

POST CARD



Ransom in Rio

THERESA LYNN HALL

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## **Ransom in Rio**

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## *Dedication*

Thank you to my sweet husband for sharing his many travel experiences with me so that I can use them in a book. Thank you to my family and friends who continue to support and encourage me in all of my writing endeavors.





# 1

Her worst nightmare had come to life.

Now, the fear of what she would do if it ever happened was over, but the loss of her brother came with a burden she hadn't foreseen. It left her to deal with her family alone. To carry the legacy. To protect the empire. To convince everyone to believe the lies.

"He was always so careful," she muttered to herself as she drove.

Snow had started falling as the last "Amen" was said at the cemetery. The heavy white powder made the pale yellow lines on the road fade in and out of sight. Lexi tugged her sweater tighter around her body with one hand and gripped the steering wheel with the other. The funeral had drained her of what little emotional strength she had left. It was crazy, but several times throughout the day she'd found herself picking up her phone to see if Jace had messaged her. He used to text or call every day. Silly stuff sometimes, like *never walk the dog with no shoes on*. Once he'd texted that he had the hiccups.

"I just can't believe he's gone." Lexi glanced at her friend. She didn't expect Kristy to say anything. Nothing she could say would make the pain go away.

Jace had been the perfect big brother, Lexi's best friend. From an early age, they learned that sticking together in a dysfunctional family was their only hope. One thing Lexi knew for certain was that Jace wouldn't leave her here alone. He would not have put himself in

danger for a stupid fishing trip. His chance to break free of their crazy family was finally around the corner. He'd just bought his girlfriend an engagement ring. They had plans to move to New York as soon as the wedding was over. Now he was gone. None of it made any sense. Why was she the only person who could see that something was wrong with ruling the cause of death as accidental?

Lexi brushed at her red hair with a careless hand and caught a glimpse of her swollen, blue eyes in the rear view mirror. She hardly resembled her brother at all—a fact that had always bothered her, but she'd never questioned it the way Jace had. He had always asked where he'd gotten his blonde hair.

"Lexi, why don't you stay with me tonight?"

The sound of Kristy's voice startled her. "I'm sorry. I'm really out of it." She smiled and wiped a stray tear from her cheek. "Thank you for everything. You've done more than enough for me over the past few days."

"You know I'm always here."

"I know." She swallowed hard. "Kristy..."

"What's wrong?"

"I can't stop thinking...I just don't think this was an accident. It couldn't be. Jace didn't even like to fish. He wouldn't charter a boat to go fishing in Cozumel. He liked nice restaurants, museums, theaters. Not fishing. And then there's the fact that he didn't take Selena with him. He always had Selena with him. Why doesn't anyone else seem to think this is odd?"

"I don't know. Now that you bring it up, Jace wasn't much of a risk-taker."

"Exactly. The strangest thing is that Selena said he told her he would be back in an hour. He only left for



*one hour.* Who charters a fishing boat for only an hour?"

"Did Selena tell you why he didn't take her?"

"She didn't say, and I didn't want to ask her a lot of questions. Not yet."

Kristy nodded. "I saw her today. She's really not handling this well."

"No one is." She pulled into Kristy's driveway. It was a relief to be off the snowy roads.

No matter how she looked at this, her brother's death could not have been an accident. Somehow, she would prove that he didn't drown on a fishing trip. She would prove Jace was murdered.

\*\*\*\*

Going back to work hadn't been easy. Jace's empty office was a constant reminder of her loss. Somehow, she'd made it through the first day and knew her brother would be proud of her. Now that she was home, a hot bubble bath and early bedtime sounded like a great ending to a long day.

She stopped at the mailboxes. It had been days since she'd checked her mail. Unlocking the box, she frowned when a manila envelope fell to the concrete. She groaned as she bent to pick it up. All the stress and lack of working out was beginning to take its toll. As her eyes scanned the writing on the front of the envelope, a chill raced down her spine, and her free hand flew to her mouth to stifle the guttural sound working its way out. She stared at her name scribbled in blue ink.

In Jace's handwriting.

Her keys fell from her hands and jingled against

the sidewalk. She fought to steady herself as she studied the postmark. It was dated this Thursday. A day *after* his funeral.

Lexi scrambled to pick up her keys and unlock the door. She stumbled inside and fell into the nearest chair. Her vision blurry with tears, she studied the handwriting. Touching her name, she traced the L.

“Oh, Jace...” she whispered.

She pulled open the envelope, reached in, and pulled out a flash drive. Was that it? No note? No explanation?

A flash drive? She ran to the bedroom, slid into the black leather office chair at her desk, and flipped open her laptop. She stared at the small piece of plastic as she waited for the computer to boot up. Her hand shook as she plugged it in.

Ten minutes later, she stood staring into the bathroom mirror gripped by nausea. She covered her face with a cold, wet towel. Her worst fears were coming true. And she needed help.

\*\*\*\*

Brayden McCoy picked up the remote and flipped the channel from the basketball game to the local news. He stared at the pile of folders on his desk and yawned. After finishing his last case, he was definitely ready for a break. A few days off throwing a lure from his boat would be a great way to finish out the week. At thirty-seven, he was finally in a good place. It had taken him years to get here, and he wasn't about to take it for granted.

“Brayden...” He winced at the barely audible sound of his name.

If he'd said it once, he'd said it a hundred times. "Darla, you have to talk louder. I can't hear you from in there."

Darla appeared at his office door. She was the best secretary he'd had in the past five years, even if she couldn't make a sound louder than a kitten.

"Mike called and said he's got a friend who needs your help."

"Really? Well, tell him in a week I'll get back to him. I'm going fishing."

"He said he knew you'd say that and to call him anyway."

Brayden groaned. "All right. I'll call him." He picked up the phone and dialed his brother. As soon as the ringing stopped, he spoke. "Hey, Darla said you called. What is it?" He didn't hide his agitation.

"Yeah. Listen, I need a favor.

"Be brief. There's a fish out there waiting for the other end of my fishing pole."

"My friend, Kristy, called me. Her best friend's brother died in Cozumel, and she got a package from him *after* the funeral. A flash drive. Think you can look into it for her?"

Brayden shook his head. "Wait. That's a little too brief. I think I must've missed something important. Tell me why you're calling me again?"

"The package. She got it after the funeral."

"So? He probably mailed it before he died. Maybe it got lost in the mail or something."

"It was postmarked the day after the man's funeral, and it was in his handwriting."

"Hmm...yeah. That's fishy. And speaking of fishy—"

"Come on, man. Can you talk to her? She wants to

see you right away.”

Brayden shoved a hand into his hair. “I haven’t been fishing in a long time. And I *just* wrapped up my last case. You know I don’t take a lot of time off. This is something I’ve needed for a long time.”

Truth was he never took time off. In the years he’d been back from Afghanistan, he’d spent most of them trying to stay busy. Turned out getting over a cheating wife was harder than fighting in a war. Neither of which he ever planned on doing again.

“Please? Just talk to her. Kristy said her friend is really distraught.”

“Ah...and let me guess. You’re trying to impress Kristy, and it’s making you look like the hero because you’ve got a brother who can take care of everything for you. Am I warm, yet?”

“Well, yeah, but all kidding aside, I honestly think this is a case you might want to take.”

“And if not, you owe me a fishing trip. All expenses paid.” Brayden leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. He let out a long sigh, then groaned. “All right. Do you have her number?”

\*\*\*\*

Brayden straightened in his chair and made sure his shirt was tucked in. He liked to look professional so he wore button down shirts nicely pressed the way his mother had taught him, but he still wouldn’t give up his jeans and boots. They were more a symbol of who he was than how he dressed. He brushed the front of his shirt with the palm of his hand. A noise made him look up.

In the door of his office stood the prettiest redhead

he'd ever seen. She wore a mint-green sweater that set off the green in her eyes and off-white slacks with high heel shoes. His stomach knotted and he wiped his palms on his knees. That was not what he was expecting at all. He stood to greet her.

With an outstretched hand, he smiled. "Hi. I'm Brayden McCoy."

She gripped his hand firmly. "Lexi Ramos."

Brayden stared into emerald eyes. Ramos. He'd bet his right arm that her father was Henry Ramos, head of Ramos Furniture Stores—with ten locations statewide and eight more across the country. Some of what he knew of them came from an annoying commercial jingle that made him want to switch the channel every time it came on. Henry's wife was said to be out of her mind. Son just died in some sort of accident in Cozumel. Now he understood why Mike wanted him to take this case. He was sure he knew more about this family, but right now he wanted to hear it from her.

"Lexi, I'm very sorry about your brother. I want you to know you and your family will be in my prayers."

She looked at him quizzically. "Thank you. I appreciate that very much."

"Please sit down." He motioned toward the chairs in front of his desk. "Tell me why you're here to see me." He'd have to be dead not to notice how beautiful she was or the way she crossed her legs as she sat down. *Put your poker face on, man!* He'd been through interrogations in Afghanistan and survived three tours as a Navy Seal. He had more resolve than to melt in front of a beautiful woman. Especially a woman who was about to be his client. Maybe missing that fishing trip wouldn't be so bad after all.

## 2

Brayden found himself wanting to see her eyes, but she spoke without looking up. She licked her lips and sat staring at her hands for a few seconds before answering. "I don't think his death was an accident."

"What makes you believe that?"

Her gaze flew to Brayden's face. "I know my brother. And if that isn't reason enough, he left me this." Lexi pulled a small manila envelope from her purse. She held it up to show the writing scrawled across the front. "It's postmarked the day after we buried him."

Brayden didn't want to tell her he already knew that part. "I agree that you have reason to be concerned, but someone other than your brother could have mailed it. Have you looked inside the envelope?"

"Yes." She nodded. "It's a flash drive with company bank statements, account numbers, and spreadsheets saved on it."

"Does that mean anything to you?"

"I work at my family's company, just like Jace. He was a vice president in charge of human resources and payroll. I'm also a vice president, but I'm in charge of purchasing. I choose what lines we carry and what items we sell. Dad is President and CEO in charge of...well, pretty much everything else."

"So you and your brother weren't really involved with the finances?"

“Not really. I was given an account to use for traveling and expenses, and another to use for purchasing. Other than that, no, I wasn’t allowed access to any of the bank accounts and neither was Jace.”

“So why do you think he would send you bank statements and account numbers? Do you know what the accounts are for?”

Brayden noticed fresh tears forming in her green eyes. There was something equally strong and vulnerable about this woman. He would bet there was more to her than what she was willing to let him see. Somehow, in less than two minutes, he already knew he liked her. And he wanted to help her.

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Lexi dabbed at the corner of her eyes with her fingers. She couldn’t let this man see her cry. She needed to be strong. This was harder than she thought. She covered her face with her hands. Maybe coming here today was a mistake. She was still grieving too much to get through this without having a meltdown. All her life she'd kept people from seeing her cry. Until now.

“Ms. Ramos, are you OK?”

His voice sent shivers down her back. Deep and strong, yet gentle and compassionate. Like a strong cup of coffee, it was bold, smooth, and comforting. He’d moved from behind his desk to stand next to her, a tissue extended towards her face.

She took the tissue and nodded. “I’m so sorry. It’s just really hard to get through this. But I need to do it. I need to be here.” She faked a smile and straightened

her shoulders. "Thank you," she said, then dabbed her eyes and nose. He moved back to his desk.

She looked into his dark blue eyes and blinked back fresh tears. Before one could fall, she forced the words out. "I think Jace was trying to tell me that someone was doing something illegal with our business." She studied his face for a reaction. He was definitely good at this job, because she saw no hint of emotion.

"Do you mind letting me look over the files?"

"Please," she said, then sniffed. She handed him the envelope. "I couldn't find anything that caught my attention. Most of the transactions were for our daily business account. Dad has several accounts, some we don't even know about, I'm sure. Some of these were for our three stores in Texas. I can't figure out why Jace would send this to me, but I know he had a reason. There's something there, but I can't see it. I see sales deposits into several accounts and withdrawals for the same amounts, but nothing is making sense."

He placed the envelope on the corner of his desk, then looked up at her. Her chest tightened, and her heart started to pound in her ears. Tears filled her eyes again, in spite of blinking them away. He held out another tissue to her, their hands brushed slightly as she took it. She noticed a scar on his left arm and wondered how he got it, then wiped her cheeks to rid herself of the tears.

"Ms. Ramos, can you tell me exactly what happened to your brother?" He watched her for a second. "Take as long as you need. There's a restroom in the waiting area if you need it."

Lexi balled the tissue in her fist and clenched her jaw. She was going to get through this. She had to do it



for Jace. "No, I'm fine." She cleared her throat. "He went on vacation to Cozumel. He left with his fiancée, but once they were there he told her he was going on a chartered fishing trip for about an hour. He left her at the hotel. She asked if she could go, and he said no. At least that's the story I've been told. I haven't exactly been able to talk to Selena. She's not dealing with this well at all. She hasn't talked to anyone in the family."

Brayden's brow lowered, and a tiny crease appeared between his eyes.

She rushed on. "Yes, I know what you're about to say. A lot of men would rather go on a fishing trip without their fiancée, but not Jace. He took her everywhere. And who charters a boat for a deep sea fishing trip off the coast of Cozumel for only an hour?"

"That's a good point," he said. "Anything else that seems out of the ordinary?"

"Not until I received the package in the mail. And please don't say it."

He shot her a confused look.

"Please don't tell me you don't work off hunches or feelings."

"Ms. Ramos..."

"Call me Lexi." She straightened out the crumpled tissue in her hand. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing each other a lot, so we can skip the formalities."

"OK, Lexi, I was going to say that my business runs on about ninety-nine percent hunches and feelings."

She looked up and saw a gentle smile lift one corner of his mouth. His earnest blue eyes met hers. She felt safe with him. Something she wasn't sure she'd ever felt with anyone but Jace.

"Good, because that's about all I've got right now."

"Well, that only leaves one other thing to discuss. Are you willing to cover the expenses that this investigation might cost you?"

"Yes, it's not going to be a problem. I will pay all expenses. You're my only hope. I can't report this to the police. Technically, they have accidental drowning as a cause of death and no reason to think there was any foul play. The authorities in Cozumel won't help me. They said there's nothing to investigate."

"I'll make a few phone calls and see what I can find. I may need to go there myself if I can't get any information over the phone or through e-mail. I'll see what I can dig up, and I'll call you. In the meantime, please let me know if you think of anything else. Again, Ms. Ramos...Lexi, I'm really sorry to hear about your brother."

She stood and allowed him to show her out. She noticed the blond flecks in his light brown hair and how the cowboy hat hanging behind his desk had flattened it out. A lot of people had given her their condolences, some even knew her brother personally, but most didn't seem sincere. Something in Brayden's eyes said he felt bad for her, and he wasn't saying the words because he had to. He had consoled her. And more than anything, she wanted to trust him. She needed to trust someone.

She hoped she wasn't wrong.

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Lexi sat at her desk staring at the computer. She'd managed to get to her office without breaking down today, but actual work was a different matter. There were times she wished she could walk away from the

family business altogether. More now than ever.

She'd joined the company only because it was her grandfather's dying wish. It was her last year of medical school the year he'd fallen ill. She'd gone in to check on him before heading home that day. She'd never forgotten the way he held her hand and told her how proud he was of her. Then there was the "*but not for being a doctor*" speech. He was proud of her for being a Ramos. Few knew that leaving the family circle was taboo. And that circle reached far and wide. As far as she knew, all her cousins were involved in running their branch of the family business, too. Some here in the U.S. and some in other countries.

Her grandfather had passed away a few days after that conversation. She'd finished medical school then decided to join the family business. Jace told her she was making a huge mistake. She'd come to that decision out of guilt but with the promise to herself that someday she'd free herself of the burden and be the doctor she'd wanted to be.

A chill enveloped her as she realized the resentment for her dad was growing every day. Since Jace's funeral, Dad acted like things were business as usual. She despised his cold, calculating manner of dealing with people. She didn't know how he was able to pretend Jace wasn't dead. How could he pretend he hadn't lost his only son? Before she allowed the anger to take over and ruin her day, she stood and looked out the third story window behind her desk.

Leaves floated through the air as large raindrops hit the glass in front of her face. She wondered what the private investigator was finding. She hadn't heard from him all week and had been patiently waiting, but her patience was running out. What if he wasn't

working on the case? What if he never called her back? Maybe he was enjoying a nice tropical vacation. Paranoia gripped her, and doubts pummeled her brain like the raindrops outside.

Something he'd said when they'd first met raced across her mind. *"You and your family will be in my prayers."* Her heartbeat slowed to a steady rhythm and her thoughts eased back into a normal reality. She had to trust him. Something was forcing her to trust him. She thought about him praying for her. Prayer was something she hadn't done since she was young. Her grandparents had taken her to church with them many times, but she'd never continued to go as an adult. It wasn't that she didn't believe in God, she did. At least to some extent. She believed that He existed, she just didn't understand Him. She'd prayed when Jace died, but in the end what good was it? It wasn't going to bring her brother back. Nothing could do that.

Lexi sat behind her computer and watched the screensaver fish swim back and forth. She opened the top desk drawer and pulled out a spare key to Jace's office. She'd refused to go in there since she'd been back. Selena had asked that no one bother his things because she wanted to come and get them herself, but she had yet to do it.

Lexi stared at the key and swallowed the lump in her throat. Maybe there was something in there that could help them. Today was as good as any to find out. She tucked the key back in the drawer and waited until most of the staff had gone home. Later that evening, she walked into the central office and asked her father's secretary if he'd gone for the day.

"He's still here," Margaret said. "He's leaving in about five minutes to meet someone for dinner. You'd

better catch him quick if you need him for something.” Margaret never looked up from her computer. “Anything else, hon?”

“No, thanks.” Lexi glanced at her watch and walked away. She'd wait in her office a few more minutes until her dad left. The last thing she wanted was to explain why she was digging around in Jace's office.

A couple minutes later, the door to her office creaked open. “Hey, sweetheart, I'm leaving. Would you like to join me for dinner?”

Lexi closed her laptop and smiled. “Thanks, Dad. I think I'll just head on home and take a long, hot bubble bath. I'm exhausted.”

“All right, then. I'll see you tomorrow. We have a meeting with the Cardoso family to set up those new shipments of armoires to Brazil. I need you here first thing in the morning.”

“I'll be here.”

Lexi waited for him to shut the door then grabbed her key to Jace's office. Once her dad was out of the office, she slipped around the corner and unlocked the door. The curtains were drawn and the blinds shut. A glimmer of the fading evening sunlight leaked into the room around a crooked slat in the blinds. It was all the light she needed to indicate that someone had already been here. She flipped on the light. His book shelves were empty, his computer was gone, and his closet was bare. Knickknacks and pictures of Jace and Selena were the only things on the shelves, but they weren't in their usual places. And Jace was very particular about how he arranged his office. Someone had been looking for something.

Lexi pulled her cellphone from her pocket and