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The Last Summer of the Death Warriors

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Chapter 1

The ride to St Anthony's took longer than he expected. He always figured you could get from one place to any other place in Las Cruces in twenty minutes or less. Maybe it was a short drive that seemed long because Mrs Olivares would not stop talking. Mostly she told him how lucky he was to be going to St Anthony's rather than a juvenile detention centre.

St Anthony's was an orphanage. It was not a place for kids with problems. Mrs Olivares had worked very hard and called in a lot of favours to get him admitted. She pointed out the high school he would attend in the fall. It was within walking distance of St Anthony's. He had been given a choice between going to summer school and entering as a senior or redoing his junior year. He chose to redo his junior year. He had other plans for the summer.

There was a white sign on the front lawn with the words st anthony's home painted in black letters. Behind it stood a one-storey brick building in the shape of a lopsided cross. Next to the building was a basketball court. Kids dressed in grey shorts and

blue T-shirts were playing a full-court game. They stopped and turned to look at Mrs Olivares's car as it drove by. The kids on the basketball court were his age or older, but he could see younger kids on the grass fields. He noticed that there was no fence of any kind around the property.

Mrs Olivares parked the car in front of the main entrance and popped open the trunk. "Well, here we are," she said. She seemed like she wanted to say one more thing. Pancho stared straight ahead and waited for her to speak.

"I can't tell you how important it is for you to get along with everyone here. I understand you're still hurting, but why make matters worse for yourself?"

He rolled down the window. It was June and it was hot. If she was going to give him another lecture, the least she could do was keep the air conditioner on.

"You need to get over the anger. The police determined that there was no foul play in Rosa's death. It was no one's fault. Not yours, not anyone's. She just died. It happens."

"What did she die of?" He dared her to answer.

"Not that again. How many times have we gone over that? The coroner's report lists the cause of death as undetermined. That just means they don't know the exact reason. It happens sometimes. People die and no one knows why. Even apparently healthy young people like your sister."

"Why was she in a motel room? Who was she with?"

"She was twenty years old. It was not illegal for her to be in a motel room with someone."

"How can they say it was no one's fault if they don't even look for the guy she was with?"

"You talked to the detective. What did he tell you?"

Pancho remembered the detective. He remembered how shocked he was when the detective told him his sister had sex with someone before she died and there was no evidence of rape. He tried his best to explain that Rosa had the mind of a child. She wouldn't go in a motel room with someone unless she was deceived or taken advantage of somehow. "You can't just give up on this," he told the detective.

But the detective wasn't interested. He took notes and grinned as if he had heard it all before. "There's no evidence that a crime was committed, so it's a waste of time to look for him. What are we going to charge the guy with? Not calling 9-1-1?"

Pancho looked out of the window. Mrs Olivares continued, "I know it's frustrating not to have someone to blame. I know you feel helpless. But you can't take your frustrations out on people. I know you're a good boy inside. I know it. I told Father Concha that you were. Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah," he said. But he said it in a way meant to make her stop talking.

"Look." She sounded annoyed. "As of last week, the State of New Mexico, that would be me, is your legal guardian and you are my charge." What a strange word that was, "charge". He was Mrs Olivares's charge. "There are worse places than this. What you did at Mrs Duggan's could have landed you in prison. I'm taking a chance here. There's a lot of people back in the office who think I'm making a mistake bringing you here. Am I making a mistake?"

Yeah, you're making a mistake, he thought.

"Pancho, I'm talking to you."

He turned towards her and saw beads of sweat on her dark brown forehead. Mrs Olivares was a heavy woman and for a moment she reminded him of his sister. He blinked to make the memory disappear.

"I'll be all right," he said. Then he asked, "What's going to happen to the trailer and the truck?"

She rolled down her window. "The State's going to auction the mobile home and all the other things. The money will be used to cover the cost of your sister's funeral. Any money left over will be held in trust for you. I doubt the truck is worth anything. Even the trailer won't sell for much."

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry," she said. She looked as if she understood the unfairness of it all. "I wish I could just let you be until you turn eighteen next year, but I can't. My boss feels there's too much liability there. I'll come get you this weekend and take you to the trailer, and we can pick out a few things for you to save. We'll find a place to store them."

He opened the door of the car and stepped out. It was six in the afternoon and the sun was still white, the heat oppressive. He looked around the grounds and saw the trees — pecan trees, the kind his father planted behind the trailer. The grass around the trees was littered with pecans. That was a good sign. At home he enjoyed sitting under the trees, cracking nuts with his teeth. Mrs Olivares opened the trunk and waited for him to grab the nylon suitcase with his belongings. "Come on," she said. "Father Concha is waiting for us."

Mrs Olivares led the way to the front entrance. When she got there, she opened the glass door and waited for him. He stopped

before entering. He had the sensation that someone was staring at him. He turned slowly towards the basketball court. There were several kids on the sideline, but the stare he felt on his back had not come from any of them. He shifted his gaze towards the trees. There under a pecan tree, a boy in a wheelchair had his eyes fixed on him. The boy wore khaki trousers, a black sweatshirt and a blue baseball cap. His body had a frozen, slumped look, like he had died sitting and someone forgot to bury him.

Pancho stepped into the dark hallway and let the door close behind him. When his eyes adjusted, he saw a glass case full of basketball trophies. On the other side, a cream-coloured wall was lined with pictures of boys grouped in different formations. Mrs Olivares stopped in front of a glass door and knocked. She waited, knocked again and tried to open the door, but it was locked. She looked at her watch and pointed at one of the two plastic chairs next to the door. "Wait here. I'll check out back where the Brothers live."

He sat down on the chair, the suitcase next to him. She went down the hallway and turned left, the tapping of her heels filling the silence. He stood up and walked over to the trophy case. There on the bottom shelf was a small, dusty trophy of a boy about to throw a right hook. He knelt down and read the engraving. Luis Rivera — Golden Gloves — 1998.

Mrs Olivares had left her briefcase by the glass door. The sound of her heels had faded away. He crossed over to the briefcase and took out a folder the colour of a grocery store bag. The words "Coroner's Report" were stamped on front in purple ink. He opened it and read. He read slowly because slowly was the only way he could read. When he heard her heels in the distance, he

closed the folder, placed it back in the briefcase and sat down in the chair again.

He stood up when he heard Mrs Olivares's voice. Then he saw her and a tall man walk towards him. The man wore black trousers and a black short-sleeve shirt. He did not have the white collar Pancho had come to identify with a priest. His hair was grey and short and his skin was white except for dark circles around his eyes.

Mrs Olivares said, "Father Concha, I want to introduce you to Pancho Sanchez." Father Concha nodded. Pancho kept his hands in his pockets.

"Pancho. Is that short for Francisco?" Father Concha's voice was deep. There was nothing friendly about it.

"No."

"Is that what you want to be called?"

For a moment, he thought about making up another name. Since he became involved with the authorities, he had stopped liking his name. It sounded childish in the mouths of policemen and judges and social workers. Now someone was offering him the opportunity to call himself something more formal, more grown up. But the only other name he could think of was Vicente, and he didn't think he should take his father's name.

"Pancho it is, then." Father Concha turned towards Mrs Olivares and said without smiling, "I'll take it from here."

"Oh. Sure." She seemed surprised by his directness. "Well. You have everything you need? All the paperwork?"

"You sent it last week."

"That's right." She turned to Pancho and said, "Well, I guess I'll be seeing you." She stretched out her hand, but when Pancho

made no move to take it, pulled it back. She began to walk away and then stopped. "Oh, I told Pancho I would pick him up Saturday and take him home to get some things."

Father Concha looked at the suitcase. "He doesn't need anything else."

"No, we won't bring them here," she said quickly. "We'll find a place to store them. Someplace else."

"I don't want anything. You can get rid of all of it," Pancho said. What was there to keep? An old TV, hammers, saws, drills, Rosa's dolls? He had his father's army medals in his suitcase. He had his mother's and father's wedding rings. He had Rosa's family album. That was enough.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You don't want me to pick you up on Saturday, then?"

"No."

Mrs Olivares looked hurt. She lowered her eyes. "I'm going to go anyway. If I see anything worth saving, I'll get it for you."

Pancho shrugged. She could do whatever she wanted. He didn't care.