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Stirred in Cancún

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**Stirred in Cancún**

**By**

**V.S. Manish**

## Chapter One: Stirred

Brian stood barefoot on the cold tiles of his seventh-floor hotel room balcony, the humid breeze off the Caribbean Sea brushing his face. The clock on the bedside table had glowed 1:57 a.m. when he woke up disoriented, his mouth dry and his head foggy. Below him, Cancún glittered under a bright moon, palm trees swayed, waves broke against the shore in long, dark lines and the distant throb of music pulsed from some beach-side bar down the road. It should have felt like paradise. But all Brian felt was an emptiness and an ache.

He leaned forward, gripping the metal handrail, its surface cool and slightly rough from salt erosion, the texture biting into his palms. He pressed his toes harder against the cold tile, the chill seeping up through his legs, a deliberate choice to stay out here longer rather than retreat to the stale air conditioning inside.

Suddenly, Brian felt a faint tremor beneath his feet. Not the swaying of too much tequila, not the tremble of emotion, this was real. Subtle, but unmistakable. The tiles vibrated once, twice, a low hum traveling up through his soles into his calves. Somewhere below, glassware rattled and clinked on a lower balcony. Palm fronds rustled sharply, out of rhythm with the steady breeze. He gripped the balcony handrail tighter, knuckles whitening, the metal now slick with condensation that sent cold chills up his palms.

The resort shook like a shiver ran down its spine. He froze. Was that an earthquake? In Cancún? It stopped almost as soon as it started, so subtle it could have been imagined. Still, something about it prickled the base of his neck. Something was off.

He counted his heartbeats, one through ten, forcing slow inhales through his nose, the salt air sharp in his lungs. When the count reached ten and nothing else moved, he exhaled, shoulders dropping a fraction. He peered over the balcony to see if any other guests were out and about. Balconies stretched left and right in neat rows, most dark, a few with faint glows from inside curtains. No one stood at the railings. No silhouettes leaned out. The resort slept on. He was about to turn back inside when movement on the beach stopped him.

Two figures moved in the moonlight near the water's edge. At first, Brian thought they might be late-night swimmers or perhaps maintenance workers finishing a late job. But their movements were wrong. Too urgent. Too focused. They were digging.

Brian leaned forward against the railing, squinting to make out more detail. The men had shovels, short-handled, blades flashing silver each time they lifted sand. Pale arcs flew backward, landing with soft thuds that carried faintly upward on the breeze. Even from seven floors up, the urgency of their movements was unmistakable. This was not leisurely. This was not casual. Whatever they were after, they needed it now.

One of the men stood up abruptly and looked around, scanning the beach, the resort, the balconies above. Brian froze. For a brief, electric moment, the man seemed to look directly at him. Seven floors up, in shadow, Brian told himself there was no way the man could actually see him. But the figure stilled, head tilting slightly, shoulders squaring as if listening. Moonlight caught the side of his face, highlighting a sharp jawline and the glint of sweat on his brow. Brian's breath caught. He stepped back instinctively, pressing himself against the wall beside the balcony door, the stucco rough against his bare back.

He waited, counting heartbeats again, slower this time, one through twenty. The night sounds returned, waves steady, distant music pulsing. No shout rose from below. No flashlight beam swept upward.

His initial reaction was to hurry back inside and lock the door shut. But something in him had stirred along with the ground. He decided to take another look. Carefully positioning himself where shadow fell deepest across the balcony, he edged forward just enough to see without exposing his silhouette. When he dared to look again, one of the men on the beach had stopped digging. The other dropped to his knees and reached into the hole they had created and pulled out an odd object. As the moonlight shone on it, Brian noticed it was large and metallic. A box of some kind. Even in the dim light, Brian could make out its angular shape. The device bristled with what looked like dials and gauges, a tangle of wires spilling from one side like exposed veins.

The standing man grabbed one side and together they hauled it free. With equipment in hand, they did not walk towards the road, they ran. Their destination, a beat-up white utility van parked at the edge of the access path. Mostly indistinct except for a large, almost faded red sketch of a sailfish on the side door panel, the paint chipped in places, the fish's eye a stark white circle that caught the moonlight.

Brian watched as they scrambled inside, the engine roaring to life with unseemly haste. The van's tires spun briefly on the loose gravel before it shot away, disappearing into the labyrinth of resort roads. Silence settled back over the beach. The waves continued their eternal rhythm. The palm trees swayed. It was as if nothing had happened at all.

Hours earlier, he had stumbled into the room, dropped face-first onto the bed, and passed out without even turning down the covers. Just days ago, he had been excitedly packing for this trip. Dinner reservations. Google maps downloaded. An absurd amount of SPF. He had even dug out the old Spanish phrasebook from his closet. He thought about the four years of high school Spanish, and this trip was finally going to be the test. He pictured himself ordering food, asking for directions, maybe even making someone laugh. His phone had dinged while he was folding swim trunks into the suitcase. A text from a number he always looked forward to seeing. He had smiled before he even opened it.

The messages came in quick succession. He remembered the feeling of the smile fading. The words blurred together, most of them lost

in the fog of shock. But one line remained sharp and clear, cutting through everything else: *I just can't do this anymore.*

No explanation. No fight. Just a quiet severing of something he thought was still alive. The plane ticket was non-refundable. The hard-won time off remained approved. And the thought of staying home in that apartment full of shared memories? Unbearable.

So, he came alone.

Now, staring out at the empty beach, at the dark patch of disturbed sand where the men had been digging, Brian tried to make sense of what he had just witnessed. Men shoveling sand and then hastily collecting equipment in the dead of night. Why the panic, the undignified scramble, the swift, almost clandestine departure? The questions hung in the humid air, unsatisfyingly puzzling.

He wondered if he should call the front desk. His hand reached out for the phone but stopped short. His mind just wasn't up to it. Not tonight. He dismissed the peculiar incident, not entirely convinced, but willing, for the moment, to surrender to the insistent call of sleep. He staggered back towards the bed and fell onto its comforting surface, almost exactly like he had just a few hours ago.