



 THE NUN'S LETTER INTERCEPTED JUAN Miguel Quintero Rios on the road to Port Bolivar. Her handwriting was small and precise, and easy to read—even in the back of a bouncing cart on a rough-paved road made rougher by the lunging wind. No natural-born American, that one. Irish, the padre guessed by her name and her habit. What she was doing on the Gulf was anyone's guess, and how she'd learned of him, he did not know; it was the only question she left unanswered in her carefully composed response.

He did not care, but he was curious.

Despite that one omission, her small bundle of papers contained a wealth of new information. At first she'd told him only that the hotel hated, and it hungered. Now, in this most recent message, she told him the rest.

In 1878, a cattle baron by the name of Jack Darnell had bought the property and its surrounding acreage, hoping to

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## Cherie Priest

build a resort that would rival any in Houston—or even the great estates of the Caribbean. But his plans were hotly resisted by the locals, for in order to create this “castle on an island,” a landmark must be destroyed.

On the site of the proposed hotel, a blue jacaranda bloomed.

No one knew for certain why the tree was planted there, or who had installed it on the island—though someone must have done so, for it was not native to the region; and it was quite ancient by any standard. Alas, the original gardener had long since passed, leaving no real clues behind.

But one rumor had attained the status of a fairy tale, short and sad: A conquistador loved a woman, and that woman had loved the jacaranda. When she died, he planted this one in her honor, if not her memory—for not even the most dedicated listener or oldest island resident knew the woman’s name.

And after all, that was only a rumor.

(Though it might have held a grain of truth, it just as likely didn’t.)

Regardless, the tree was greatly beloved. For as long as anyone remembered, it had been a favorite place for lovers to meet and children to climb. Its trumpet-shaped flowers cascaded in clusters of purple-blushed indigo; over the years they’d been woven into the braids of a thousand maidens, and offered in a thousand gestures of romantic intent. They were gathered into bouquets for weddings, and laid upon caskets as sweet farewells. To be sure, there were other flowers on the island, but none compared to these.

All the same, ground was broken for Jack Darnell’s hotel.

And likewise was the tree.

People came from every corner of the island to witness its destruction, not with the morbid glee of those who attend a hanging—but with the sorrow of a loved one’s wake. It was said that one last blossom was taken in the end, and pressed between

the pages of a Methodist minister's bible...as a reminder of the wickedness that men may do.

Wicked or only ambitious, Darnell constructed his castle.

He never gave a second thought to the tree; in fact, he had never set eyes on it in the first place.

Whereas the tree had been living, lithe, and sprawling, the hotel that replaced it was a blocky, almost manly affair—built in a style just ahead of its time, or so Darnell was assured by his architects. Its symmetry was clean and precise, and its lines stopped short of being austere, for there were touches of art at the corners, and details of refinement along the ivory plaster and red bricks, the graphite shade of the cornerstones and the wood-framed windows, with their narrow sills and shutters the color of rust. Inside, the floors were set with clean, dramatic mosaic tiles in sharp white, black, and green; and the fixtures were mostly brass that had been polished until they gleamed like mirrors.

It spoke of wealth without too much ostentation, and quality without excessive frivolity. All in all, it was a restrained place for a man with so much money and such grandiose plans, but his wife might have been the guiding, stabilizing hand in that matter.

In the end, the hotel was given her name. They called it *Odessa's Court*.

The padre wondered what sort of name “Odessa” was, and where it might have come from. Perhaps he'd ask when he arrived, and maybe someone would know.

A gust of wind tugged at the letter; he held its pages tightly until the bluster passed. Above, the sky was going pale, all the blue washed out of it. A storm was coming. Or rather, he was coming toward a storm.

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He read on, picking up the tale on the next sheet.

The millionaire and his bride were the hotel's first two victims.

Jack Darnell was found hanging in the lobby, dangling from one of the new-fashioned fans with tracks that snaked along the ceiling. Though dead, he moved slowly, back and forth across the room, drawn along by the ratcheting chain—his feet dangling ten feet off the floor. Odessa Darnell lay face-down on the ground beneath him, her skull shattered against the tiles by what must have been a terrible fall from the second story landing.

The Texas Rangers called it a double suicide. The case was closed, and in the wake of three more deaths in the span of a month...so was the hotel.

For fourteen years it sat empty, until it was purchased by a private investment group in San Antonio. A manager was sent out to assess the property, and upon his approval everything was cleaned, renovated, and re-opened under a new name: the *Jacaranda Hotel*, after the long-gone landmark.

The nun suggested that this was a canny move, or else a superstitious one. It would seem that they hoped to appease whatever unhappy thing had taken up residence there.

At any rate, according to Sister Eileen, the former republic (and now mere state) of Texas was sending a Ranger to investigate, or so it'd vowed—but no such man had yet arrived. In all frankness, she did not expect her request to be taken very seriously by anyone in Austin. It was too hard to frame the problem while leaving out all the stranger, stickier bits. She had to tell them that people were dying, yes. She was compelled to admit they died by storm, by suicide, by accident, and by coincidence: almost two dozen of them, in singles and in clusters. She was

bound to confess they'd been unable to uncover any murderer, or even any plot of murder.

She requested their intervention all the same, with all haste, before the tally of dead could rise any higher.

But she knew—she *believed*—she could tell the padre everything else...the whole truth, so help her God. Even if Texas would not answer, *he* might.

He finished her letter a full hour before he finished his journey, arriving at Port Bolivar just as the first spits and hisses of rain began to fall. The sky was still white, the curdled color of milk on the verge of turning.

The grain driver dropped him off at the pier, where they parted on friendly terms. The padre was grateful for the ride. The driver was grateful for having shared a confession so minor, that it was a wonder it'd weighed upon his heart so heavily, and for so long.

With a round of thanks, the padre set off for the ferry.

“You’re a madman, you know,” the driver called out as he cracked the reins to get his horse’s attention. “Everyone with any sense is leaving Galveston, before it’s washed away.”