

When San Antonio attorney Sharon Morgan gets a desperate call regarding the mysterious death of her girlhood friend Laura Velásquez, Sharon returns to her hometown, Zapata, Texas. She soon learns that her old nemesis Bernice Peralta was not only blackmailing Laura, but wreaking havoc on other friends as well. Sharon realizes that until family secrets are brought to light, Bernice's vindictiveness will only escalate.

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Margaret Tessler

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CHAPTER 1

January, 2000

"Don't tell anyone you're a lawyer, Sharon. Pretend you're a bird-watcher or something."

The warning would have sounded comical if not for the desperation in her voice. After ten years of little more than hastily scribbled Christmas notes, I'd gotten an unexpected call from my girlhood friend, Erica Montoya. But she was so upset I could hardly make sense of what she was saying.

"Erica, I haven't even said I'll come down there yet." Though I already knew I would.

"You have to, Sharon! You just have to! Please. I know you think it's crazy for me to call you like this after all these years...."

That was the only part of this conversation that *wasn't* crazy. As kids growing up in Zapata, Texas, Erica and I had been practically inseparable. We'd spent every summer together since we were seven, and had even gone through two years of junior high together. Although we'd both moved away and our correspondence had gradually dwindled, our friendship never wavered.

"After all these years, Erica, you know I'll be there."

"Thank God, Sharon." A sigh of relief mingled with the sound of muffled sobs. She paused in an effort to regain her composure. "And thank *you*. You can't imagine."

I looked at my calendar, then closed my eyes. "Will tomorrow be soon enough? I can come down now, but...." But it would leave a lot of people in a bind. Still, Erica came first. I began mentally rearranging my schedule.

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"Tomorrow. Tomorrow's fine." Her voice sounded less frantic, but still ragged. "It—it helps just to know I'll see you tomorrow."

"Till then, try not to worry." What an idiotic thing to say, but all I could think of at the moment. "Let's go over this again so we can make plans."

Erica was staying with friends and was convinced their telephone was bugged. She wouldn't even give me a name or number, having made her call to my office from a pay phone. We'd barely agreed to meet tomorrow evening at 6:00, when her voice suddenly sank to a whisper. "I have to go now!" Then a click, followed by a dial tone.

CHAPTER 2

If you travel Texas Highway 16 from San Antonio to Zapata, it becomes increasingly lonely, marked by mile after dusty mile of deserty vegetation—mesquite, thorny blackbrush, prickly pear, and the like.

Sometimes you can spot a scissor-tailed flycatcher rocking back and forth on a telephone wire. More often your only company is an occasional caracara hunched over his fencepost like some gloomy sentinel who's assigned himself the job of discouraging trespassers.

And trespasser I was. I hadn't been in Zapata since Erica's quinceañera, her fifteenth-birthday celebration, twenty years ago. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't have ventured down that lonely road even now if I'd felt I had a choice. And I couldn't help wondering, for that matter, why the caracara chose to patrol there on such a dreary January day. Although this proud Mexican eagle fascinated me, he was still a bird of prey, and pickin's looked pretty slim to me.

Maybe we both needed the solitude. For me it offered a chance to mull over everything Erica had told me. I couldn't imagine who would want to murder Laura Velásquez. But I couldn't imagine her committing suicide either, which had been the official conclusion. Sweet Laura, with her angelic smile.

I'd never been as close to Laura as to Erica, but I'd always liked her. The three of us were a study in contrasts. Erica, with her dark eyes and long black hair, seemed unaware of her natural beauty. I was never satisfied with

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my blond curls, hazel eyes, and skin that tended to freckle easily. If not for Mrs. Montoya, I probably would have ruined my skin trying to get a tan, but she was fanatic about sunscreen and constantly assured me that I had a beauty of my own. As for my curls, they'd recently been hacked off in a disastrous encounter with a snooty and very expensive hair stylist.

I'd always thought Laura exotic. Her almond-shaped eyes were light blue, thanks to some Castillian forebears; otherwise she was dark, her short black hair framing a delicate face.

In temperament, Erica and I were much alike—down-to-earth kids with a streak of mischief. Laura, on the other hand, had an ethereal quality, a dreaminess, that set her apart.

I found it inconceivable that Laura had died from an overdose of prescription drugs, and felt my legal instincts kick into overdrive. Who was Laura's doctor? Why had he prescribed barbiturates in the first place? Could the pharmacy have made a mistake? How I'd like to question a few people! Probably the very reason Erica wanted me to keep a low profile.

Erica said it was a "hate crime" but was too distraught to explain her reasons. It seemed unlikely to me. People who commit hate crimes usually make a big production of them and like to see their names in the paper. Bombing things and torturing people was more their style. Poisoning didn't fit the picture.

Erica had also rambled on about how Laura's grandmother—Laura's *Abuelita*—had "upped and moved back to Mexico" six months ago and hadn't been heard from since. But that was as incoherent as the rest of her outpourings. I couldn't make the connection. Besides,

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Abuelita had been talking about going back to Mexico ever since I'd known her.

And how long had *that* been? How long since I'd let myself think of the past, the way I was doing now? I had tried so hard to develop the habit of never looking back. I certainly didn't want to dredge up any romantic memories of Ryan.

Back to the problem at hand, I told myself sternly. And what exactly was the problem? Although Laura's death seemed to be the immediate concern, I sensed there were deeper issues at stake.

Highway 16 ended abruptly at El Tigre Exxon, where I pulled in for gas, a Dr. Pepper, and a package of Tom's peanut-butter crackers. The attendant, a nice-looking kid whose nametag read "Enrique," studied me with a mixture of nonchalance and curiosity. Strangers around here aren't unusual if they're elderly and/or gray-haired. A 35-year-old blonde doesn't exactly blend in.

"Trece cuarenta y cinco," he quoted innocently, his gaze fixed on the computer.

"Tá bueno," I answered, looking him in the eye as I handed him the thirteen dollars and forty-five cents.

He grinned. "Thanks. Come back now."

I smiled back at him. "Thanks. I will."

From there I crossed the street to find myself on Farm Road 496, which continues another three miles to the Rio Grande and Los Mareados Motel and Apartments, where Erica wanted me to stay. It was a small L-shaped complex consisting of twelve units with kitchenettes. Most of the tenants, older people on fixed incomes, had moved in permanently.

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The manager, Mrs. Pirtle, was an elderly woman with fuzzy gray hair. Her eyes appeared gray and fuzzy too, but that could have been because her glasses were so smudged.

"Hello, I'm Sharon Morgan. Do you have a vacancy?" Rhetorical question, since there was a large sign by the office proclaiming "VACANCY."

"Well, I might have," she said grudgingly. "And I might not." She peered at me over her useless glasses. "We don't usually have young folks here, and my tenants want it quite. None of that screechy music. No BOYFRIENDS with motorsickles and like that."

"Gracious, no. I spend all my waking hours watching birds. I'm quite quite. I mean, quiet." Flustered is what I meant. I've never been very good at lying and I felt my insincerity prickling me like heat rash in summer.

Mrs. Pirtle looked—naturally—unconvinced and more suspicious by the minute. "You mean a young person like you don't have employment? You just set around watchin' birds all day long?"

"Oh no. I'm a photographer for a new wildlife magazine, and I've been assigned to, uh, take pictures. Of birds." The photographer bit was a stretch; I was doing well to know the difference between a tripod and a lens-cap. I could only hope Mrs. Pirtle wouldn't ask to look at my "professional equipment," which consisted of one pocket-sized camera.

But since the Rio Grande valley was well known as a haven for rare birds and not-so-rare bird-watchers, my fabrication calmed her. She dug around for some registration forms, which she shoved at me to sign.

Now that I'd been accepted, I felt bold enough to ask how the apartment complex had gotten its name. This finally brought something like a smile to her face.

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"It's Spanish," she told me importantly. "Spanish is such a pretty language."

"Oh yes, very pretty. Is Mareados a family name?"

She laughed at my ignorance. "No, dearie. Well, I don't know EXACTLY, but it's to do with the sea. '*Mare*' means 'sea' in Spanish."

Mar, I corrected mentally, but didn't interrupt.

"We're actually on the river, or the '*ree-o*,' as they say around here."

We're actually on Falcon Lake, a reservoir that was created decades ago from the Rio Grande, stretching some thirty miles as the crow flies. But some of the older residents, like Mrs. Pirtle and my Aunt Amanda, continued calling it the river; I had picked up that habit myself.

"When they were choosin' names for this place, they wanted somethin' kinda classy," Mrs. Pirtle explained, "and Mr. López suggested '*mareados*.' It has such a nice sound, don't you think?"

I agreed, wondering who the humorous Mr. López might be, but decided not to tell her the word means "seasick."

Mrs. Pirtle fished out some keys and led me to #12, diagonally across from her unit, #1. I shivered involuntarily. Erica had told me that—up until her presumed disappearance—Laura's grandmother lived in "the last apartment, the one on the end."

This must have been her apartment. I pulled my jacket tighter around me, telling myself this might be a real break if it meant I could find out something about Laura. But at the moment, I felt more chilled than lucky, and the chill had nothing to do with January.

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