

The house was named Batten's Down, and Cal Batten had no idea what to do with the damn thing. It was shaped like a football, with rounded outer walls, fake laces painted along the roofline and vertical white stripes on either end where it narrowed to almost-pointed blobs. It sat apart from the other Mahogany Row homes on a headland separating Spider Bight from Rosalita Flats and the open sea. Fading pink paint flaked off in the afternoon sun. Cal's grandfather had built a solid house to weather any storm, then his father had built the wooden football frame around it. Now it was all Cal's. And more than anything he wanted to get rid of the monstrosity and be quit of this grubby little island.

"Settle a bet?" Rafe Marquette, the island's police constable, loomed behind him, dark sunglasses reflecting the afternoon sun. Rafe had driven Cal down from Blacktip Island's airstrip.

"A bet?"

"Why'd your daddy shape it like that?"

"Oh. Mom said Rhodes didn't want her to get the house if they divorced. They did. It worked."

Cal stepped to the open doorway and froze. Skylights in both pointed ends lit the main room. Inside, a riot of junk covered every surface. Piles of papers and file folders. Old, leather-bound books that could have been from a museum. Yellowed nautical maps. A star chart stapled

to the exposed-beam ceiling. Under it, antique brass scales, oil lamps, ropes, rusty bicycle wheels dangled from the rafters. A ragged velour couch sat in at the room's center. It was very orange.

Cal shuddered at the chaos, ran his thin fingers over his close-cropped black hair. He put one foot inside. Coughed at the reek of stale liquor, spilled chemicals and something earthier he couldn't quite place. He flipped the nearest wall switch. It crackled, sparked behind its wall plate. An overhead light flickered twice, then went out. Cal's eye twitched. Even the lights were chaotic. And a fire hazard.

He picked up a dusty brass plate with marks engraved evenly around its edge and a rotating needle mounted to its center.

"What the hell is all this stuff?" Cal hadn't meant to say it aloud.

"That's an astrolabe," Rafe said.

"Of course."

Cal had no idea what an astrolabe was. And didn't care. He stepped to the room's center, where a five-pointed star had been chalked inside a circle on the wooden floor, an oversized lizard skull beside it.

"Your daddy was a sorcerer."

"He was crazy." There was a twinge in his chest at that. His father was a name and some hazy memories. "I'm starting to see what drove Mom away. And made her warn me away from him and this place."

Rafe laughed, a rumbling sound like a rock slide. He glanced at Cal's still-pressed polo shirt.

"Need help sorting through things? I get you a leaf blower. Or maybe a back hoe."

Cal closed his eyes. He could still see the disorder. He opened them, stepped farther in, scanning for anything familiar. Rafe followed him, running his fingers over the labels on the nearest stack of bulging file folders. What looked to be an iguana skin tacked to a weathered plank leaned against the wall by the door to his old bedroom. Now the room contained a low table crowded with test tubes, a Bunsen burner and jars of bright-colored powders and gravel-sized crystals. A knee-high, bullet-shaped plastic something with handles on either side stood on end behind the door. Vanes that could have been stubby wings near its tip and a small propeller at the other end. An underwater scooter. By the window, a brass telescope perched on a tripod beside what looked like a modern GPS unit.

In the kitchen, a child's laminated Crayon drawing hung on a towel hook behind the stove: three turkeys made from tracing three kids' spread-out hands, with feathers and feet drawn in. Under the turkeys was printed, in his mom's precise handwriting, 'Cal,' 'Rafe,' and 'Marina.'

"Why in the world would Rhodes save that, much less preserve it and tack it on the wall?" Cal said.

"I remember that day. Kinda." Rafe leaned down, peered closer, muscles stretching against his uniform shirt. Cal kept himself fit, but nothing like Rafe.

Something that could have been remorse swept through Cal. He should have contacted Rhodes over the years, made some sort of effort. They might have gotten along, despite what Cal's mom always said.

"When's the last time you saw your daddy?" Rafe's voice pulled Cal out of his thoughts.

"When Mom and I left."

"And the last time you and he spoke?" Rafe picked up a stack of papers, leafed through them.

“The same time.” Cal straightened the corners of the nearest pile of folders, shifted the pile so the edges were square with the table’s edge.

Rafe watched Cal, face stern. No longer the cheery kid Cal had grown up with. Or the helpful policeman at the airport.

“You get any letters from him? Any . . . packages? Parcels? Papers?”

“We had zero contact since I was twelve. Why?”

“You never talked to your daddy all those years?” Rafe looked part suspicious, part shocked.

“Mom swore he was the devil, and Rhodes never reached out. First I heard of him in years was when you called.” Cal straightened another stack of folders, squared them with the table. Why all the questions? “Was Rhodes’ death suspicious?”

“Not suspicious. Not exactly.” Rafe put down the papers, picked up a folder, thumbed through it. “You call your daddy by his first name?”

Reproach dripped from Rafe’s voice.

“Only thing I knew him by.”

Rafe looked down at Cal, said nothing,

“So where’d he die?” Cal said to break the silence.

“No one told you?”

“All I know is it was a heart attack. What’s the big secret?”

“He passed in the bedroom . . . Oh! Here’s Rosie. Your daddy’s housekeeper.” Rafe dropped the folder as if it had burned him. “She’s the one . . . called 911. Rosalita Bottoms, this’s Cal, Mister Rhodes’ son.”

A short, dark-haired woman, eyes level with Cal's chest, stood in the bedroom doorway, yellow feather duster in hand, face expressionless. Cal had a vague memory of Dermott Bottoms' goody-two-shoes, tattletale little niece Rosie, and the age was about right, but Cal couldn't be sure. Her black eyes went from Marquette, to Cal, then back to Marquette. Rafe eyed her, wary.

"I'll leave you with Rosie." Rafe backed out the door. The police truck started up, then drove away.

"You found him?" Cal focused back on Rosie.

Rosie nodded once, eyes guarded, as if facing a travelling salesman.

"What happened?"

"Heart give out." Rosie shrugged. "One minute he was fine and happy, next he just went limp."

"You . . . were with him when he died?"

Rosie nodded again.

"You remember his last words?"

"I'm fixing to come." Rosie's face stayed expressionless.

"I . . . oh . . . I didn't realize." Cal searched for words, hoped he didn't look as blindsided as he felt. "You and he were . . . close, then."

"Nope." Rosie crossed her arms. "Randy old goat, Mister Rhodes. No telling what he'd want cleaned. Or when."

"Well, the place won't need cleaning anymore." Cal nearly choked as he said it. The place needed to be knocked down and rebuilt. "I'm selling it quick as I can. I'll pay you for the next two weeks and . . ."

“Can’t sell Mister Rhodes’ place just like that!” Rosie cut him off. “Got history. Years of memories to go through.”

“And the new owner can go through all of it. Or burn it. Either way, I won’t need you anymore.”

“No.” Rosie’s eyes blazed. “Mister Rhodes, he paid me in advance. For the rest of the year. I been paid. I’m gonna clean.”

“But you don’t need to. I’m here now. Consider his advance pay a gift.”

“Can’t take money and not do the work!” Rosie shook the yellow feather duster in Cal’s face. “Your daddy passed, but he’s still here. *I’m* not gonna let him down.”

“He’d understand.”

Cal swatted the outermost ball on a mechanical solar system, sent all the planets spinning around a lemon-sized Sun.

Rosie scowled, made a show of straightening a knee-high pile of National Geographics beside an overstuffed armchair.

Cal stared, hands on his hips, not sure what to do. He had fired Rosie. But she wouldn’t leave. He could pick her up and drop her outside. No, that wouldn’t do. He could have Rafe Marquette talk to her. Or drag her away. They didn’t seem to like each other anyway. Cal pulled out his phone. Cursed under his breath. No cell signal. Great. He was so far off the map his phone wouldn’t work. Okay, then. He would let Rosie finish today, then change the locks.

Cal circled the room, resisting the urge to sort all the junk, the papers, catalogue it all . . . but where to start? And it would take months.

The far wall was covered with tacked-up maps and nautical charts. Some looked to be made of leather, or some sort of animal skin. Clear glass globes, from watermelon- to softball-

size, hung from the ceiling, each in its own rope fishnet. A small Tesla coil sat beside an armchair. The bookcase was overflowing, with books stacked sideways on top of the filed books. Some modern, others looking a hundred years old. Titles about astronomy, navigation, gardening, banking, sharks. Cal shuddered again, thankful he hadn't inherited Rhodes' lack of tidiness.

He needed to find Rhodes' will, the property deed. His computer, bank books and wallet. Where was a likely place? Over-stuffed Manila folders towered high on the dining table. Magazines covered the kitchen counters. Stray papers, hand-drawn charts and calculations were strewn across the coffee table. Cal went to the spare bedroom-turned- chemistry-lab, scanned the room for a filing cabinet, a safe. Nothing. No computer or cell phone, either. The will and deed had to be here somewhere. And information about Rhodes' attorney, or estate agent or whoever else Cal would need to get the place sold.

A quick shuffle through the folders on the table in the main room showed no apparent order—electric bills for the last twenty years were filed between tree identification guides and automobile engine schematics in German. He didn't have time to plow through every paper in the house looking for the will. Cal would have to talk to Rafe, or someone, to find out who handled Rhodes' affairs.

Across the room, Rosie had stopped dusting, was watching him.

“Rosie, you have any idea where Rhodes kept important papers?”

“Dunno.” She stared at him, as if daring him to ask more.

“How about his banking information? His checkbook?”

“Didn't hold with banks.”

“Who doesn't use a bank?”

“Paid cash for everything.”

Cal scanned the room. If Rhodes worked solely in cash, where was his money stashed?

“His wallet?”

Rosie shrugged.

“How about his cell phone or his computer?”

“Didn't have none,” she said

“Well, how did Rhodes keep records?”

“*Mister* Rhodes kept things in his head.” Rosie tapped her temple, then flicked her feather duster over the books piled on the end table. “Lived by his wits.”

Cal ground his teeth to keep from yelling at her. He needed air, a break from the house's chaos. And Rosie's belligerence. As if the place were hers.

He stepped outside, squinted in the sunlight. Waves crashed into the headland behind the house, set the ground vibrating. Yes, Cal remembered that. And the low moan of wind in the crevices in the island's central bluff towering 100-feet high across the road.

He remembered the rough sand-and-gravel grounds around the house, too. The house's walls were more weathered now. That was to be expected. The doors and windows, wide open, were laid out to catch any breeze. Rhodes hadn't believed in air conditioning. Cal would find out if the house was still breeze-cooled later when he tried to sleep.

“Hooo-ooo!”

A wavering voice came from behind him, from Mahogany Row. A tall woman with graying hair was picking her way toward him, amber bracelets rattling as she waved. Behind her came a man about the same age, in a wide straw hat. They looked vaguely familiar, but Cal couldn't place them.

“You must be young Cal,” the woman said in a thick English accent. “We’re the Maples. Helen and Frank. We’re *voisins* again!”

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Frank Maples said in a near monotone with the same accent.

“We are simply delighted to see you!” Helen cut in. “And all grown up. Last time we saw you, you were tussling with Rafe and Marina, right about where we’re standing now. Have you three reconnected yet?”

“Rafe drove me from the airfield,” Cal said. “He didn’t seem impressed. Or happy to see me.”

“Hmm, well, you should definitely find Marina, too. She’s divemastering at Eagle Ray Cove these days.” Helen’s lips pursed. Her voice lowered. “*And* driving a boat.”

Cal smiled, said nothing. He had no idea whether Marina driving a boat was good, bad or just a shock for Helen. He hadn’t thought about gangly Marina DeLow since he left Blacktip Island. The way things were going, she would probably be as happy to see him as Rafe or Rosie.

“Happy memories flooding back, though?” Helen said.

“No . . . I mostly blocked this place . . . those days out of my head.”

“Ahh . . . Well, we’re about to pop into town, if you need anything.” Frank said.

“I . . .” Cal had no idea how much food was in the house, and he needed to find a lawyer, if there was one on the island, but he didn’t dare leave the house with Rosie poking around. “No. I’m still settling in here. Thanks, though.”

“Well, if you do, we’re just there.” Helen waved at the nearest house, a two-story affair nestled under coconut palms 100 yards away. “Think of us as your long-lost aunt and uncle.”

Cal watched their Range Rover disappear up the dirt road, dust cloud swirling behind it. Cal had forgotten how dirty, how gritty the island was. He stepped back inside the house. He had

left Rosie alone too long. Sure enough, she was thumbing through one of the folders he had straightened on the table.

“You looking for something in particular?”

Rosie didn't budge, as if she had expected him to come in and find her there.

“Visting old memories,” she said. “Mister Rhodes, he was a character.”

“Well, you have no business going through his papers.” Cal snatched the folder from her, set it on the far side of the table. “Aren't you about finished cleaning for today?”

Rosie glared at him, then gathered her things and walked out to a rusty bicycle leaning against the house. She gave Cal one last, long nasty look before pedaling away.

Cal sat on the sunny front step, relaxed. Behind the house the waves breaking on the headland sounded like the house was grumbling. Cal cursed under his breath. He had forgotten to call Kat, let her know he had made it okay, tell her what was going on. She wouldn't care, but it was the ex-husbandly thing to do, and she *was* watching his shop. He dug his phone from his pocket out of habit, stared at the screen. No cell signal.

“Typical,” he said aloud. “Just typical.”

He could still call her on an old-school landline, cost be damned. Cal went inside, scanned the kitchen, the living room for a corded phone. Nothing. Not even a wall jack for a phone. The only communication gadget he saw was a VHF radio by the kitchen sink. Cal went back outside, walked to the Maples place. They would have wireless service. But when he reached their house there was still no signal. He made a quick tour among the other Mahogany Row homes, boarded up now for the season. Still no signal. How did people communicate here?

He and Rafe had passed several resorts on the drive out. There would be a cell signal, there. He would run back to one of them. And with Rosie gone, he was comfortable leaving the house unattended. He would grab Rhodes' car and drive in before it got too late.

Cal walked to the northern end of the house, where a one-sided corrugated tin lean-to was cobbled together beside the house as a makeshift storage shed. He looked inside and laughed. Sitting under the rusting tin, beside a mound of empty rum bottles, was a once-bright-orange Volkswagen Thing, its soft top in shreds across the car's rear and swathes of gray primer slathered across a host of dents. Three black-and-yellow feral chickens eyed him from the hood. Two more clucked at him from the rear seat. He hadn't seen a Thing in decades, yet here one was, battle-scarred, but still in one piece. Cal started for the house to find the keys. Stopped. This was Blacktip Island. One of the few hazy memories he had from childhood was people leaving their car keys in the ignition.

Sure enough, keys dangled from the steering column on the right side of the car. Right-hand drive. Okay. And a stick shift. Great. He knew how to drive a stick, in theory, but he had never actually done it. Challenging, but he could figure it out. Cal shooed the chickens from the car in a flurry of feathers. He climbed in, stepped on the brake pedal, cursed at himself, moved his foot to the clutch. He pumped the gas a few times and turned the key. The car coughed blue smoke, but didn't start. He pumped the gas, tried again. More smoke billowed out, filling the lean-to with oily fumes. Cal coughed, staggered from the shelter, queasy from the exhaust. He retreated to the front steps, gulped fresh air.

Walking back the six, seven miles of dirt road to the nearest resort wasn't going to work. There had to be some alternate transportation. A bike or something. If Rosie could bike in, so could he. A quick search turned up no bicycle, though. Well, then, he would flag down the first

passing car, get a ride from whoever. Cal grabbed a bottle of water and sat under the palms by the road to make sure he didn't miss any passing vehicles. The island's central bluff towered across the road, its top fringed with hardwoods of some sort, with red, papery bark peeling from the trunks. An occasional cactus. The afternoon sun backlit the bark like stained glass.

After what seemed like forever Cal looked at his watch. Forty-seven minutes had passed. Great. He was on a peach of an island, all right. No cell signal, no internet and no traffic. He walked back to the house, worked the wall switch up and down until lights stayed on. Ceiling fans spun. At least he had electricity. He would put in a new wall switch tomorrow.

Cal explored the kitchen cabinets. Microwave popcorn. Canned chili. Smoked sardines. Saltines. A bottle proclaiming 'Blacktip Island's own Bottoms Up Rum!' Rosie was gone, but he still couldn't be rid of the Bottoms.

In the fridge was a pack of hotdogs and a dozen bottles of beer. Not ideal, but he could make do. He would catch a ride to the resort strip the next morning, maybe find a mechanic while he was hunting down a cell signal.

Cal opened a beer and went back outside. The sun was dropping. He walked to the house's seaward side, stopped. A grasshopper-looking contraption with a single swing-arm and a massive counterweight stood on the ironshore's edge, arm rising twenty-five, thirty feet in the air, a pouch like an oversized slingshot's dangling from the top of the lever arm. A catapult? Another of Rhodes experiments, though why he had experimented with a medieval gizmo was a mystery. Probably the same reason he had an astrolabe. Or he expected seaborne invaders. Beside the catapult was a weathered lawn chair and a pile of scuba diving weights. Cal sat, watched the sea breaking on the headland. The ground vibrated with the waves slamming into

the ironshore's hollows. He remembered lying in bed, feeling the nearly imperceptible sway of his mattress in time with the waves booming outside.

The wind gusted, set off a low moaning inland. Cal smiled, remembering wind in the caves high on the bluff, sounding like voices. Local legend said the moaning was duppies, island spirits, tempting unwary people into the bush. When he was little, Cal had imagined the duppies were talking to him, trying to share their secrets.

A deeper boom pulled Cal out of his reverie. The ground pulsed from a big wave. Cal shuddered, too. He needed to sell the place before the ironshore headland eroded and took the house with it.

At dusk the mosquitos chased Cal back inside, half-soaked in sweat despite the breeze. He didn't remember the island being so humid. He turned on the kitchen faucet to splash water on his face. A stream of orangey-yellow water poured out, smelling like decayed vegetation. Great. Another island quirk. Cal wiped his face with a dish towel and waited for the tap water to run clear. And waited. And waited. All the water in the cistern must be yellow. He gave up, gritted his teeth and washed his face as best he could, trying not to get any of the liquid in his mouth.

Cal broiled some hot dogs, poured canned chili over them and wandered to the living room, floorboards creaking with each step. He settled into an overstuffed armchair by the bookcase, the only place clear of debris he could sit. He scanned the books closest to him. Great. The shark section.

Cal shuddered again, then laughed at himself for being so jumpy. They were just books. And he wasn't going in the water. Or on it. He tried to relax, but couldn't. Sure, his welcome hadn't been very welcoming, from an old friend, the new housekeeper or the former neighbors.

But that wasn't it. Being in the house again had him on edge, and not entirely because Rhodes had died here. The sheer disorder of the place was overwhelming. A combination of everything, maybe. Being on Blacktip Island. In the house where his father had died. Surrounded by water. Water filled with sharks. And maybe sharks on land, too, if Rosie was any indication.

More incentive to sell. If he got enough for the place, he could pay off his shop debts and maybe throw some money Kat's way. Tomorrow he would find the will and find out what the place was worth. For now, though, he was exhausted, despite the early hour.

Cal lifted stacks of folders, magazines off the couch, stacked them neatly by the bookcase. One of the folders was marked 'CAL.' He flipped open the folder. Oddly-spaced writing on the top page made Cal pause. Rhodes had written . . . haiku? For him? Cal would never have guessed. He carried the folder back to the armchair, read the first poem:

*In times of seeking
Like a soft rain on sea swells
Gold en la boca*

It made no sense, but poetry rarely did to Cal. And from what little his mother had told him, Cal had never imagined Rhodes going for this sort of thing. Hard drinking and hell raising was more like it. Cal scanned the next one:

*Hidden in darkness
Below the teeth, the belly
And sea cave thunder*

And another, just as squirrely:

*To see clearly now
A thorny bluff-top sunset
And Euler angles*

It was obvious the surroundings had inspired the poems. Rum and too much time alone, too. Cal closed the folder, put it on top of the others by the bookcase. He didn't have the mental

energy to sort through poems. Maybe if he had known Rhodes, they would have made sense. Or made Cal feel some connection to him. As it was, they just made Cal's head hurt.

A scuffling sound came from outside, like shuffling feet. A faint snuffling. A person? An animal?

"Hello?" Cal said.

The shuffling stopped. Restarted.

Cal grabbed a truncheon-sized chrome flashlight from the kitchen counter, swung the front door open and stepped outside. He held the light high, playing the beam across the grounds. Nothing. He shined the light back the other way. Still nothing. His imagination? He was wiped out from the 2 a.m. get up and multiple flights that day.

Cal went inside, started to lock the door. There no lock button or mechanism of any kind other than a sliding bolt. He opened the door, looked at the outside knob. Sure enough, no keyhole. How had he not noticed that before? Out so far, on such a small island, maybe Rhodes hadn't felt the need to lock the place unless he was inside. No more. Tomorrow Cal would get a locking door knob. He could swap that out in a few minutes. The place would be secure. It would keep Rosie out, too.

Cal cleaned off the couch. There was no way he could sleep in the bed Rhodes died in while . . . screwing the cleaning woman. Cal piled the throw pillows at one end, lay down and turned off the light. There was enough of a cross breeze the heat didn't seem so bad.

A buzzing near his ear. Then more. Cal swatted the mosquitos away. More buzzing. Then pinpricks in his arm as others bit him. He had forgotten how horrific Blacktip's mosquitos were. And half the mosquitos on the island must have swarmed in when he opened the door. Cal turned on the light, grabbed a blanket off the back of the chair and curled up fetal on the couch,

completely covered. It was stuffy under the blanket, but the mosquitos left him alone. Soon he fell into a fitful sleep, dreaming of jewels and sharks and kids playing.

