

*Excerpt from Big Cypress Crossroads by Bren Christopher. Published by Loose Id ©2011*

Scott pushed back from the computer he had been using to click through the crime-scene photos. Stretching out his leg, he rubbed it absently in an attempt to alleviate the ache brought about by the busy day.

The closest medical examiner's office was an hour away in Naples, so a nearby warehouse had been converted into temporary storage for the evidence. Scott had opted to stay at the station and help the team get set up, rather than return to the site. He could learn nothing else there.

But he did learn something from the photos. After zooming in closely, he identified the vestiges of a tattoo on the upper right arm of the corpse as a heart with a knife through it. It seemed very likely that the corpse was indeed Lugo.

Scott stared at the photo of the tattoo. He knew he should feel relieved that the dealer was dead. But he was more disappointed that someone else had beaten him to it. They'd never been able to prove that the bullet that had shattered Scott's femur came from Lugo's gun, but the dealer had definitely been in the house when they'd raided it. And as bitter as Scott felt about his leg, other officers had paid a much higher price for that drug raid gone wrong.

Noah had stayed at the tour office to help his father organize the boats and the guides, and most of the team had been dispatched to the site. It hadn't take them long to confirm that an unknown number of bodies lay scattered under the water. Lieutenant Hanahan had stayed in Miami, putting Rivera in charge of the scene. That didn't stop representatives from a half dozen other agencies from showing up to put in their two cents.

Noah was right. It had turned into a damn big three-ring circus.

As night fell, most of the team returned, including Rivera. He stared at the pictures. "So it is him? It's the same tattoo?"

"Yes, damn it. It's him." Scott's voice sounded tight and angry.

"Feeling cheated?" Rivera sounded bitter too. "Some asshole beat us to it. I wanted to perp-walk him through a station full of cops pissed about the officers killed in that raid."

"More than that," Scott said. "I'm pissed about what he could have told us about his boss. Do you think Santiago will come out of the woodwork now?"

"That would be interesting, wouldn't it? But for right now, he's got other lieutenants to help run the show. *El jefe* can sit back and pull the strings like he always has."

"Yeah, you're right. And anyway, what the hell--if Santiago did show up, how would we know? We don't have a clue what he looks like. We've got no pictures of him. No description."

"Not yet. But his network is falling apart. He lost a lot of men in that raid. Lugo escaped that raid only to end up dead here. If the other bodies turn out to be Santiago's men, he might run out of lieutenants. He'll be forced to come out from under his rock or give up his business altogether. Once he's in the open, we'll find a way to identify him. People have seen him. They're just afraid to talk."

Chief Walsh joined them, cutting their speculation short.

Rivera looked at him. "I would still like to understand how Noah realized there were more bodies." Apparently he hadn't been very successful at getting any more information from Walsh while they had been alone.

"I already told you what I think," Walsh answered.

Scott still thought Walsh was hiding something, but there was nothing he could do short of calling the man a liar, and they were a long way from that.

Noah and Jacob Taylor arrived, forestalling any more questions. A thin, weathered man, Taylor ran his business quietly and efficiently. He had the same light, sun-streaked hair as his son, although it was shorter and beginning to recede. He carried a contract for the additional boats they had already begun using to carry the forensics team and the evidence back and forth from the crime scene.

Rivera signed off on the contract and then left Taylor and Walsh to work out the schedule. He joined Scott in front of the monitor. Scott pointed out some of the research he'd been doing on the talisman found with the body.

Noah wandered over to the two detectives. He leaned over Scott's shoulder to look at the screen. He had freed his hair from its rubber band. The long ends gently brushed Scott's shoulder. Scott had the irrational thought--it had to be irrational, didn't it?--that the young man had done it deliberately. He smelled of sea air and soap, and Scott breathed him in, filling his lungs and then letting his breath out in a slow sigh. Some of the stress drained from Scott's body to be replaced by another, altogether more pleasant sort of tension.

Noah spoke, his breath a light whisper against Scott's cheek. "What have you got there? Is that the talisman they found on the body?"

They turned their attention to the screen. "Yes. I've been doing some research. I've studied Lugo's file--spent months following him. His life was nothing but clubs, tattoo parlors, and dealing. Never once did he go near a church. But the talisman is Santeria. It's a symbol for Eshu, also known as Elegua. Elegua is an *orisha*, a spirit or deity who guards the crossroads and brings fortune or misfortune, apparently depending on his whim at the time."

Rivera said, "Santeria practices a lot of sacrifices, usually chickens or other small animals. Nothing like this...but still...do you think...?"

"Considering the way Lugo hung from that tree, and the talisman... You're thinking what I am-- that the killer placed it around his neck during some kind of ritual sacrifice."

Rivera nodded. "I'll tell the forensics team to hunt for more of those talismans. Between decay and scavengers, the bodies are in such bad shape that they probably won't be wearing the necklaces anymore. But there might some items scattered underwater."

Scott turned back to the screen. "Another piece that does not fit into this puzzle is the location. If this is a sacrifice to Eleggua to bring fortune, the ritual is supposed to be performed at a crossroads. The blood has to be spilled at an intersection. So why out in the middle of the swamp?"

Rivera shook his head, but Noah said, "*It is* a crossroads."

They stared at him. "What do you mean?" Scott asked. "There's nothing out there that's anything like a road."

Noah led them to the map on the wall of the chief's office. "Here," he said, his finger tracing the line of the stream they had followed that morning. "And here." He pointed out an intersecting waterway curving around the stand of mangroves, making it an island of sorts. "This one is very shallow now, so it's hard to see, but in the summer, during the rainy season, it's much deeper. These were canoe trails used by the Calusa, a tribe that dominated this region for hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived. See? These waterways intersect right at the trees."

Scott smiled at him. "You're a pretty useful guy, aren't you?"

"Well, I *am* a guide. I'm supposed to know the history of the area." But he was smiling back.

Scott ignored Rivera's raised eyebrows. His partner looked back and forth between the two of them as they stood there for a minute, smiling at each other.

Scott brought his mind back to business. "So the question is, who would know the area this well? Who could get in and out of the swamp, off the marked trails, and know those two streams create a crossroads? And be a practitioner of Santeria?"

"Or just be working for the person who wanted to make the sacrifices. Could be another guide." Rivera stared pointedly at Noah.

Noah looked astonished. "You don't really think I had anything to do with this, do you? Why would I even report the body?"

"You'd be surprised how many murderers are the ones who actually report the crime," Rivera remarked, but Scott knew him well enough to see he was just playing devil's advocate. Unfortunately, others did not.

"Are you accusing my nephew of something, Detective Rivera?" Chief Walsh's voice was deceptively mild.

"No, Chief, not really. Only speculating that it would take someone with Noah's skills to haul those men out there. If it *was* a sacrifice, the men would still have to be alive in order to have their blood spilled on the spot, and that would probably take more than one person. Any ideas?"

"There are a lot of guides around here, and a lot of folks who enjoy boating and camping in the park. You don't have to be a guide to know the area pretty well. But Santeria... I don't know. We do have a small Hispanic population. Most attend St. Luke's Catholic Church. I know that Santeria is widely practiced by Cubans and other folks in Miami, but I've never heard of it here. I can talk to the priest and a few of the parishioners and see if they have any ideas."

Noah sounded hesitant. "Uncle Terry, I can talk to some of the guys Kyle knew."

"No." Walsh's voice was firm. "You don't go near those people. Leave them to me."

Noah seemed reluctant, but he said, "Okay."

Rivera and Walsh left to report their latest findings to the other team members, leaving Scott alone with Noah.

"Don't take it personally. Miguel is suspicious of everyone," Scott said as he sat back down and absently rubbed his thigh.

"It's all right. I guess I can understand why he might think I know more than I do." Noah took a chair near him--not quite close enough to touch, but definitely close enough to feel the slight warmth radiating from his skin. "Your leg hurting?"

"It's been a long day." He dropped his hand away from his leg, feeling a little ashamed to show such weakness in front of this vital young man. "Will you tell me about Kyle? Is he your friend who overdosed?"

"Kyle Brooks. He was a friend of mine in high school. He had everything going for him--lots of friends, a nice family, money. We were...involved." He looked at Scott as if to gauge his reaction to that statement. Did he think Scott would have a problem with Noah being gay? True, they hadn't actually discussed it yet, and Scott *was* a cop--a fact that did not usually inspire people to confide their most closely guarded secrets. But Noah had to see Scott's interest in him, and Scott had a feeling Noah made no pretense of being in the closet.

Scott smiled at him encouragingly and even went so far as to "accidentally" brush their arms together. Noah returned his smile and seemed to relax. He continued. "I was always surprised Kyle wanted to be seen in public with me and that he didn't mind people knowing we were together. He caught a lot of grief from his family. But he never hesitated."

Noah smiled at the memories--a small, sad smile that went straight to Scott's heart. Then the smile faded. "Like a lot of high school kids around here, we would go out in the woods on the weekend, smoke some pot, have a few drinks, and make out. That was enough for me, but Kyle would sometimes experiment with different pills he'd scored--Ecstasy, uppers, downers, whatever. I never did. I figured I needed to be at least halfway in my right mind, so I could make sure he didn't go too far."

Noah shifted in his seat and sighed. "He was smart as well as good-looking. He got a scholarship to the University of Miami. He tried to talk me into going, but I didn't want to live in the city. Miami is only a couple of hours away, so I'd go visit him on the weekends."

"And you didn't like what you were seeing?" Scott was all too familiar with the story of good-looking small-town boys and girls being lured into lives they had no idea how to handle.

"It seemed like every time I went to see him, he'd want to take me to another party where there were more hard-core drugs, more hard-core people. I know his grades suffered, and after a year, I begged him to come home with me. He just laughed and told me to quit acting like his old man. He never thought anything could really hurt him." Noah ended the story abruptly. "Then they found him in his apartment, dead from an overdose."

Scott had a feeling there was more to it than that, but he didn't press Noah any further.

They were quiet for a moment while Scott resisted the urge to pull the other man close in a comforting embrace. Not really appropriate behavior with the chief's nephew in the man's own office.

Noah said, "It's late. Have you eaten anything since we had breakfast?"

Scott shook his head.

"There's a nice seafood restaurant down by the water. Stone crab and beer. What do you say?"

Scott hesitated, unsure if the invitation meant what he thought it might mean. He found it difficult to believe that the energetic trail guide could be interested in someone who limped when he walked.

"Hey," Noah said, "you took care of me this morning. It's my turn, okay?"

Scott looked into those clear, smiling eyes and nodded. "All right. I'll tell Rivera I'm going."

The restaurant was built on a pier jutting over the water. They were seated in front of a large plate-glass window with a gorgeous view across the river leading to the Chokoloskee Bay and then west into the gulf.

"This is really nice. Thanks." Scott felt ridiculously self-conscious. It had been a long time since he'd been on a date, which he supposed this was. Even before the shooting, he'd been so wrapped

up in work that he had to force himself to get away for an afternoon on his boat. He'd always loved being out on the water by himself, fishing, or at least pretending to fish. The thirty-footer was the one indulgence he allowed himself. But he found it difficult to make the time.

They had ordered and started on their beers when Noah asked, as if reading his mind, "Do you like to fish?"

Astonished, Scott stared at him. But it wasn't really an unusual question, considering the heavy charter boat business in the area. Scott told him about the fishing boat that served as his refuge when the stress of his job grew to be a little too much.

Gradually he relaxed and started enjoying himself. Noah seemed so easygoing, and his slow, soft accent had an oddly soothing effect. Noah talked about his family and the people he met as a trail guide. He appeared very sure of himself, as if he already knew exactly where the night was headed. His self-assurance was infectious, and Scott's tension drained away as he grew more confident in response.

"Can I ask you something, Noah?"

"Sure."

"When we first met, you acted as if you knew me. But we've never met. I'd remember you. What was that all about?"

Noah pulled the meat from the crab claw and ate it slowly, seeming to savor every bite. Scott watched his mouth, feeling the warmth building in his crotch.

"Messy," said Noah, licking one finger clean and then another.

"Oh," Scott murmured.

"I did feel like I had met you before. I can't tell you why right now, though. I'll tell you later. Is that all right?"

"Okay," he answered absently, still staring at Noah's mouth.

They went out on the pier after dinner to take in the view of the bay. Noah led him to a bench by the water, hidden in the shadows of the huge cypress tree for which the town was named.

Noah sat next to him in the dim light and gently placed a hand over his, where he had absently been rubbing at his thigh again. Scott stilled but didn't move his hand from under Noah's. Instead, impulsively, he turned it up and entwined their fingers. A few other people strolled the pier, both tourists and locals, but Scott's attention was only on Noah.

"Tell me how this happened," Noah said. "It has to do with that dead dealer I found--Lugo?"

Scott gazed at their clasped hands where they rested on his injured leg. "Yes. He was part of a big drug-running ring in Miami that we've been following for some time now. A few months ago we thought we had him and a couple of his buddies fairly well cornered in a little house in north Miami. We had them surrounded, and we thought we were ready for anything." His voice turned grim. "But there were a lot more of them than we expected, and they had some serious firepower, including armor-piercing rounds. Three good officers died that day. Lugo got away in the chaos, although several of his associates were killed."

Scott looked down at his leg. "I took a bullet in my thigh. It gouged out some muscle and broke the femur in a couple of places. I have a steel rod in there now. I'm told I'm lucky I can walk at all. But I don't feel lucky."

"Still, you don't need the cane all the time, right? And I'm guessing you need it less now than you did a few weeks ago."

"That's true." Scott's gaze came to rest on Noah's hair. He reached out and did what he'd wanted to do all day--ran a hand through it, letting the smooth strands fall between his fingers. Noah smiled and half-closed his eyes at the touch.

"You clean up nice," Scott said.

"You sure better like it. Took half an hour to get all the knots out."

"You did it for me?"

"Of course."

"Oh." Scott let his hand drop from Noah's hair to stroke his cheekbone, taking his time despite the urge to yank the man toward him and crush their lips together. His heart pounded. This first kiss felt unreasonably important.

Noah seemed to enjoy the attention. His eyes drifted shut again as Scott brushed a thumb over his lips and then pressed it lightly against his mouth. Noah parted his lips and took in the thumb, wrapping his well-shaped lips around it and sucking gently. Scott let out a small moan before he could stop himself.

No longer able to wait, he slipped his hand behind Noah's head, cupping it and drawing him forward. Their tongues slid together in a firm but gentle kiss that lasted forever and not long enough. The young man tasted of mints and a hint of beer and a sweetness all his own, and Scott thought his heart would burst from his chest.

When they finally broke apart, both gasped for breath.

"Oh," Noah said. "Oh my." His eyes appeared a little glassy.

"Yeah," Scott panted. And did it again, with more force this time, crushing the younger man's lips and taking possession of that lovely mouth to ravish it completely.

When they broke apart this time, Scott said, "We're pretty well hidden here, but not invisible. If we start this again, your uncle is going to have to arrest us for public indecency." He squeezed Noah's hand. "Come with me. Back to my room. Will you?"

"Sure." As if Noah had always assumed they would end up there. "I brought an overnight bag, so I can stay over. I mean, if that's what you want."

Scott looked at him in amazement and then just said, "Yes."

They stumbled into the motel room, Scott struggling to hold his cane. They shut the door and continued the eager kiss they had begun in the hallway. Noah was laughing into his mouth. Scott broke off. "Are you laughing at me, boy?" He pressed Noah against the wall. "You're going to pay for that."

"Who are you calling a boy?"

"I'm older than you are."

"Not by much."

Scott suddenly felt anxious. He drew away, focusing on stowing GLOCK, badge, and handcuffs in the bedside table. He fiddled with the drawer a little nervously. "I'm thirty-three. That's a big difference. And I'll probably get arthritis in this leg sooner than I should. And--"

Noah grabbed him and pushed him to the bed. Scott landed on his back with a shocked gasp. Noah crawled on top, one leg on either side of his hips, straddling him. "Don't start that bull with me. Quit acting like you're some crippled old man instead of one sexy, totally built dude." He ground his crotch into Scott's, sending a shockwave of heat and desire straight through him. Scott groaned and pushed up, trying to get more pressure. "Still feel like an old man?"

"Little bastard," he growled and flipped Noah under him in a surprise move, making him shout with laughter. "I sure hope Miguel's not next door."

"I'll try to keep it down. I can be pretty noisy, though."

Scott grinned down at him, propping himself up with his arms on each side of Noah's head and wedging his good leg between the man's knees. "We'll have to see how loud you can get."

"Promises. What are you waiting for?"

Scott lowered himself full-length, and their lips met again in a searing kiss, Scott's tongue working in and claiming Noah's mouth. Their lips slid together as Noah returned the kiss with equal passion. Scott slipped his hands under Noah's shirt, taking charge of his nipples. He rubbed

the small nubs gently, and then pulled as he felt them grow hard. Noah moaned under him, squirming, and Scott pulled off Noah's shirt, frantic to get at that fine, firm chest. Kissing and licking his way down to the navel, he gave it some attention before moving back up to suck those pretty nipples into his mouth. Lost in the taste and scent of Noah, he only gradually became aware of the man's urgent efforts to pull off Scott's shirt. Scott reared up and pulled the shirt over his head. Noah took the opportunity to slip out from under him and jump off the bed.

"Hey," Scott protested, sliding forward to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"Just taking my pants off." He grinned, standing in front of Scott, wearing only his shorts. He rested a hand lightly on his own crotch, fingers trailing over the bulge. Scott's eyes were glued to his hand, watching the slow stroking. "Unless you don't want me to?"

"Damn tease."