

Ghosts of the Past

Part 3

The following events begin 10 years prior to “The Box Journey Home”

Glint of steel. Nick of bone.

The warm ocean breeze washed over Bryson’s face as he looked over the greenish-blue of the Gulf of Mexico. Sail boats and fishing ships made their way slowly across the relatively still water. He took another sip of his over-priced coffee and picked up the manila folder sitting next to him on the bench. He set his coffee down and flipped open the folder. For the eighth time, he looked over the coroner’s reports of both Melicent and Mikel. Their deaths had been ruled as accidental. A fire had started in the bedroom, spread and ignited a gas line causing an explosion. Melicent had died in the explosion while Mikel had been critically injured, impaled by debris. He died shortly after and burned in the fire.

None of this was new. It was the same information he received eighteen years ago. At the time, he mourned their loss but had taken the report at face value. Now that he had the actual coroner’s report it seemed all wrong. If Melicent died from the explosion why didn’t her lungs have signs of smoke damage. He flipped the page to Mikel’s autopsy and looked over the picture. Broken left shoulder, broken left arm and a thin cut eight inches in length in the center of his chest. He had seen that kind of wound a thousand times.

“You see it too?” Thomas asked as he slid into the metal chair across from Bryson. He sipped on his Grande Cappuccino with a double shot of espresso and gave a nod to report.

“Sword wound,” Bryson replied as his finger tapped the picture.

“Not something that first comes to mind when you are doing an autopsy,” Thomas said with a shake of his head. “Can’t fault the coroner too much. Police didn’t find a sword, they did find some sharp metal from the siding. He just put two and two together.”

Although Bryson didn’t like it, he agreed with the Detective. They had met with coroner that morning and had even talked to a few of the officers that worked the scene over ten years ago. Per all accounts, it was an accident. Perhaps helped along by the severe storm that had hit Galveston that evening.

“Eight-inch cut,” Bryson murmured. “His sword was like a Scimitar. At its maximum width, it was just under eight-inches.”

“Sharp as hell too for what I remember,” Thomas replied looking at the picture. “Damn near could cut a man in half, especially with Mikel swinging it.”

“So, he was killed with his own sword.” Bryson closed the report and handed it back to Thomas.

Bryson looked out over the ocean then up and down the beach. To his left, he could see large houses and then a dock. To his right, new beachfront cafés, bistros and high-end shops that had cropped up in the last ten years. Even the *Starbucks* that they were sitting at was less than five years old, built on the same spot where Mikel and Melicent had died. Any evidence they had hoped to find was buried under a few tons of concrete, brick and coffee grounds.

"It doesn't add up," Thomas said as rubbed his eyes. The sun was beginning to set behind the Starbucks putting an end to an already long day. "David and Mike were both big, tough and seasoned soldiers. Next to Sara they were two or the fiercest fighters to come here with us. Even Mel could hold her own in a fight. How does someone get the drop on them?"

Bryson really wished Mikel and Mel would have given him more to go on. The killer's identity would have been nice. "Maybe it was someone they knew?"

"Mikel and David weren't in the same circles," Thomas replied. "David had a tendency of rubbing people the wrong way and Mikel was always happy to just be around Mel. Besides I can't see one of us doing this."

"We can't rule anything out," Bryson said as he finished off his coffee.

"So, what's next?" Thomas asked as he swished the contents of his cup, giving it one final mix.

"I have to meet an old friend of mine down at the dock in about an hour," Bryson replied nodding at the dock. "In the meantime, I thought I'd walk by the beach houses along the way and ask anyone who was here eleven years ago if they remember anything strange that night."

"Sounds like fun," Thomas said with a chuckle. "I'm going to check out some of the pawn shops in the area. See if anyone remembers a scimitar like sword being sold in the area. Can't believe that is something that is pawned a lot around here. It's a long shot but you never know."

"I'm always looking for something nice for around the house so If you find any antiques let me know," Bryson said with a smile.

Thomas laughed as he flashed Bryson a half-grin, "I'm looking at one."

"Don't I know it," Bryson replied with a wave as he left Thomas behind.

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The canvassing of the neighborhood didn't turn up any new information. The only people that had lived on the beach during that time was an elderly couple a few houses down. The things they remembered was the storm and the fire. The wife, a little blue-haired lady with leathery-tan skin, commented that she had met Mikel and Mel and thought they were a lovely couple and had passed each other on the beach a few times during her nightly walks.

By the time Bryson had gotten to the pier the sun had set and the lamps had come on. The pier was far from empty as the last fishermen cast their lines into the water and teenagers rode skateboards and hung out on the benches. The pier was longer than it appeared when he was sitting at the *Starbucks* and jutted out over a hundred feet. From the pier stairs led town to the docks below and the dozen or so boats that were tied up for the night. Bryson could hear laughter and loud discussions from the boats to his left and right.

He leaned on the railing looking back at the coffee shop. He had hoped that maybe Mikel and Mel would appear there on the beach, holding hands or playing in the waves. He wanted to see more than the sad looks that had been on their faces just a couple nights ago.

"Well Bryson Rikes as I live and breathe," a gruff voice called out from behind Bryson.

Bryson's slipped his hand into his jacket, his fingertips caressed the cold pommel of his knife. He turned slowly, his body slipping to a defensive stance.

In front of Bryson stood an older man in an leather jacket. His hair was white and his beard was gray. His skin was tan as if he spent far too many hours in the sun. He looked like someone that Bryson wouldn't have wanted to tussle with twenty or thirty years ago. Even under the Coast Guard hat the man was wearing and beneath the laugh lines and wrinkles of age, Bryson could still see the face of an old friend, Wilbur Nash.

"Whoa, there," Wilbur said throwing up his hands. "Didn't mean to spook you, old man."

Old man? It was odd to hear outside of the Prodigals. He was by far the oldest of all the others, he was even older than Sara, so he was use to the old man jokes from them. Wilbur however, was not a prodigal. He was a remnant of the past and one of the few that Bryson trusted with his secrets...well most of them.

"Who you calling old timer?" Bryson said with a chuckle slipping his hand back out of his jacket. He gave the old man a hug then held him at arm's length as if looking him over. "Look at you. How'd you get so old?"

"Good living and hard liquor," Wilbur laughed. "You don't look a day older than when I saw you last, when was that ten years ago?"

"More like fifteen," Bryson replied. "If I remember right I was pulling you out of that dive bar in Vera Cruz with about twenty or so of the Sinaloa cartels best chasing us out to sea."

"We got the smugglers though and put a dent into the Cartel while we were at it," Wilbur said with a smile. "Good times. You still doing Government work?"

"For the most part, no. I'm retired, debts paid and all that," Bryson said patting his friend on the shoulder. "So your back with the Coast Guard then."

"Retired last month," Wilbur said with a twinge of sadness in his voice. "Finally, spending time with the grandkids and Maria. Turned in my Captain's chair for a rocking chair."

The two men saddled up to the side of the railing and looked out over the ocean. Both of them for a moment lost in memories.

Wilbur broke the silence first, "That all being said I was surprised to get your call."

Wilbur pulled a folded sheet out of his jacket pocket along with a pair of bifocals. "I was able to get the information you were looking for."

He unfolded the paper and read the words, "Says that, on the date you asked about, Private Lindsey Martin got a call from a Mikel Grace regarding a sail boat that was experiencing trouble docking due to ocean conditions caused by a summer storm. She intended to relay the message to the local port police. However, we had a cruiser in the area that was able to attempt assistance."

"The cruiser did locate and respond to the call for assistance," Wilbur continued and Bryson felt his heart beginning to race. "The boat was the Harper's Hope out of Seabrook. The Captain and owner of the vessel was Scott Farley. He declined assistance and said he was going to bring it into the beach as the waves made docking on the pier difficult. The Coast Guard crew watched him steer the boat close to shore, weigh anchor and disembark to the beach just ahead of the storm. They then called it in and made for the US Coast Guard base on the other side of the island."

Bryson was beside himself. It was a lot to take in. They had a name now, Scott Farley. Yet it wasn't a name that was familiar to him. "You wouldn't happen to have this Scott Farley's contact info would you?"

Wilbur shook his head, "Going to be hard to talk to him. While he made it to Galveston alright, he was found three days later about two miles off Pelican Island. Looks like his boat took on water and he got caught up in the severe tides we have up there."

All of the hope that Bryson had slipped away. Wilbur must have seen the pain on his face as he said, "Why is this so important to bring you all the way here."

"A couple of my friends died in a fire here eleven years ago," Bryson replied. He decided that the theories he had on Mikel and Mel's real cause of the death were best left between him and Thomas. "This Scott Farley may have been the last to see them and we wanted to talk to him."

"Sorry to hear that," Wilbur said as he placed a hand on Bryson's shoulder. "I ask because there are a few things I found suspicious,"

"Like what?" Bryson asked.

Wilbur flipped through the papers. "The Harper's Hope was a top of the line sail boat at the time. It was worth over a hundred-thousand dollars and Farley was looking to sell it. Why risk damaging it by bringing it to shore? The Coast Guard could have helped him secure the boat at the docks."

"Maybe he was in a hurry to get to shore," Bryson replied playing devil's advocate.

"That's a lot of money to risk for just saving ten minutes or so," Wilbur said with a shake of his head. "Based on the report it was as Farley wanted to get away from the Coast Guard. He was going out of his way to assure the Coast Guard he was okay."

"That wasn't the only thing though," Wilbur continued as he flipped a page. "When you called to see if there were any reports that night I found that your friend's call wasn't the only call that went out regarding Harper's Hope that night. Turns out Farley's wife had called the Coast Guard as she was worried about her husband taking the sailboat out earlier in the day and was not responding to contact. She said that he had told her he was going to take a potential buyer out on the boat for a quick sale but hadn't returned. The Coast Guard hailed the boat and got a response from someone claiming to be Farley. He said that he had dropped off the buyer and was heading to Galveston."

"Do you have a picture of Farley?" Bryson asked nodding at the papers.

Wilbur turned the page to the last page and turned it so Bryson could see it. "Yeah, I pulled it for you."

Scott Farley appeared to be in his late fifties with a short grey beard and salt and pepper hair. His face was heavy set and it was easy to tell that the man was probably on the portly side.

"Any description in the Coast Guard report?" Bryson asked. "Did they visually identify the man during the rescue attempt?"

"No, nothing in the report," Wilbur shook his head then tapped the picture. "I think you and I are reaching the same conclusion so I made a few calls and no one from the crew that night remembered anything about the Captain of that vessel besides that he wore a rainslicker. By the time they got to him, it was raining pretty hard and the seas were beyond rough."

"Did they salvage the vessel?" Bryson asked.

"No, the damage to the boat was severe so they left it," Wilbur replied. "Why?"

"I hate to ask but I'm going to need another favor."

"I think you can cash in an IOU or two," Wilbur said with a smile. "Name it!"

"I don't expect that there is much left of the boat but could you go take a look for yourself in the next couple of days?" Bryson asked.

"Anything in particular I'm looking for?"

"Anything that looks odd or out of place," Bryson replied. "Anything that may prove that Scott Farley never made it to Galveston. Any clues to who this mysterious client was."

"So, we are on the same page," Wilbur whispered. "What am I getting myself into here, Bryson?"

"Hopefully nothing," Bryson said wistfully. "Still better bring a friend just in case."

"I got a few Navy buddies who wouldn't mind a little work," Wilbur said. He then tapped the side of his jacket. "I still pack my .45 for any other trouble that we may run into."

Bryson hoped it wouldn't come to that. As of now, he felt that he and Thomas were possibly a step ahead of the killer. He hoped that finally the killer had made a mistake. It was a glimmer of hope but at this point he would take it gladly.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Bryson patted his old friend on the shoulder. "I'm leaving tomorrow but I got a little time tonight if you want to catch up over a beer or two."

"Sure, but let's pick something a little fancier than the last dive bar we went to," Wilbur said with a laugh. "The metal detector at the airport still beeps thanks to that shrapnel in my ass."

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By the time that Bryson had helped Wilbur to his cab, it was nearly 1 AM. He said good-bye to his old friend and wished him luck then began the hike back to his hotel. He had a little too much to drink but his hotel wasn't far, only a couple miles down the beach. The night air was crisp and cool and he could hear the crashing of the waves as he walked down the boulevard. The bars were still full of people and he could see more walking along the beach. He understood why Mikel and Mel liked it here.

He continued for a mile until he reached a row of restaurants and shops, all of which were closed. There were fewer people in this area. The cars that drove by became sporadic and the sounds of laughter had been replaced by the loud crashing waves. The wind felt colder as he strode down the sidewalk. He wondered if it was actually colder or if it was just his body playing tricks on him.

He could see his hotel a few blocks away and the lights from the IHOP next to it. It wasn't a large hotel but kept to the beach feel with its white shutters and light pink paint. He could have afforded something fancier but it was the closest to Mikel and Mel's with a view of the Ocean. Each room had a large balcony and from his room, he had a good view of the pier and the beach beyond.

He felt them before he could see them. Standing just beyond the light of a street lamp, half a block down the road were Mikel and Mel. Mel was pointing at him, which was a little freaky even for him, while Mikel turned his head to the hotel. If it wasn't for the fact that they disappeared when light from the headlights of a passing car hit them, he would have sworn they were alive. He was so caught up in them that he didn't even notice the man that bumped into him.

“Sorry,” Bryson yelled back to the passing man. He felt like an idiot and wondered if he truly had too much to drink.

The man though didn't appear angry but instead gave a wave backward and continued on his way. When Bryson looked back to where Mikel and Mel were a second ago they were gone. He scanned further down the street and saw them a little closer to the hotel.

Both Mel and Mikel had turned to face the hotel. Bryson followed their gazes and could tell they were looking up at the third or fourth floor about halfway across. He picked up the pace as he realized what they were looking at. It was definitely the fourth floor. Room 426 to be exact. The room that he was sharing with Thomas.

He rushed to the other side of the road, narrowly avoiding a speeding Prius. He hit the sidewalk in a full sprint. He passed the spot where Mikel and Mel were a few moments ago and looked back up at his balcony. Mikel and Mel were no longer looking at him, they had their backs turned to him and were facing the darkness of his room.

Bryson raced past the IHOP and crossed the parking lot of the hotel. In mid run, he fished his room key out of his pocket and scanned it at the lobby door. The door opened, much slower than he had hoped, and he crossed the lobby as quickly as possible. He reached for his cellphone in his jacket pocket and dialed Thomas' phone. By the time he stepped into the elevator, the phone was ringing. It continued to ring until he heard, “You have reach Detective Thomas Lees of the Boulder Police Department. I'm not available at this moment. If it's an emergency, please call 911...”

Bryson hung and immediately tried again. The doors of the elevators slid open to his hallway. He turned to the right and rushed down the hallway. He took a right turn towards his room and came to a stop in front of the door. Before opening the door he hung up the phone and slipped it back in jacket pocket. He then reached in and pulled out his knife. He flipped it in his hand so that the blade was pointing down and stepped towards the door. It took three swipes for the light on the door handle to go from green to red. He pushed the door open slowly, his body as close to the door frame as possible.

The room beyond was dark except for the moonlight that streamed through the large sliding glass door. He could see the door was open and watched as the drapes billowed into the room. While the drapes blocked some of his view he could see Mikel and Mel were gone.

He listened carefully for any sounds and heard something coming from the center of the room. It was heavy breathing as if labored. He reached out and flipped on the light, ready for anything or anyone that was suicidal enough to try and jump him.

It took a second for his eyes to adjust from the light. When he did he let out an audible gasp. In the center of the room, lying face down on the floor was Thomas Lees. A pool of blood was growing on the carpeting from his head and neck area. His body was twisted and appeared lifeless. As much as he wanted to rush to Thomas' side he also didn't want to be part of a headline that read, “Two men found dead in a Beach Side Hotel” in tomorrow's paper.

Bryson flipped the lights on in the bathroom and checked in the shower. He then carefully stepped back into the bedroom. His eyes darted across the room to make sure no one was going to pop-up from behind the office chair or from behind the bed. Content that he was safe for now he slipped the knife back into his jacket and ran to the side of his friend.

He kneeled and looked down at the still body of the detective. He felt for a pulse and to his relief found that it was slow but steady. He could see Thomas's back rise a little with each shallow breath. He heard something muffled from the where Thomas laid face down.

“Thomas?” Bryson yelled as he gently turned the man’s head. “Are you okay?”

Thomas’ voice was no more than a loud groan but he managed to moan out, “No.”

Bryson felt around Thomas’ neck and felt hot sticky blood. “Where are you hurt?”

“My hand,” Thomas groaned again, “You’re kneeling on my hand.”

Bryson jumped up and off Thomas’ hand. When he did, he watched Thomas push himself up on all fours. He leaned down to help Thomas up to the side of the bed.

Thomas’ face was bruised and bloody. A large gash was opened above his left eye and his nose was now about a half an inch to the left. Both eyes were starting to get puffy and purple. Other than there were no other signs of injury on his neck or body.

“My nose, is it broken? Feels broken,” Thomas said as he gingerly toughed his face and received a jolt of pain in return.

“Yes, it’s going to need to be reset.” Bryson replied. “We need to get you to the hospital as your head is bleeding pretty bad.”

“In a minute,” Thomas said trying to steady himself on the bed.

“What the hell happened?” Bryson asked as he rose to his feet. He wanted to get a clean towel to help with the bleeding and new there were some new towels in the bathroom.

“I don’t know,” Thomas said. “The pawn shop search turned up zilch so I went back to the hotel. I called Alicia to let her know I was alright. I was going to call you but I passed out on the bed.”

Thomas paused as if he was trying to remember a distant memory. “When I awoke, someone was standing just inside the room and balcony doors were open. I tried to get out of bed and he hit me with something hard twice in the face. I hit the ground and thought it was all over.”

“What happened then,” Bryson asked as he stepped into the bathroom.

“I couldn’t see him but I felt him walking around the room,” Thomas replied. “I think he thought he killed me. Must not have realized how hard of a head I’ve got.”

“Amen for that,” Bryson said with a chuckle. “Did you see his face?”

“No, I wish I did,” Thomas called out. I think he was going to wait for you but something spooked him. Right before I blacked out I heard him run to the balcony.”

Bryson grabbed a towel and turned the water on in the sink, “What? Did he jump off the balcony?”

“You’re not going to believe me but I think he climbed up the balcony to break in and climbed down to escape,” Thomas replied almost in disbelief of his own words. “That’s some crazy Jackie Chan type crap right there.”

“How long do you think you were out?” Bryson asked as he wet down the towel.

“Maybe a few minutes,” the Detective answered. “I honestly don’t think I’ve ever been hit that hard and I’ve taken a few hits to the face in my lifetime. He hit me and I felt blood just explode from my face. It was disturbing. He’s probably going to have a nasty dry cleaning bill.”

Bryson always appreciated Thomas' humor although he questioned the timing. He turned off the water and then looked at himself in the mirror. On the right shoulder of his jacket he noticed something. On top of the brown leather, on his left shoulder was a blotch of red. His mind whirled backwards. He retraced the steps quickly through his brain like rewinding a movie. He stopped it just as he bumped into the man on the sidewalk a block away. The man had hit him hard in the left shoulder. "It couldn't be." He thought.

He remembered Mel pointing at him just before he bumped into the stranger. He realized that Mel wasn't pointing at him. She was identifying her killer. His heart hit the floor. He had literally bumped into the person that they were chasing. He felt that glimmer of hope he had of being one step ahead shatter. The killer had him dead to rights both at the hotel, if he had stayed, and on the sidewalk below. Why not just take him out then? These were all great questions and he knew it was going to consume him for a while to come. In the meantime, he stepped out of the bathroom and gave Thomas the towel. "Okay, we need to get you to a hospital before Alicia can no longer recognize you."

"We're going to need to change hotels," Thomas said as he pressed the towel to his forehead.

"We're done here," Bryson said as he gathered up his things. "We'll talk on the way to the hospital but I think we just got lucky. We need to head back to Colorado where there is strength in numbers."

"Dear, Creator, you're spooked," Thomas replied in shock and awe.

"I don't know why he didn't kill us both but he made it pretty clear that he can," Bryson said as he grabbed for Thomas' bag. "I don't think David, Mikel and Mel are the only people he has killed. We need to do some more research. I think it may be time to warn the others or they won't be the last either."

Bryson went to the desk to grab his phone charger and found a folded piece of paper sitting just under the dangling court. The stationary was yellow and familiar. He swept it up off the desk and unfolded it.

"What's that?" Thomas asked squinting through his swollen eyes.

"It's another note," Bryson said. He looked over the familiar jagged letters. It was the same hand-writing he had seen before on David's note.

"Son of a bitch left a note?" Thomas yelled. "Read it!"

"One I took by breaking bone. With a glint of steel I took another of your own. The third died from friendly fire. The last I took will earn your ire. I'll save you dear Bryson for the last. You will pay for all of the sins of your past."

Thomas groaned as he leaned back on the bed. "Well he not only kills people he also kills poetry."

"I don't think he was trying for Shakespeare," Bryson said as he folded the paper back up. "Friendly-fire...I think we need to consider Felnor's death now."

"Yeah," Thomas said. "On the plus side, he thinks I'm dead. So, we have that going for us."

Something wasn't sitting right with Bryson about any of this. It explains why he wasn't killed on the sidewalk but why leave the note and not make sure Thomas was dead? Why the sudden rhyming? It was almost too theatrical. Too sloppy for a killer that covered his tracks so well eleven years ago, and again a few weeks ago.

"I'd like to get the hell out of Galveston, please," Thomas said as he closed his eyes. "Hospital than home. And, by the way, the next time you want to take a road trip...ask your wife."

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The waves crashed as the man peered out over the ocean. The pier was empty now and the dim lights cast heavy shadows over the benches and walkways. His arms were sore and his heart was still pumping a mile a minute. Still he felt invigorated and powerful. He had killed a man and had an opportunity to strike down Bryson. He wanted to but that wasn't the plan. He didn't want to go up against the plan.

The phone in his pocket vibrated so he slipped it out. The caller ID was blocked but he didn't need to see a number to know who was calling. Only one other had the number to his phone. He paused to catch his breath then answered it.

"Good morning," the man said, his voice a little higher than he hoped.

"Is it done?" asked a voice like broken glass.

The man smiled and removed the metal knuckles on his right hand. "Yes, Thomas Lees is dead. I killed him in the way that you asked."

There was a pause and the man continued, "I left the note too. I added a little flourish."

The line was quiet except for a low rumble of static. Then the voice growled, "You were to write what I told you word for word. *Glint of steel. Nick of bone.* These words would lead Bryson to where we need him."

The man was taken aback. He thought his master would be pleased with the initiative. "I... uh... remembered what you said about Felnor and..."

There was a distant guttural groan then, when the voice continued, it was labored as if holding back a wave of anger. "Felnor! Damn fool you are."

There was silence then the voice continued more steady and measured than before, "I will deal with Felnor's death. We will discuss this when you return and there will be consequences."

The man felt his body begin to shake. He still had scars on his back from the last time there were consequences for his action. While he loved his master without question, he feared him even more. "I'm sorry master I'll..."

"Dispose of the phone and anything that would lead Bryson to you," the voice commanded. "Once you cleaned up any loose ends, return home. We have much yet to do. Without Lees, Bryson will need to lean on another. We will need to make sure we are ready."

"Yes, Master," the man said hanging up the phone. He then tossed the phone in the ocean, followed by metal knuckles. His clothes he would destroy on the long drive home. He took one last deep breath of salt air and looked up at the silvery moon. He smiled to himself and began to whistle as he walked back down the pier. He decided to make a stop on the way back from Galveston. There were many small towns along the way with their quaint shops and kind locals. He had tasted death and found himself wanting more.