

HUNT  KILLER[®]

**BLOOD
IN
THE WATER**

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL BY CALEB ROEHRIG

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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ONE

The biggest downside to working on the beach is all the tourists who say things like *You must love getting to work on the beach*. Especially when I'm standing in front of them just barely holding on to a plastic tub stacked with dirty dishes, used napkins, and half-eaten food. People spill beer on me, yell at me, and don't tip—and the closest I get to the ocean is the few miserable yards of sand that make up our outdoor seating area—but yeah, sure. I'm really *living the dream*.

Tonight, the culprits are a group of girls huddled together under one of the heat lamps set up on the patio, all of them shivering in T-shirts and halter tops, despite the fact that temperatures are still dipping well into the fifties at night here. They're Spring Breakers, though—you could clock them a mile away—and they're going to wring

every second of fun out of this sweet, sweet beach life until it gives them hypothermia.

Spring Breakers, ironically enough, are both the second-biggest downside as well as the biggest *upside* to working on the beach. They're loud and obnoxious, they get drunk and start fights, and they wreck things for the sole purpose of recording themselves doing it and then going viral on social media; they barf in the sand, they treat locals like their personal staff . . . and did I mention they spill beer on me? Because they do that *a lot*.

But if they stopped coming, the restaurant would fold in about a week—and then the entire rest of the town would follow. So you can't live with 'em . . . but you sure as hell can't live without 'em. At least, not in Barton Beach.

The fact is that this isn't such a bad place to live, most of the year; there's the occasional burglary, and something of a drug problem, but otherwise the crime rate is low and things are . . . sleepy. The quintessential postage-stamp town, it's barely two square miles in area—and aside from the pier, the boardwalk, and about a half mile of picturesque, oceanfront sand, we don't have much. Townies like me and my family depend on the business the high season brings in to keep us afloat for the rest of the year.

So when some drunk frat bro accidentally dumps his drink on me and forgets to apologize, I just tell him, "Forget about it," and reward my superhuman restraint by

transferring five bucks of my meager tip earnings into my college fund. I've invested a hundred dollars so far this year alone, and it's not even April yet.

"Zac—a two-top and a four-top just opened in the garden, and I need those tables cleared, like, *now*." Haley Jensen gets in my way, her hands on her hips, affecting her best Night-Shift Manager tone. Which is hilarious, since she's (a) the hostess, (b) a seasonal hire, and (c) barely older than me. "The wait list is ridiculous, okay? I've got people backed up halfway to the boardwalk!"

"So, tell them to buy some saltwater taffy. It'll curb their appetites," I grumble under my breath. Before she can ask me to repeat myself, I jostle the bone-crushing tub of dishes. "I have to get these to the kitchen first, but I'll take care of those tables next."

"Some of these people have been waiting for almost an hour already!" she exclaims, tossing her hands out. "Do you have any idea what it's like out there? You know, maybe I should tell your dad he needs to hire more busboys, since apparently there aren't enough of you to get the actual job done."

"Sure thing, Haley." Shoving past her and heading for the kitchen, I plaster an insincere smile across my face. "You do that."

Typical of a conversation with Haley, it barely lasted thirty seconds, and already I can feel a migraine coming

on. My dad will never hire another busboy when he's got me to do the job for free, and she knows it; she's just threatening to tattle, because she wants to put me in my place.

Which, I guess, brings me to the *third*-biggest downside of working on the beach: having my dad as my boss. The Beachcomber isn't very big, just a half-dozen indoor tables, a dozen more in the outdoor "garden" area, and then a patio set aside for the bar crowd. The menu is the standard grease-bomb burgers and seafood dishes you'd expect from a cozy little shack with an ocean view, but it was founded by my grandfather, so my dad thinks it's the most important restaurant in town.

Well, I guess from a practical standpoint, it *is*—at least where the Fremont family is concerned. Although we're not very big, either.

"I heard Haley shouting at you," my little sister, Ruby, comments the second I enter the kitchen. There's a table set up in the corner near the door where she gets to hang out on nights our dad can't find anyone to stay with her, and she's got her eyes locked on her tablet computer. "Tell her that if she complains about you to Dad, you'll tell him how she lied about being sick last weekend so she could go to Atlantic City with her boyfriend."

I pause as I'm unloading the dishes. "Is that true? Actually, wait—don't tell me. If you hacked into her email or something, it'll make me an accessory after the fact."

“Didn’t need to. She tweeted from a casino with her location on.” Ruby chews her thumb absentmindedly, still not looking up from her tablet. “Not exactly a criminal mastermind. Of course, if she really wanted to get away with it, she wouldn’t have brought her phone with her at all—it’s a total amateur move. All you’d need to do is check the GPS tracking on her cell to show she was lying when she said she was home with the flu.”

“I don’t think Dad has the kind of resources to triangulate people’s cell phones, or whatever.” I smile at the thought, though—Haley Jensen on the witness stand, frantic, caught in her lies. “Especially since we don’t actually require doctor’s notes for sick days.”

“I’m just saying.” Finally, Ruby spares me a glance. “That’s how they caught the Falls Church Hatchet Killer. He chopped his whole family into pieces—*pieces*, Zac!—while pretending to be in Richmond on a business trip, but his phone records showed he’d driven back to town that same day, and he was busted. I learned about it on the *Behind True Crime* podcast.”

My headache/brain tumor gets worse, and I groan. “Come on, Ruby, you’re twelve! You’re too young for that stuff. It’s gonna give you nightmares.”

“You know what gives me nightmares? *Health-code violations*.” She mouths the last three words, gesturing above my head—to where an elliptical rack of pots and pans

hangs from the ceiling by a literal thread. It started to collapse two years ago when dry rot buckled one of the ceiling joists it's bolted to, and now it's mostly held in place by a rudimentary rope and pulley. "Leave my podcasts alone. At least they're about actual historical events—and they almost always end with the bad guy getting caught! Or at least identified. Before he disappears forever with lots of money and a bloody hatchet."

Her expression barely changes, and I start to think she's spending way too much time in this kitchen, surrounded by adults who say whatever they want because they've forgotten there's a kid present. "Do I need to tell Dad what kind of stuff you're listening to?"

"Do I need to tell him you're not clearing tables fast enough?" she counters instantly.

"Touché." I roll my eyes, hoisting my now-empty tub and starting for the garden. "You're a monster, Ruby Roo."

"Mess with me, you get the horns!" she calls as the door swings shut behind me.



When I say that I work on the beach, I mean that I literally work *on the beach*. Our family restaurant is one of only a handful of businesses that sit right on the actual sand itself, in the shadow of the boardwalk, with the ocean gradually eating away at our front yard. We call the outdoor seating area the "garden," because that's what Grandpa called it, for

whatever reason, but in reality, it's just a cluster of tables arranged in close enough proximity to the bar that we can still serve alcohol to the people who sit out there.

Okay, I guess I mean the royal “we” here, because I'm only sixteen and I'm not allowed to serve alcohol to anyone. Hence the reason I'm a free busboy instead of a free waiter. But it's a family business, and Dad says he wants us all to think of everything as “ours,” which is only risky when you put Ruby too close to the maraschino cherries.

The surf is up tonight, the Atlantic slapping loudly against the shore as I clear the two-top and four-top that had Haley so deep in her feelings, and I take a moment to look out at the water. It's a pretty impressive sight. White-caps froth in the moonlight as they surge against the beach, and the pier—lit up like a bandstand directly across from us—casts dazzling reflections over the choppy waves. From here, you can just see the beacon at the end of the jetty that marks the start of Dead Man's Cove. It's flashing, I realize, and the way the air smells makes me wonder if our busy night will be cut short.

“Seems like it's gonna rain, doesn't it?” As if reading my mind, Mia Montes sidles up to me while I'm stacking the last of the grimy plates in my grimier tub, her expression defeated.

“I think my dad fixed the awning,” I say eagerly—*too* eagerly, like embarrassingly eagerly—pointing at the

mechanical apparatus that's currently ratcheted up against the front of the building. It broke last winter, and it went on the long list of Things to Deal With . . . somewhere ahead of the collapsing kitchen rack but behind the escalating property taxes. "Look at the bright side: If the weather goes to crap, people won't want to leave!"

"Yeah, but if they don't order more food, I don't get any more tips." Mia sighs, running a hand through her dark hair, and I try not to make any pathetic whimpering or groaning noises out loud.

Mia might honestly be the most gorgeous person on the planet. A student at the community college in the nearby city of Franklin Harbor, she's one of the Beachcomber's precious few year-round employees not named Fremont. She started out as a seasonal hire two summers ago, and then just never quit—and even though she's nineteen, and she's told me several times that she's too old for me, I'm holding out hope that she'll eventually change her mind.

"We can take Haley's tips," I suggest. "I'll hold her while you kick her shins?"

"Better have Ruby do the kicking." Mia grins, dimples appearing in her cheeks, and my stomach flips over. "At least she's intimidating. The other day, she told me some methods for disposing of human remains that I . . . don't think I'll ever be able to forget. No offense, but there's something kinda freaky about a twelve-year-old who memorizes that

stuff. I mean, it's more of a Dana Scully way than a Dexter way, but still."

"She's got this fixation with true-crime stuff." I shake my head, not sure what to do about Ruby's latest obsession. She's always seemed mature for her age, but she's only twelve, and it's hard to know if she really takes stuff in stride as much as she seems to. "Have you seen my dad, by the way? Haley got on my case earlier, and I should probably do a preemptive strike, before she gets the chance to tell him what a slacker I am."

Mia shrugs. "Last I heard, he was meeting with someone in his office."



With my tub once again full of dirty dishes, I trudge back to the kitchen—an endless cycle I repeat pretty much every single day during the high season—and once I've unloaded the tub for the umpteenth time, I go looking for my dad. His office is behind the bar, so I start in that direction, but I stop when I nearly run right into him outside the kitchen door.

"Thanks for letting me take up your time, Luke." The man standing with my dad shoots the cuffs on a gaudy, button-down shirt, and I turn around immediately, pretending to organize a basket of soup crackers while listening in. I want to make sure I don't lose track of Dad, of course—but if I'm honest, I'm also really curious about what they're

saying, “I’m glad to know I can count on you. You’re one of the good ones.”

“Any time, Mr. Webb.” Dad looks kind of moody and distracted, with dark circles under his eyes—but lately, that’s not really unusual. Every year it gets a little more expensive to run the restaurant, but we basically maintain the same number of customers. “You know how I feel about protecting small businesses in Barton Beach. We’re part of what makes this community special, and I’m happy to do what it takes to see that things stay that way.”

“Good man.” Vincent Webb thumps my dad on the shoulder and gives him the wide, empty smile of a Realtor who’s glad you didn’t check the basement.

It’s a little weird to see Vincent Webb, the wealthiest man in town and owner of half the businesses on the boardwalk, at the Beachcomber. Having started out with nothing, he’s a man who makes a point of flaunting his newfound wealth. He wears designer shirts, luxury sunglasses, and Italian loafers—but it’s all ugly as sin. He’s the kind of guy who sorts the price from high to low and then buys whatever comes up first, because the whole point is showing off how much he can afford to spend. Meanwhile . . . well, we buy off-brand ketchup in bulk and then pour it into the nicer bottles and hope nobody can tell the difference. If he needed to see my dad badly enough to slum it with us down on the beach, there must be a good reason.