step creaking too loudly in the silence. His senses sharpened, every detail snapping into place. Shadows clung to the corners. The air smelled faintly of dust—and something else. Something stale. Closed in.

Rico's feet hit the landing.

He stopped. Dropped low. Listened.

His pulse steadied, controlled, precise. His eyes moved quickly, scanning the hallway, the walls, the floor. No immediate movement. No sound now. Too quiet.

All the doors on either side of the landing remained closed—except for one.

With his back to the wall, he sidestepped down the hall, his eyes constantly moving, searching for signs of a threat. He itched to have his Glock in his hand, but drawing a gun like that would only generate more questions than a supposed beach bum like Rico wanted to answer.

So he adjusted. Improvised. Adapted.

Always.

When he reached the doorway, he flattened himself against the wall and angled a glance inside.

Frankie scrambled backward from the bed, crablike, her movements frantic, uncoordinated. Her eyes were wide—too wide—her mouth open as she dragged in a broken breath.

Fear. Real fear.

Not attitude. Not bravado.

Where the hell was the threat?

Rico's gaze swept the room fast, controlled. Windows. Corners. Ceiling. Floor.

Nothing.

His eyes searched the room, then moved back to the bed. Curtains blocked his view, but judging from the way Frankie's eyes stayed glued in that direction, whatever had her frightened had to be there.

He slipped into the room.

The canopy curtains blocked his view, but her eyes—locked there, frozen—told him everything he needed to know.

Something was there.

“Frankie—”

She saw him. A small, broken sound escaped her, somewhere between a sob and a gasp. Her body shook, her eyes glassy with terror.

Rico whipped his head around and, in disbelief, watched a fat mother of a snake slide off the bed. “Crap.”

The snake slid from the bed in one slow, heavy movement, its thick body rippling as it dropped to the floor. Big. Too big. Its scales caught the

dim light, dull brown-black, blending too easily into shadow.

It paused. Tongue flicking. Testing the air. Then it rose, fast.

Coiled to strike.

Rico didn't think.

He acted.

His hand dipped into his pocket, the motion smooth, practiced.

The switchblade snapped open with a sharp click that cut through the silence.

One breath.

One calculation.

Distance. Angle. Strike point.

He threw.

The blade cut clean through the air and sank deep into the snake's neck. The creature thrashed violently, body coiling and snapping against the floor in a frenzy of dying muscle.

Frankie screamed again.

Then she was moving—straight into him.

Her body hit his hard, arms wrapping tight around his neck, clinging, shaking, her breath coming in short, panicked bursts against his skin. "Oh, God... oh, God... oh, God..."

Rico steadied himself automatically, one arm coming around her back, the other bracing her. His hand moved in slow circles between her shoulder blades, grounding, calming. "You're okay," he said quietly.

“You’re okay.”

But his eyes never stopped moving.

Scanning.

Tracking.

The snake continued to writhe, slowing now, its movements weakening. Still, his gaze swept the room again. Corners. Walls. Floorboards. Windows.

How did it get in? And was it alone?

The thought tightened something cold in his gut.

Out here, isolated like this, anything could get in. And no one would know.

His jaw flexed. If that thing had bitten her—

“You need to come back to town,” he said, voice firmer now.

“What?” she pulled back slightly, still close, still within the circle of his arms.

“You can’t stay here alone.”

Her fear flickered, then hardened.

There it was. That fire again.

“It was just a snake,” she said, lifting her chin. “I can handle that.”

Rico’s gaze dropped to her, disbelief threading through him. “Like you handled it this time?”

Her eyes flashed. And for a second—just one—he wondered if she realized how close they still stood.

Her body fit against his as it belonged there.

Warm. Soft in the right places. Strong in others. Her scent wrapped around him, something light, feminine, layered over sweat and heat and something uniquely hers. His gaze drifted. Her mouth. Full. Soft. Inviting in a way that hit him low and dangerous.

Damn.

He wanted to kiss her. The realization hit hard. Unwanted. Immediate. And then—

She shoved him.

Rico blinked, stepping back. “What was that for?”

Color rushed to her cheeks. “Uh... thank you... for helping me, but you and your friend need to go.”

He stared at her.

“You’re kicking me out?”

“Yes. No. I mean—” she gestured vaguely toward the door, clearly flustered now. “You came to unload the lumber. That’s done. So... you can go.”

Rico shook his head slowly, disbelief settling in. A minute ago, she’d been clinging to him like he was the only solid thing in the room. Now this? “You going to clean that up by yourself?” he asked, nodding toward the snake.

She followed his gaze and visibly shuddered. “Do you think you could take care of that?”

Rico exhaled through his nose and crossed the room, crouching beside the carcass. Up close, it was worse. Thick. Heavy. Nearly seven feet. Not native. Not supposed to be here.

“Nasty bastard,” he commented.

“That thing wanted to eat me,” Frankie said from the doorway, arms wrapped tight around herself.

“I doubt it,” Rico replied, gathering the body into the sheet. “Not enough meat on your bones.” He wiped the blade clean and secured the bundle, movements efficient, controlled.

Behind him, something shifted. He glanced back.

Frankie stood frozen, her gaze locked on the knife. him. Her lips parted slightly. Her tongue licked her lips, making him think of that kiss he’d foregone.

“You’re pretty good with that,” she said, nodding towards the black-handled switchblade he held.

“A skill I picked up.” He put the knife back in his pocket.

“You got a bag or something I can put this in?”

“Yeah... I—yes.” She moved quickly, almost too quickly, out of the room.

But not before he caught it. That look. The edge of it. The shift. Rico straightened slowly, eyes narrowing just slightly.

She was afraid. But not of the house. Not of the snake.

Of him.

Frankie had known people who were good with knives. Too good. Some used them for protection. Others used them to cut. Some slow, deliberate, like they had something to prove. She shuddered at the last thought. The memory slid in uninvited, sharp and unwelcome. Having been shuttled from place to place in foster care, she spent a lot of layover time in state-run institutions, and she saw her fair share of knives. Foster homes. Group facilities. Locked doors and whispered threats.

She shoved it down hard. Right now, she didn't want to think about it. Rico had to go, and he had to go now.

Quickly, she grabbed a thick black contractor bag from the room across the hall, her movements sharper than necessary. "Here."

He took it without hesitation, stuffing the bloodied sheet and the heavy weight inside with an efficiency that made her stomach tighten. No hesitation. No disgust. No second thought.

Like he'd done it before.

"José is probably wondering if *el chupacabra* ate us," he said, a hint of humor in his voice.

Frankie rolled her eyes, latching onto irritation because it was easier than anything else. "Oh, please. Tell me you don't believe in that crap."

His expression shifted. Not amused. Not anymore. "No." He slung

the bag over his shoulder and walked past her, close enough that she felt the brush of his arm, the heat of him, the solidness.

Frankie followed, more aware of him now than she wanted to be. “Finally,” she muttered, folding her arms. “Someone with some common sense.”

“Vieques is a small island,” he said, his voice quieter now, more measured. Most of the people are natives, *borinqueños* who have never left the island. Puerto Ricans like to tell stories. Maybe you should listen to some of them.”

Frankie let out a short laugh. “I thought you didn’t believe in monsters.”

He glanced at her. Really looked at her. “I believe there are monsters,” he said, patting the bag on his shoulder. “Just not the imaginary kind.”

Before she could respond, the horn blared from outside.

“José is waiting.”

Good. Time for him to go.

She turned toward the stairs, relief and something else twisting together inside her. Once he left, it would just be her again. Her and the house. And whatever else decided to crawl in.

Her sneakers hit the bottom step when a loud crack sounded from behind her.

CRACK.

The sound split the air.

Frankie spun around, heart slamming into her throat. Rico stood several steps above her, one leg plunged straight through the rotted wood, splintered edges jutting around his calf.

“Oh my God—” Frustration exploded out of her. She grabbed at her hair, fingers tangling. “What else in this God-forsaken deathtrap could possibly go wrong?”

The house groaned softly around them, as if answering.

Rico didn't panic. He tugged at his leg, tearing the fabric of his jeans as he pulled free. Wood cracked, splintered, fell away. He landed steady, balanced, like he'd done this a hundred times before.

“I'm fine,” he said, brushing debris from his leg like it was nothing.

Frankie forced herself to breathe, to pull it together. She couldn't afford to lose control. Not here. Not now. Frankie put a lid on her emotions. She could have a breakdown later. “Are you all right?” she asked.

He descended the rest of the stairs carefully, testing each step, his movements controlled, aware. Watching. His eyes seemed to take in everything, even the littlest detail. That unsettled her more than the broken stair.

“I should've warned you,” she continued quickly, filling the silence. “I've been meaning to fix it, but the lumberyard refused delivery. Said the roads were bad.” She huffed. “More like they're scared of some ridiculous

curse.”

Her eye twitched. God, she needed to get a handle on this.

Rico placed a hand on her shoulder. Warm. Firm. Steady. “Relax,” he said, softer now. “No harm done. We can drive out there tomorrow and pick up what we need.”

We.

There was that “we” again. She liked the way his hand felt warm and rough against her skin. So calm and reassuring. She wanted to lean into his touch, but pulled away. The temptation to lean into that steadiness. To let someone else take control for once. Dangerous.

She stepped away.

His hand fell. “It’s going to take more than what you’ve got out there,” he added, glancing around.

“I know, but the lumberyard won’t deliver here, and I’m short on cash. What I ordered will have to do.” She looked at the gaping hole and moved it to the top of her list of jobs to tackle.

Why had her grandmother let the place deteriorate like this? Why had her grandmother waited until she was dead to contact Frankie? Too many unanswered questions. Shaking her head, she turned back to Rico. “I’m sorry. You could have broken your leg.” She looked into eyes as tranquil as the Caribbean Sea, aware that he wasn’t the least bit frazzled.

“But I didn’t.” He smiled wickedly and leaned on the banister, their

mouths inches apart. His gaze lingered on her a second too long.

Close. Too close.

“You need to be more careful,” she said breathlessly as his hand slid up the banister to cover hers.

Electric.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he murmured. “But I’m usually reckless by nature.” He stroked his thumb over the back of her hand.

Her pulse jumped.

Frankie tightened her grip on the solid wood banister beneath her fingers, grounding herself. “I have iced tea in the kitchen,” she said quickly, her throat suddenly dry. Quickly extracting her hand from the heat of his touch, she tried to put more space between them. “Excuse me.”

Rico took a step back, allowing her room to move. She squeezed past him. Her breasts accidentally brushed against his T-shirt. Heat flared instantly, sharp and unwelcome. Her nipples tightened, betraying her.

Frankie crossed her arms over her chest and hurried through the parlor doors into the kitchen.

The man was way too hot, and she wasn’t about to get burned. She grabbed one of the glasses and downed the icy liquid, aware of Rico’s eyes on her as he passed through the kitchen and out the back door. Once composed, she picked up the tray with refreshments and headed

outside.

Rico circled to the back of the truck and threw the garbage bag onto the truck bed. José sat in the driver's seat, impatient to leave.

By the time she stepped back outside, tray in hand, she had herself under control again. Or so she told herself.

Rico tossed the last bag into the truck. José looked ready to bolt.

"Thought you might like a drink," she said.

José practically inhaled his.

Rico took it slower. Watched her over the rim of the glass. That gaze again. Too knowing. Too steady.

Rico smiled and took a glass from the tray. "Gracias."

She watched his Adam's apple bob as he thirstily drank the iced tea.

He swiped his lips with the back of his hand. "The land looks like it needs a drink too."

Frankie followed his gaze across the dry, cracked earth. The land mirrored the house. Neglected. Waiting. Or dying. She pushed the thought away.

Frankie knew what he meant. Long ago, the grounds had been fertile and used as a sugar cane plantation. That had been nearly half a century ago, according to the lawyer who had handled the execution of the will. Neglect and lack of funds had left a good portion of the land hard-caked dirt. Aside from weeds and the occasional prickly poinciana

bush with its brilliant reddish blossoms, there was little vegetation. A few ceibo trees grew on the property. Their large green fronds offered some shade from the sun and, on occasion, she found herself sitting beneath them, listening to the breeze through the leaves. Overall, since arriving, she had put her effort into restoring the house and had little time to explore the sixty-plus acres, much less take care of the grounds.

He gave the house a once-over and handed the glass back to her. “Why don’t you come back to town with us. You’ll be safer.”

Safer.

The word hit wrong. Her spine straightened immediately. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said. I’m not about to be driven off my property by stupid stories or anything else.” She’d toughed it out nearly all her life. This place was a piece of cake compared to the cold streets of the Big Apple. “Your ride’s leaving.”

Rico’s head whipped around. Sure enough, José had put the truck in gear and was starting to back up. Rico cursed.

Frankie grinned. “Better jump in. It’s a long walk back.”

The truck disappeared down the drive, leaving behind dust and silence. Thick. Immediate. Oppressive.

Frankie stood there a moment longer than she should have.

Then turned and walked back inside. The door shut behind her with a dull, final sound. The house closed in instantly. Quiet.

She drew in a breath. Held it. Let it out slowly. She would not let

this place get to her. Control. That's what she needed. Focus on the work. Not the house. Not the stories. Not the man with dark eyes and dangerous hands who moved, belonged in places people didn't talk about.

She set the tray down and grabbed her hammer, gripping it tighter than necessary. She tested the weight of the hammer in her hand. No one or nothing was going to stop her from making Casa Verde her home. Not some goat-sucking legend, or a man-eating snake, and especially not some macho Latino with a superhero complex.

"Who does he think he is?" she muttered, tightening her grip. "Superman?"

The way he moved. The way he took control. The way he made everything feel handled.

Safe.

Frankie's grip tightened. Nothing in life came free. Nothing.

If Rico Lopez thought she was some *naïve turista*, he was in for a surprise. She had survived worse than him. Worse than this house. Worse than whatever shadows lived in these walls.

Frankie lifted the hammer. "No one," she whispered into the stillness, "is taking this from me."

The house said nothing. It listened.

Dark Waters

Sasha Tomas & Patrizia Hayashi

© 2026
Green Bamboo Books
Charlotte, NC



COMING SUMMER 2026

<https://www.sashatomas.com/category/caribbean-gothic-mystery>