

Blood in the Water

Sawgrass Wars, Volume 1

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BLOOD IN THE WATER

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Written by Kurt Weichert.

"Every fortune in Dawber County was paid for twice—once in money, and once in blood."

—Johnny Malone

CHAPTER ONE

HILL 861

Vietnam, 1968

The bullet cracked over Kenny Gregory's head so closely that he felt its heat before he heard it.

He pressed his face deeper into the mud and tried to make himself smaller. Bamboo roots dug into his ribs. Blood seeped from somewhere beneath him, warm against his stomach, though he could no longer tell whether it belonged to him or one of the Marines scattered across the hillside.

The patrol had walked into the ambush less than a minute earlier.

It felt as if they had been dying there for hours.

Another burst of gunfire tore through the bamboo. Splinters rained across Kenny's helmet and shoulders. He kept both hands wrapped around his M16, but the weapon was pinned beneath him, useless unless he raised himself high enough to fire. Any movement would reveal his position.

A phosphorus grenade struck the ground near one of his Marines.

The explosion flashed white.

The young man's face seemed to ignite from within. His left cheek bubbled, burst, and peeled away from his skull as he stumbled through the smoke. He made a sound Kenny would carry with him for the rest of his life—a terrible, astonished cry, as if death had violated some agreement the boy believed he had made with the world.

The Marine fell and did not move again.

Kenny started toward him.

Enemy rounds hammered the ground between them, throwing dirt into Kenny's eyes and forcing him back into the shallow depression beneath the bamboo.

"Goddamn it," Kenny whispered.

He had been leading the patrol. Those boys had followed him onto the hill because he was supposed to know what he was doing.

Now most of them were dead.

Kenny forced himself to breathe through his nose. Slowly. Quietly. His heart pounded so violently that he became convinced the enemy could hear it through the ground.

Twenty feet ahead, another Marine lay on his side with both hands pressed against his belly. He was eighteen years old, a quiet kid from Ohio who carried a photograph of his high-school sweetheart inside his helmet. The bullet had opened him below the ribs. Blood pumped between his fingers each time he tried to breathe.

The boy looked toward Kenny.

Help me.

He did not speak the words. He did not have enough air left. But Kenny saw them form on his lips.

A North Vietnamese soldier emerged through the bamboo behind him.

He was scarcely more than a boy himself. Palm fronds had been woven into his khaki uniform, and strips of old tire rubber served as the soles of his shoes. An AK-47 hung from his shoulder. He carried a fixed bayonet in both hands.

Kenny tightened his grip on the M16.

The enemy soldier stood over the wounded Marine.

Kenny could rise and fire. He might kill the boy before the bayonet came down.

He might also expose himself to the other soldiers moving through the brush.

The wounded Marine found Kenny's eyes again.

Please.

Kenny did not move.

The bayonet plunged into the Marines chest.

His body convulsed once. Then the terror left his face.

Kenny remained frozen in the mud, hating the enemy soldier, hating himself, and hating God for allowing him to survive long enough to understand the difference between courage and suicide.

The young soldier withdrew the blade and wiped it on the dead Marine's trousers. He crouched and began searching the body. He collected ammunition, cigarettes, and a folded letter stained with blood. From one pocket he pulled a half-eaten Hershey bar melted inside its wrapper.

The boy stared at it as though he had discovered gold.

He raised the chocolate to his nose, inhaled, and smiled.

Then he took two hurried bites.

For a moment, he was not an enemy soldier. He was a hungry child tasting American chocolate in the middle of a war.

Then he stood and turned toward Kenny.

Kenny stopped breathing.

The soldier walked closer.

One step.

Then another.

Kenny eased his finger inside the trigger guard. Mud clogged the barrel of his rifle. If the weapon misfired, he would have no second chance.

The soldier stopped directly above him.

Kenny could see the chipped rubber beneath his shoes. He could smell sweat, smoke, and the chocolate on the boy's breath.

The soldier stared down into the depression.

Kenny was certain their eyes met.

After a moment, the boy lowered his rifle, unfastened his trousers, and began urinating into the hole.

Warm liquid splashed across Kenny's helmet, neck, and hands. It ran down his face and mixed with the mud and blood beneath him.

Humiliation burned through Kenny, followed by a wave of murderous rage. He imagined rising from the earth and driving his knife into the boy's throat.

Instead, he remained still.

Being mistaken for a dead man was better than becoming one.

The soldier finished, fastened his trousers, and disappeared through the bamboo while calling to the others.

Kenny released the breath trapped inside his chest.

Gunfire erupted farther down the hill.

This time it came in disciplined bursts.

American rifles.

The enemy answered from the tree line, and the entire hillside exploded. Machine-gun fire chewed through the bamboo. Helicopters thundered overhead, their door gunners pouring rounds into the jungle. Dirt, leaves, and shattered wood collapsed over Kenny.

A sharpened length of bamboo spun through the air and buried itself in his left thigh.

Kenny screamed.

Pain shot through his leg and into his spine. He grabbed the bamboo with both hands but stopped before pulling it free. The shaft might be slowing the bleeding. He had seen men kill themselves by removing whatever had punctured them.

Another explosion lifted the ground beneath him.

Then, as quickly as the shooting had begun, it moved farther up the hill.

Kenny lay beneath the debris and listened.

English voices carried through the smoke.

Marines shouted to one another as they secured what remained of the patrol's position. Someone called for a corpsman. Someone else began counting bodies.

Kenny tried to answer, but his throat had closed. All that emerged was a wet cough.

A Marine stepped through the smoke and stopped beside the body of the boy who had been bayoneted.

The sleeves had been torn from his fatigues, exposing the snake tattoo coiled around his right arm. A pack of Marlboro Reds rested beneath the leather band around his helmet. Written across the helmet in black marker were the words SORRY, CHARLIE.

A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth.

“Found one,” the Marine called. “KIA.”

Kenny would have recognized that voice anywhere.

Johnny Malone.

They had grown up together in Dawber County, gone to school together, hunted the same swamps, chased the same girls, and enlisted together. Johnny had been a clever, restless boy back home. In Vietnam, he had become something else—calmer when everyone around him panicked, more alive when death drew near.

Johnny studied the body, then surveyed the ruined hillside.

“Kenny Gregory!”

Kenny tried to answer. The effort produced another coughing fit.

Johnny spun toward the sound and raised his rifle.

Kenny coughed again.

Johnny lowered the weapon and ran toward him.

“Kenny?”

He dropped to his knees and dug through the fallen bamboo with his bare hands. Mud packed beneath his fingernails. When Kenny’s eyes appeared beneath the debris, Johnny broke into a grin.

“You are one sorry sight, Sporty.”

Kenny attempted to laugh but coughed instead.

Johnny cleared the bamboo from his shoulders and pulled him upright. The movement sent a blade of pain through Kenny’s injured leg.

“Easy,” Johnny said. “I’ve got you.”

Kenny sagged against him.

Johnny took in the mud, blood, and urine covering his friend. "You've really been through the shit."

"You don't know the half of it."

Johnny shouted over his shoulder. "Corpsman! I've got one alive!"

He handed Kenny his canteen.

Kenny drank too quickly, choked, and spat water across Johnny's shirt.

Johnny looked down at the dark stain. "Good to see you, too."

"I knew you'd come."

Johnny's smile faded into something more serious. "Dawber County boys stick together."

The words meant something there. They had meant something back home, too, but not like this.

A voice cut through the smoke.

"We're moving out! Malone, on the double!"

Sergeant Rodrigo Sanchez emerged from the bamboo with his rifle ready. Lean and hard-eyed, Sanchez had the permanent look of a man who expected trouble and was usually proven right.

Johnny glanced toward him. "Gregory's alive."

"I can see that."

"He needs a corpsman."

"We all need something. What we have is six enemy battalions moving around this hill."

Kenny stared at him. "Six battalions?"

"That's what intelligence says."

"Two thousand men," Kenny said.

Sanchez gave him a humorless smile. "Maybe intelligence counted wrong and there are only nineteen hundred."

Johnny slipped Kenny's arm over his shoulders. "Welcome to Vietnam."

The Americans began firing toward the tree line again.

Sanchez turned. "Scully commandeered a medevac bird. He's looking for somewhere to put it down."

Kenny nearly laughed. Thomas Scully would steal a helicopter from the Lord Himself if he believed one of his friends needed a ride.

"How far to the landing zone?" Johnny asked.

"Farther than I want to carry his ass."

"I can walk," Kenny said.

He tried placing weight on his wounded leg and nearly collapsed.

Johnny caught him. "That was convincing."

A hand slapped Johnny's shoulder.

He spun with his rifle raised.

"Easy," Kenny said. "You're liable to shoot one of us."

Johnny looked around the shattered jungle. "Right now, that might improve the odds."

Something moved near Kenny's boot.

Johnny drew his combat knife and drove it into the mud.

A yellow cobra twisted around the blade, its mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Johnny lifted it, inspected it, and flung it into the brush.

Kenny stared at him. "How did you see that?"

"I didn't."

"You just stabbed the ground?"

"Had a feeling."

"You're crazier than Timmy."

"No one is crazier than Timmy."

A rifle clicked in the darkness beyond them.

Johnny's expression changed.

"Down!"

The jungle erupted.

"Contact right!" Sanchez shouted.

The Marines returned fire. Johnny lowered Kenny behind a fallen tree, pulled a grenade from his web belt, and removed the pin with his teeth.

“They’ll hit us from the middle next.”

“How do you know?” Kenny asked.

“They think we’re as dumb as they are.”

Johnny hurled the grenade.

“Frag out!”

The explosion ripped through the vegetation. Men screamed beyond the smoke.

An enemy soldier rushed from the brush directly in front of them. Sanchez cut him down with a burst from his M16.

“Defend yourselves, Marines!”

More soldiers came through the bamboo.

Kenny raised his rifle and fired. One of them fell. Another reached him before he could fire again and seized the front of his fatigues.

The soldier drove a fist into Kenny’s jaw.

Kenny fell backward, dragging the smaller man with him. His injured leg struck the ground, and the bamboo shaft shifted inside the wound. White pain blinded him.

The enemy soldier wrapped both hands around Kenny’s throat.

Kenny punched him in the ribs. The man grunted but did not release him. Kenny struck his jaw, rolled his weight, and managed to throw him sideways.

A knife appeared in the soldier’s hand.

Kenny caught his wrist.

The blade hovered inches above Kenny’s face.

The boy attacking him was the same one who had stood over the wounded Marine. Chocolate remained smeared at the edge of his mouth.

The same boy who had urinated on him.

Kenny forced the knife away, but his strength was fading. The boy's face tightened with determination as the blade descended.

A pistol fired.

The soldier went limp and collapsed across Kenny.

Johnny stood behind him with an old Colt .45 extended in both hands.

Kenny shoved the body aside.

The boy landed on his back. His eyes remained open, fixed on the sky. Surprise still lingered on his young face.

Kenny stared at him.

He had imagined killing the boy. He had wanted it.

Now all he saw was a dead child with melted chocolate on his lips.

Johnny grabbed Kenny beneath the arms. "Don't look at him."

"I watched him kill one of mine."

"And now he's dead. Keep moving."

Sanchez appeared through the smoke. "Timmy! How are we looking behind us?"

Timmy Dawber emerged from the bamboo covered in blood. His eyes were wild, and his combat knife was red to the handle.

"Situation unchanged," Timmy said. "Still fucked up in the rear, but I think I discouraged them."

Kenny looked over him. "Good Lord, Timmy. How bad are you hit?"

Timmy glanced down at himself as if noticing the blood for the first time.

"This ain't mine."

"What happened?"

"Ran out of ammunition."

Timmy held up the knife.

For one brief second, Kenny did not recognize the boy he had known since childhood. Timmy had always been the most enthusiastic

among them—the first to volunteer, the first to fight, the first to laugh afterward. Something different stared out through his eyes now.

“Carved my way through,” Timmy said. “Too many to count.”

Sanchez pointed through the jungle. “Save the stories. We have a new landing zone. Scully’s bringing the bird in for Gregory and the other wounded.”

A distant rotor beat sounded beyond the hill.

Kenny had never heard anything so beautiful.

Timmy moved to one side of him and Johnny took the other. Together they lifted him.

“You boys don’t have to carry me,” Kenny said.

“Wasn’t asking permission,” Timmy replied.

Sanchez moved ahead, firing short bursts into the jungle. The remaining Marines formed around the wounded and pushed toward the landing zone.

Rounds snapped through the trees behind them.

Kenny felt Johnny’s grip tighten.

“We ain’t dying in this soup today, Ken.”

Kenny looked from Johnny to Timmy, then ahead to Sanchez cutting a path through the smoke.

They had come halfway around the world together. They had survived the jungle, the monsoon, the enemy, and themselves. Whatever waited beyond Vietnam, Kenny believed they would face it the same way.

Together.

The helicopter dropped through the smoke ahead of them, its blades bending the jungle beneath it.

At the controls, Scully held the wounded aircraft steady while enemy rounds punched holes through its metal skin.

Sanchez waved the men forward.

Johnny and Timmy carried Kenny toward the waiting bird. None of the Dawber County boys stayed behind.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SHARK

DAWBER COUNTY, FLORIDA, 2003

There was an old saying in Dawber County that a man had to live the way he could so he could die the way he wanted.

Alex Gregory hated that saying.

As far as he could tell, the people of Dawber County used it to excuse every bad decision they had ever made. They drank because they could. They fought because they could. They stole, lied, cheated, and slept with one another's wives because that was how they could live. Then, when the consequences arrived, usually escorted by a sheriff's deputy, a divorce lawyer, or an ambulance, they acted as though they had always intended to end up that way.

That stupid philosophy was why Alex found himself in a rickety blue skiff with Billy Dawber and Bones Malone, meandering up the southwest Florida coast in search of boat motors to steal.

The Gulf was calm that afternoon. Green-brown water rolled against the hull, reflecting a sun so bright it made Alex's eyes ache. The skiff's battered outboard coughed each time Billy pushed it faster, leaving a thin ribbon of gray smoke behind them.

Alex looked down at his reflection in the water.

Seventeen years old. Sunburned. Broke. Halfway to dropping out of high school and already engaged in a criminal enterprise too pathetic to qualify as organized crime.

His father would have been embarrassed.

Then again, Kenny Gregory had been in prison for most of Alex's childhood, so his opinion did not carry much weight.

Billy Dawber sat at the stern with one hand on the tiller. His blond hair had been bleached nearly white by the Florida sun. He wore a faded green fishing shirt, white shorts, and sneakers that had not been

white in years. A lump of chewing tobacco bulged beneath his lower lip.

Billy scanned the waterfront homes lining the canal ahead.

Most belonged to northerners who occupied them for only a few months each winter. Their storm shutters were closed. Their swimming pools sat beneath protective covers, and their expensive boats hung above the water on steel lifts.

To Billy, the empty homes represented opportunity.

To Alex, they represented people who had escaped Dawber County before they were ever unfortunate enough to be born there.

"The white place," Billy said.

Alex followed his gaze.

A three-story house stood at the mouth of the canal. A center-console fishing boat rested behind it with twin outboard motors mounted on the stern.

"Too big," Alex said.

"Motors ain't too big."

"The boat's too exposed. Anyone coming down the canal will see us."

Billy shifted the tobacco in his mouth. "Nobody's coming."

"That's what you said last time."

"We got away last time."

"We almost got arrested."

"Almost don't count."

"That should be printed on the Dawber County seal."

Billy smirked but did not take his eyes off the property.

Billy had been born into the closest thing Dawber County possessed to royalty. His family founded the county, built its first profitable businesses, controlled its politics, and eventually helped turn the surrounding swamps into one of the most efficient drug corridors in Florida.

Now Billy piloted a stolen-looking skiff toward Naples so the three of them could remove boat engines and sell them for a fraction of their value.

Royalty had suffered a considerable decline.

Billy's father, Timmy Dawber, had been one of the Marines from the old Dawber County brotherhood. Everyone said Timmy returned from Vietnam carrying a darkness he could never put down. He died when Billy was still a little boy, officially by his own hand.

Billy rarely spoke about him.

After Timmy's death, Billy had been raised by his uncle Bocephus and aunt Rose. Then Bo and most of Dawber County's criminal establishment were swept away in the federal raids of 1991. The government seized the money, boats, land, and businesses. What the government missed, lawyers and creditors devoured.

Billy grew up with the Dawber name but none of its power.

For a while, baseball had offered him a way out. He could hit a ball farther than anyone at Dawber County High School, and scouts had begun appearing behind the backstop to watch him. Then Billy destroyed his leg during the state championship.

One bad play ended his future.

He never complained about it.

That bothered Alex almost as much as if Billy had complained constantly. Billy carried his disappointments as though admitting they hurt would give them more power.

At the bow, Bones Malone paid no attention to either of them.

Bones wore a black Metallica T-shirt stretched across his massive shoulders, brown cargo shorts, white ankle socks, and gray sandals. A red deep-sea fishing rod rested in his hands, its line trailing behind the skiff.

The rod had belonged to his father.

So had the Colt .45 tucked into the back of Bones's shorts.

Johnny Malone disappeared in 1991, shortly before federal agents descended upon Dawber County and arrested almost everyone associated with its drug-smuggling empire. Some people said Johnny had been murdered by the Colombians. Others said he had stolen millions from Bo Dawber and fled the country. The most popular story—and the one most likely to get a man beaten senseless by Bones—was that Johnny had betrayed everyone and entered federal witness protection.

Bones had grown up fighting over those stories.

By the time he was twelve, he was larger than most grown men. By sixteen, he was a state wrestling champion. During his junior year, he put another student in a coma for suggesting that Florida State had a better football program than the University of Florida.

The boy had also said something about Johnny Malone.

No one repeated exactly what.

Alex had known Bones almost his entire life. Beneath the temper and size, Bones could be loyal, funny, and unexpectedly gentle. But there were places inside him no friend was allowed to enter.

Johnny Malone was the darkest of those places.

Alex glanced at the rod.

“Catch anything?”

Bones continued watching the line. “Not yet.”

“You know we’re not out here to fish.”

“I’m out here to fish.”

“We’re supposed to be making money.”

“You complained about stealing motors the whole way here.”

“Because stealing motors is stupid.”

Bones looked back. “Then why’d you come?”

“To stop you two from getting caught.”

Billy laughed. “You planned the last three jobs.”

“And each one taught me this is a waste of time.”

Bones returned his attention to the water. “Then swim home.”

Alex watched him for another moment.

Bones knew something.

Two weeks earlier, Alex had seen the map concealed behind the clothes in Bones's bedroom. Postcards had been pinned across it from Switzerland, Colombia, Panama, the Cayman Islands, and half a dozen American cities. None carried Johnny's name, but they had all been written in the same compact hand.

The latest card came from Miami.

Bones claimed they were from an old wrestling coach.

Alex had never known a high-school wrestling coach who traveled under the name Ed Dantés.

Billy pointed toward the canal. "First house on the right. That's the one."

Alex studied it. "The smaller boat?"

"The Yamaha on the back."

"That motor's bolted through the transom."

"I've got tools."

"You've always got tools. You never have a plan."

"My plan is to use the tools."

A high metallic whine rose above the skiff's engine.

The spool on Bones's fishing rod began turning so rapidly that it blurred.

Bones sat upright. "Got one!"

Alex closed his eyes. "Of course you do."

The rod bent toward the water.

Bones planted both feet against the inside of the hull and pulled. The muscles in his arms tightened beneath the sleeves of his shirt.

"This is a big one."

Billy looked over his shoulder. "How big?"

"Marlin big."

"There aren't any marlin this close to shore," Alex said.

Bones grinned. "There is now."

The fish pulled again, tilting the skiff.

"Slow us down!" Bones shouted.

Billy eased off the throttle.

"We have a motor to steal," Alex said.

"We'll steal it after I land this."

"You're not landing anything."

Bones struggled with the reel. "Turn us toward him."

Billy swung the skiff away from the canal.

Alex stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Helping."

"Why?"

"Because I want to see what he caught."

"He caught seaweed."

Bones glared at Alex. "Seaweed doesn't pull."

"A tire, then."

"I'm telling you, it's a marlin."

Alex watched the expensive homes slide away behind them.

The three of them had spent months traveling up and down the coast looking for engines they could remove without being seen. They had risked arrest, wasted fuel, skipped school, and earned almost nothing.

Now, when an unoccupied house and a valuable motor were directly in front of them, they were chasing a fish.

Alex began to laugh.

Billy looked at him. "What's funny?"

"This."

"What about it?"

"It's a metaphor."

Bones grunted as he pulled the rod upward. "Here we go."

Billy frowned. "A metaphor for what?"

"Our lives."

"I know what a metaphor is."

"I didn't say you didn't."

"You spelled it for me last time."

"Because you looked confused."

"I wasn't confused."

"You always look confused," Bones said.

Billy pointed at him. "You stay out of this."

Alex gestured toward the open Gulf. "We're broke. We have no future. We finally agree to make money, even if we pick the dumbest possible way to do it, and then Bones drags us away because he thinks he hooked a marlin."

Bones stared at him. "How is that our lives?"

"Because every time we start moving toward something, one of you jerks us in another direction."

Billy shook his head. "You didn't want to steal the motor."

"That isn't the point."

"It feels like the point."

"The point is that we need a real plan."

Bones pulled the rod again. "I have a real fish."

"You don't know what you have."

"I know it's big."

"And what are you going to do with it?"

"Put it on my wall."

"Which wall? Your mother's trailer barely has room for you."

Bones's grin disappeared.

Alex knew he should stop.

He did not.

"Maybe you can hang it between the Dukes of Hazard poster and your daddy's Budweiser mugs."

Billy rose from the stern.

"Alex."

Bones's face reddened, but his voice became quiet.

"You'd best watch yourself."

The quieter Bones spoke, the more dangerous he became.

Alex leaned toward him. "How much more time are you going to waste before you realize we need to work together?"

"This fish is coming into the boat."

"This isn't about the fish."

"It is to me."

"That's the problem."

The line cut across the surface of the water. Something large rolled beneath it, flashing gray.

Billy pointed. "There!"

Bones fought the reel. "I told you!"

"It isn't a marlin," Alex said.

"You jealous?"

"Of what? Whatever garbage you hooked?"

The fish thrashed again.

Billy left the tiller and moved toward the bow. "Bring him up."

"Hold the line," Bones said.

Billy grabbed it with both hands.

The skiff rocked beneath their weight.

Alex remained seated.

Billy nudged him with his foot. "Help us."

"This is how people lose fingers."

"Get up."

Alex reluctantly stood and grabbed a pair of thick pliers from the open tackle box. He took hold of the line above Billy's hands.

Bones pulled.

The creature broke the surface.

A blunt gray head rose beside the skiff, followed by a black eye and an open mouth filled with serrated teeth.

Billy yelled and released the line.

The six-foot bull shark twisted in the water, snapping inches from his arm.

Alex shoved Billy backward.

"Cut it!" Billy shouted.

Alex moved toward the gunwale with the pliers.

Bones held the rod against his chest. "Wait!"

"It almost took Billy's arm."

"We can get it in."

"In what? This boat?"

"We'll have shark steaks."

"It'll have us."

The shark struck the side of the skiff. Its tail churned the water, drenching them.

Alex reached for the line.

A pistol fired beside his head.

The concussion knocked the breath from him.

For one impossible second, Alex believed he had been shot. He dropped the pliers and stumbled backward, searching his chest and stomach for blood.

Billy ducked behind the center bench.

Bones stood with Johnny's Colt .45 extended over the water.

The shark hung lifelessly from the line, blood spreading from a hole in its head.

Smoke curled from the pistol.

Alex looked at the gun, then at Bones.

"You shot at me."

"I shot the shark."

"The bullet passed my hand!"

"I knew where you were."

"You didn't know where the shark was until I pulled it out of the water!"

Bones lowered the pistol. His anger vanished when he saw the terror on Alex's face.

"Al—"

The fishing rod slipped from beneath his arm.

Bones grabbed for it too late.

The rod struck the gunwale and disappeared into the Gulf. The dead shark sank after it, dragging the line into the green water.

The three boys watched until both vanished.

Bones slowly tucked the Colt into the back of his shorts.

Alex's hands began shaking.

"You asshole."

"I'm sorry."

"You almost killed me."

"I wasn't gonna hit you."

"You fired a forty-five-caliber pistol past my wrist!"

Billy approached and inspected Alex. "You're not hit."

"No thanks to him."

"I said I was sorry," Bones repeated.

Alex shoved him.

Bones barely moved.

"Where's your shark?"

Bones looked toward the water. "Lost it."

"And your father's rod?"

"That, too."

"All that and you lost everything."

Bones's regret hardened into anger.

"Yeah," he said. "It's a metaphor."

Alex lunged toward him.

Billy forced himself between them.

"Sit down. Both of you."

"Get out of my way," Alex said.

"Sit down before the cops hear another shot and find us."

Billy returned to the stern, restarted the engine, and pushed the skiff to its highest speed. The bow rose as they fled the Naples coast.

Alex sat on the center bench, still searching his body for a wound that was not there.

Bones lowered himself at the bow and buried his face in his hands.
“I’m sorry, guys.”

Billy spat tobacco juice over the side. “Thanks for nothing.”

The sun had begun its descent toward the Gulf, casting a path of orange light across the water. The homes and boat lifts receded behind them.

Another wasted day.

More gasoline they could not afford.

Another narrow escape with nothing to show for it.

Alex looked at Billy and Bones.

“We can’t keep doing this.”

Neither answered.

“I’m serious. We’re going nowhere.”

Billy kept his attention on the water ahead. “You have a better idea?”

“Yes.”

Bones lifted his head.

Alex had intended to approach the subject carefully. What remained of his caution had disappeared with the gunshot.

“We find Johnny Malone’s money.”

Bones’s expression went still.

Billy laughed once. “That again?”

“It exists.”

“It’s a Dawber County story.”

“So is Smiley, but that gator ate Bobby Boone.”

“That doesn’t prove Bobby found any money.”

“No. But I found what he was using to look for it.”

Billy glanced back. “What?”

“A map.”

Bones stared at Alex.

“What kind of map?”

"Hand-drawn. The swamps, fishing holes, old landing sites. Most of it's written in code."

"Where'd you get it?" Billy asked.

"Bobby left it at the boathouse."

"You've had this map and didn't tell us?"

"I'm telling you now."

Billy shook his head. "If Bobby had a map to five million dollars, why didn't he find it?"

"Maybe he found the wrong thing first."

"Smiley."

"Exactly."

Billy considered that.

Bones did not.

"Leave my daddy out of it."

"We can't."

"You can."

"Kenny and Johnny made the map."

"You don't know that."

"I recognize my father's writing. The rest has to be Johnny's."

Bones turned away.

Alex leaned forward. "You said Johnny was alive."

"I never said that."

"You did at Mary Chris's funeral."

"I said I didn't believe he was dead."

"That's the same thing."

"No, it ain't."

"What about Ed Dantés?"

Bones looked back sharply.

Billy frowned. "Who's that?"

Alex watched Bones. "Ask him."

Bones rose.

The skiff shifted beneath his weight.

"You went through my room?"

"I saw the postcards."

"You had no right."

"Postcards from all over the world. Same handwriting. Then a birthday card from Miami telling you to come see him before you turn eighteen."

Billy stared at Bones. "Is that true?"

Bones said nothing.

Alex pressed harder. "Your father is alive. You know how to reach him, and you've been letting us rot while he sits on millions."

Bones stepped toward him.

"Don't."

"You almost shot me. I'm done protecting your feelings."

"I mean it, Alex."

"We are the sons of the men who earned that money. Billy's family lost everything. My father lost everything. Your father took the money and disappeared. That makes it ours."

"My daddy doesn't owe you anything."

"He owes you."

The words stopped Bones.

For an instant, something wounded appeared behind his eyes.

Alex saw it and continued.

"He left you and your mother here to take the blame for what he did. Everybody in Dawber County grew up hating you because of him. If he's alive, he owes you an explanation."

Bones's hands curled into fists.

Billy slowed the skiff as Widow's Walk marina appeared through the evening haze.

The old marina leaned over the water like something too tired to fall. Several slips had collapsed. The bait shop had been boarded up for years. At the far end stood the weathered boathouse where Alex lived alone.

Billy guided the skiff into the nearest usable slip.

"Help me tie up," he said.

Bones jumped onto the dock with the bowline.

Alex collected the cooler and climbed after him.

"You know I'm right," Alex said.

Bones tied the line around a cleat.

"We find Johnny, we find the money. Then none of us has to stay here."

Billy covered the skiff with a black tarp.

Bones approached Alex.

For a moment, Alex believed he had won.

Bones punched him in the left eye.

The world flashed white.

Alex flew backward and struck the dock hard enough to shake it. The cooler toppled beside him, spilling warm beer and melted ice across the planks.

Bones stood over him.

"Stay out of my room. Stay out of my family. And don't ever tell me what my daddy owes me."

He walked away.

Billy hurried toward Alex and offered his hand.

Alex slapped it aside.

"A lot of help you were."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"He listens to you."

"No, he doesn't."

"You could've tried."

Billy looked down the road where Bones had disappeared.

"You knew what was going to happen."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No. It makes it Bones."

Alex struggled to his feet. His eye was already swelling.

Billy picked up the cooler.

"Forget the money, Al."

"I can't."

"It'll get us killed."

"So will stealing boat motors if Bones keeps bringing a gun."

Billy set the cooler near the boathouse door.

"Go put some ice on your face."

"The ice is all over the dock."

"Then use a beer."

Billy returned to the skiff.

Alex watched him untie the stern line and push away from Widow's Walk.

The marina settled into silence.

Alex touched his eye and winced.

Bones could refuse. Billy could pretend the money was a myth. Pastor Bubs could preach about sin, and Forbee Battenberg could leave Alex to rot in a collapsing boathouse.

None of it mattered.

The map was real.

Johnny Malone was alive.

And if Bones would not help Alex find him, Alex knew the one man who might.

Kenny Gregory was getting out of prison in three weeks.

Alex had not spoken to his father in six years. It was time to pay him a visit.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MAP

REFORM CORRECTIONAL CORPORATION, FLORIDA
Kenny Gregory had survived twelve years in prison by allowing dangerous men to underestimate him.

At five feet six inches tall, he did not look especially threatening. His once-black hair had turned mostly gray and remained slicked behind his ears in the same style he had worn when federal agents arrested him in 1991. His handlebar mustache had also gone gray, and the years had carved deep lines around eyes that still carried a trace of mischief.

New prisoners saw a short, aging redneck from a forgotten Florida county.

The ones who had been there awhile knew better.

Kenny spoke conversational Spanish, understood enough Russian to recognize when someone was plotting against him, and could break a man's jaw with his left hand. He knew which prisoners wanted cigarettes, which guards wanted money, and which men could be turned against one another with the right insult whispered at the right time.

Prison was not so different from Dawber County.

The walls were higher, but the politics were simpler.

As Kenny walked down the corridor, a pair of hands shot through the bars of a nearby cell.

"Chaparrito!"

Kenny stopped.

A bald Latin Kings member in his twenties grinned through the bars. Kenny called him Hot Tamale because the young man's actual name had never seemed important enough to remember.

"You still talking?" Kenny asked. "I thought I broke your jaw."

Hot Tamale gripped the bars. "I'm gonna kill you before you get out."

Kenny stepped closer. "You've got three weeks."

"Plenty of time."

"You've been promising for six months. I'm starting to think you're not serious about our relationship."

The prisoner hissed and reached farther through the bars.

Kenny remained just outside his grasp.

"Come closer."

"I would, but people might talk."

The correctional officer escorting Kenny struck the bars with his baton.

"Keep moving."

Kenny looked over his shoulder. Michael Greaves was a thick-bodied man with a military crew cut, an overgrown mustache, and the humorless expression of someone who had spent his entire life waiting for a uniform to grant him authority.

Kenny called him Dick.

Not to his face every time.

Only often enough to keep their relationship honest.

Hot Tamale rattled the door. "My people are gonna get you, Gregory!"

Kenny resumed walking. "Your people couldn't get laid in a monkey whorehouse with a fistful of bananas."

Hot Tamale shouted after him in Spanish.

Kenny answered without turning.

The shouting stopped.

Greaves looked at him. "What'd you say?"

"I complimented his mother."

"You think you're funny?"

"I know I am."

Greaves jabbed the baton into Kenny's stomach.

Pain folded him forward.

Hot Tamale cheered from the cell.

Greaves leaned close. "You think because you're getting out that you own this place?"

Kenny struggled to breathe. "Three weeks."

"What?"

"I'm getting out in three weeks. Not someday. Thought accuracy might be important to a professional like you."

Greaves raised the baton again.

Kenny lifted both hands. "I surrender to your superior intellect."

"You're still mine until you walk through that gate."

"I was hoping we could stay friends afterward."

Greaves shoved him down the corridor.

Kenny smiled as he walked, but his mind remained fixed on his release.

Three weeks.

He had repeated that number every morning for the last year. Three weeks until he could stand beneath an open sky without razor wire cutting it into pieces. Three weeks until he could return to Widow's Walk. Three weeks until he could find Alex and try to explain twelve years of silence.

Kenny did not expect forgiveness.

He would settle for the chance to speak.

"Through here," Greaves said.

He opened the door to the visitors' room.

A wall of reinforced glass divided the space. Metal stools had been bolted to the floor on each side, with gray telephones mounted beneath the windows.

Kenny expected to see Deon Childress, his attorney. Deon had promised to check on Kenny's release paperwork and investigate why the prison had suddenly begun recording disciplinary violations that had never occurred.

Instead, a thin teenager with an injured left eye sat on the other side of the glass.

Kenny stopped.

For one strange moment, the room seemed to tilt.

Alex had been eleven the last time Kenny saw him. Mary Chris had still been alive then, and Kenny could still persuade himself that serving his sentence was something happening to him rather than something he had done to them.

The boy behind the glass was almost a man.

Messy brown hair fell across his forehead. His face was narrow, his clothes worn, and a dark bruise had swollen his left eye nearly shut. But Kenny recognized Mary Chris in the shape of his mouth and the way he stared without blinking whenever he was angry.

Kenny suddenly understood how much time had been taken from them.

Greaves nudged him with the baton.

“Move.”

Kenny approached the glass and sat.

Alex picked up the telephone.

Kenny lifted the receiver on his side.

He had imagined this moment countless times. In every version, he knew what to say.

Now his mind went blank.

His eyes settled on the bruise.

“I hope the other guy looks worse.”

Alex’s expression hardened.

“Six years, and that’s the first thing you say to me?”

Kenny regretted the words immediately.

“Well, I—”

“You always did have a way with words, Kenny.”

The use of his name hurt more than Kenny expected.

“What happened to your eye?”

“Nothing.”

“That doesn’t look like nothing.”

"It's handled."

"Who hit you?"

Alex leaned back. "You planning to do something about it from there?"

Kenny looked at the glass separating them.

"No," he said quietly. "I guess I'm not."

Alex's anger shifted for a moment. He had expected an argument and seemed uncertain what to do with an admission.

Kenny attempted to recover.

"Where's Bobby?"

"Dead."

The word landed harder than Greaves's baton.

Kenny stared at him. "What?"

"Bobby Boone is dead."

"When?"

"A few weeks ago."

"How?"

"They found his boat drifting in the swamp. Then they found his hat."

Alex paused.

"And his right arm."

Kenny's hand tightened around the telephone.

"What happened to the rest of him?"

"Wildlife officers cut open Smiley."

Kenny closed his eyes.

Everyone in Dawber County knew Smiley, the ancient alligator with the scarred snout and crooked teeth. People had been blaming unexplained disappearances on that animal for decades. Most of the stories were nonsense.

Apparently, Bobby Boone was not.

"Why wasn't I told?"

Alex shrugged. "Who was supposed to tell you?"

"Bobby was supposed to be looking after you."

"He wasn't very good at it."

"What about your grandparents?"

"Which ones?"

"The Battenbergs."

Alex laughed without humor. "Forbee hasn't spoken to me in months."

"He's your grandfather."

"He remembers that when it's useful."

"Where are you living?"

"The boathouse."

"With who?"

"By myself."

Kenny stared at him. "You're seventeen."

"Almost eighteen."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer I've got."

"What about school?"

"What about it?"

"Are you going?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"I didn't come here to discuss my attendance."

Kenny felt anger rise, followed immediately by shame. He had no right to demand that Alex explain his life. Kenny had surrendered that authority each day he remained behind bars.

He softened his voice.

"Are you eating?"

Alex's jaw tightened. "I'm not a dog you left tied behind the house."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know that."

The answer stopped Alex again.

Kenny placed his free hand on the metal counter.

"I know I wasn't there."

"You went to prison."

"I remember."

"Ma got sick while you were in here."

Kenny looked down.

"They would've found the cancer sooner if we'd had decent insurance," Alex continued. "But we didn't. We didn't have money for much of anything after the government took it."

"Alex—"

"By the time the doctors found it, there wasn't anything they could do."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

Kenny looked up.

"I was there when she died," Alex said. "You weren't."

The visitors' room seemed to disappear around them.

Kenny remembered Mary Chris Battenberg as she had been when they met: barefoot at a county fair, holding her expensive shoes in one hand and laughing at something Kenny could no longer remember. She had been born into wealth and married him knowing her father would disown her for it.

Kenny had promised to give her a better life.

Instead, he gave her Widow's Walk, federal agents, poverty, and a husband she could visit only after passing through metal detectors.

"I loved your mother."

"Then you should've stayed out of prison."

Kenny had no defense.

Alex reached beneath his shirt and removed a folded sheet of paper.

"I came because of this."

He pressed it against the glass.

Kenny recognized the lines before he could make out the writing.
The map.

His hand struck the window.

“Put that down.”

Greaves looked toward them from across the room.

Alex did not move.

“Where did you get it?” Kenny whispered.

“Bobby’s things.”

“Put it away.”

“You recognize it.”

“Alex.”

“Who made it?”

Kenny glanced toward Greaves.

The guard had begun walking closer.

“Where did Bobby keep that?”

“At the boathouse.”

“Who else has seen it?”

“No one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Bones and Billy know it exists. They haven’t seen it.”

Kenny pressed his hand against the glass, trying to cover the paper.

Greaves struck the counter with his baton.

“Hands off the window.”

Kenny pulled back.

Alex lowered the map but kept it visible.

“I can’t read the code.”

“Good.”

“You and Johnny Malone made it.”

Kenny’s eyes moved toward the camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling.

Every word was being recorded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

"You almost broke the glass trying to hide it."

"You need to forget you found that."

"Five million dollars is difficult to forget."

Greaves stopped behind Kenny.

Kenny kept his voice low. "You don't understand what you have."

"That's why I'm here."

"Some things are dangerous even when you don't understand them."

"Everything in Dawber County is dangerous. At least this might be worth something."

Kenny saw himself in the boy then—not merely in his features, but in the certainty that intelligence could protect him from consequences. Kenny had once believed the same thing.

Johnny Malone had, too.

"Listen to me. You take that map back to the boathouse and hide it."

"Where's the money?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Can't or won't?"

"Both."

"Then tell me how to find Johnny."

Kenny's heart lurched.

He looked toward the camera again.

"Johnny's dead."

"No, he isn't."

"You don't know that."

"Bones does."

"What did Bones say?"

"That he believes Johnny is alive."

Kenny studied his son.

Alex was holding something back. Kenny could tell by the slight lift of his chin. He had always done that as a child when he possessed information he wanted someone else to ask about.

Kenny refused to give him the satisfaction.

Instead, he leaned toward the receiver.

"Have you spoken with the pastor?"

"Bubs?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"Your situation."

Alex glanced at the map.

"My financial situation?"

Kenny held his gaze. "Pastor Bubs understands how difficult financial times can be."

"You want me to ask a bankrupt church for money?"

"I want you to speak to him."

"Why?"

"Because I'm your father and I'm telling you to."

Alex smiled coldly. "That argument might've worked six years ago."

Kenny forced himself not to react.

"Talk to Bubs. Show him nothing. Tell him only that I sent you."

Alex folded the map and returned it beneath his shirt.

"All right."

"And stay away from Johnny Malone."

"You just said he was dead."

"Then staying away should be easy."

Greaves reached over Kenny's shoulder and pressed the hook beneath the telephone, disconnecting the call.

"Time."

Kenny turned. "We just started."

"Visit's over."

"That's my son."

"I don't care if he's the governor."

Kenny picked up the receiver again, but the line was dead.

Alex remained seated behind the glass.

Kenny placed his hand against it.

Greaves lifted the baton.

"I said hands off."

Kenny lowered it.

He looked at Alex and spoke loudly enough to be heard through the glass.

"I'm getting out in three weeks."

Alex stood.

"We can start over," Kenny said.

His son stared at him for a long moment.

"I'm not interested in starting over."

He turned toward the exit.

"I love you," Kenny called.

Alex stopped but did not look back.

Then he walked out of the room.

Greaves seized Kenny's shoulder.

Kenny twisted free. "All right, Dick."

The guard smiled.

"What did you call me?"

Kenny immediately understood.

Greaves had been waiting for an excuse.

"I said all right."

"You threatened me."

"I did no such thing."

Greaves shoved him against the counter.

Two additional guards entered through the door.

Kenny raised his hands.

"What is this?"

"Inmate Gregory became aggressive during his visit," Greaves announced. "Threatened a correctional officer."

"That's a lie."

"Take him to isolation."

Panic moved through Kenny before either guard touched him.

"No."

Greaves's smile widened.

Kenny backed against the glass.

"My release is in three weeks."

"Should've thought about that before threatening staff."

"I want my attorney."

"You can want anything you like."

"Get Deon Childress."

The guards grabbed his arms.

Kenny resisted.

"Deon is my lawyer! You call him now!"

Greaves drove the baton into Kenny's ribs.

The guards dragged him from the room.

On the other side of the glass, the empty stool where Alex had been sitting continued to face him.

Warden Vern Kinder watched the recording for the third time.

He sat in the prison control room with his jacket draped over the back of his chair and his tie loosened beneath an open collar. His large square glasses gave him the harmless appearance of an insurance salesman or a high-school principal.

The appearance had served him well.

On the monitor, Alex unfolded the map and pressed it against the visitors' glass.

Kinder paused the recording.

"Magnify that."

Waylon Wiggins sat at the adjacent console in his correctional uniform, a can of Budweiser concealed between his boots.

"The camera resolution ain't good enough."

"Try."

Waylon enlarged the image.

The map dissolved into gray squares.

Kinder leaned closer. He could make out waterways, several handwritten markings, and what appeared to be a coded set of numbers.

"That boy has it."

"Has what?"

"What do you think?"

Waylon looked at the screen. "Could be a fishing map."

"Bobby Boone died looking for something in those waters."

"Smiley ate him."

"Smiley didn't draw that."

Kinder resumed the recording.

Kenny told Alex to speak with Pastor Bubs.

Kinder stopped it again.

"The pastor."

Waylon nodded slowly. "Bubs has been around forever."

"He was close to Malone."

"Everybody was close to Malone until the arrests."

Kinder removed his glasses and cleaned them with the end of his tie.

For years, rumors of Johnny Malone's missing fortune had circulated through the prison. Most inmates treated the five million dollars like a ghost story. Kinder did not believe in ghosts, but he believed in men hiding money.

He also believed Kenny Gregory knew where it was.

"What do you want me to do?" Waylon asked.

"Keep Gregory in isolation."

"How long?"

"Until he tells us what the map means."

"His release date is close."

Kinder replaced his glasses.

"Then we don't have much time."

"Department of Corrections might ask why we put him in the box."

"The company will explain that an unstable inmate threatened staff."

"What about the kid?"

Kinder watched Alex leave the visitors' room.

"Call Trent."

"He's following the lawyer."

"He can follow two people."

Waylon reached for the telephone.

"And Waylon?"

"Yeah?"

"Find out everything you can about Pastor Bubs."

The isolation cell was smaller than Kenny remembered.

White concrete walls surrounded a steel cot and a combination sink and toilet. There was no window. The overhead light remained on day and night, flattening time into one endless moment.

The guards threw Kenny inside.

Greaves stood in the doorway.

"One way or another, you're going to tell us where Malone put that money."

Kenny rubbed his ribs. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're a terrible liar."

"And you're a terrible person. Yet here we are, both doing our best."

Greaves's smile disappeared.

"We can keep you in here past your release date."

"No, you can't."

"I can write a report saying you attacked me. Warden can recommend charges. Company lawyers can keep you tied up for months."

Kenny looked at the walls.

They seemed to be moving inward already.

Greaves noticed.

“You don’t like small places, do you?”

Kenny forced himself to smile. “I’ve lived in your head for years. Nothing’s smaller than that.”

Greaves slammed the door.

The lock engaged.

Kenny stood alone beneath the fluorescent light.

His breathing quickened.

The walls lost their shape. White concrete became wet earth. The hum of the light became helicopters and machine guns. He smelled mud, blood, bamboo, and the warm urine of the enemy soldier standing above his hiding place.

Kenny pressed both hands against the sides of his head.

“This isn’t Vietnam.”

His voice sounded distant.

He sat on the cot and drew his knees toward his chest.

“This isn’t the hill.”

The room continued shrinking.

Kenny closed his eyes and tried the breathing exercises the prison psychologist had taught him. In through the nose. Hold. Out through the mouth.

His thoughts returned to Alex.

The bruised eye. The anger. Mary Chris’s death. The map pressed against the glass.

Someone had already hurt his son.

Now Alex was chasing Johnny Malone and five million dollars through the same swamp that had swallowed Bobby Boone.

Kenny rocked forward and backward on the cot.

He had three weeks to survive the prison.

Alex might not have three weeks outside it.

Kenny opened his eyes and stared at the door.

“Get me Deon Childress!” he shouted. “I want my lawyer!”

No one answered.

Kenny struck the door with both fists.

“Do you hear me? Get me my damned lawyer!”

His voice echoed through the isolation wing.

Then even the echo died, leaving him alone with the walls.

CHAPTER FOUR

GETHSEMANE

The First Baptist Church of Dawber County looked as tired as the people who worshipped there.

Its white paint had faded to gray. Several shutters hung crooked beside windows clouded by years of heat and rain. A blue tarp covered part of the roof where the shingles had surrendered during the last storm, and the wooden cross above the steeple leaned slightly east, as though even Christ had grown weary of standing upright in Dawber County.

Pastor Bubs stood at the bottom of the church steps and watched Deon Childress place a folder of bankruptcy documents inside his Mercedes.

Deon had arrived wearing a tailored tan suit, polished shoes, and a watch worth more than the church had collected in offerings during the previous year. He carried his success naturally, without apology or arrogance. That made Bubs proud.

There had been a time when Deon owned nothing that had not first belonged to someone else.

Bubs and Millie took him in after his father murdered his mother. Deon had been a frightened boy then, too angry to pray and too intelligent to believe that adults knew what they were doing. He slept in a small room behind the church office and kept a baseball bat beneath his bed.

Now he was an Ivy League attorney with a home in Miami and clients whose names appeared in newspapers.

To Bubs, he remained Brother Deon.

"I'll take care of the filing," Deon said. "You and Mama Millie won't have to go to court unless the trustee requests it."

Bubs nodded. "I appreciate that."

"You shouldn't have waited this long."

"I was hoping the Lord would provide another solution."

Deon closed the car door. "Sometimes the Lord provides bankruptcy attorneys."

Bubs smiled. "He does work in mysterious ways."

"I'm serious. The church is months behind on the mortgage. The roof needs replacing, the insurance is about to lapse, and you've been paying the electric bill with credit cards."

"Millie has always preferred candlelight."

"Pastor."

"I hear you."

Deon removed his sunglasses.

"You can't save Gethsemane by pretending the numbers will change."

Bubs looked across the property.

The church stood on land his wife's family had called Gethsemane for generations. The name came from the garden where Christ prayed on the night before His crucifixion, asking that the cup of suffering be taken from Him before accepting that it would not.

Bubs had always considered it an appropriate name for any piece of ground in Dawber County.

The property stretched from the gravel road to a creek at the edge of the swamp. Live oaks surrounded the church, their limbs heavy with Spanish moss. Beyond them stood the fellowship hall, a small parsonage, and an old storage building that had not been opened in years.

The congregation once filled every pew on Sunday mornings.

Now entire rows remained empty.

When the federal agents dismantled the smuggling empire in 1991, they did more than arrest criminals. They removed the industry that had quietly supported nearly every family in the county. Fishing boats stopped running. Mechanics closed their garages. Restaurants emptied. Those who could leave moved to Fort Myers, Tampa, or farther north.

Those who remained brought less money to church because they had less money to give.

Bubs had spent twelve years watching Dawber County die one family at a time.

"Millie and I will manage," he said.

"You always say that."

"We always do."

Deon studied him. "Managing isn't the same as living."

A hammer struck the church roof.

Both men looked up.

Billy Dawber leaned over the edge with a tool belt hanging around his waist.

"Everything all right down there?"

"Just fine, Brother William," Bubs called. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Your roof ain't."

"That's why you're up there."

Billy shook his head and returned to work.

Eileen Scully stepped out of the church carrying a pitcher of iced tea. Her red hair was tied back, and freckles covered the bridge of her nose. She looked up at Billy.

"Mama Millie is heating the ribs."

Billy immediately leaned over the edge again. "What kind?"

"The same kind she made Sunday."

"I might stay for lunch."

Bubs glanced at Deon. "Young love."

Deon smiled. "Does Billy know?"

"I don't believe either one of them knows."

"I think Eileen knows."

"Women usually do."

Eileen noticed Deon and raised the pitcher. "You sure you won't stay?"

"My wife has me on a diet."

"Mama Millie doesn't recognize diets."

"That's why I have to leave before she sees me."

Deon put on his sunglasses.

He hugged Bubs, holding him longer than either man expected.

"You call if Kinder gives you any trouble about Kenny."

Bubs drew back. "Why would the warden give me trouble?"

"Because Kenny listed you as an emergency contact years ago, and his release is coming up."

Bubs's expression remained calm.

"That shouldn't concern Warden Kinder."

"No," Deon said. "It shouldn't."

The two men understood that the statement did not mean it wouldn't.

Deon entered his Mercedes and started the engine.

"Take care of yourselves," he said through the open window.

"Go with God, son."

Deon drove down the gravel road, passing beneath the wooden sign that read WELCOME TO GETHSEMANE.

Bubs watched until the car disappeared.

Behind him, Eileen called Billy to lunch.

The hammering stopped.

For a moment, Gethsemane became quiet.

Then another engine roared beyond the trees.

A black Chevrolet Caprice came around the bend far too quickly, throwing gravel and dust across the road.

Bubs stepped into its path and raised both hands.

The car skidded sideways.

Its front bumper stopped several feet from him.

Alex Gregory leaned through the open driver's window.

"You trying to get killed?"

"You're the one driving like the devil is collecting rent."

"I saw you."

"Then why did you nearly run me over?"

"I thought you'd move."

"At my age, moving is a deliberate process."

Alex glanced toward the church. "I need to talk to you."

Bubs approached the window.

The boy's left eye had swollen purple and black. He looked as though he had not slept.

"What happened to your face?"

"Fell."

"On what?"

"A fist-shaped rock."

"Whose fist?"

"It doesn't matter."

Bubs noticed a plastic bag of marijuana on the passenger seat.

He opened the door, picked up the bag, and placed it on the floor before sitting.

Alex stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Getting into your car."

"I can see that."

"Park beside the church."

"I'm not staying."

"Mama Millie made ribs."

"I didn't come to eat."

"You look like you haven't eaten since Easter."

"I came to talk."

"We can talk inside."

Alex pulled the gearshift into drive. "I'm not going into church."

Bubs closed the door. "That is between you and God. Parking is between you and me."

Alex accelerated toward the gravel lot.

"When did you last sleep?" Bubs asked.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"At this rate, that should be Thursday."

Alex parked beneath an oak tree but kept the engine running.

"I'm not here for a sermon."

"That's fortunate. I usually require people to sit still for those."

"I don't believe in organized religion."

"You don't believe in organized anything."

"I'm a Deist."

Bubs looked at him.

"I read about it."

"In what?"

"That John Adams book."

"John Adams was not a Deist."

"Maybe it was Thomas Jefferson."

"Thomas Paine would be a better example."

"That's who I meant."

"You should read the Bible."

"If I'm a Deist, why would I read the Bible?"

"Because you clearly need help selecting a religion."

Alex turned off the engine.

Bubs opened the door.

"Hold on."

The urgency in Alex's voice caused him to stop.

"I saw Kenny."

Bubs slowly closed the door again.

"How was he?"

"In prison."

"That wasn't my question."

"He looks old."

"Twelve years will do that."

"He's getting out in three weeks."

"So I've heard."

"He told me to come here."

Bubs's fingers tightened around the brim of his straw hat.

"What did he say?"

"That you understand difficult financial times."

Bubs glanced toward the church.

The roof, the bankruptcy papers, and the attorney's Mercedes disappearing down the road made the statement seem almost comical.

"Your father always possessed a peculiar sense of humor."

"He wasn't joking."

"No?"

"I showed him something."

"What?"

Alex studied Bubs before answering.

"A map."

Bubs did not move.

"What kind of map?"

"The swamps around Dawber County."

"There are many maps of the swamps."

"Not like this one."

Alex reached beneath his shirt.

Bubs caught his wrist.

"Don't."

Alex smiled.

That smile told Bubs he had already made a mistake.

"You don't even know what I'm reaching for."

"I know you shouldn't be pulling things out of your clothes in front of a church."

"It's paper, Pastor."

"Then leave it where it is."

Alex withdrew his hand.

"Kenny recognized it."

"Kenny recognizes many things he should forget."

"It has his writing on it. Someone else's, too."

Bubs looked through the windshield at the church.

Billy had climbed down from the roof and was speaking with Eileen near the fellowship hall. Millie stood in the doorway holding a tray covered in aluminum foil.

They appeared ordinary.

In Dawber County, ordinary was usually an illusion maintained by people who knew better.

"Who have you shown?" Bubs asked.

"No one."

"Keep it that way."

"You recognize it, too."

"I recognize trouble when it parks beneath my tree."

"Where is the money?"

Bubs turned toward him.

"What money?"

"Johnny Malone's five million dollars."

The name filled the car.

Alex watched every movement in the pastor's face.

Bubs had spent years sitting beside dying men, counseling convicts, negotiating with smugglers, and surviving interrogations in a North Vietnamese prison camp. He knew how to control his expression.

The boy still saw something.

"That money is a legend," Bubs said.

"So is the devil."

"The devil has better documentation."

"Kenny sent me to you."

"Your father sent you to speak with me. That doesn't mean I have millions of dollars."

"Do you?"

"If I had millions, do you think Deon would be filing bankruptcy papers for this church?"

"That might be exactly why you're filing."

Bubs frowned. "Explain."

"Kenny and Bo get out soon. You know they'll come looking for what belongs to them. Bankruptcy makes you look broke. Then you and Millie can leave Dawber County before anyone asks questions."

Bubs stared at him.

"You believe I'm stealing drug money and hiding behind bankruptcy?"

"I believe everyone in this county lies."

"Including you?"

"Especially me."

"At least you're self-aware."

Alex leaned closer. "Johnny gave you something."

Bubs looked out the passenger window.

"No."

"That wasn't convincing."

"I have some belongings stored for men who went to prison."

"What kind of belongings?"

"Photographs. Military papers. Clothes. Things their families did not want federal agents taking."

"Johnny's things?"

"I don't remember."

"You remember everything."

"Age changes a man."

"So does five million dollars."

Bubs opened the car door.

Alex grabbed his forearm.

"Pastor."

"Take your hand off me."

Alex released him.

Bubs remained seated.

His voice softened.

"Listen carefully. Whatever you believe your father and Johnny Malone buried, it brought nothing good to this county."

"It brought money."

"It brought cocaine."

"It brought jobs."

"It brought death."

"People were already dying."

"Then we gave them more efficient ways to do it."

Alex looked toward the church. "The county was better when they had the money."

"For some."

"For everyone."

"No. It only appeared that way because the suffering had not yet presented its bill."

"You sound like Kenny."

"That should trouble both of us."

Alex's expression hardened.

"My mother died broke."

Bubs said nothing.

"Forbee Battenberg could've helped her. He didn't. Kenny could've helped her if he hadn't gone to prison. He didn't. Every man who promised to take care of us disappeared, got arrested, or decided we weren't worth the trouble."

"I know."

"You don't."

"I buried your mother."

Alex looked away.

Bubs continued gently.

"I watched you stand beside her grave and refuse to cry because you believed grief was another thing people could use against you."

"I didn't cry because I was done."

"You were a child."

"I'm not anymore."

"No," Bubs said. "You are a seventeen-year-old boy attempting to inherit the worst decisions of grown men."

"I'm trying to get out."

"With blood money."

"With money."

"There is no difference."

"There is when you're hungry."

Bubs looked at the bruise around Alex's eye.

"Did Bones do that?"

Alex did not answer.

"You asked him about Johnny."

"He knows how to find him."

"That doesn't mean Johnny wants to be found."

"I don't care what Johnny wants."

"You should."

For the first time, Alex's confidence faltered.

Bubs opened the door and stepped out.

Alex followed.

"So he's alive."

"I didn't say that."

"You said he doesn't want to be found."

"I said you should care what happens when you go searching for dangerous men."

"You're terrible at lying for a pastor."

Bubs turned toward him.

"And you are far too pleased with yourself for a boy standing at the edge of a grave."

Millie waved from the church.

"Alex! You coming to eat?"

Before he could answer, Bubs called back.

"Give us a moment."

Millie placed one hand on her hip. "You've had several."

Billy and Eileen watched from behind her.

Alex lowered his voice. "If you know where the money is, tell me."

"I don't."

"If you know where Johnny is—"

"I don't."

"What did Kenny mean?"

"That you need guidance."

"I need cash."

"You need your father."

"I tried that."

Bubs looked at him sadly.

"Try again."

He walked toward the church.

Alex remained beside the car.

Mama Millie approached carrying the tray of ribs.

Up close, she noticed his eye.

"Oh, baby, what happened?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing seems to be beating up every boy in Dawber County lately."

She touched his cheek gently.

Alex tolerated the affection for only a moment before stepping away.

"Come inside," Millie said. "You're too skinny."

Bubs stopped at the church steps.

"Millie."

"What?"

"Leave him be."

"He hasn't eaten."

"He has convinced himself he needs something else."

Millie looked from Bubs to Alex.

She knew her husband well enough to hear the fear beneath his irritation.

“What did you two discuss?”

Alex answered before Bubs could.

“Money.”

Bubs opened the church door.

“Be careful with that boy, Millie. His mind is in a dark place.”

Millie watched him enter.

“All minds pass through dark places,” she said. “That’s why the Lord gave us lamps.”

Alex looked at her.

For one reckless second, he considered showing her the map. Millie had always been easier to read than Bubs. If she recognized it, he would know.

Then Billy approached.

“Come eat,” Billy said.

Alex turned on him. “What are you doing here?”

“Fixing the roof.”

“For free?”

“That’s generally how volunteering works.”

“You don’t volunteer.”

“I do now.”

Alex looked toward Eileen.

She smiled and waved.

“Hey, Alex.”

His anger abandoned him without warning.

“Hey.”

Eileen glanced at his eye. “Are you all right?”

“Never better.”

“What happened?”

“Fishing accident.”

Billy coughed to hide a laugh.

Alex ignored him.

"Your hair looks nice."

Eileen touched her ponytail. "It looks the same as always."

"Then it always looks nice."

An uncomfortable silence followed.

Billy stared at him.

Eileen shifted the pitcher between her hands. "Thank you."

Millie called her inside.

"Don't take too long," Eileen told Billy.

She returned to the fellowship hall.

Alex watched her go.

Billy folded his arms. "What was that?"

"What?"

"You sounded brain damaged."

"I was being polite."

"You're never polite."

Alex looked at the church door. "Are you here because of Bubs?"

"Yes."

"What has he told you?"

"That the roof leaks."

"About Johnny."

Billy's face changed.

"Not this again."

"Kenny sent me here."

"You went to the prison?"

Alex pointed at his bruised eye. "This inspired me."

"What did your daddy say?"

"He told me Bubs knows something."

Billy looked toward the church.

"What kind of something?"

"The money."

Billy shook his head. "Bubs is filing bankruptcy."

"Convenient, isn't it?"

"No. It's terrible."

"Kenny and Bo are getting out. Bubs suddenly claims he's broke and talks about leaving Florida."

"He's been broke for years."

"Maybe he wants everyone to think that."

Billy lowered his voice. "You're accusing the pastor of stealing drug money."

"I'm accusing him of knowing where it is."

"You need help."

"That's what everyone says when they don't want to answer."

Billy glanced at the Caprice.

"Is the map in your car?"

Alex smiled. "So now you believe in it."

"I believe you're going to get yourself killed."

"I'm getting Johnny Malone."

"Bones said no."

"Bones also shot a shark six inches from my hand."

Billy looked at the bruise. "You asked for that punch."

"No one asks to get punched."

"You practically submitted a written request."

Alex opened the driver's door.

"You coming?"

"To where?"

"To find Bones."

"No. I'm eating ribs."

"With Eileen."

"Yes."

"You like her."

Billy smiled. "I like ribs."

"You've never repaired anything without being paid."

"Maybe I'm becoming a better person."

Alex started the car.

“Or maybe you’re becoming a liar.”

Billy stepped away as the engine roared.

“Slow down on the gravel.”

Alex reversed out of the parking space.

He looked once more at the church.

Bubs had lied.

Not well, but repeatedly.

He recognized the map. He believed Johnny was alive. And when Alex mentioned the five million dollars, the old pastor looked less like a man hearing a ridiculous legend than a man hearing someone knock on a door he had spent twelve years pretending did not exist.

Alex drove toward the county road.

The visit had not given him the location of the money.

It had given him something better.

Proof that there was money to find.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NECK

The Neck was the part of Dawber County that other residents discussed as though it were a separate country.

A narrow strip of marshland extended from the county into the upper Everglades, surrounded on three sides by dark water and sawgrass. The families who lived there had arrived generations earlier to cut cane for the Battenbergs, trap animals, and perform whatever work respectable people preferred not to see.

They built homes from salvaged wood and corrugated metal. They hunted what they ate, ate almost anything they killed, and observed laws that had never been written by the state of Florida.

Even people from Dawber County considered them strange.

Bones Malone felt comfortable there.

No one in the Neck cared who his father had betrayed. Most of them had family members who had been betrayed by the Dawbers, the Malones, or the federal government. A man's last name mattered less than whether he could fight, fix an engine, or keep his mouth closed.

Bones had proven himself in all three categories.

He lay beneath a rusted Chevrolet pickup parked in front of the Shelton house, studying a transmission held together by wire, mismatched bolts, and faith.

Jasper Shelton leaned over the raised hood.

"How's she look?"

"Like shit."

"That good?"

"I've seen dead animals in better condition."

"You think I need a new transmission?"

"I think you need a new truck."

Jasper laughed.

At seventeen, he weighed nearly three hundred pounds. Some of it was fat, but enough was muscle to make the distinction unimportant. His blue overalls hung loosely from his frame, and rubber fishing boots reached almost to his knees. He had repeated the tenth grade twice and regarded school as an inconvenience imposed by people incapable of understanding his talents.

Those talents included wrestling, drinking moonshine, repairing vehicles, and hurting anyone who insulted a Shelton.

Bones pushed himself out from beneath the truck.

Jasper handed him a jar of clear liquid.

Bones removed the lid and smelled it. The fumes burned his nose.

"What's in this?"

"Moonshine."

"What else?"

"Family secret."

Bones took a cautious drink.

Fire moved down his throat and exploded inside his stomach. He fought the urge to cough.

Jasper grinned. "Smooth, ain't it?"

"Like gasoline."

"That's the corn."

"That isn't corn."

"You want more?"

Bones drank again rather than admit the first swallow nearly blinded him.

Jasper slapped the side of the truck.

"Once I get her runnin', I'm painting her candy-apple red."

"You selling it?"

"Maybe."

"How much?"

"More than you've got."

"You don't know what I've got."

Jasper held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"I know what you ain't got."

Bones's hand tightened around the jar.

Jasper noticed.

The grin left his face.

For several seconds, neither moved.

Then Jasper reached into the bib of his overalls and produced a prescription bottle.

"Relax. I'm playin'."

He shook two pills into his hand.

Bones looked at them. "What are those?"

"Something that'll make you forget why you're mad."

"I'm not mad."

"Then you don't need 'em."

Jasper swallowed both pills with moonshine.

Bones handed back the jar.

Beyond the house, an animal screamed.

Bones turned toward the swamp.

Merle Shelton emerged through the sawgrass carrying a dead raccoon by its hind legs and a rifle across his shoulder. He was leaner than Jasper, with a patchy brown beard, several missing teeth, and sunglasses too expensive to have been purchased legally.

"Dinner!" Merle announced.

Bones stared at the raccoon.

Merle noticed.

"You got a problem?"

"No."

"Your face says you do."

"My face always looks like this."

Jasper laughed. "He don't want none of your coon stew."

Merle pointed the rifle at Bones.

"Boy comes onto Shelton land and looks down on Shelton food."

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

Bones remained still.

People often expected him to become frightened when guns appeared. That usually disappointed them.

"If you're gonna shoot me over a raccoon," he said, "you'd best do it before you cook that thing. Otherwise, you're wasting dinner."

Merle studied him.

Then he lowered the rifle and laughed.

"I see why Jasper likes you."

"I don't," Jasper said.

Merle carried the raccoon toward the rear of the house.

"Y'all want some, come around back in an hour."

"I'm good," Bones called.

Merle stopped.

Bones added, "But I appreciate the invitation."

"That's better."

He disappeared behind the house.

Jasper leaned close. "He would've shot you."

"I know."

"Maybe not killed you."

"That's thoughtful."

"He's been tense."

"About what?"

"Money."

Everyone in Dawber County was tense about money.

The Sheltons once served as enforcers for the Dawber family. They collected debts, guarded shipments, frightened witnesses, and made certain people disappear. When the federal raids destroyed Bo Dawber's empire, the Sheltons lost their primary source of income.

They also lost their father.

Atticus Shelton had been the most feared man in Dawber County.

People called him the Swamp Taker. Some claimed he could move through sawgrass without making a sound. Others said he kept pieces of the people he killed. The one story no one disputed involved the gator pit behind the Shelton house.

Atticus fed his enemies to the alligators.

Sometimes they were dead first.

Sometimes they were not.

The uncertainty became part of the legend.

Sheriff's deputies avoided the Neck unless they arrived in groups. Hardened smugglers lowered their voices when Atticus entered a room. Even Bo Dawber, the most powerful man in the county, treated his enforcer with a degree of caution.

Two men were exceptions.

Johnny Malone was never impressed by Atticus's legend.

Sanchez was the only man who appeared not to fear him at all.

Bones had heard stories about Sanchez confronting Atticus in front of Bo and refusing to lower his eyes. Each telling ended differently. In some versions, Johnny stepped between them. In others, Bo ordered Atticus to stand down. The oldest men in Dawber County said Atticus simply smiled and walked away because he knew there would be another day.

Sanchez did not live long enough to see many more of them.

Atticus survived until the federal raids.

What happened to him afterward depended upon who told the story.

The official account claimed he died exchanging gunfire with federal agents. Merle insisted his father had been murdered after the arrests, when the battle was already over. He never identified the man responsible, but he spoke about the killing as though one day the murderer would return and confess.

Bones looked toward the trees beyond the house.

The gator pit remained there.

Merle and Jasper still used it to raise alligators for their exotic-meat business, though nobody believed that was its only purpose.

"You ever been inside the pit?" Bones asked.

Jasper shook the pill bottle. "Plenty."

"With the gators?"

"They know me."

"They're alligators."

"They knew Daddy."

"That didn't make them pets."

Jasper smiled. "You scared?"

"No."

"You should be."

A car engine approached through the Neck.

Molly Hatchet's "Flirtin' with Disaster" blasted loud enough to shake birds from the trees.

A red-and-black Dodge Challenger tore across the property and stopped beside the truck. Waylon Wiggins climbed out wearing his correctional officer uniform. His hair formed a narrow strip down the center of his head, creating a style too deliberate to be accidental and too ugly to be fashionable.

He finished a can of Budweiser, crushed it against his forehead, and threw it into the yard.

Then he removed a cigarette from behind his ear and lit it.

"Where's Merle?"

"Cooking," Jasper said.

Waylon looked at Bones.

The two regarded one another.

Bones recognized him from the private prison where Kenny Gregory and Bo Dawber were held. Waylon was related to the Sheltons through one of the tangled marriages that connected half the Neck.

"What're you doing here?" Waylon asked.

"Helping Jasper."

"With what?"

Bones pointed at the truck.

Waylon looked beneath it. "That thing ain't worth fixing."

"That's what I told him."

Jasper appeared offended. "Both of you can go to hell."

Waylon removed a twelve-pack of beer from the Challenger and headed toward the rear of the house.

"Merle!"

Jasper watched him go.

"What's he doing here?" Bones asked.

"Family."

"He didn't come for coon stew."

"How do you know?"

"No one comes anywhere for coon stew."

Jasper laughed, but his eyes moved toward the back of the property.

Bones saw it.

The visit had been planned.

Jasper had invited Bones to help with the truck that morning, only hours after Bones punched Alex at Widow's Walk. Since arriving, Jasper had mentioned money twice, Johnny once, and the old Dawber empire often enough to make the pattern impossible to ignore.

Bones reached behind him and touched the grip of the Colt .45.

Jasper noticed.

"You expecting trouble?"

"Always."

"Your daddy's gun?"

Bones removed his hand.

"You ask a lot of questions."

"Just making conversation."

"Make it about something else."

Jasper opened the hood wider.

"You hear from him?"

Bones stared at him.

"Your daddy," Jasper said. "People say he's still alive."

"People say your father fed a tax assessor to a twelve-foot gator."

"He did."

"No, he didn't."

Jasper considered it. "Might've been an insurance man."

Bones walked toward the front of the property.

"Where you going?"

"Home."

"You ain't got a ride."

"I'll walk."

"Through the Neck?"

"I walked here."

"That was before dark."

The sun had begun to sink behind the sawgrass. Shadows gathered beneath the trees, and insects rose from the water.

Bones stopped.

Jasper was right. Reaching the main county road on foot would take more than an hour. By then, he would be walking through swamp darkness with snakes, alligators, and people more dangerous than either.

"I'll stay until the truck runs."

Jasper smiled. "That's the spirit."

From behind the house came Merle's laughter, followed by Waylon's lower voice.

Bones moved closer to the corner of the building.

Jasper blocked him.

"Give 'em privacy."

"Why?"

"They're discussing business."

"What kind?"

"The private kind."

Bones looked down at him.

Jasper was nearly as large as Bones but had none of his discipline. His eyes had become glassy from the pills and moonshine. A knife handle protruded from the front pocket of his overalls.

"You brought me here so Merle could talk to Waylon."

"I brought you here to fix my truck."

"You haven't done anything to it since I arrived."

"I handed you tools."

"Most of them don't fit."

Jasper's smile weakened.

Bones stepped around him.

Jasper grabbed his arm.

Bones looked at the hand.

"Let go."

"We're friends."

"Then let go."

Jasper released him.

Bones walked around the house.

Merle stood beside a wooden table, cutting the raccoon into pieces and dropping the meat into a black pot suspended over a fire. Waylon drank beer and smoked beside him.

Neither saw Bones.

"Warden put Kenny in the box," Waylon said.

Merle sliced through a joint. "How long?"

"Until he talks."

"He'll talk?"

"Man hates tight spaces. Been screaming half the night."

Bones stopped.

Waylon continued.

"Warden says the kid brought a map into the visit."

"What kid?"

"Kenny's boy. Alex."

Merle dropped another piece of meat into the pot.

"Bones know about it?"

"That's what you're supposed to find out."

"I told Jasper to work on him."

"Jasper couldn't work on a screen door."

Merle pointed the bloody knife toward the front yard. "He and Bones are close."

"How close?"

"Wrestling close. Drinking close."

"Close enough Bones tells him how to reach Johnny?"

Merle looked toward the house.

Bones stepped silently backward.

A branch snapped beneath his heel.

The conversation stopped.

"Jasper?" Merle called.

Bones moved around the corner before either man appeared.

Jasper stood beside the truck.

"What were you doing?"

"Taking a leak."

"Outhouse is over there."

Bones looked toward the leaning wooden structure near the saw-grass.

"I forgot."

Jasper studied him.

The sound of another engine reached the property.

This one was deeper.

Multiple vehicles.

Jasper's face changed.

"Who's that?"

"You tell me."

Headlights appeared between the trees.

A black Ford F-350 emerged onto the property, followed by an orange pickup with a Confederate battle flag stretched across its grille.

Jasper grabbed the knife in his pocket.

"Get in the outhouse."

Bones did not move. "Why?"

"Go."

The trucks stopped.

Doors opened.

Dale Brody climbed out of the F-350 wearing a surplus Army jacket despite the heat. A black patch covered his left eye, with a crude white eyelid drawn across it. A German cross hung from a chain around his neck, and a live hand grenade dangled from his belt.

His brothers and nephews spread across the yard carrying rifles.

Jasper pushed Bones toward the side of the house.

"If Dale sees you here, we're all dead."

"Why?"

"He ain't here about the truck."

Bones looked toward Merle and Waylon.

Both men had disappeared.

Jasper shoved him again.

"Move!"

Bones crossed the yard and entered the outhouse. The smell nearly forced him back outside.

Through a crack in the warped boards, he watched Dale approach Jasper.

Dale peeled an orange with a hunting knife.

"Evening."

Jasper kept both hands visible. "Dale."

"Where's your brother?"

"Out back."

"Waylon?"

"Don't know."

Dale placed a slice of orange in his mouth and chewed slowly.
His men began searching the property.
One headed toward the gator pit.
Another moved toward the house.
Dale noticed the empty jar of moonshine beside the Chevrolet.
He looked at Jasper.
“Who else is here?”
“No one.”
Dale sniffed the air.
Once.
Then again.
Jasper shifted his weight.
Dale smiled.
“You smell that?”
Jasper shook his head.
“Old cheese.”
“What?”
“A lie. Lies always smell like old cheese.”
Dale walked toward the outhouse.
Bones drew the Colt .45 and held it beside his leg.
Dale stopped halfway across the yard.
He turned back to Jasper.
“I know Johnny Malone’s boy was here.”
Jasper said nothing.
Dale removed the knife from his belt.
“So why don’t you tell me where he went?”

CHAPTER SIX

BLOOD IN THE NECK

Dale Brody stood in the Shelton yard with a hunting knife in one hand and an orange in the other.

“So why don’t you tell me where Johnny Malone’s boy went?”

Inside the outhouse, Bones held the Colt .45 against his thigh and watched through a split in the wall.

The structure was barely large enough for him to stand. Heat and the stench of human waste pressed around him. Mosquitoes whined against his ears, and something with too many legs moved across the back of his neck.

He did not move.

Outside, Jasper Shelton faced six armed Brodys.

“I ain’t seen Bones,” Jasper said.

Dale removed another strip of peel.

“That disappoints me.”

“Can’t help that.”

“I thought we had an understanding.”

“About money. Not Bones.”

Dale placed an orange slice on his tongue.

His brothers and nephews continued searching the property. Garth Brody approached the gator pit with a Desert Eagle held in both hands. Clayton carried an AK-47 toward the rear of the house. Jessup searched the ancient Chevrolet pickup, throwing tools and loose parts into the mud.

Dale looked at the jar beside the truck.

“Whose moonshine?”

“Mine.”

“There were two cups.”

“I get thirsty.”

Dale smiled.

"You know what your trouble is, Jasper?"

"I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

"You're too stupid to lie."

Jasper's hand drifted toward the knife in his overalls.

Dale saw it.

"Go ahead."

Jasper stopped.

"You think being Atticus Shelton's boy makes you dangerous?"

"It didn't hurt."

"No. Mack Donnelly did that."

Jasper's face changed.

The name seemed to alter the air.

Dale grinned. "That still bothers you?"

"You weren't there."

"Neither were you."

"My brother knows what happened."

"Merle knows whatever story makes him feel better."

Jasper stepped closer.

Dale lowered the orange.

"Careful."

"My daddy was the most feared man in Dawber County."

"Your daddy is dead."

The words struck harder than a fist.

Dale continued.

"Bo Dawber went to prison. Johnny Malone ran away. Atticus got himself killed. That old world is finished, and the Shelton name don't buy what it used to."

Jasper removed his knife.

Bones tightened his grip on the Colt.

The Brodys raised their weapons.

Dale held up one hand.

"Let the boy show us what he inherited."

Jasper lunged.

For a man his size, he moved quickly. The knife swept toward Dale's stomach.

Dale turned just enough to avoid it. He seized Jasper's wrist, drove his forehead into Jasper's nose, and slashed downward with his own blade.

Jasper stumbled.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then blood poured down his right leg.

Jasper looked at it with confusion.

Dale stepped away.

"You ever hear of the femoral artery?"

Jasper's knee buckled.

He fell into the mud.

Dale wiped his knife on Jasper's overalls.

"That's a no."

Blood spread beneath the boy.

Bones moved toward the outhouse door.

He stopped himself.

If he stepped outside, the Brodys would shoot him before he raised the Colt. He would die beside Jasper without helping anyone.

Dale crouched.

"That artery carries a whole lot of blood. Cut it in the right place and a man can empty out quicker than a punctured gas can."

Jasper pressed both hands against the wound.

His face had already begun losing color.

Dale ate another slice of orange.

"Good news is we can get you to the hospital."

Jasper looked up.

"Bad news is I'm the only one willing to drive."

"Go to hell."

"You first."

Dale stood.

"Merle!"

His voice carried across the property.

"Your baby brother is bleeding to death!"

No one answered.

Garth returned from the gator pit.

"Found signs someone's been back there."

"Signs?"

"Gate's open."

"Did you look inside?"

Garth stared toward the black water.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Gators."

Dale blinked at him.

"You are holding a fifty-caliber pistol."

"They're big gators."

"That's what the pistol is for."

Garth glanced at the pit again.

"You want me to go in?"

"I want you to stop wasting whatever portion of my life the Lord has forced me to share with you."

Dale pointed toward Clayton.

"Take him. Find Merle and Waylon."

The two men moved toward the pit.

Dale turned to Jessup.

"Get the truck lights on Jasper."

Jessup stood over the wounded boy, staring with an expression approaching wonder.

"Jessup."

No response.

Dale clapped in front of his face.

Jessup jumped.

"Lights."

Jessup hurried toward the F-350.

Bones watched him approach the outhouse side of the property.

If Jessup looked toward the door, he would see it was not fully closed.

Bones eased backward.

His heel struck a metal bucket.

The sound seemed deafening.

Jessup stopped.

Bones raised the Colt.

A scream came from the gator pit.

Jessup turned toward it.

Garth fired three rounds into the water.

The pistol blasts shook the property.

Something large thrashed inside the enclosure.

"Goddamn it!" Dale shouted. "Are you shooting the gators or my people?"

"Could be both!" Garth called back.

Jessup resumed walking toward the truck.

Bones lowered the pistol.

The F-350 stood twenty feet from the outhouse. Its fuel door had been left open, and a rag hung from the toolbox in the bed.

An idea came to him.

It was not a good idea.

Alex would have called it a reckless improvisation born from limited intelligence.

Bones called it the only idea available.

He slipped from the outhouse while Jessup opened the driver's door. Staying low behind the truck, Bones removed the rag from the toolbox and fed one end into the fuel opening.

Gasoline soaked into the cloth.

He searched his pockets.

No matches.

His father's old Zippo was at home beside the birthday card from Miami.

Bones cursed silently.

Then he saw the cigarette burning on the ground near Waylon's Challenger.

He crawled through the mud and retrieved it.

The ember nearly died between his fingers.

Jessup climbed inside the cab.

Bones touched the cigarette to the gasoline-soaked rag.

Nothing happened.

"Come on."

A thin flame appeared.

Bones moved away.

The flame traveled toward the fuel tank.

He ran for the trees.

Jessup started the truck.

The explosion lifted the F-350 from the ground.

Fire engulfed the cab and rolled across the yard. The windshield burst outward. A door spun through the air and struck the Shelton house. The blast threw Dale against the Chevrolet and knocked the orange from his hand.

Jessup disappeared inside the flames.

Bones hit the mud and covered his head.

Metal fragments cut through the trees.

The hand grenade on Dale's belt tore free and landed several yards away.

Everyone saw it.

For a terrible second, no one moved.

Dale crawled toward the grenade.

Bones rose and kicked it into the gator pit.

The detonation sent black water, mud, and pieces of the enclosure into the air. Alligators roared and thrashed behind the damaged fence.

Merle emerged from the smoke near the pit with Waylon behind him.

Merle saw Jasper lying in blood.

"Jasper!"

He ran toward his brother.

Dale tackled him before he arrived.

The two men crashed into the mud.

Dale rolled on top and drove his forearm across Merle's throat.

"You burned my brother!"

Merle clawed at his face. "Wasn't me!"

Dale reached for the knife lying nearby.

Merle caught his wrist.

The blade descended toward his neck.

Bones raised the Colt.

Dale and Merle twisted together, making a clear shot impossible.

"Get off him!"

Dale looked toward Bones.

His exposed eye widened.

"There you are."

He shifted his weight and pulled Merle in front of him.

"You killed Jessup."

Bones kept the pistol trained on him. "Let Merle go."

"I came here to talk to you."

"You brought six men and assault rifles."

"That's how Brodys talk."

Dale pressed the knife against Merle's throat.

Bones saw blood gather beneath the blade.

"Put down the gun."

"No."

"I'll open him."

"Then I'll shoot you."

"You might hit Merle."

"I might."

Merle stared at Bones. "Not helping."

Dale laughed.

Bones took a step closer.

Dale dragged the knife across Merle's skin.

Merle gasped.

Bones fired.

The bullet struck Dale below the shoulder blade.

He collapsed beside Merle.

Merle rolled away, holding his neck.

Dale writhed in the mud.

Bones approached with the Colt extended.

Dale looked up.

His eye patch had twisted sideways, revealing a scarred and empty socket beneath it.

"You little bastard."

"Stay down."

"You think one bullet ends this?"

"No."

Bones aimed at his head.

"This one will."

Dale stopped moving.

Behind them, the gator fence groaned.

Waylon ran toward his Challenger.

Merle grabbed Bones's arm. "Jasper."

The boy lay where he had fallen.

His skin had turned gray. Blood saturated the dirt beneath his leg.

Merle dropped beside him and pressed both hands against the wound.

"Stay with me."

Jasper's eyes fluttered.

"Bones?"

"I'm here."

"Did you get Dale?"

Bones looked toward the wounded man.

"Yeah."

Jasper smiled weakly. "Knew you would."

Merle pulled off his belt and tightened it around Jasper's upper thigh.

"We need a truck."

Waylon started the Challenger.

Merle shouted at him. "Get over here!"

Waylon looked toward the Brodys regrouping near the gator pit.

Clayton raised the AK-47.

Bullets struck the Challenger.

Waylon ducked behind the steering wheel and accelerated from the property.

Merle stared after him.

"That coward!"

More gunfire ripped through the yard.

Bones and Merle dragged Jasper behind the Chevrolet.

"We can use this," Bones said.

"It don't run."

"You said it was almost finished."

"Jasper said that. Jasper lies about trucks."

Bones opened the driver's door and searched beneath the seat.

No keys.

"Where are they?"

"Sun visor."

Bones pulled it down.

The keys fell into his lap.

Merle climbed into the truck bed with Jasper and continued applying pressure to the wound.

Bones inserted the key.

The engine clicked.

He tried again.

Nothing.

Clayton fired from behind the pit. The windshield shattered, spraying Bones with glass.

“Start, you piece of shit.”

He pumped the accelerator and turned the key.

The engine coughed.

Then it roared to life.

Merle laughed despite himself.

“Jasper, you lying son of a bitch. You fixed it.”

Bones shifted into drive.

The truck lurched forward, stalled, and rolled several feet.

“Come on!”

He restarted it.

The engine caught.

Bones slammed his foot down.

The Chevrolet spun through the mud and headed toward the road.

Garth stepped into their path with the Desert Eagle.

Bones drove directly at him.

Garth fired twice before diving aside.

One bullet tore through the hood. The other passed through the cab inches behind Bones’s head.

Merle fired a sawed-off shotgun from the truck bed.

The blast knocked Clayton backward.

Bones reached the narrow road and accelerated into the swamp darkness.

The engine rattled as though every part had begun arguing about which would fail first.

Merle shouted through the sliding rear window.

"Hospital's east!"

"I know."

"You're going west!"

Bones yanked the wheel.

The truck swerved across the road and nearly entered the canal before turning around.

Merle looked down at Jasper.

"Keep your eyes open."

Jasper did not answer.

Merle slapped his face.

"Talk to me."

Jasper's head rolled sideways.

Bones watched them through the rearview mirror.

"Is he breathing?"

Merle lowered his ear to Jasper's mouth.

"I don't know."

"Check."

"I am checking!"

"Keep pressure on his leg."

"There ain't much blood left to keep in him!"

Bones pressed the accelerator harder.

The truck shook violently.

The road ahead twisted between walls of sawgrass. No streetlights reached the Neck. The headlights bounced across black water and tree trunks.

Bones heard his own breath.

He had shot a man.

He had fired his father's weapon into Dale Brody and nearly put another bullet through his skull.

The act itself did not trouble him.

How little it troubled him did.

"Jasper," Merle pleaded. "Come on, little brother."

Bones glanced into the mirror.

Merle was cradling Jasper's head.

His hands no longer pressed the wound.

"Put pressure on his leg."

Merle did not respond.

"Merle."

"He's gone."

Bones looked back at the road.

"No."

"I can't feel him breathing."

"We're almost there."

"He's dead."

"You don't know that."

"I know my brother."

Bones tightened both hands on the steering wheel.

Jasper had lied to Dale for him.

He could have given Bones up and lived.

Instead, he remained silent because they were friends.

Or because he was stubborn.

In the Neck, those qualities were often the same.

Merle bent over his brother's body.

For several miles, only the failing engine and the movement of the tires across the road could be heard.

Finally, Merle lifted his head.

"That took nerve."

Bones looked into the mirror.

"What?"

"Coming out like you did."

"I wasn't going to watch Dale kill both of you."

"Most people would."

"I ain't most people."

"No," Merle said. "You're Johnny Malone's boy."

Bones felt anger return.

"I'm Bones."

"Your daddy never feared mine."

"Maybe he should have."

"Sanchez was the only man who didn't fear Atticus. Johnny just never let him see it."

"You knew my father?"

"I was a kid when he disappeared."

"But you remember him."

"Everyone remembers Johnny Malone."

Bones looked at Jasper's body in the mirror.

"My father left."

"He lived."

"Same thing, where I come from."

Merle rested one hand on Jasper's chest.

"The Brodys came because somebody told them you know how to find him."

"I don't."

"Dale believes you do. Warden Kinder believes Kenny knows where the money is. My cousin Waylon believes whatever the warden pays him to believe."

"What do you believe?"

Merle looked into the cab.

"I believe the old war is starting again."

The truck reached the main county road.

Lights from Dawber County appeared beyond the trees.

Bones thought of the card hidden in his bedroom.

SANCHEZ PROPERTIES, LLC.

A Miami address.

COME SEE ME BEFORE YOUR EIGHTEENTH BIRTH-DAY.

Ed Dantés.

Alex had been right.

The money, the map, and the stories were no longer legends. Men were willing to kill for them. Jasper Shelton was dead because everyone believed Bones possessed answers his father had denied him.

Bones turned toward the hospital.

After he delivered Jasper's body, he would return to Widow's Walk.

He would find Alex.

And then he would take them both to Miami.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SANCHEZ PROPERTIES

Bones arrived at Widow's Walk after midnight wearing somebody else's blood.

Alex heard the old Chevrolet before he saw it. The truck came rattling down the shell road with one headlight pointed toward the trees and the other bouncing across the marina. It rolled past the dark bait shop, coughed twice, and stopped crooked beside the boathouse.

Alex slipped the coded map beneath a cushion and reached for the Colt .45 on the table.

The driver's door opened.

Bones climbed out slowly.

His shirt was black with sweat and streaked red from his chest to his knees. Mud covered his legs. A dark crust had formed across one cheek, and his pale hair stood away from his head in damp, tangled clumps. He looked as though the swamp had chewed him up and changed its mind about swallowing him.

Alex lowered the pistol.

"Jesus Christ."

Bones slammed the door. The truck continued running for several seconds before sputtering itself dead.

"That yours?" Alex asked.

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"Jasper Shelton's."

Alex looked at the blood again.

"Where's Jasper?"

"Hospital."

"Why?"

Bones walked past him into the boathouse.

Alex followed. "Bones."

"I heard you."

"You look like you murdered half the county."

"Only shot one of 'em."

Alex stopped.

Bones dropped into the old sofa hard enough to make its wooden frame complain. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and stared at the floor.

The usual grin was gone.

"Who did you shoot?" Alex asked.

"Dale Brody."

The name seemed to change the temperature inside the room.

Alex closed the door and locked it. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know."

"You shot a man and don't know if he's dead?"

"He went down. I didn't stick around to take his pulse."

Alex set the Colt on the table, keeping it within reach. The bruise Bones had given him earlier throbbed beneath his left eye.

"Start at the beginning."

Bones rubbed both hands down his face. The dried blood cracked across his knuckles.

"Jasper and Merle called me out to the Neck. Said they wanted to talk."

"About what?"

"What do you think?"

"The money."

Bones nodded.

Alex pulled a chair across from him. "So I was right."

"Don't start."

"I told you people knew about it."

"I said don't start."

Alex studied him. Beneath the mud and blood, Bones looked exhausted. More than exhausted. Scared.

That was something Alex had rarely seen. Bones could be angry, reckless, drunk, wounded, or dumb enough to grin at a loaded gun. Fear usually had to work harder to find him.

“What happened?” Alex asked.

“They wanted to know where Johnny hid the money. Kept saying my daddy wouldn’t have left Dawber County empty-handed.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That I didn’t know.”

“Do you?”

“No.”

Alex waited.

Bones glared at him. “I don’t.”

“All right.”

“They didn’t believe me. Jasper said Waylon was coming to get me. Said Waylon had ways of making people remember things.”

Alex thought of Waylon Shelton’s pale, patient face. “And you stayed?”

“I was figuring a way out.”

“You were waiting to see what happened.”

“I was figuring.”

“What happened?”

“The Brodys showed up before Waylon did.”

Every family in Dawber County carried grudges. Most were inherited like land or bad teeth. The feud between the Sheltons and Brodys was older than either boy, and men had died preserving it.

Bones continued. “Dale started in on Jasper. Said the Sheltons had no right putting their hands on me. Jasper told him I was Shelton business.”

“Since when?”

“Since they decided I could lead them to Johnny’s money.”

"So the Brodys wanted you too."

"Everybody wants me now."

The bitterness in his voice silenced Alex.

Bones stared down at his hands. "Dale pulled a knife. Jasper didn't even see it until it went in. Dale cut him high in the leg. Blood came out like somebody opened a spigot."

Alex looked at Bones's clothes.

"Jasper hit the ground," Bones said. "Merle tried stopping it with his shirt, but Dale was laughing. Jessup and the others were standing around waiting to see who got to take me home."

"What did you do?"

Bones's mouth tightened.

"I shoved a rag in the Brodys' gas tank and lit it."

"You did what?"

"Truck went up good."

"You blew up their truck?"

"Jessup was standing too close."

Alex leaned back. "How close?"

"Close enough."

"Is he dead?"

"I reckon."

"Then you killed Jessup Brody."

"The truck killed him."

"You set the truck on fire."

"I didn't tell him to stand beside it."

Alex opened his mouth, then stopped. Arguing with Bones's logic was like trying to wrestle an alligator in deep water. Even if you won, you came away missing something.

"And Dale?"

"Came after me. I shot him."

"With what?"

Bones pulled a Colt .45 from beneath his bloodstained shirt.

Alex stared at it. "You had that when you punched me?"

"I didn't shoot you."

"That ain't the point."

Bones placed the pistol on the floor.

"I could've killed Dale," he said.

"You just said you shot him."

"I shot him in the shoulder. Had him dead to rights after that. Could've put the next one through his skull."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know."

For the first time that night, Bones sounded his age.

He looked down at the dried blood on his shirt.

"Maybe because he was already on the ground. Maybe because Jasper was bleeding out. Maybe I just didn't want to watch another man die."

Alex's anger receded.

"What happened to Jasper?"

"I got him and Merle into the Chevy. Drove them to Dawber County General."

"You rescued the men who were going to turn you over to Waylon?"

"They weren't gonna let the Brodys have me."

"That doesn't make them your friends."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

Bones raised his head.

"I couldn't leave Jasper there like that."

Alex saw something hard and wounded behind his friend's eyes. It was the same thing Bones hid beneath his drinking, his jokes, and his constant appetite for trouble. He had spent his life pretending nothing mattered because the one person who should have cared about him had vanished.

"Did Jasper make it?" Alex asked.

Bones did not answer.

"Bones?"

"He died before they got him upstairs."

The marina settled around them. Water tapped softly against the pilings beneath the boathouse. Somewhere beyond the docks, a mullet broke the surface and fell back with a splash.

Alex leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees.

"I'm sorry."

"Jasper was an asshole."

"He was."

"He was gonna hand me to Waylon."

"Probably."

Bones's eyes reddened. "But he kept Dale off me."

"You kept him from dying alone."

"Didn't do much good."

"It mattered."

Bones wiped his nose with the back of his hand. The gesture left a stripe of blood across his cheek.

Alex stood, found a clean towel, and tossed it to him.

"You need to wash that off."

"Ain't mine."

"I know."

Bones pressed the towel to his face. After a moment, he said, "You were right."

Alex glanced at him.

"About the money," Bones said. "About people coming for us. The Sheltons know. The Brodys know. Waylon knows."

"Bubs knows something too."

"What did he tell you?"

"That blood money always brings death."

Bones looked down at his shirt. "Maybe he ain't wrong."

Alex retrieved the map from beneath the cushion and spread it across the table.

The old paper seemed more dangerous now. Hours earlier it had been a puzzle—a promise that Johnny Malone’s buried fortune might exist somewhere in the mangrove islands and black water of Dawber County.

Now men were bleeding for it.

One was already dead.

Bones came to the table and studied the markings. “That the map you showed Kenny?”

“Yeah.”

“You really went to see him?”

“Somebody had to tell me the truth.”

“And did he?”

“He sent me to Bubs.”

“Who told you to stay away from the money?”

“He didn’t say there wasn’t any.”

“Only you could hear a preacher warn you about death and think it was confirmation.”

Alex folded the map. “The money’s real.”

“Even if it is, we don’t know where it is.”

“No. But Johnny does.”

Bones became still.

Alex noticed the change immediately.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You do that every time somebody mentions your daddy.”

“Do what?”

“Look like you’re about to run.”

“I ain’t runnin’.”

“You came all the way here.”

“Had nowhere else to go.”

"You could've gone home."

Bones gave a humorless laugh. "That trailer ain't home."

Alex let the words hang between them.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

Bones reached inside his shorts and removed a creased envelope.

It was cleaner than everything else on him because he had wrapped it in a plastic grocery bag. The envelope bore a Miami postmark. Written in dark ink across the return-address corner was the name ED DANTÉS and a post-office box.

Bones handed it over.

Alex read the name twice.

"Who's Ed Dantés?"

"Nobody."

"Then why's he sending you mail?"

"Open it."

Inside was a birthday card decorated with palm trees, neon lights, and a sunset over Biscayne Bay. A plain white business card slipped from the fold and landed on the table.

SANCHEZ PROPERTIES, LLC

An address in Miami appeared beneath the name.

Someone had written across the back in red ink:

COME SEE ME IN MIAMI AS SOON AS YOU CAN FOR
AN EARLY 18TH BIRTHDAY GIFT!

Alex looked at Bones. "When did you get this?"

"Few weeks ago."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I wasn't gonna go."

"Who sent it?"

Bones stared at the business card.

"Johnny."

Alex felt his heartbeat quicken.

"How do you know?"

"He's sent postcards my whole life. Never signs his name. Always uses names from books or old movies. But they're from him."

Alex turned the envelope over again.

"Ed Dantès," he said.

"Yeah."

"Edmond Dantès."

Bones shrugged.

"The Count of Monte Cristo."

"The what?"

"It's a book. Man gets betrayed and thrown in prison. Escapes, finds a fortune, and comes back for revenge."

Bones frowned at the envelope. "Sounds cheerful."

"It isn't an accident. Johnny chose that name for a reason."

"Maybe he liked the movie."

"Maybe he's telling you something."

"He's telling me to go to Miami."

"He's offering you an early birthday present."

"I can read."

"Your eighteenth birthday."

Bones took the card back and held it by the edges.

"I ain't seen him since I was little. Barely remember what he looks like."

"You have pictures."

"Pictures ain't the same as a father."

Alex said nothing.

Bones's jaw worked as though he were chewing words he could not swallow.

"He had seventeen years to come see me," he said. "Seventeen years to walk through the door and say my name. Now he sends a card like he's some uncle I see at Christmas."

"Maybe he couldn't come back."

"He could send postcards from Jamaica and Panama and the goddamn Philippines, but he couldn't make one trip across Alligator Alley?"

"He might have been protecting you."

"Everybody says that when a man leaves. Makes the leaving sound noble."

Alex understood more than he wanted to admit. Kenny Gregory had not disappeared, but prison had placed him almost as far beyond Alex's reach as Johnny Malone had placed himself beyond Bones's.

"Then don't go for him," Alex said.

Bones looked up.

"Go for yourself. Ask him why."

"And while I'm asking, you plan on finding out where he put the money."

"Yes."

"At least you're honest."

A knock struck the door.

Both boys reached for a gun.

"Alex?" Billy called from outside. "You in there?"

Alex unlocked the door. Billy stepped inside wearing jeans, work boots, and the same gray shirt he had worn on the church roof. His hair was flattened on one side from sleep.

He took one look at Bones.

"What the hell happened to you?"

Bones sighed. "I shot Dale Brody."

Billy closed the door behind him. "Of course you did."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means nobody else I know says things like that before breakfast."

"It ain't breakfast."

"It's two in the morning."

Alex handed Billy the Miami card.

Billy read it, then looked from Alex to Bones.

"This Johnny?"

Bones nodded.

"You sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

Billy examined the Sanchez Properties address. "Who's Sanchez?"

"Man our daddies knew in Vietnam," Alex said. "Kenny talked about him sometimes. Said he was the only man in Dawber County who never feared Atticus Shelton."

"That ain't possible," Billy said.

"Maybe Sanchez was worse."

Bones took the card from him. "Whoever he is, Johnny trusts him."

Alex folded the map and tucked it into his jacket.

"We leave before sunrise."

Billy studied him. "We?"

"Bones isn't going alone."

"I ain't said I'm going," Bones replied.

"Yes, you have."

"When?"

"When you brought that card here instead of burning it."

Bones looked at the envelope in his hand.

Billy walked to the window and peered across the dark marina. "If Dale's alive, every Brody in the county will be hunting him."

"Sheltons too," Alex said. "Waylon wanted Bones before the Brodys arrived."

"And the sheriff?"

"Buck Dawber will arrest Bones first and ask what happened after the Brodys write the story for him."

Billy turned back. "Then we can't take Bones's trailer truck. Everybody knows it."

"We take my Caprice."

"That thing make it across the Alley?"

"It'll make it."

"It overheats going to the Piggly Wiggly."

"Only when it's hot."

"We live in Florida."

Bones stood. Fatigue made him sway slightly. "You two can keep discussing the reliability of Alex's piece-of-shit car after I wash Jasper off me."

Billy caught his arm before he could pass.

"You all right?"

Bones glanced at the hand, then at Billy.

"No."

It was the simplest and most truthful thing he had said all night.

Billy released him. "There are clean clothes in my truck."

"Why?"

"Because I work for a living."

Bones disappeared into the small bathroom.

Water groaned through the pipes.

Billy lowered his voice. "You really think Johnny will tell you where the money is?"

"He'll tell Bones."

"That isn't what I asked."

Alex looked at the closed bathroom door.

"No," he said. "But once we find Johnny, we'll have something nobody else has."

"What?"

"Leverage."

Billy shook his head. "You've been reading too many of Kenny's books."

Alex placed the Sanchez Properties card beside the map.

"What if the money isn't there anymore?" Billy asked.

"Then we find out who took it."

"And if Bubs was right?"

"About what?"

"That it gets us killed."

Alex looked at the blood Bones had tracked across the floor.

"The killing already started."

Billy followed his gaze.

After a moment, he pulled out his truck keys. "I'll get the clothes."

Alex smiled faintly. "Knew you were coming."

"I didn't say that."

"You came here in the middle of the night."

"Because you said it was an emergency."

"It is."

Billy opened the door, then paused. "If I go, it ain't for Johnny Malone's money."

"What's it for?"

Billy looked toward the black water beyond the marina.

"My daddy came home from Vietnam with Johnny, Kenny, Bubs, and the rest of them. Then the whole county went to hell, Johnny disappeared, and nobody ever told us the same story twice."

He glanced back at Alex.

"I want the truth."

He went outside.

Alex returned to the table. The envelope, the business card, and the coded map lay together beneath the yellow light.

Edmond Dantès had escaped prison, discovered a fortune, and returned to punish the men who betrayed him.

Alex wondered whether Johnny Malone had done the same.

Behind him, the shower ran red into the drain.

Outside, Billy loaded supplies into the Caprice. Its hood stood open beneath the marina light while he checked the coolant, the oil, and every cracked belt that might leave them stranded in the Everglades.

Bones had Johnny's address.

Billy wanted the truth about their fathers.

Alex wanted enough money to free Kenny and save Gethsemane.
Three boys. Three reasons for crossing Alligator Alley.
By sunrise, they would be on their way to Miami.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ACROSS THE ALLEY

The Chevrolet Caprice left Dawber County twenty minutes before sunrise.

Billy drove because Alex's right headlight worked only when it wanted to and Billy did not trust either of his friends to notice an eighteen-wheeler coming toward them in the dark. Alex rode beside him with the coded map folded inside his jacket. Bones occupied the back seat, stretched across the torn upholstery with his head against the passenger door.

He had fallen asleep before they reached the county line.

Every few miles, the Caprice drifted toward the shoulder. Billy corrected it without comment.

Alex noticed.

"You tired?"

"No."

"You keep doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Trying to kill us."

Billy glanced at him. "Car's pulling right."

"It didn't pull right yesterday."

"Yesterday you weren't carrying three people, two guns, and whatever Bones ate before we left."

From the back seat came a wet snore.

Alex looked over his shoulder. Bones wore Billy's clean jeans and an old Gethsemane Baptist T-shirt. The clothes were too small for him. The shirt stretched tightly across his stomach, and the jeans ended several inches above his ankles.

His bloodstained clothes were tied inside a garbage bag in the trunk.

"He looks dead," Alex said.

"He nearly was."

"You believe everything he told us?"

"I believe somebody's blood covered him."

"He could've exaggerated the rest."

"Bones exaggerates when he's proud. Last night, he wasn't proud."

Alex faced forward again.

Dawn began as a gray line beyond the cypress trees. Mist floated over the drainage canals, turning the roadside into a pale dream of water and shadow. They passed bait shops, shuttered gas stations, and weather-beaten houses raised on concrete blocks. Then the land flattened and opened around them.

Behind the Caprice, Dawber County disappeared into the swamp.

Alex kept checking the side mirror.

Billy noticed. "You expecting somebody?"

"The Brodys."

"In what? Bones blew up their truck."

"They own more than one."

"The Sheltons?"

"Maybe."

"Waylon?"

"Probably."

Billy adjusted the mirror. "Anybody else?"

"Sheriff Buck."

"Good thing we're traveling inconspicuously."

The Caprice had faded black paint, a dented rear bumper, and a passenger door a different color from the rest of the car. Its exhaust announced their approach long before anyone could see them.

"It's inconspicuous in Miami," Alex said.

"We ain't in Miami."

A green highway sign emerged through the mist.

MIAMI — 114 MILES

Bones woke when the Caprice hit a pothole.

He sat up abruptly and reached beneath his shirt for a pistol that was no longer there.

"Easy," Billy said. "Gun's under the seat."

Bones blinked at the empty road behind them. "Where are we?"

"Across the county line."

"You see anybody following?"

"Not yet."

Bones rubbed his face. The dried blood was gone, but a bruise had appeared along his jaw.

"What happened to you?" Alex asked.

"Merle hit me."

"You left that part out."

"Didn't seem important."

"Why'd he hit you?"

"Thought I was driving too slow."

"You were trying to save his brother."

"He was upset."

Billy shook his head.

Bones leaned forward between the front seats. "How much farther?"

"Two hours if the car holds," Billy said.

"It'll hold," Alex replied.

The temperature gauge crept slightly above the halfway mark.

Billy tapped it.

Alex slapped his hand away. "Don't encourage it."

They merged onto Alligator Alley as the sun broke over the Everglades.

The highway cut across the wilderness in a straight gray line. Water and sawgrass stretched to both horizons, interrupted by stands of cypress and dark islands of hardwood hammock. White birds rose from

the marsh as the Caprice passed. An alligator rested beside a canal with its mouth open toward the warming sky.

There was nowhere to hide on the Alley.

Alex checked the mirror again.

A dark sedan had appeared behind them.

It stayed several car lengths back.

"You see that?" Alex asked.

Billy looked in the rearview mirror. "Yeah."

Bones twisted around.

"Quit looking," Alex said.

"How am I supposed to know if they're following us?"

"By not letting them know we noticed."

Bones continued staring through the back window.

"Very subtle," Billy said.

The sedan maintained its distance.

Billy moved into the right lane. The sedan followed.

He reduced his speed from seventy to sixty. The sedan slowed.

Alex reached beneath his seat and took hold of the Colt.

"Don't pull that out," Billy warned.

"I'm not."

"If Buck put out a notice on this car, every state trooper between here and Miami will be watching for it."

"Buck don't know we left."

"Buck knows everything ten minutes after it happens."

"Then why hasn't he ever solved a crime?"

"He knows. He just doesn't care."

Bones crouched low in the back seat. "Could be Dale."

"With one good arm?" Alex asked.

"Maybe I didn't hit him in the shoulder."

"You said you did."

"I was busy."

The sedan moved closer.

Billy accelerated.

The Caprice shuddered but gained speed. The temperature needle climbed another fraction.

"Don't cook the engine," Alex said.

"You want distance or coolant?"

"Both."

"You bought the wrong car."

The sedan pulled into the left lane.

Alex drew the Colt and held it below the window.

Billy gripped the wheel. "Keep it down."

Bones reached under the seat for his own pistol.

"Don't fire inside my car," Alex said.

"You'd rather they shoot us?"

"I'd rather you not blow my head off from behind."

The sedan came alongside them.

A woman in sunglasses drove with one hand on the wheel. Two small children slept in the back seat beneath a pile of beach towels. She glanced at the Caprice, saw the three young men staring at her, and accelerated away.

Bones lowered his pistol.

Billy exhaled. "Terrifying."

"She could've been working for Waylon," Bones said.

"Her youngest looked especially dangerous."

Alex returned the Colt beneath the seat.

None of them laughed for long.

The fear stayed inside the car with them, occupying the empty space between the guns and the questions they had carried out of Dawber County.

After several miles, Billy said, "What happens when we get there?"

"We find Johnny," Alex replied.

"And then?"

"Bones introduces us."

"What if he won't?"

Alex looked back.

Bones rested his forehead against the window. "I'll introduce you."

"That ain't what I meant," Billy said. "What if Johnny won't see us?"

"He invited me."

"He invited you. Not us."

Bones removed the birthday card from his pocket. The paper had softened along the folds from being opened and closed too many times.

"He'll see us," he said.

"You sound sure."

"I ain't."

They drove in silence.

Sunlight spread across the Everglades, turning every pool of standing water silver. Miami existed somewhere beyond the flat horizon—another world connected to Dawber County by a road built across an ocean of grass.

Alex thought about Johnny Malone making this journey in the opposite direction more than twenty years earlier. Johnny had returned from Vietnam with Kenny, Timmy, Bubs, and the others. He had become an accountant, then a savior, then a drug kingpin, depending upon who told the story.

By 1991, one-third of Dawber County's men had been arrested.

Johnny Malone had vanished.

Everybody else had paid for what he built.

Now Alex was riding across the state to ask him to build it again.

They stopped at a service plaza near the middle of the Alley.

Billy filled the radiator from a gallon jug while Alex stood watch beside the hood. Bones went inside with five dollars and returned carrying three Cuban sandwiches, two bags of pork rinds, a package of powdered doughnuts, and no change.

"What did you do?" Billy asked. "Rob them?"

"Woman felt sorry for me."

"Why?"

"Told her my daddy abandoned me."

Alex stared at him.

Bones handed him a sandwich. "What? It's true."

They ate beside the Caprice while tourist traffic hissed past them. Bones demolished his sandwich, opened the doughnuts, and studied the birthday card again.

"You know what you're going to say to him?" Billy asked.

Bones licked sugar from his thumb. "Yep."

"What?"

"Hello."

"And after that?"

"See how hello goes."

Billy poured the last of the water into the radiator.

Alex unfolded the map across the hood. The coded markings meant no more to him in daylight than they had beneath the boathouse lamp.

"Don't show him that right away," Bones said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm asking the questions first."

"You've had seventeen years to ask questions."

"And you've had one day to become an expert on my family."

Alex folded the map slowly.

"This isn't just about your family anymore. Jasper Shelton is dead. Jessup Brody might be dead. Dale might be dying. Kenny's locked in isolation because I showed him this."

Bones looked at him. "What?"

"The warden knows I visited. Kenny told me to find Deon Childress, and Kinder put him in the hole."

"You didn't tell us that."

"I'm telling you now."

Billy slammed the hood shut. "Anything else we should know before we arrive?"

Alex considered it.

"Bubs and Millie are losing Gethsemane."

"We know that," Billy said.

"Bubs may have control of Johnny's money."

Bones stopped chewing.

"He denied knowing where it was," Alex continued. "But he didn't deny Johnny left it."

"Why would Johnny trust Bubs with the money?" Bones asked.

"Because Bubs was the one man in Dawber County who wouldn't steal it."

Bones looked at the business card.

"Then maybe we ain't going to Miami to find out where it is."

"What are we going for?" Billy asked.

"To find out why Johnny wants it back."

Miami rose from the horizon in pieces.

First came the traffic. Cars surrounded the Caprice in every lane, moving fast and changing direction without warning. Then came concrete walls painted with murals, overpasses layered above other overpasses, palm trees, warehouses, billboards, and glass buildings shining in the distance.

Bones sat upright, watching everything.

He had received postcards from cities all over the world but had rarely traveled farther than Fort Myers. Miami seemed less like another Florida city than another country.

Spanish music thundered from a car beside them. A woman shouted into a cell phone while steering with her knees. Motorcycles slipped between lanes. The air smelled of exhaust, salt, hot pavement, and food none of the boys could identify.

Billy held the business card against the steering wheel.

"You sure this is the street?"

"That's what it says," Bones replied.

"It better be. Temperature gauge is almost red."

"Turn on the heater," Alex said.

"It's ninety-three degrees."

"Pulls heat from the engine."

Billy switched on the heater.

Hot air blasted into the car.

Bones leaned between the seats. "You trying to kill us?"

"Open a window."

"The window don't work."

"Then sweat."

They left the main road and entered Little Havana.

The neighborhood changed block by block. Brightly painted houses stood beside crumbling Spanish homes hidden behind chain-link fences. Men sat beneath striped awnings drinking coffee from tiny cups. Old women swept sidewalks. Roosters wandered through yards as though they owned the city.

Billy slowed.

"Address should be ahead."

Alex spotted the house first.

It was a decaying Spanish colonnade behind an overgrown yard. Vines climbed the walls. Palm fronds pressed against the windows. A rusted chain-link fence enclosed the property.

A black sign on the gate warned:

BEWARE OF DOG

Someone had spray-painted HORN before DOG, turning it into BEWARE OF HORNDOG. A crude picture of a naked woman had been added beneath it.

Bones stared.

"This is it?"

Alex checked the number. "This is it."

"My daddy lives here?"

"Maybe Sanchez owns it."

"Looks condemned," Billy said.

A black Mercedes sat at the other end of the block.

It did not belong in the neighborhood.

Billy drove past the house without stopping.

"What are you doing?" Bones asked.

"Checking the street."

"You think that Mercedes followed us?"

"No. It got here first."

They circled the block and parked beneath a broad mango tree where they could watch the property through the Caprice's dirty windshield.

Nobody spoke.

After a few minutes, the driver's door of the Mercedes opened.

A tall Black man stepped out wearing a dark suit despite the heat. His polished shoes and expensive sunglasses made him look as misplaced as his car.

Alex leaned forward. "That's Deon Childress."

"How do you know?" Billy asked.

"Saw his picture at Bubs's house."

"The football player?" Bones asked.

"Lawyer now."

Deon walked toward the old house, checking both directions before approaching the gate.

"What's he doing here?" Billy asked.

"Finding Johnny," Alex replied.

They watched Deon peer through a tear in the tarp covering the fence. A man's voice called from somewhere behind the house. Deon answered, though the boys could not hear the words.

The gate opened.

Deon entered.

Bones reached for the door handle.

Alex stopped him. "Wait."

"That's my daddy in there."

"Maybe."

"You heard him."

"I heard a man."

Bones pulled his arm away. "I didn't come this far to sit in your car."

"He could have guards."

"He's an accountant."

"He was Pablo Escobar's accountant."

"That story's bullshit."

"So is the one about Atticus's gator pit?"

Bones hesitated.

Billy killed the engine. The heater went silent.

"We wait for Deon to leave," he said. "If Johnny trusts him, he'll come out calm. If he comes out running, we keep driving."

"For once," Alex said, "Billy has a good idea."

"I'm starting to regret coming."

They waited.

Twenty minutes passed.

The Caprice grew hotter.

Bones tapped the birthday card against his knee until the paper bent. He straightened it, then bent it again.

"What if he don't recognize me?" he asked.

Neither Alex nor Billy answered immediately.

"He sent the card," Billy finally said.

"What if somebody else sent it?"

"Then we find out who."

Bones looked at the house. "My mama used to tell me he stayed gone because men wanted to kill him. Said if he came home, they'd use me to get to him."

"Sounds possible," Alex said.

"She stopped saying it when I got older."

"Maybe she got tired of defending him," Billy said.

Bones nodded.

The side gate opened.

Deon emerged with a leather briefcase in one hand and anger in every step. He stopped outside the gate and turned back toward the property.

"You've got until five tomorrow!" he shouted. "After that, I file the papers!"

A shirtless man appeared behind him.

Alex could see only pieces at first—sun-darkened skin, green running shorts, brown sandals, a cigarette, and the handle of a revolver tucked into the back of his waistband.

The man wore an old gold watch.

A faded military tattoo marked his left wrist.

Bones stopped breathing.

Johnny Malone looked older than the photographs pinned inside Bones's trailer. His hair had thinned and gone gray at the temples. His body had softened, and Florida sunlight had carved deep lines around his eyes. Yet something about him remained unmistakable.

The crooked smile.

Bones had the same one.

"Stay safe, brother," Johnny called.

Deon pushed through the gate.

Alex opened his door.

Bones grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?"

"Going with you."

"I didn't ask."

"You didn't have to."

Billy climbed out on the driver's side.

Alex looked across the roof. "Stay with the car."

Billy shut the door. "I didn't cross the Everglades to guard your Caprice."

The three boys walked toward the house.

Deon noticed them first.

He slowed, studying their faces. His expression changed when he recognized Bones.

"Bones?"

Bones stopped.

His hand disappeared beneath the hem of his shirt before he remembered his pistol was still in the car.

"I didn't do anything."

Deon's gaze moved to Alex, then Billy. "That usually means you did."

"We're looking for somebody," Alex said.

Behind Deon, Johnny stepped closer to the gate.

"Who is it?" he called.

Deon looked back at him.

Then he moved aside.

For seventeen years, Johnny Malone had existed for Bones as postcards, rumors, photographs, and arguments overheard through trailer walls. He had been a criminal, a fugitive, a hero, a coward, and a ghost.

Now he stood less than twenty feet away.

The birthday card trembled in Bones's hand.

Johnny's cigarette dropped slightly between his lips.

The color left his face.

For one fleeting instant, the old man looked frightened.

Then the crooked Malone smile returned.

He opened both arms as though Bones had been gone for an afternoon instead of a lifetime.

"Hey, boys."

Nobody moved.

Johnny's gaze settled on Bones.

The smile faltered.

Bones had spent the entire journey deciding what he would say when he finally saw his father.

Hello had seemed like enough.

Now it was not nearly enough.

CHAPTER NINE

THE GHOST

Johnny Malone continued holding his arms open.
Bones continued staring at him.

The moment stretched until Johnny seemed to understand that his son was not going to cross the yard and embrace him. He lowered his arms, brushed imaginary dust from his green shorts, and looked toward the street.

“You boys come alone?”

“Depends who’s asking,” Alex said.

“I am.”

“Then yes.”

Billy glanced toward the Caprice. “Unless you count whoever owns that Mercedes.”

“Deon’s leaving.”

As if summoned by his name, Deon Childress stepped between them. Up close, he was larger than Alex had expected. He carried himself like a man accustomed to courtrooms but still capable of remembering every football field on which someone had tried to break him.

His gaze settled on the three boys.

“You followed me?”

“We were here first,” Alex said.

Deon looked at Billy. “Billy Dawber?”

Billy nodded cautiously.

“You look like Timmy.”

“People say that.”

“They’re right.”

Deon’s expression softened for an instant. Then he turned to Bones.

“What happened to your face?”

“Merle Shelton.”

"Why did Merle Shelton hit you?"

Bones shoved the birthday card into his pocket. "Long story."

"Does that story involve Dale Brody being shot?"

Nobody answered.

Deon removed his sunglasses.

"I heard about it on the drive over. One Brody dead, one wounded, Jasper Shelton dead at Dawber County General, and half the sheriff's department looking for a stolen Chevrolet."

Bones pointed toward the Caprice. "That Chevy's ours."

"The other Chevrolet."

"Oh."

"Did you shoot Dale?"

Bones glanced at Johnny for the first time since the gate opened.
"He was trying to kill me."

Johnny's casual smile vanished.

"Dale Brody tried to kill my son?"

"He tried to take him," Alex said. "The Sheltons did too."

"What for?"

"The money."

Johnny's eyes shifted to Alex.

"What money?"

"The five million dollars you hid in the Dawber County swamps."

Johnny lit his cigarette.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're not a very good liar," Alex said.

"I'm an excellent liar. You're just not important enough to deserve the effort."

Deon placed a hand against the open gate.

"Johnny, these boys cannot stay here. Half of Dawber County may be looking for them."

"Then they especially shouldn't leave."

"You're not listening."

"I heard every word."

"I have to get to Kenny. Kinder's people claim they found him unconscious in isolation."

Alex stepped forward. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know yet."

"Is he alive?"

"He was when the prison called."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"No. You're staying here."

"That's my father."

"And you arriving at Reform Correctional with two fugitives and a Dawber won't help him."

"We're not fugitives," Billy said.

Deon gave Bones a pointed look. "The sheriff may disagree."

"What did Kinder do to Kenny?" Alex demanded.

"I intend to find out."

Deon turned toward Johnny. "You have until five tomorrow afternoon. After that, I file Bubs's bankruptcy petition, and whatever happens next belongs to you."

"Hold off until I talk to him."

"One day. That's all I can give you."

Deon looked at the boys again.

"Do not go back to Dawber County until I call."

Bones frowned. "You got my number?"

"I've had your number since you were ten."

Johnny inhaled sharply.

Bones heard it. "You been checking on me?"

Deon said nothing.

"Have you?"

"I made sure you and your mother were alive."

"For him?"

Deon's silence answered.

Bones looked at Johnny, but Johnny found something fascinating about the burning end of his cigarette.

"Come on inside," Johnny said. "Standing in the street isn't good for anybody."

Deon pushed past them.

"You are one smooth son of a bitch."

"So I've been told."

Deon put his sunglasses back on and walked toward his Mercedes.

Johnny watched until the car turned the corner. Then he studied every window, rooftop, and parked vehicle on the block before ushering the boys through the gate.

He closed it quickly and slid two heavy locks into place.

"Welcome to Miami."

The backyard resembled a tropical hideout assembled from other people's garbage.

An old swimming pool occupied the center of the yard. Its cracked blue tile had faded almost white, but the water was clean. Two yellow lawn chairs sat beside it beneath a striped umbrella. Empty mojito glasses crowded a rusted patio table. A portable radio played Cuban music beside an overflowing ashtray.

A revolver rested on the table.

Another pistol lay beneath a folded newspaper.

Billy noticed both.

Johnny noticed him noticing.

"Beautiful neighborhood," Johnny said. "Friendly people. Still, a man should respect the unexpected."

Alex looked around. "This is it?"

Johnny removed his cigarette. "This is what?"

"You."

"That is a difficult philosophical question for this early in the day."

"Everybody in Dawber thinks you escaped with millions."

"Everybody in Dawber spends too much time discussing my affairs."

"You live in a dump."

Johnny looked toward the house. "I don't come to your boathouse and criticize the mildew."

"How do you know about my boathouse?"

Johnny smiled.

Alex glanced at Bones.

Bones had not taken his eyes off his father.

Johnny's smile weakened beneath the scrutiny.

"How've you been, son?"

Bones looked around the yard. "You really asking me that?"

"Yes."

"Not good."

Johnny nodded slowly. "How's your mother?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I can't."

"You know where she lives."

"Knowing where somebody lives and being free to knock on the door are different things."

"You invited me here."

"You're turning eighteen."

"Tomorrow."

"I know."

Bones stepped closer. He was several inches taller than Johnny and nearly twice as broad.

"You know my birthday."

"Of course I know."

"You know where I live. You know who I run around with. You even know we steal boat motors."

Billy glanced at Alex. "He knows about that?"

Johnny pointed his cigarette at them.

"Stealing outboard motors is an amateur enterprise with an unacceptable risk-to-profit ratio."

Alex stared at him. "That's your objection?"

"It's my professional assessment."

Bones's face reddened.

"You knew everything," he said. "All this time, you knew everything."

"Not everything."

"You knew enough to send somebody to watch us."

"To protect you."

"You sent Deon?"

"Deon provided occasional information."

"Occasional?"

"Birthdays. School trouble. Your mother's health. The people around you."

Bones's hands curled into fists.

"But you couldn't come yourself."

"No."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?"

Johnny looked toward the pool.

"The Colombians wanted me dead. The Haitians wanted me dead. Some Italians in Tampa wanted me dead for reasons I never completely understood. The federal government wanted me in prison. Mack Donnelly wanted me in the ground."

"Mack's gone," Bones said.

"Men like Mack are never gone. They leave apprentices."

"What about Atticus?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "What about him?"

"People say Mack killed him looking for you."

"That's what happened."

"You let everybody else pay."

The accusation struck harder than a fist.

Johnny took a drag from his cigarette, but his hand was no longer steady.

"I left because staying would've killed more people."

"Leaving killed people too."

Johnny looked at his son.

For once, he had no clever answer.

Alex stepped between them.

"Where's the money?"

Billy sighed. "Alex."

"What? That's why we came."

"That's why you came," Bones said.

"It's why Dale Brody tried to take you. It's why Jasper Shelton is dead. It's why Kinder put Kenny in isolation. Everybody thinks we can find Johnny's money."

Johnny studied Alex with renewed interest.

"Kenny showed you something?"

"I showed him a map."

"What map?"

Alex drew the coded paper from inside his jacket.

Johnny reached for it.

Alex pulled it back.

"You first."

Johnny laughed softly. "Kenny's boy, all right."

"You know what it is?"

"I might."

"Can you read it?"

"I might."

"Where is the five million dollars?"

Johnny's humor disappeared.

"Who told you the amount?"

"Dale Brody."

"Before or after Bones shot him?"

"Before."

Johnny looked at Bones. "You really shot Dale?"

"He had a knife."

"Did you kill him?"

"Don't know."

Johnny nodded as if Bones had passed a test neither of them knew was being given.

"Come inside," he said.

"I'm not giving you the map," Alex replied.

"I was going to feed you."

Bones's stomach growled.

Johnny smiled. "At least one Malone is willing to negotiate."

The inside of the house looked older than the outside.

Small white tiles covered the floor. Dark wood paneling lined the walls. A brown sofa faced a television with rabbit-ear antennas. Stacks of newspapers, financial magazines, and property records occupied every flat surface.

The air smelled of mildew, coffee, stale cigarette smoke, and something cooking too long in the oven.

Johnny led them into the kitchen.

"Make yourselves at home."

A young woman entered wearing denim shorts and a red brassiere. She had dark hair, an angry expression, and a wooden spoon in one hand.

"You left the tamales in the oven."

Johnny glanced at the stove. "I was handling a security situation."

She looked at the three boys.

"Who are they?"

Johnny placed a hand on Bones's shoulder.

Bones stiffened.

"This is my son."

The woman's anger gave way to surprise. "Your son?"

"Bones, meet Carmen."

Bones shook her hand.

Carmen stared at Johnny. "You said you had no family."

"I said my family lived far away."

"You told me your son was a baby."

"He was when I left."

"That was seventeen years ago!"

"Time passes quickly."

She struck him in the chest with the wooden spoon.

Johnny stepped back. "We have guests."

"Now you care?"

"Carmen."

"You could not meet my parents because you were hiding. You could not come to my cousin's wedding because you were hiding. But three children from the swamp can walk through the gate?"

"We ain't children," Bones said.

Carmen looked him up and down. "Not that one."

Johnny opened the oven. Smoke rolled into the room.

"The tamales appear to have suffered."

Carmen shoved the pan onto the counter. Red sauce splashed against the wall.

Billy moved out of range.

"You are an impossible man," she said.

"I have survived because I am difficult to predict."

"You survive because God wants to punish the rest of us."

She grabbed Johnny's hair with one hand.

Johnny shouted and bent at the waist.

Bones lunged forward. "Get off him!"

Carmen pulled.

A thick piece of Johnny's hair came away in her hand.

Everyone froze.

Johnny covered the top of his head.

Carmen held an expensive brown wig.
Bones stared at his father's short gray hair.
Alex began laughing.
Billy tried not to, which made it worse.
Carmen threw the wig into the sink.
"I hate this thing."

She stormed through the kitchen and slammed the screen door behind her. Her voice faded down the side of the house in a rapid stream of Spanish.

Johnny straightened.
"Well," he said, "she took that better than expected."
Bones pointed at the wig. "What the hell is that?"
"A disguise."
"You wear a wig?"

"The Colombians, Haitians, Italians, and federal government all possess photographs of me."

Johnny peeled a false mustache from beneath his nose and dropped it beside the wig.

Billy looked at Alex. "We crossed the state for this man."
Alex wiped tears from his eyes. "Apparently."
Johnny opened a cabinet and removed a bottle of rum.
"Neither of you is funny."

Bones did not laugh.
"You can live here like this," he said, "but you couldn't come check on Mama?"

Johnny put the bottle down.
"I told you. Returning would have endangered you."
"You endangered us by leaving."
"How?"
"We were broke."

Johnny frowned. "I made arrangements."
"Your arrangements didn't pay the light bill."

"I sent money."

"When?"

"Regularly."

"Then somebody stole it."

Johnny's face changed.

"Your mother never received anything?"

"Postcards."

"I sent cash through intermediaries."

"Who?"

Johnny did not answer.

Bones stepped closer.

"Who?"

"I'll look into it."

"You've had seventeen years to look into it."

Johnny pressed both hands against the counter.

"I cannot get those years back."

"No."

"I can't give you an explanation that makes them hurt less."

"No."

"But I did not forget you."

Bones looked away.

Johnny left the kitchen without another word.

Alex moved toward the doorway.

Billy stopped him. "Give them a minute."

"We don't have a minute. Deon said something happened to Kenny."

"And Johnny just learned somebody may have stolen money meant for his family."

"That isn't our problem."

Billy stared at him.

Alex's shoulders lowered. "Fine."

Johnny returned carrying a black duffel bag.

He placed it on the kitchen table.

"You remember why I sent the card?" he asked Bones.

"Early birthday present."

Johnny unzipped the bag.

Bundles of cash filled it from end to end.

Alex moved closer.

Billy whispered, "Good Lord."

Bones stared without touching it.

"How much?" Alex asked.

"Eighty thousand dollars."

Johnny turned the bag toward Bones.

"It's yours."

Bones looked at his father. "Why?"

"Because you're my son."

"That didn't matter yesterday."

"It mattered every day."

"You think this fixes it?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"A start."

Johnny took out one bundle and placed it in Bones's hands.

"Use it as a down payment. Buy a piece of property. Something with road access and room to grow. Land is the only thing they aren't making more of."

"What am I supposed to grow?"

"Value."

Bones frowned.

Johnny looked at Alex. "Help him."

"We didn't drive here to become real-estate agents."

"What is this 'we'?"

"We're partners."

"In boat-motor theft?"

"In whatever comes next."

Johnny's gaze hardened. "My son is finished stealing motors."

"My son," Bones repeated bitterly.

Johnny ignored the tone.

"You buy land," he said. "You hold it. You borrow against it when the value increases. Then you buy more."

"What about the rest of the money?" Alex asked.

Johnny lit another cigarette. "What rest?"

"The five million."

"Different money."

"You know where it is."

"Yes."

The answer came so easily that all three boys fell silent.

Alex unfolded the coded map and placed it on the table.

Johnny looked down.

Recognition passed across his face.

"You can read it," Alex said.

"I can."

"Then take us to it."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I can't return to Dawber County."

"You can. You don't want to."

"Those are not the same thing."

"Everyone back home is drowning because of what you started."

"I saved Dawber County."

"You saved it for a few years. Then you left Kenny, Timmy, Bo Dawber, and everybody else to go to prison while you hid in Miami wearing a wig."

Johnny's eyes flashed.

"You know nothing about what happened."

"I know my father served twelve years. Bones grew up without one. Bubs is losing his church. Billy's family lives under a name everybody hates. And you're sitting beside a swimming pool giving investment advice."

Billy moved between them before either could take another step.

"Every story I ever heard about Vietnam said you ran toward the shooting," Billy told Johnny. "Nobody ever called you a coward back then."

Johnny looked at him.

"My daddy left Dawber County as somebody everybody admired," Billy said. "He came home from Vietnam a different man. Then he died before I ever got the chance to know him."

Johnny's expression darkened.

"Timmy deserved better."

Then tell me what happened to him.

Johnny's anger faded.

He looked at the sons of the men with whom he had gone to war, first in Vietnam and later in Dawber County. They had arrived carrying their fathers' faces, their fathers' grievances, and a map that should never have left the swamp.

"The five million was a reserve," Johnny said. "If the organization collapsed, it was supposed to help the families of every man arrested."

"It didn't," Alex said.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because the arrests happened faster than expected. I was allowed to walk, but once I left the county, Mack Donnelly came hunting. Then Atticus crossed his path."

"And Mack killed him," Bones said.

"Yes. After that, there was no safe way back."

"You could've told somebody where the money was," Alex said.

"I did."

"Who?"

Johnny pointed at the map.

"Your father helped hide it."

Alex shook his head. "Kenny says he doesn't know."

"Kenny knows more than he remembers."

"Who else?"

Johnny hesitated.

"Bubs?" Alex asked.

Johnny's silence confirmed it.

"And the third person?" Billy said.

Johnny crushed his cigarette into an ashtray.

"The third person is dead."

"Atticus?" Bones asked.

"No."

"Who?"

Johnny zipped the duffel bag shut and pushed it toward his son.

"That is a story for another day."

"We came for answers," Alex said.

"And you have one. The money exists."

"Then come home and get it."

Johnny laughed once, but there was no humor in it.

"I return to Dawber County, people die."

"People are already dying," Bones said.

Johnny looked at the bloodless bruise on his son's face.

Bones lifted the duffel bag and set it back down.

"I don't want your eighty thousand dollars."

"Don't be foolish."

"I wanted a father."

The words struck the room silent.

Johnny stared at him.

Bones pushed the bag across the table.

"If the money belongs to all those families, then bring it back to them yourself."

"I told you why I can't."

"No. You told me why you're scared."

Johnny Malone had faced artillery on Hill 861. He had stood against cartels, federal agents, rival smugglers, and men who fed their enemies to alligators.

He could not look his son in the eye.

Alex picked up the coded map.

"Deon gave you until five tomorrow," he said. "Whatever Bubs is about to do, you're afraid of it."

Johnny remained silent.

"So you have a choice. Stay here and let Bubs hand your secret to the federal government—or cross the Alley with us and take control of what you left behind."

Johnny looked toward the doorway through which Carmen had vanished. Beyond it lay his pool, his disguises, his false name, and the small life he had constructed inside exile.

Then he looked at Bones.

"When are you boys leaving?"

"As soon as the Caprice cools down," Billy said.

Johnny glanced through the window at the battered car.

"That thing brought you across the state?"

"Barely."

Johnny reached for the duffel bag.

Alex smiled. "You coming?"

Johnny lifted it from the table.

"No."

Bones turned away.

"But you boys aren't driving back to Dawber County without me."

CHAPTER TEN

THE HIT

Johnny Malone opened the duffel bag again.
“You’ll need this.”

Bones stared at the money he had just refused.

“I told you I don’t want it.”

“You don’t have to want money for it to be useful.”

“What’s it gonna buy us?”

“A better car, for starters.”

Billy looked through the kitchen window at the Caprice. “He has a point.”

Alex folded the coded map and slipped it inside his jacket.

“If you’re coming with us, we leave now.”

“I did not say I was coming with you.”

“You said we weren’t driving back without you.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“It sounds exactly the same.”

Johnny took a bottle of rum from the cabinet and wrapped it inside a shirt. He placed it in the duffel bag beside the cash.

“I’m accompanying you as far as Homestead.”

“Homestead is south,” Billy said. “Dawber County is west.”

“Thank you, Magellan. I know where Homestead is.”

“Then what happens there?”

“I make arrangements.”

Alex planted both hands on the table. “You go to Homestead, we go back to Dawber, and nothing changes.”

“I’ll contact Bubs.”

“He won’t listen to you on the telephone.”

“He used to.”

"That was before his son died from the poison you brought into Dawber County."

Johnny stopped packing.

Bones looked between them. "Bubs's son?"

Johnny reached for his cigarettes.

"Not now."

"When?"

"When we're somewhere safer."

Alex laughed. "Safer than the home you've been hiding in for twelve years?"

Johnny pointed toward the windows.

"This property has reinforced interior walls, three escape routes, an independent water supply, and enough weapons to hold off a small army."

The first burst of gunfire shattered every window facing the street.

Glass exploded across the kitchen.

Billy tackled Bones.

Alex dropped behind the counter as bullets tore through the cabinets above him. Plates burst apart. Cans spun from the shelves. Red tamale sauce sprayed across the wall beside the stain Carmen had already left.

Johnny fell to one knee with the .38 in his hand.

He did not look surprised.

"Small army?" Alex shouted.

"A figure of speech."

Another volley raked the front room.

The television imploded. Wood paneling splintered into the hallway. A round struck the bottle of rum inside the open duffel, filling the kitchen with alcohol and broken glass.

Johnny stared at the ruined bottle.

"Now I'm angry."

He crawled toward the doorway.

Bones raised his head.

Johnny pushed it down. "Stay low."

"Who is it?"

"I haven't asked."

Bullets continued chewing through the house.

Billy dragged Bones behind the refrigerator. Alex crawled after them, slicing his palm on broken glass.

A car idled outside. Men shouted to one another in Haitian Creole.

Johnny recognized the voices.

He closed his eyes briefly.

"The Haitians."

Bones looked through the gap beside the refrigerator. "You said there was a funny story."

"The humor developed poorly."

"What did you do to them?" Alex asked.

"Technically, nothing."

A bullet struck the refrigerator with a metallic crack.

Billy jerked away. "What does technically mean?"

"It means Etienne Baptiste stole money from them and blamed me."

"Did you have the money?"

"For a short time."

"How short?"

"Six years."

Alex stared at him. "You stole their money."

"I recovered misallocated funds."

Another burst punched through the wall.

Bones drew the Colt .45.

Johnny looked at the pistol and then at his son.

"Where did you get that?"

"Ma gave it to me."

"That's mine."

"She said you left it."

"I was coming back for it."

"When?"

Johnny had no answer.

A man outside shouted, "Malone! We come for the money!"

Johnny leaned around the doorway.

"I gave it to Etienne!"

"We don't work for Etienne!"

Johnny looked back at the boys. "That is new information."

The gunfire stopped.

Silence descended so abruptly that Alex heard shell casings rolling across the front porch.

Billy whispered, "They're reloading."

Johnny nodded.

"And moving closer."

He crossed the hallway on his stomach and opened a narrow closet. Coils of black wire, ammunition boxes, and military equipment crowded its shelves.

Alex saw two green blocks inside a wooden crate.

"Are those mines?"

"Defensive improvements."

"You have land mines in your closet?"

"It isn't illegal if they aren't armed."

Johnny took out a spool of wire.

"Are they armed?" Billy asked.

Johnny crawled toward the front door. "They're about to be."

Outside, shoes moved through the grass.

Bones started after his father.

Alex caught his leg. "Where are you going?"

"To help him."

"He knows what he's doing."

"How do you know?"

“Look at him.”

Johnny worked beneath the front window while bullets continued passing through the wall above him. His movements remained calm and exact. He attached the wire to two hidden contacts, stretched it across the entrance, and secured it near the broken remains of the door.

For an instant, Alex saw the young soldier Kenny had described on Hill 861.

The fearlessness had never left Johnny Malone.

It had merely learned to wear a wig.

Johnny crawled back.

“When they come through the door, stay down.”

“What happens?” Bones asked.

“They regret their choices.”

A shadow crossed the front window.

The muzzle of an Uzi appeared through the broken glass.

Johnny fired once.

The weapon disappeared.

A man screamed outside.

Gunfire erupted again.

Billy covered his head. Bones pressed both hands over his ears, the Colt trapped against his cheek. His entire body shook.

Johnny saw him.

“Bones!”

Bones did not respond.

“Look at me!”

A bullet tore through the refrigerator door and sent milk spraying across the floor.

Bones squeezed his eyes shut.

Johnny crawled to him and grabbed his shirt.

“You hear me, son?”

Bones opened his eyes.

"When they stop firing, you shoot through that window. Three rounds. No more."

"I can't see 'em."

"You don't have to hit anybody. We need their heads down."

Bones tried to nod.

"Three rounds," Johnny repeated. "Then follow Alex and Billy into the back bedroom."

"What about you?"

"I'll be behind you."

The shooting stopped.

Johnny slapped the floor. "Now!"

Bones rose to one knee.

He let out a roar and fired.

The first round struck the front wall.

The second passed through the shattered window.

A man outside cried out.

Bones continued pulling the trigger.

Johnny seized the weapon after the fifth shot and forced the barrel upward.

"I said three!"

"I hit one!"

"You nearly hit the neighbors!"

"They're shooting at us!"

"And Mrs. Alvarez next door isn't!"

Footsteps thundered onto the porch.

A man hit the tripwire.

The explosion lifted the front door from its frame.

Heat and pressure swept through the house. The kitchen ceiling cracked. A wall of dust, smoke, and broken plaster rolled down the hallway.

Johnny pushed the boys toward the back bedroom.

"Move!"

The bedroom door barely closed before gunfire resumed.

Johnny locked it.

A second later, bullets punched through the wood.

Billy and Bones shoved an oak dresser across the floor. It struck the door as someone hit it from the other side.

Alex searched the room.

One window faced the backyard, but iron security bars covered it.

"We're trapped."

Johnny opened the closet.

"We're prepared."

Behind a row of tropical shirts, an attic ladder hung from the ceiling. Johnny pulled a cord. Wooden steps unfolded into the closet.

Billy stared at him. "You planned this?"

"I plan everything."

The bedroom door shook.

Bones climbed first. The ladder groaned beneath him.

"Your mother feeding you concrete?" Johnny asked.

Bones disappeared into the attic.

Billy followed.

Alex placed one foot on the ladder, then looked back.

"What about the eighty thousand?"

Johnny threw him the duffel bag.

Alex caught it against his chest. "You're trusting me with this?"

"No. Bones is directly above you."

The dresser slid several inches from the door.

Johnny climbed behind Alex and pulled the ladder upward.

Darkness swallowed them.

The attic was hot enough to burn their lungs. Insulation clung to their clothes. Narrow planks ran above the ceiling joists toward a small window at the side of the house.

Johnny flicked open his military lighter.

In the weak flame, Alex saw wires running in every direction.

Some disappeared through drilled holes in the beams. Others led to small wrapped packages attached to the roof supports.

Alex stopped.

"You wired the whole house."

"I told you I plan ahead."

"You're gonna blow it up?"

"It no longer seems like a sound real-estate investment."

Bones peered through the attic window.

"The street looks clear."

"They're entering through the front," Johnny said. "They think the explosion was the only surprise."

A crash sounded beneath them.

Men shouted from inside the house.

Johnny opened a small metal box attached to one rafter. Inside were blasting caps, a timer, and a white fuse.

Billy stared at it. "How much explosive is in here?"

"Enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Move."

Bones forced open the attic window.

The neighboring yard lay several feet below. A row of Eureka palms concealed most of the side passage from the street.

"Go feet first," Johnny said.

Bones squeezed through the opening. His shirt caught on a nail and tore across the back before he dropped into the shrubbery.

Billy followed.

Alex pushed the duffel through before climbing onto the sill.

Johnny caught his arm.

"Where are the car keys?"

Alex reached into his pocket and produced them.

"Keep the engine running," Johnny said. "Do not wait if the Haitians come around the side."

"What about you?"

"I'll be there."

"You just said not to wait."

"If I'm not there, I won't care."

The bedroom door crashed open below them.

Johnny touched the lighter flame to the fuse.

It sparked.

Alex watched the fire begin its slow journey along the white line.

"You're crazy."

"Your father used to say that."

Johnny shoved him through the window.

Alex landed badly, rolled across the dirt, and struck the fence with his shoulder.

Bones pulled him upright.

"Where's Pa?"

"Coming."

Billy had already reached the sidewalk. He waved frantically.

"Car!"

They ran.

Men shouted inside the house.

Alex expected bullets to follow, but the Haitians were still searching the rooms. Smoke billowed through the broken front windows. A body lay motionless near the porch.

The Caprice seemed impossibly far away.

Billy reached it first.

"Keys!"

Alex threw them.

Billy unlocked the driver's door, slid across the bench seat, and started the engine. The starter ground twice before the motor caught.

Bones climbed into the front passenger seat.

Alex threw the duffel onto the floor and dove into the back.

Johnny was still inside the yard.

“Go!” he shouted.

Billy shifted into drive.

Alex grabbed his shoulder. “Wait!”

A Haitian gunman appeared around the side of the house.

Bones leaned through the passenger window and fired.

The man dropped behind a parked car.

Johnny cleared the fence and sprinted toward them with surprising speed for a man his age. The false mustache still clung to one side of his face.

Billy began moving.

Johnny reached the Caprice and pulled open the rear door. One foot slipped on the pavement. Alex grabbed his wrist and hauled him inside as Billy accelerated.

Gunfire followed them.

The rear window shattered.

Johnny grunted and fell across the seat.

Alex saw blood.

“You’re hit.”

“Not again.”

“Where?”

Johnny reached behind himself. His fingers came away red.

Bones looked back. “They shot you in the ass?”

“Drive faster.”

“You got shot in the ass in Vietnam too,” Bones said.

Johnny pressed a magazine against the wound. “Your mother had no discretion.”

Billy turned hard at the intersection. Tires screamed against the pavement.

The house disappeared behind them.

Bones aimed through the empty rear window and fired again.

Johnny slapped the pistol downward.

“Stop shooting!”

"They're behind us!"

"You're firing at an entire neighborhood!"

The sky turned orange.

A deep explosion struck the Caprice like a wave.

The back of Johnny's house rose in fire. Windows burst outward. A section of roof lifted, folded, and collapsed into the flames. Black smoke rolled above the palm trees.

The pursuing car swerved to avoid debris.

Billy drove through another intersection without slowing.

Sirens began somewhere in the distance.

Alex stared through the shattered window.

"You blew up your house."

Johnny removed the remaining strip of false mustache.

"It was time to move."

"What about Carmen?" Billy asked.

"She left before the shooting."

"All your things?"

Johnny nodded toward the duffel bag. "Everything important is in there."

Bones looked at the bag. "The eighty thousand?"

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

"Passports. Account numbers. Property records. Names of people who owe me favors."

"Guns?" Alex asked.

"No guns."

A metallic object shifted inside the bag.

Johnny sighed. "One gun."

Billy glanced at the rearview mirror.

"Where are we going?"

"Hospital," Alex said.

"No hospitals," Johnny replied.

"You've been shot."

"It passed through."

"Through your ass," Bones said.

"Yes, thank you."

"What if you bleed to death?"

"Then I'll die facedown, which seems appropriate."

Billy made another turn and merged into traffic.

Police cars raced toward Little Havana in the opposite lanes.

Johnny lowered himself against the seat. Color had drained from his face, but his voice remained steady.

"Take Flagler west. There's a warehouse near the airport."

"What's Sanchez Properties?" Alex asked.

Johnny's face darkened.

"A company that belonged to the finest man I ever knew."

"Who was Sanchez?" Billy asked.

"One of us. He fought beside your fathers in Vietnam."

"What happened to him?"

"Atticus Shelton killed him in 1991."

Bones shifted in his seat. "People say Atticus was the most feared man in Dawber County."

"He was," Johnny said. "But Sanchez was the only man Atticus never frightened."

"Why did Atticus kill him?"

Johnny looked at Billy through the rearview mirror.

"Because Bo Dawber ordered him to."

Billy stiffened. "That's a lie."

"Bo made Sanchez's murder look like the cartel did it. Everybody believed him."

"But you didn't," Alex said.

"No. I knew Bo was responsible."

"So you went to the federal government."

Johnny stared through the shattered rear window at the smoke rising over Miami.

"I gave the feds what they needed to destroy Bo's empire. I wanted revenge against Bo. I never intended to send my friends to prison."

"But they went anyway," Bones said.

Johnny's voice fell quiet.

"They were collateral damage in a war I thought I could control."

"Drive," Johnny said. "It's time I went home."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALLIGATOR ALLEY

Sanchez Properties occupied a windowless warehouse behind Miami International Airport.

There was no company sign, mailbox, or indication that anyone conducted business there. A twelve-foot fence enclosed the property. Security cameras watched the steel gate from three directions.

Billy stopped the bullet-riddled Caprice beside a keypad.

Johnny leaned forward from the back seat and entered six numbers. Nothing happened.

He entered them again.

A red light turned green. The gate rolled sideways.

"You forget the code?" Bones asked.

"I've been shot. Allow for typographical errors."

"You can't make a typo with numbers."

"Drive inside, Billy."

Billy guided the Caprice through the gate. It closed automatically behind them.

The warehouse appeared abandoned. Dust covered the loading dock, and weeds grew through cracks in the pavement. Every exterior window had been sealed with concrete blocks.

Billy stopped beside a steel door.

"Somebody expecting us?" he asked.

"No."

"Then who opened the gate?"

"I did."

Johnny struggled with the rear door.

Alex helped him stand. Blood had soaked through the magazine Johnny held against his wound.

Bones removed the duffel bag from the floor.

"Does Sanchez own this place?"

Johnny looked at the faded lettering above the loading dock.

"He did."

"Where is he?"

"Dead."

The answer silenced everyone.

Johnny entered another code beside the steel door. A lock disengaged with a heavy metallic clunk.

Overhead lights illuminated the warehouse one row at a time.

A black Cadillac sat near the center. A white cargo van and an old military Jeep occupied the spaces beside it. Steel cabinets lined one wall. Maps of Florida, the Caribbean, Colombia, and Central America covered another.

A medical table stood beneath bright lights.

"This is yours?" Alex asked.

"It belongs to the company."

"Which belongs to who?"

"Complicated men don't ask simple questions about ownership."

"You own it."

"I have access to it."

Johnny removed his bloodstained shirt and lowered himself face-down onto the medical table.

He pointed toward a cabinet.

"Top drawer."

Alex found antiseptic, bandages, gauze, tape, and several bottles of medication.

"You planned on getting shot?"

"I planned on eventually needing medical care without explaining myself to a hospital."

"You've done this before."

"More times than I recommend."

Alex cut away the fabric around the wound.

Bones stared.

"You really got shot in the ass."

"Thank you for confirming it."

"Same place as Vietnam?"

"Approximately."

"You have two scars?"

"Symmetry is important."

Alex poured antiseptic onto a cloth.

"This will hurt."

"I've survived worse."

Alex pressed the cloth against the wound.

Johnny's hands clamped around the table.

"Gentler."

"You survived Vietnam."

"The Vietnamese were gentler."

Billy walked around the Cadillac. The windows were darkly tinted, and the tires appeared new. He found the keys in a locked drawer beneath the workbench.

The drawer also contained bundles of cash, passports bearing different names, property records, and two pistols.

"What is this place?" Billy asked.

"A contingency."

"For what?"

Johnny looked toward the damaged Caprice.

"The day my past found me."

Bones placed the duffel bag beside the medical table.

"Looks like it found you."

A framed photograph hung between the maps.

Five young servicemen stood together in Vietnam. Their uniforms were covered in mud, and exhaustion had hollowed their faces.

Johnny Malone.

Kenny Gregory.

Timmy Dawber.

Thomas "Tommy" Scully.

Rodrigo Sanchez.

Bones approached the photograph.

"Which one is Sanchez?"

Johnny pointed toward the man standing at his right shoulder.

"He was your friend?"

"My brother."

"Not really."

"Blood isn't the only thing that makes brothers."

Billy studied the picture of Timmy.

His father had left Dawber County as a popular leader, baseball star, and one of the most admired young men ever to graduate from Dawber High School. The man in the photograph was thinner and harder, but something remained in his eyes that later photographs had lost.

"He looks normal," Billy said.

"He wasn't," Johnny replied. "None of us were by then."

"But he wasn't crazy."

"Your father came home wounded in a place nobody knew how to treat. People called him crazy because that was easier than admitting what the war had done to him."

"Bo tried to help him."

"So did all of us."

"Bo said nothing worked."

Johnny looked at Billy but did not answer.

Bones pointed to Sanchez.

"What happened to him?"

"Atticus Shelton killed him in 1991."

"Atticus?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Johnny's expression darkened.

"Because Bo Dawber ordered him to."

Billy turned away from the photograph. "That's a lie."

"No."

"Bo said the cartel killed Sanchez."

"That's what he wanted everyone to believe."

"You don't know what Bo wanted."

"I know exactly what happened."

"Were you there?"

"No."

"Then you don't know."

Johnny sat up carefully while Alex taped clean gauze over the wound.

"Sanchez and I established the smuggling operation. We knew we couldn't move anything through Dawber County without Bo's permission."

"It was his county," Billy said.

"No county belongs to one man."

"He protected it."

"He demanded sixty percent of everything we earned."

"That was the deal."

"It was extortion."

"You agreed to it."

"We agreed because refusing Bo wasn't an option."

Alex finished the bandage. "So you lied to him."

Johnny looked at him.

"If the operation earned ten million dollars, we might report four million. The rest went through private accounts, shell companies, property investments, and cash reserves."

"Sanchez Properties," Alex said.

"Yes."

"How long did you skim from Bo?" Billy asked.

"Years."

Billy's face reddened.

"Then you stole from him."

"Bo received more money than he could spend in ten lifetimes."

"That doesn't mean the rest belonged to you."

"Johnny and Sanchez built the network," Alex said.

Billy turned on him. "This ain't your family."

"It became my family when Kenny went to prison."

Johnny raised one hand.

"Enough."

He looked back at the photograph.

"Bo brought Mack Donnelly into the organization to launder his share. Mack examined the books and discovered the real revenue."

"He told Bo," Alex said.

"Yes."

"And Bo had Sanchez killed."

"Yes."

"Why not kill you too?"

"I was the accountant. I knew where the money went, which officials had been paid, and how every part of the operation worked. Killing me would have endangered the entire organization."

"But Sanchez was expendable," Bones said.

Johnny's jaw tightened.

"Not to me."

"What proof did you have?" Billy asked.

"Atticus took Sanchez's watch."

"Did you find it?"

"No."

"Then it wasn't proof."

"Cartel executions were messages. They wanted credit. Sanchez's death was staged to resemble one of their hits, but the details were wrong."

"That gave you enough reason to blame Bo?"

"It gave me enough reason to destroy him."

Billy stared at Johnny.

"You were the informant."

"I gave the FBI the records they needed to dismantle Bo's empire."

"You sent my uncle to prison."

"I wanted revenge against Bo. I never intended for Kenny, Bubs, and the others to pay for it."

"But they did."

Johnny looked toward Alex.

"Yes."

Billy threw the Cadillac keys onto the workbench.

"Drive yourself."

He walked toward the loading dock.

Alex picked up the keys.

"He'll come back."

"You sound sure."

"He wants answers more than he wants to leave."

Johnny removed the framed photograph from the wall and placed it inside the duffel bag.

Billy returned several minutes later.

He held out his hand.

Alex gave him the keys.

"I'm driving," Billy said.

Nobody argued. Tiana Ross was forty miles west of Miami when Deon Childress called for the third time.

She guided her white BMW through the afternoon traffic with one hand while pressing the telephone against her ear with the other.

"I'm already on Alligator Alley," she said.

"Where exactly?"

"I passed the service plaza about ten minutes ago."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

Deon was silent.

"Why do you keep asking me that?"

"I need you to listen carefully. Kenny Gregory was removed from isolation after an alleged suicide attempt."

"Alleged?"

"Kenny didn't try to kill himself."

"How do you know?"

"Because Kenny Gregory would kill everybody else in the building first."

"If anything happens to me, call my brother." "Willis?" "Don't sound so surprised."

"You told me never to involve him in your legal work." "This isn't legal work anymore."

Tiana heard voices behind Deon. A metal door slammed.

"Where are you?"

"Still at the prison."

"I thought you were meeting me outside."

"Plans changed."

Something in his voice frightened her.

"Deon, what is happening?"

"I need you to bring the emergency petition, Kenny's representation agreement, and every note from our investigation."

"They're in my briefcase."

"Do not show them to anyone."

"I know how attorney-client privilege works."

"This is not about privilege. There are people inside this prison who cannot know what we've discovered."

"What people?"

The connection crackled.

"Deon?"

"Turn around."

"What?"

"Go back to Miami."

"You just told me to come."

"I'm telling you not to now."

"Why?"

The connection became silent.

Tiana looked at the screen.

The call had ended.

She tried Deon again.

The call went directly to voicemail.

Rain began striking the windshield.

Behind her, a black Ford Crown Victoria maintained a steady distance. Trent Dietrich watched Tiana's brake lights through the rain.

He had been following her since she left Miami.

For several weeks, Tiana believed he was her boyfriend. In reality, Trent was a corrections intelligence officer working directly for Warden Kinder. Their chance meeting at a Miami Beach bar had been arranged. Their dates had been surveillance sessions disguised by alcohol, expensive meals, and carefully rationed affection.

Tiana had told him everything she knew about Deon.

She had not known she was being interrogated.

Trent's telephone rang.

"Where is she?" Kinder demanded.

"Thirty miles from the prison."

"Deon made a call."

"I saw her answer."

"What did he tell her?"

"I don't know."

"Is she still heading west?"

"Yes."

"Then stop her."

Trent tightened his grip on the telephone. "How?"

"I don't care."

"There are cameras at the prison. If she arrives and disappears—"

"She cannot arrive."

"What do you want me to do?"

Kinder's voice lowered.

"Make it look like an accident."

The call ended.

Trent watched Tiana's BMW.

Visibility continued deteriorating. Rain turned the road into a white blur. Canals and swamps stretched beyond the guardrails on both sides.

Alligator Alley offered few places to stop.

It offered many places to disappear.

Trent accelerated. Billy drove the Cadillac west beneath the approaching storm.

Johnny lay across the rear seat with his head against the door. Bones sat beside him, guarding the duffel bag. Alex occupied the front passenger seat with Kenny's coded map inside his jacket.

The Miami skyline had disappeared.

Concrete gave way to canals, sawgrass, and the long straight road through the Everglades.

Johnny reached for a cigarette.

Bones took the pack from him.

"What?"

"You've been shot."

"In an unrelated location."

"You ain't smoking."

Johnny started to object, then saw his son's expression.

He lowered his hand.

Billy noticed in the mirror.

"He listens to you."

"First time," Bones said.

"Don't become accustomed to it," Johnny replied.

Alex unfolded the map.

"You'll help us find the five million?"

Johnny watched the dark islands passing beyond the glass.

"If it's still there."

"You said you knew where it was."

"I know where we buried it. That was twelve years ago."

"Who could've moved it?"

"Bubs."

Bones frowned. "You left five million dollars with a preacher?"

"I left him access to it. The money was supposed to provide for the families after the arrests—mortgages, legal expenses, medical bills, whatever our people needed."

"Then why is everybody still poor?" Alex asked.

"Because Bubs decided the money was poisoned."

"Blood money," Alex said.

"That's what he calls it."

"He never touched it?"

"According to Deon, not one dollar."

"Then it's still in the swamp."

"Unless somebody else found it."

Alex leaned closer. "What about the rest of your money?"

Johnny looked at him.

"What rest?"

"The millions everybody says you hid overseas."

"You ask expensive questions."

"Swiss accounts?"

Johnny turned toward the window.

"Accounts I haven't touched since 1991."

"Why not?"

"Because the DEA never stopped watching me. I made an agreement with the FBI, not the DEA. As far as the DEA is concerned, I escaped with a fortune they couldn't recover."

"And Mack Donnelly," Billy said.

Johnny's jaw tightened.

"Mack doesn't care about the law anymore. He cares about proving I beat him."

"So the money just sits there?" Bones asked.

"Until I settle matters in Dawber County and know you're safe."

Alex shook his head. "I don't just want the five million."

Johnny looked at him.

"I want you to teach us."

"Teach you what?"

"How to rebuild the operation without making the mistakes you and our fathers made."

Johnny studied the three boys.

"You think our mistakes were accounting errors?"

"I think you built the most profitable smuggling network in Florida."

"And then I destroyed it."

"That means you know how to do both."

Rain struck the windshield.

Billy switched on the wipers. They dragged across the glass without clearing it.

"Storm's getting bad."

Johnny looked past him.

Several hundred yards ahead, a white BMW had reduced its speed.

A black Crown Victoria followed closely behind it.

"Back off," Johnny said.

Billy eased off the accelerator.

The Crown Victoria moved into the passing lane.

Instead of overtaking the BMW, it remained beside it.

"What's he doing?" Alex asked.

Johnny sat upright.

"Nothing good." Tiana could no longer see the road behind her.

The black Crown Victoria appeared beside her through the rain. Its tinted passenger window lowered.

She recognized the driver.

"Trent?"

She lowered her own window several inches.

Rain blew into the BMW.

Trent pointed toward the shoulder and motioned for her to pull over.

Tiana raised the telephone.

He shook his head and pointed again.

She called him.

He answered.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I've been following you."

"Why?"

"Deon called me. He said you shouldn't go to the prison."

"He told me the same thing."

"Pull over."

"Why?"

"There's something wrong with your rear tire."

Tiana glanced toward the dashboard.

No warning light appeared.

"The car feels fine."

"It's wobbling. Pull over before you lose control."

There was nowhere safe to stop. A narrow shoulder separated the highway from a high chain-link barrier. Beyond it lay a canal filled with black water.

"I'll stop at the next service area."

"Pull over now."

His voice had changed.

The attentive man she knew had disappeared. What remained was cold and commanding.

"Who told you I was going to the prison?"

Trent did not answer.

"Deon didn't call you."

"Tiana, pull over."

"You've been following me since Miami."

"Do what I said."

She accelerated.

Trent matched her speed.

Then he steered toward her lane.

The Crown Victoria struck the BMW's left side.

Tiana screamed.

Her car swerved toward the barrier. She corrected and regained control.

"Are you insane?" she shouted into the telephone.

Trent hit her again.

The BMW fishtailed across the wet pavement.

Tiana dropped the phone and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

In the mirror, headlights approached rapidly from behind.

Billy saw the Crown Victoria strike the BMW

"He's running her off the road."

Johnny grabbed the back of the front seat. "Slow down."

"If we slow down, he'll push her through the fence."

"Then pass them."

"There's no room."

The BMW swerved into their lane.

Billy hit the brakes.

The Cadillac began sliding.

"Don't fight it!" Johnny shouted. "Steer into the skid!"

Billy turned the wheel.

The rear of the Cadillac swung sideways. Alex braced himself against the dashboard. Bones pulled the duffel bag over his head.

The Crown Victoria stopped abruptly across the roadway.

Billy had nowhere to go.

The Cadillac's front corner smashed into the rear of Trent's car.

Metal folded.

The impact drove the Crown Victoria forward.

It struck the BMW near its rear passenger wheel.

Tiana's car spun across the shoulder.

The BMW crashed through the chain-link barrier and disappeared over the embankment.

A tremendous splash rose from the canal.

The Cadillac rotated once and stopped against the guardrail.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Steam escaped from beneath the crumpled hood.

Johnny raised his head.

"Everybody alive?"

"My nose hurts," Bones said.

"You're alive."

Billy's hands remained locked around the steering wheel.

"I hit them."

"The black car stopped in front of you," Johnny said.

"The woman went into the water."

Alex opened his door.

Johnny grabbed him. "Wait."

"We have to help her."

"The man in the Crown Victoria did that deliberately."

"How do you know?"

"Because accidents don't usually require three attempts."

Trent's door opened.

He climbed out holding a pistol.

"Down!" Johnny shouted.

A bullet struck the Cadillac's windshield.

Billy ducked beneath the steering wheel.

Bones drew the Colt.

Johnny caught his wrist. "Not through the glass."

Alex crawled across the front seat and exited through the driver's door, keeping the Cadillac between himself and Trent.

Bones followed.

The BMW was already sinking.

Only its roof remained above the black water.

Tiana appeared through the broken driver's window. She gasped, grabbed the roof, and tried to pull herself free.

Something moved in the canal behind her.

An alligator's head broke the surface.

"Bones!" Alex shouted.

Bones looked toward Trent.

Another shot struck the Cadillac.

Then he looked at Tiana.

He ran toward the embankment.

"Cover him!" Johnny ordered.

Billy reached beneath the seat for the second pistol from the warehouse. He fired twice toward the Crown Victoria.

Trent disappeared behind his car.

Bones slid down the muddy bank.

Tiana clung to the sinking BMW. Water had reached her shoulders. Her clothes and hair dragged against her as she attempted to climb onto the roof.

"Help me!"

"I'm comin'!"

Bones waded into the canal.

The mud swallowed his legs to the knees.

Alex reached the fence opening and saw the alligator approaching from behind Tiana.

“Bones, hurry!”

“I am!”

The BMW shifted.

Tiana lost her grip and disappeared beneath the surface.

Bones lunged forward and caught her arm as she resurfaced. She seized his shirt with both hands.

“Don’t pull me under!”

“There’s something behind me!”

“I know.”

The alligator moved closer.

Bones raised the Colt.

The animal submerged.

“Where did it go?” Tiana screamed.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“It went underwater!”

Bones wrapped one arm around her and dragged her toward the embankment.

The mud fought every step.

Tiana looked back.

The BMW disappeared beneath the water.

Bubbles rose where it had been.

Alex climbed partway down the slope and reached for her.

A shot struck the fence near his head.

Trent had left the cover of the Crown Victoria.

He walked toward the embankment with his pistol aimed at Tiana.

Johnny fired from beside the Cadillac.

His round struck the pavement near Trent’s foot.

Trent turned and fired back.

Johnny collapsed behind the engine block.

“Pa!” Bones shouted.

Trent continued toward the canal.

Tiana recognized him.

“Trent?”

He aimed at her.

The truth arrived before the bullet.

Their meeting had not been accidental. Their dates had not been romance. Every question about Deon, Kenny, and the prison had been part of an assignment.

“Why?” she asked.

Trent hesitated.

That moment saved her.

Bones pushed Tiana into Alex’s reach, turned, and fired the Colt.

The round struck Trent in the chest.

He staggered.

Bones fired again.

Trent fell near the broken fence.

His pistol slid across the wet pavement and disappeared into the canal.

The alligator surfaced.

It was less than ten feet from Bones.

Tiana screamed.

Bones shoved her up the embankment and scrambled after her. Alex caught Tiana beneath both arms and pulled. Billy reached through the fence and helped drag her onto the shoulder.

Bones climbed last.

The alligator lunged from the canal.

Its jaws closed on the heel of his boot.

Bones kicked free, leaving the boot behind.

The animal rolled backward into the black water.

Bones collapsed beside Tiana.

She coughed canal water onto the pavement.

"You all right?" he asked.

She stared at him.

"You shot Trent."

"He was gonna kill you."

"That was my boyfriend."

Bones looked toward the body.

"You need better taste in men."

Johnny searched Trent's pockets while Alex checked the highway for approaching traffic.

They had only minutes before another vehicle arrived.

Johnny found Department of Corrections identification, an unmarked badge, two telephones, and a small photograph of Tiana entering Deon's law office.

He handed the photograph to her.

Tiana stared at it.

"This was taken weeks ago."

"He was watching you," Johnny said.

"Who are you?"

"Somebody who knows what surveillance looks like."

She looked at the blood on his trousers, the revolver in his hand, and the three young men surrounding him.

Then she recognized Alex.

"You're Kenny Gregory's son."

Alex frowned. "How do you know me?"

"I work for Deon Childress."

Johnny stepped closer. "Why were you going to the prison?"

"Deon called. He said something happened to Kenny."

"What?"

"They claimed he attempted suicide. Deon said it was a lie."

Alex's face hardened.

"Where's Deon now?"

"At the prison."

Johnny looked at Trent's identification.

"Not for long."

Tiana tried standing. Her knees failed.

Bones caught her.

"Easy."

She looked at him. "What's your name?"

"Bones."

"Of course it is."

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Billy looked east. "Police."

"Not necessarily," Johnny said.

"What do we do?" Alex asked.

Johnny surveyed the wreckage.

The Cadillac could still move, but steam poured from the damaged radiator. The Crown Victoria's rear had collapsed. Tiana's BMW was gone.

"We take the Cadillac."

"It won't make Dawber," Billy said.

"It only needs to get us off the highway."

"What about Trent?"

Johnny looked toward the canal.

Johnny looked toward Trent's body.

"Bones, help me move him."

Tiana stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping you from spending the night explaining why your boyfriend followed you onto Alligator Alley and tried to murder you."

"We need to call the police."

Johnny held up Trent's Department of Corrections identification.

"He was the police—or close enough that the distinction won't save you."

"Moving his body makes us criminals."

Johnny looked at the ruined cars, the broken fence, and the dark canal below.

“That decision was made when he fired the first shot.”

Bones took Trent beneath the arms. Johnny grabbed his legs, wincing as the movement pulled against his wound.

Together, they carried him through the opening in the fence.

Tiana followed. “Stop! You can’t do this!”

Johnny searched Trent’s pockets, removing his telephones, identification, keys, and the photograph of Tiana outside Deon’s office.

Then he and Bones rolled the body down the muddy embankment.

Trent struck the water facedown.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

A dark shape moved beneath the surface.

Then another.

Trent’s body jerked sideways.

Tiana covered her mouth.

An alligator seized his shoulder and pulled him into deeper water. A second animal struck from the opposite direction. The canal erupted in mud, blood, and white foam.

When the surface became still again, Trent was gone.

Johnny looked at Bones.

“That man came here to kill an innocent woman. Don’t waste your conscience mourning him.”

Bones stared into the canal.

“I wasn’t.”

Johnny turned toward the Cadillac.

“Good. Because the gators weren’t either.”

The sirens grew closer.

Bones helped Tiana into the back seat.

Johnny climbed beside her. Alex and Bones crowded into the remaining space while Billy returned to the wheel.

The Cadillac started.

Steam rose over the hood.

Billy drove through the broken fence opening, crossed the shoulder, and returned to the highway.

Tiana watched Trent's body disappear through the shattered rear window.

Everything she believed that morning had vanished into the canal with her BMW.

Her relationship.

Her career.

Her safety.

Possibly Deon.

She looked at Johnny.

"You still haven't told me who you are."

Johnny pressed a hand against his wounded side.

"Johnny Malone."

Tiana went pale.

Deon had spoken that name only a few times, always carefully, as though saying it too loudly might summon something from Dawber County's past.

"You're supposed to be gone."

"So is Scully," Johnny said. "People are often mistaken."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Dawber County."

"I need to get to Deon."

"So do we."

Billy looked at the temperature gauge.

"We need another vehicle first."

Johnny looked toward the western horizon.

The storm was passing. A thin strip of red sunlight appeared beneath the clouds.

Behind them, police vehicles approached the collision.

Ahead waited the prison, Kenny, Deon, Warden Kinder, and the county Johnny had destroyed twelve years earlier.

Bones sat barefoot beside Tiana, his empty boot filling with canal water on the floor.

“You saved my life,” she said.

Bones shrugged.

“You would’ve done the same.”

“No,” Tiana replied honestly. “I don’t think I would have.”

Bones smiled.

The Cadillac continued west, leaking coolant and carrying five people who had not intended to become allies.

They had not yet crossed into Dawber County.

The war had already reached them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE COUNTY LINE

The Cadillac began overheating twenty miles from Dawber County.

Billy watched the temperature needle climb toward the red.

"We're losing coolant."

Johnny looked through the cracked windshield at the steam rising from the hood.

"Keep moving."

"If the engine seizes, we'll stop permanently."

"If the police find that wreck before we leave Alligator Alley, the engine will be the least of our problems."

Tiana sat between Johnny and Bones in the back seat. Her wet clothes clung to her skin. Mud covered her legs, and the cut above her left eye had swollen.

She held Trent's two telephones and Department of Corrections identification inside a plastic sandwich bag.

Her briefcase had gone into the canal with the BMW.

Every document Deon instructed her to bring was underwater.

"What did you do with Trent's body?" she asked.

Nobody answered.

She looked at Bones.

"You know."

Bones stared at his one remaining boot.

"I helped Pa move him."

"Where?"

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"He went into the canal," Johnny said.

"You fed him to the alligators."

"I removed an immediate problem."

"He was already dead."

"That condition prevented him from objecting."

Tiana stared at him.

Johnny's face showed no remorse.

"You destroyed evidence."

"I preserved the evidence that matters."

He nodded toward the plastic bag.

"His identification, telephones, keys, and the photograph proving he had been following you. A dead corrections officer on the highway would have brought every law-enforcement agency in Florida down on us before we reached Dawber County."

"You made me part of a cover-up."

"Trent made you part of a murder attempt."

"That doesn't give us the right to dispose of his body."

"No. It gives us the need."

Tiana turned toward Bones.

"And you went along with it?"

"He tried to kill you."

"You could've said no."

Bones glanced at his father.

"No one says no to him."

Johnny's expression tightened.

"Plenty of people have."

"Where are they?" Tiana asked.

Johnny looked through the window at the black canal running beside them.

"That depends which people you mean."

The temperature needle touched the red.

Billy pulled onto the shoulder.

The Cadillac rolled to a stop beneath a highway sign warning motorists not to approach or feed alligators.

Bones looked back toward the canal.

"Little late for that."

Steam erupted when Billy lifted the hood.

Johnny removed his clean shirt and tied it around his waist before examining the radiator. The collision had bent the front frame inward. A narrow split leaked coolant in a steady stream.

"We need water," Billy said.

"We're surrounded by it," Bones replied.

Billy looked toward the canal. "You first."

Alex searched the trunk and found a tool kit, two gallons of drinking water, and a container of radiator sealant.

"Sanchez planned for everything," he said.

Johnny took the container.

"Sanchez believed preparation was the difference between an escape and a funeral."

Tiana stood beside the car, attempting to call Deon.

His telephone went directly to voicemail.

She tried his private number.

No answer.

Then she called the main office at the law firm.

"This is Tiana Ross. Has Mr. Childress called?"

She listened.

"When did he leave?"

Another pause.

"Did he say where he was going?"

Tiana closed her eyes.

"Yes, I know he went to the prison. I'm asking whether he returned."

The receptionist answered.

"No. Don't call the police yet. If he contacts the office, tell him to call me immediately."

She hung up.

Johnny watched her.

"He never left the prison."

"You don't know that."

"His Mercedes is still there."

"How do you know?"

"The firm tracks company vehicles."

Johnny looked west toward Dawber County.

"You said he called you."

"He told me to bring Kenny's representation agreement, the emergency petition, and every note from our investigation. Then he called again and ordered me to turn around."

"Something changed while he was inside."

"He sounded frightened."

"Was Deon easily frightened?"

"No."

"Then assume the threat was real."

Tiana looked at Deon's number on her telephone.

"Before the call ended, he told me something else."

"What?"

"If anything happened to him, I should call his brother."

Johnny stopped pouring the sealant.

"Willis."

"You know him?"

"I knew him when he was a boy."

"He isn't a boy now."

"No."

"He runs the Maroon Gang."

"I know."

"Deon told me never to involve Willis in legal matters."

"This stopped being a legal matter when Kinder sent Trent to kill you."

Tiana looked down at the plastic bag.

"Deon and Willis barely spoke."

"That doesn't mean they didn't love each other."

"How do you know?"

Johnny returned his attention to the radiator.

"Deon escaped Dawber County. Willis learned how to rule the part everybody else abandoned. Brothers don't need to understand each other to remain brothers."

Bones studied his father.

"You speaking from experience?"

Johnny ignored him.

Tiana removed Trent's first telephone from the bag.

"It's locked."

"Both?"

"Yes."

Johnny extended his hand.

She hesitated before giving him one.

He removed the battery.

A strip of paper had been taped beneath it. Six handwritten numbers appeared on the paper.

Tiana stared.

"His passcode."

"Men who lead secret lives prepare for the inconvenience of forgetting which life they're living."

She entered the numbers.

The telephone unlocked.

The recent-call list contained repeated calls to the same unlisted number.

Johnny used his own telephone to dial it.

The call connected.

"Who is this?" Warden Kinder demanded.

Johnny said nothing.

"Trent?"

Johnny ended the call.

Tiana stared at the telephone.

"That was Kinder."

"Yes."

"That proves Trent was working for him."

"It proves Trent called him."

"Repeatedly."

"A prosecutor will want more."

"I'm a lawyer. I know what a prosecutor wants."

"Then you know we need Kinder to believe Trent is still alive."

Johnny replaced the battery and returned the telephone.

"When Kinder calls, answer."

"And say what?"

"Nothing. Let him hear the highway."

"That won't fool him for long."

"It only needs to fool him until we reach Widow's Walk."

Billy poured the first gallon of water into the radiator.

"What happens when we get there?"

"We hide the Cadillac," Alex said.

"And her?" Billy nodded toward Tiana.

"She stays with us."

Tiana folded her arms. "Nobody asked me."

"You can leave whenever you want," Johnny said. "The Everglades is that direction."

He pointed toward the sawgrass.

Bones stepped between them.

"She ain't going anywhere alone."

Tiana looked up at him.

"You always this protective?"

"No."

Johnny gave his son a sideways glance.

Bones ignored it.

Billy poured the remaining water into the radiator and closed the hood.

"We might get another thirty miles."

"County line is twenty," Alex said.

"And Widow's Walk?"

"Twenty-seven."

Billy returned to the driver's seat.

"Then we walk the last seven."

They crossed into Dawber County after sunset.

The damaged engine clicked and groaned. Steam escaped from beneath the hood, but the temperature needle remained below the red.

A weather-beaten sign appeared beside the road.

WELCOME TO DAWBER COUNTY

WHERE FLORIDA BEGINS

Three bullet holes pierced the word WELCOME.

Johnny sat upright.

The smell entered through the cracked windows: sawgrass, salt water, mud, rotting vegetation, and distant wood smoke.

Home.

He had imagined returning for twelve years.

In some versions, federal agents brought him back in chains. In others, he arrived with enough money to purchase every acre Bo controlled. Sometimes he returned to kill Bo. Sometimes he came back only to stand beside Sanchez's grave.

He had never imagined arriving wounded, nearly broke, and surrounded by the children of men his revenge had sent to prison.

Bones watched him.

"You all right?"

"No."

It was the first answer Johnny had given him that required no interpretation.

Billy drove past the sign.

Tiana studied Johnny.

"You destroyed the smuggling operation here."

"Yes."

"Deon said you saved this county first."

"Both things can be true."

"Why come back?"

Johnny looked toward Bones.

"I was invited."

Alex laughed. "That isn't how I remember it."

The Cadillac left the paved road and entered the shell road leading toward Widow's Walk.

The engine died fifty yards from the marina.

Billy turned the key.

The starter clicked but did not engage.

"That's it."

Bones looked toward the boathouse. "We can push it."

"You can push it," Alex said.

They climbed out.

Bones and Billy took the rear bumper. Alex pushed from the driver's side while steering through the open window. Johnny attempted to help until his wound reopened.

Tiana caught his arm.

"You're bleeding again."

"I've been informed."

"Sit down."

"We need the car hidden."

"Bones can push it by himself."

Bones strained against the bumper.

"She ain't wrong."

Johnny stepped aside.

They rolled the Cadillac behind the abandoned bait shop and covered it with a weathered boat tarp. From the road, it resembled another forgotten piece of Widow's Walk.

Alex led them along the dock.

Tiana stopped several feet from the boathouse.

"You live here?"

"Temporarily."

The structure sagged over black water. Mosquitoes covered the screens. One section of roof had been patched with an old campaign banner stolen from Sheriff Buck Dawber.

Tiana looked at the banner.

"Does the sheriff know you have that?"

"He didn't win that election because of signs."

Bones unlocked the door.

The lamp remained burning inside.

Nothing appeared disturbed.

Alex checked the rear room and loft before lowering his pistol.

"Clear."

Tiana stepped inside.

The place smelled of mildew, fish, gasoline, and old books. A sagging sofa occupied one wall. Kenny's coded map lay beneath a cushion. Tools, boat parts, and fishing equipment covered every available surface.

She looked at Johnny.

"I nearly died for this?"

"You nearly died because your boyfriend worked for a prison warden," Alex said.

"Former boyfriend."

"Very former," Bones added.

Johnny lowered himself into the recliner.

Bones carried the duffel bag inside and placed it beside him.

Billy closed the curtains.

"No lights near the windows. Nobody goes outside unless we have to."

Alex looked at him. "You giving orders now?"

"Somebody should."

Johnny raised one hand.

"Billy's right. Kinder knows Tiana survived, and traffic cameras caught the Cadillac entering the county."

"We lost the rear plate in the crash," Alex said.

"That will delay identification, not prevent it."

Tiana placed Trent's telephones on the table.

"We need to contact law enforcement."

"No," Johnny said.

"You cannot keep saying no every time the law becomes inconvenient."

"The law is not inconvenient. It is compromised."

"Trent worked for Kinder. That doesn't mean every officer in Florida does."

"Kinder operates the prison. Bo controls people inside it. Sheriff Buck controls the county outside it. Which one do you trust?"

"Deon."

"Then find him."

Tiana called again.

Voicemail.

She left a message.

"Deon, it's Tiana. I was attacked on Alligator Alley. Trent was working for Kinder. I have his phone and identification. I'm safe, but I need you to call me immediately."

She almost ended the message.

Then she remembered Deon's final instruction.

"You told me to call Willis if something happened. I haven't done that yet. Please don't make me."

She disconnected.

Bones found a clean towel and handed it to her.

"You can use the shower."

"There's a shower?"

"Sort of."

"What does sort of mean?"

"You stand in it and water comes out."

"Then why sort of?"

"It ain't always the same color."

Tiana stared at him.

Bones smiled.

Despite everything that had happened, she almost smiled back.

Billy found dry clothes inside an old storage trunk. Alex spread the coded map across the table.

Johnny watched him.

"Put that away."

"We came here for the money."

"We came here because men tried to kill us."

"Same reason."

"Not tonight."

"Kenny is inside that prison because of this map."

"And rushing into Kinder's facility will put all of us beside him."

"Tiana can get us inside."

Tiana removed her wet jacket.

"I cannot get anybody inside. Deon had the authorization."

"Then we use his name."

"I will not impersonate my employer."

"You don't have to impersonate him. Just act like a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer."

"Then it should be easy."

Tiana stepped toward Alex.

"You think being intelligent excuses being obnoxious."

"No. Being right excuses it."

Johnny reached across the table and folded the map.

"Enough."

Alex looked at him.

"My father may be dying."

"I know."

"You don't care."

"I crossed the state because your father may be dying."

"You crossed because Bubs might give away your money."

Johnny placed the folded map inside his shirt.

"You want me to teach you how to rebuild the operation?"

Alex's anger paused.

"Yes."

"Then learn the first rule."

"What?"

"Never let desperation choose your next move."

Johnny leaned back in the recliner.

"Tonight, we gather information. Tomorrow, we act."

Trent's telephone rang.

Everyone looked at it.

The display showed the same unlisted number.

Kinder.

Tiana answered and activated the speaker.

She said nothing.

For several seconds, only silence passed between them.

Then Kinder spoke.

"Trent, if you can hear me, the situation has changed."

Johnny motioned for everyone to remain quiet.

"Deon Childress is still inside the prison. His associate never arrived. Kenny Gregory has been moved."

Tiana covered her mouth.

Kinder continued.

"If the woman survived, finish the assignment and call me. If you fail again, don't come back."

The connection ended.

Nobody moved.

Tiana stared at the telephone.

"He admitted Deon is there."

"He admitted nothing a court could use," Johnny said.

"I don't care about court."

"That makes two of us."

She reached for her shoes.

Bones stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"To the prison."

"You won't get through the gate."

"I have to try."

Johnny stood carefully.

"No."

Tiana turned on him.

"I am not one of your soldiers."

"No. You're Deon's responsibility, and he sent you away because he wanted you alive."

"He needs help."

"He needs us to understand why Kinder is holding him."

"The money."

"Yes."

"What can Deon tell him?"

"Nothing."

"Then Kinder will kill him."

The truth silenced the room.

Johnny looked toward the distant glow above Reform Correctional.

He knew men like Kinder. They did not release witnesses. They removed them.

“What do we do?” Billy asked.

Johnny looked down at Trent’s telephone.

“We give Kinder a reason to keep Deon alive.”

“What reason?”

“We make him believe Deon is the only person who can lead him to the five million.”

Alex understood first.

“And while Kinder interrogates him?”

“We find Bubs.”

Tiana shook her head. “You’re gambling with Deon’s life.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t get to do that.”

Johnny met her eyes.

“Kinder already did.”

Outside, a boat engine moved through the dark channel beyond Widow’s Walk.

Its lights were off.

Everyone became still.

The engine slowed near the marina.

Then stopped.

Johnny reached for his revolver.

Alex extinguished the lamp.

Bones moved beside Tiana.

In the darkness, Johnny listened to water striking the pilings.

Someone had followed them home.

At Reform Correctional, Deon Childress waited alone while a guard with a shotgun came to escort him downstairs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MORTUARY

Deon Childress knew something was wrong the moment the prison gate closed behind him.

The guards were too quiet.

On earlier visits, they had joked among themselves, complained about overtime, and made crude remarks intended to remind visiting attorneys who controlled the building. That afternoon, nobody spoke unless required.

The officer at the first checkpoint examined Deon's identification three times.

The officer at the second ordered him to surrender his telephone, briefcase, belt, keys, and watch.

"My briefcase contains privileged legal documents."

"You'll get it back when you leave."

"It does not leave my possession."

The guard rested one hand on his baton.

"Warden's orders."

"I am here to see my client."

"Then you'd better cooperate."

Deon looked through the reinforced window behind the guard. Two additional officers waited in the corridor.

This was not a security procedure.

It was a warning.

Deon placed the briefcase on the counter but retained his grip on its handle.

"I want a written inventory of everything you take."

"You'll get a receipt."

"I want the inventory before I surrender it."

The guard rolled his eyes and began listing each item on a property form.

Deon watched him open the briefcase.

The emergency petition was gone.

So were Kenny's representation agreement and Deon's notes about the prison.

Tiana had them.

Deon concealed his relief.

He had telephoned her before entering and instructed her to bring the documents. Later, when he realized the prison had no intention of allowing him to leave freely, he called again and ordered her to turn around.

His last words had been the most difficult.

If anything happens to me, call my brother.

Deon had spent his adult life protecting Willis from consequences.

Now he was trusting Willis to become one.

The guard finished the inventory.

"Sign."

Deon signed.

The guard placed the briefcase beneath the counter and pushed a visitor's badge across the desk.

A portly officer with a gray-streaked beard waited near the metal detector. His nameplate read DALY.

He carried a shotgun.

"Attorney Childress?"

"Yes."

"Follow me."

"Where is Warden Kinder?"

"Busy."

"Where is Kenny Gregory?"

"I'll take you to him."

Daly turned without waiting.

Deon followed. They passed the visitation room.

Deon stopped.

"Kenny usually meets me here."

"Not today."

"Why?"

Daly continued walking.

The corridor narrowed as they entered an older section of the prison. The concrete walls showed water stains. Fluorescent lights flickered behind wire cages.

No inmates occupied the area.

No guards followed them.

Deon noticed a camera near the ceiling.

Its indicator light was dark.

"Where are we going?"

Daly pointed ahead with the shotgun.

A wall sign displayed two arrows:

INFIRMARY — LEFT

MORGUE — DOWNSTAIRS

Daly turned toward the stairs.

Deon did not move.

"Officer?"

Daly looked back.

"Come on."

"Why are we going to the morgue?"

The guard shifted the shotgun.

"Because your client hanged himself."

Deon stared at him.

"No."

"Afraid so."

"When?"

"Couple hours ago."

"I spoke to this facility less than an hour ago. I was told Kenny was receiving medical treatment."

"Things changed."

"Who pronounced him dead?"

"Doctor."

"What doctor?"

"The prison doctor."

"Name."

Daly's expression hardened.

"You want to see your client or stand here asking questions?"

"I want Warden Kinder."

"He'll talk to you afterward."

"I am not entering that morgue without him."

Daly looked beyond Deon toward the empty corridor.

"You drove all this way."

Deon glanced at the dead camera.

Every instinct told him to return to the gate.

Then he thought of Kenny.

If the body below truly belonged to him, Deon had an obligation to identify it, preserve evidence, and prevent the prison from destroying whatever proved how he died.

If it was not Kenny, Deon needed to know why they were lying.

"You go first," he said.

Daly shrugged.

"Suit yourself."

He descended the stairs.

Deon followed several steps behind.

The door at the bottom was painted black.

White letters identified the room:

MORTUARY — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

Daly unlocked it.

Cold air escaped into the stairwell.

He waved Deon inside.

The mortuary contained six stainless-steel drawers, an examination table, and a deep utility sink. Bleach could not completely disguise the odor of death.

A body lay beneath a white sheet.

Only one hand remained exposed.

An identification band encircled the wrist.

GREGORY, KENNETH.

Deon remained near the door.

“What happened?”

“Used his bedsheet.”

“Kenny was in isolation.”

“That’s right.”

“Isolation cells use tear-resistant bedding.”

Daly stared at him.

“Guess he found a way.”

“Where is the ligature?”

“Evidence.”

“Where are the photographs?”

“Being processed.”

“Why is his face covered?”

Daly nodded toward the body.

“You wanted to identify him.”

Deon approached slowly.

The exposed hand bothered him.

Kenny Gregory had broken two fingers during the 1991 arrests. The bones healed crooked, leaving the smallest finger angled toward the palm.

The dead man’s fingers were straight.

“That isn’t Kenny.”

Daly’s grip tightened around the shotgun.

Deon stepped away from the table.

A shadow moved behind him.

He turned.

A wiry inmate with wild eyes emerged from the corner holding a sharpened piece of metal.

Deon raised his arm.

The shiv cut through his sleeve and opened the flesh beneath it.

The inmate lunged again.

Deon caught his wrist.

They crashed against the examination table. The covered body rolled sideways beneath the sheet.

"Help me!" Deon shouted.

Daly closed the mortuary door.

Deon understood.

The inmate drove his forehead into Deon's face.

Pain burst behind Deon's eyes.

The shiv came free.

Deon seized the attacker's shirt and slammed him against the steel drawers. One opened behind him, revealing the empty tray inside.

The inmate grinned.

"You fight good for a lawyer."

"You picked the wrong one."

Deon struck him in the throat.

The inmate staggered but did not fall.

Deon moved toward Daly.

The guard raised the shotgun.

"Stay where you are."

"You brought me here to be killed."

"I said stay back."

The inmate attacked again.

Deon turned too late.

The blade carved deeply across his neck.

Heat became cold.

Blood struck the white sheet, the floor, and the front of Daly's uniform.

Deon pressed both hands against the wound.

He tried to speak.

Only air escaped.

His legs failed.

Daly caught him before his head struck the concrete and gently lowered him onto a sheet of plastic spread beneath the examination table.

They had known exactly where he would fall.

The inmate stood above him, breathing hard.

"You said this clears what I owe."

Daly raised the shotgun.

"Inmate Fester, Warden Kinder thanks you for your service."

Fester's grin vanished.

The shotgun blast struck him in the chest.

His body flew backward and crashed against the mortuary drawers.

Blood and buckshot marked the steel.

Daly pumped the shotgun and waited.

Fester slid to the floor.

Deon continued breathing.

Barely.

Daly looked down at him.

"Damn."

He placed the shotgun on the table and pressed one gloved hand against Deon's wound.

Not to save him.

To make certain the bleeding continued.

Deon could no longer feel his body.

Sounds became distant.

Daly called for the cleanup team. Guards entered with a rolling bin, fresh plastic, and cleaning chemicals.

Nobody appeared surprised.

One guard pulled the false identification band from the dead inmate's wrist. Another removed the body beneath the white sheet.

The corpse was not Kenny.

Deon had been right.

Kenny remained alive somewhere inside the prison.

That knowledge gave Deon a final moment of peace.

He saw Pastor Bubs waiting outside the county courthouse after Deon's father was sentenced for murdering his mother.

Deon had been ten years old.

Bubs knelt in front of him and said, You can come home with us.

Millie stood beside him holding a paper bag containing a sandwich, an apple, and a clean shirt.

Willis remained across the street.

Their father's friends had already begun teaching him that tears made boys weak. Willis had refused to cross the road.

Deon went with Bubs.

Willis stayed behind.

They had chosen different sides of Dawber County before either was old enough to understand what the choice meant.

Years later, Willis watched from across another street when Deon left for college.

He pretended he had not come to say goodbye.

Deon pretended he had not seen him.

His younger brother had always been there, just beyond the road Deon crossed.

The guards lifted Fester.

Daly dragged the body across the plastic and placed it over Deon.

An inmate who murdered a visiting attorney.

A guard who heroically stopped him.

A tragedy nobody could have anticipated.

Daly leaned close.

"Should've stayed in Miami."

Deon thought of Tiana.

He hoped she had listened.

He hoped she had turned around.

Most of all, he hoped she would make the call he had avoided making for years.

Find Willis.

Fester's dead eyes stared down at him.

Deon Childress stopped breathing beneath the body of the man hired to kill him. Warden Kinder watched the mortuary cleanup on a small monitor inside his office.

The supposedly disabled camera had been transmitting to one location.

Kinder sat behind his desk sipping Scotch.

Bo Dawber occupied a leather chair near the window. His orange Department of Corrections uniform had been professionally tailored. A gold watch rested on his wrist.

An uncuffed prisoner sitting in the warden's office and drinking eighteen-year-old Scotch was an unusual sight.

At Reform Correctional, unusual privileges had prices.

Bo watched Daly position Fester's body.

"You're enjoying this," he said.

Kinder smiled.

"I think I am."

"Didn't know you had it in you."

"You should have seen my unit in Vietnam."

"Someday you'll have to tell me about it."

Bo took another drink.

"Malone never shut up about his time over there."

"You really hate Johnny Malone."

"Does it show?"

Kinder laughed.

"That's why I like you, Bo. Ice water in your veins."

Bo looked at the monitor.

"You killed Pastor Bubs's boy."

"Deon Childress was not his son."

"Blood isn't the only way people become family."

"Sentimental."

"Practical. His death creates problems."

"Deon knew too much."

"He knew nothing about the location."

"He knew Kenny."

"Half the county knows Kenny."

"He threatened federal action."

"Lawyers threaten things. That's how they bill clients."

Kinder reclined in his chair.

"You would have let him leave?"

"I would have let him believe he was leaving."

Kinder studied Bo.

Neither man smiled.

Their partnership had always depended upon each believing he would betray the other first.

Bo planned to use Kinder's guards and prison access to find the five million before his release the following month. Once free, he would have Kinder killed and reclaim control of Dawber County.

Kinder planned to locate the money, kill Bo before his release, and blame the death on another inmate.

Both plans required Kenny Gregory.

Neither required the other man afterward.

Kinder turned back to the monitor.

"Daly did well."

"Daly talks when he drinks."

"Then he'll stop drinking."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know."

Bo set down his glass.

"You're sure Bubs can lead us to the money?" Kinder asked.

"He's the only man alive who can interpret the complete route."

"Kenny drew the map."

"Kenny remembers pieces. Bubs knows how those pieces fit together."

"Five million dollars buried in a Baptist preacher's swamp. That's one hell of an offering."

"The money isn't Bubs's. Johnny gave him access so he could help the families after the arrests."

"And he never touched it?"

"He sees it as blood money."

"What man leaves five million dollars buried for twelve years?"

Bo leaned closer.

"A better man than either of us."

Kinder stiffened.

Bo saw it and smiled faintly.

"And if he refuses when my guards question him?" Kinder asked.

"You don't touch Bubs."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's the last friendly warning you'll receive."

For several seconds, the only sound came from the monitor as guards washed Deon's blood into the mortuary drain.

Kinder forced a hollow laugh.

"Just let the guards know when you're ready to return to your cell."

Bo finished his Scotch and stood.

"No cameras tonight?"

"Maintenance issue."

"No entry in the visitor log?"

"Deon never arrived."

"What about his Mercedes?"

"We'll move it."

"Tiana knows he came here."

"Trent was supposed to handle Tiana."

"Supposed to?"

Kinder reached for his telephone.

Trent had not reported.

Bo noticed.

"You lost your man."

"I haven't lost anyone."

"Then call him."

Kinder dialed.

The call rang.

Someone answered.

Kinder heard no voice. Only a car engine and wind.

"Trent?"

The connection ended.

Kinder looked at the telephone.

Bo smiled.

"Sounds like you've lost two men today."

Kinder placed the receiver down.

"Trent will complete his assignment."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then Tiana will lead us to whoever saved her."

"Johnny."

"You think Malone is back?"

"I think he never stopped watching Dawber County."

Kinder looked toward the dark window.

"If he returns, we'll be ready."

Bo walked toward the office door.

"No," he said. "You won't."

Kinder's eyes narrowed.

"What makes Johnny Malone so dangerous?"

Bo stopped.

"He will let you believe you've won."

"And then?"

"He'll burn down everything—including his own empire—just to make sure you lose."

Bo opened the door.

Kinder called after him.

"You still haven't explained why he did it."

Bo looked back.

"He blamed me for Sanchez."

"Did you kill Sanchez?"

Bo smiled.

"Everybody knows the cartel killed him."

He left the office.

Kinder watched the closed door.

Bo had not answered.

AT WIDOW'S WALK, THE BOAT ENGINE MOVED CLOSER

Johnny stood beside the darkened window with his revolver ready. Alex guarded the rear door. Billy and Bones waited on opposite sides of Tiana.

The unseen boat drifted past the marina.

Nobody aboard spoke.

Its engine restarted farther down the channel and disappeared into the swamp.

Everyone remained still.

Then Tiana's telephone rang.

Deon's name appeared on the screen.

Relief swept across her face.

She answered.

"Deon?"

A man spoke from the other end.

"Is this Tiana Ross?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Deputy Warden Marsh at Reform Correctional."

Johnny lowered his revolver.

He recognized the rehearsed tone.

"What happened?" Tiana asked.

"There was an incident involving Mr. Childress."

"What kind of incident?"

"An inmate attacked him inside a secure area. One of our officers responded immediately."

"Let me speak to Deon."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible."

Tiana gripped the telephone.

"Is he alive?"

The pause told her first.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Ross."

Her knees weakened.

Bones caught her before she reached the floor.

The deputy warden continued speaking, but Tiana no longer heard the words.

She lowered the telephone.

Johnny already knew.

"Deon's dead," she whispered.

Nobody moved.

Tiana pressed both hands against her face.

Bones held her upright.

Billy removed his hat.

Johnny Malone stood in the darkness with the sons of the men his revenge had once sacrificed.

He had returned believing the old war was waiting for him.

Warden Kinder had just made it new.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BLOOD IN THE WATER

Dawber County Swamps, 1991.

Johnny Malone reduced the boat's engine to an idle as Gethsemane Baptist Church disappeared behind the cypress trees.

Kenny Gregory sat near the bow with three black duffel bags between his boots. Each bag had been wrapped in waterproof canvas, sealed inside heavy plastic, and bound with enough duct tape to survive a hurricane.

Five million dollars occupied surprisingly little space.

The money had arrived in Dawber County over several months, separated from the revenue Johnny and Sanchez reported to Bo. By then, the smuggling operation had grown beyond anything they had imagined. What began as a way to save unemployed fishermen had become one of Florida's most profitable cocaine routes.

Bo still believed he received sixty percent.

Johnny and Sanchez made certain he never learned the full amount.

A ten-million-dollar shipment became four million in the books Mack Donnelly reviewed. The rest moved quietly into property, foreign accounts, and cash reserves.

Johnny watched the tree line.

"Check the ridge."

Kenny lifted a pair of binoculars and examined the strip of high ground beyond the mangroves.

"All clear."

"You sure?"

"You want to check?"

"I trust you."

"That's a first."

Johnny smiled around the cigarette hanging from his lips.

The boat entered a narrow channel surrounded by sawgrass. Cypress knees rose from the dark water like old bones. Insects swarmed above the surface. Nothing identified the place as different from a thousand other hidden corners of the Everglades.

That was why Johnny selected it.

Kenny checked the bags again.

"We good?"

"Relax. This ain't Vietnam."

"Last time you told me that, somebody shot at us."

"People shoot at us everywhere."

"Comforting."

Johnny offered him a cigarette.

Kenny shook his head.

"Not now."

"Suit yourself."

Johnny lifted the first duffel bag.

"Separate but close. If somebody finds one, we don't want him finding the rest."

"You really think Bo knows?"

"Not yet."

"Mack?"

Johnny looked toward the ridge.

"Mack knows the reported numbers don't match the volume moving through the county."

"Then stop skimming."

"If we stop now, Bo asks why."

"What does Sanchez say?"

"That we move the reserve before Mack completes his audit."

"And after that?"

"We prepare for the day Bo discovers the truth."

Kenny stared at him.

"You're talking about war."

"I'm talking about insurance."

Johnny steadied himself and threw the first bag overboard.

It struck the water and floated briefly. Air escaped from beneath the plastic in a trail of bubbles. Then the weight pulled it below the surface.

Kenny opened a small notebook.

"Bearing?"

Johnny checked his compass.

Kenny recorded the number beside a drawing of the channel.

"Depth?"

"Twelve feet."

"Current?"

"Almost nothing."

"Landmark?"

Johnny pointed toward a cypress with two trunks twisted around each other.

"The Widow."

Kenny sketched it.

Johnny handed him the second duffel.

"Farther east."

Kenny strained beneath the weight.

"You put bricks in this one?"

"Hundred-dollar bills get heavy."

He swung the bag and released it.

A massive alligator erupted from the water.

Its jaws closed around the canvas strap.

Kenny fell backward and drew the Uzi from beneath his seat.

"Don't shoot!"

The weapon fired.

Rounds struck the water beside the animal. One grazed the armored ridge above its eye.

The alligator twisted.

Water crashed over the boat.

Its tail struck the hull hard enough to send Johnny into the console.

The animal disappeared with the duffel bag still caught in its jaws.

Johnny seized the Uzi and forced the barrel upward.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"It had the money!"

"That was Smiley."

Kenny stared at the boiling water.

"That was Smiley?"

"Yes."

"How am I supposed to recognize an alligator?"

"He's missing two teeth on the left side."

"I was looking at the rest of them."

Johnny searched the surface.

The torn strap appeared twenty feet away.

"He let it go."

"You sure?"

"Smiley doesn't eat luggage."

"You know him personally?"

"We have an understanding."

The duffel surfaced briefly near a stand of cypress knees before sinking into deeper water.

Johnny checked the compass.

"Mark it."

"You want to leave it there?"

"It's separated but close."

"You planned that?"

"Of course."

Kenny stared at him.

Johnny retrieved another cigarette.

"Insurance requires flexibility."

Kenny recorded the bearing.

The third duffel went overboard without incident.

When they finished, Kenny reviewed the notebook. It contained bearings, depths, distances, water channels, and crude drawings of natural landmarks.

Johnny looked over his shoulder.

"Make a second copy."

"Why?"

"If something happens to one of us."

"What happens to the copies?"

"You keep the coded map. I'll leave recovery instructions with Bubs."

"Bubs doesn't want anything to do with the money."

"He won't spend it on himself."

"He might burn it."

"Bubs won't burn five million dollars."

"He burned a liquor store once."

"That was different."

"He called it a temple of wickedness."

"It was also uninsured."

Kenny closed the notebook.

"What do you want Bubs to do with the money?"

"If the organization collapses, he uses it for the families. Mortgages, lawyers, medical bills—whatever people need."

"You think it's coming apart?"

Johnny looked toward the water where the bags had disappeared.

"Mack knows something. Bo suspects everybody. Sanchez thinks we're being watched."

"You trust Sanchez?"

"With my life."

"Bo doesn't."

"Bo doesn't trust his own shadow unless it pays him."

Kenny returned the notebook to his shirt pocket.

"What about Timmy?"

Johnny's humor disappeared.

"Timmy doesn't learn the location."

"He's our brother."

"He's also unstable."

"He came home from Vietnam that way."

"I know."

"You think Bo had something to do with his death?"

"So does Sanchez."

"You have proof?"

"No."

"Then what do we have?"

Johnny started the engine.

"A dead brother, five million dollars in the swamp, and too many men lying to one another."

The boat moved out of the hidden channel.

Behind them, Smiley surfaced.

One dark eye watched them leave.

WIDOW'S WALK MARINA, LATER THAT NIGHT

Johnny opened two beers and handed one to Kenny.

They crossed the dock toward a battered Ford Bronco parked near the old bait shop. Kenny's shirt had dried stiff with sweat and swamp water.

"Pop the back."

Johnny unlocked the Bronco.

Kenny placed the empty cooler inside and threw his beer bottle toward a trash barrel.

It missed and broke on the road.

Headlights swept across the marina.

A patrol car entered sideways and stopped behind the Bronco, blocking the road.

Sheriff Buck Dawber stepped out.

His son climbed from the passenger side.

Little Bucky was already in his twenties but remained little only in comparison with his father. He wore a reserve deputy's uniform, a pistol too large for his belt, and the expression of a man forever waiting for permission to prove himself.

Buck approached slowly.

"What're you boys up to?"

Johnny drank from his beer.

"Taking care of business."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't told about any shipments tonight."

"Wasn't a shipment," Kenny said. "Just a check-in."

Buck looked toward the dark water.

"You fishing now?"

"Jones McNeely called in a lost package," Johnny said. "We followed up."

"Jonesey's been in Georgia all week."

"Just got around to it."

Buck closed the distance between them.

"You're full of shit."

Johnny smiled.

Buck did not.

"What did you dump out there?"

"Nothing."

Little Bucky pointed toward Johnny.

"You know he's running side action, Pa."

Kenny laughed. "What's it to you?"

Little Bucky stepped forward.

"What'd you say?"

"You heard me."

Buck placed one hand against his son's chest.

“Not while you’re wearing the uniform. Internal Affairs has been sniffing around.”

“But he’s always riding me.”

Buck shoved him toward the patrol car.

“How do you get a donkey’s attention?”

Little Bucky glared at Kenny.

Buck answered his own question.

“You beat it with a stick.”

Kenny laughed again.

“Listen to your daddy.”

Buck turned.

His fist struck Kenny before Johnny saw it move.

Kenny slammed against the Bronco.

Buck drew his nightstick and struck him across the ribs.

Kenny fell.

The nightstick rose and fell.

Johnny took one step forward.

Little Bucky drew his pistol.

“Don’t.”

Buck struck Kenny across the back.

Kenny tried to stand.

Another blow dropped him.

“Get him, Pa!”

Johnny stared at the pistol aimed at his chest.

“Buck!”

The nightstick stopped.

Buck stood above Kenny, breathing heavily.

“You got something to say?”

“You’re going to kill him.”

Buck looked down.

Blood ran from Kenny’s mouth onto the dirt.

“Nah. I won’t kill him.”

He tapped the nightstick against his leg.

"Maybe put him in a coma."

Johnny's hands curled into fists.

Buck saw it.

For one dangerous moment, both men considered what would happen if Johnny moved.

Then Buck smiled.

"Tell Bo what you dumped."

"We didn't dump anything."

Buck struck Kenny one final time.

"Then next time I won't stop."

He returned to the patrol car.

Little Bucky kept the pistol on Johnny until he climbed inside.

The patrol car backed away.

Johnny knelt beside Kenny.

"You conscious?"

"Unfortunately."

"Anything broken?"

"Pride."

"That was cracked already."

Kenny laughed, then groaned.

Johnny helped him sit against the Bronco.

"You should've let me shoot him."

"With what?"

Kenny pulled a pistol from beneath his shirt.

Johnny stared.

"You had that the entire time?"

"Little Bucky had the angle."

"You would've killed the sheriff and his son."

"They were beating me."

"And Bo would've killed everyone we know."

Kenny returned the pistol to his waistband.

"You think Buck tells him?"

"Yes."

"Then Bo will search the swamp."

"He won't find anything."

"He'll search Gethsemane."

"Bubs won't tell him."

"Bubs doesn't know yet."

Johnny looked toward the distant church steeple.

"He will tomorrow."

Kenny wiped blood from his mouth.

"You sure about trusting him?"

"No."

"You sure about anything?"

Johnny helped him into the Bronco.

"I'm sure Smiley has terrible timing."

Kenny laughed despite the pain.

Johnny closed the door and looked back toward the swamp.

Five million dollars rested beneath its black water. The reserve was intended to save families if Bo's empire collapsed.

Johnny did not yet know that he would be the man who brought it down.

WIDOW'S WALK MARINA, PRESENT DAY

Tiana remained in Bones's arms after the call ended.

Nobody told him to release her.

Nobody knew what to say.

She had spent years preparing for legal emergencies. She knew how to request injunctions, preserve evidence, challenge unlawful detention, and force institutions to answer questions they preferred to bury.

None of that knowledge told her how to exist in a world without Deon Childress.

"He told me to turn around," she whispered.

Bones held her more tightly.

"I should've kept going."

"They tried to kill you."

"If I'd reached the prison—"

"You'd be dead too."

"I could've helped him."

"No," Johnny said. "You couldn't."

Tiana lifted her head.

"You don't know that."

"I know Kinder sent Trent to stop you. Your survival depended upon not reaching that prison."

"I abandoned Deon."

"You followed his final instruction."

"And he died."

Johnny accepted her anger.

"He died protecting you and Kenny."

"How do you know?"

"Because Deon entered that prison knowing something was wrong. He sent you away anyway."

Tiana looked at Trent's telephone.

"I have to call the police."

"You have to call Willis."

The name made her hesitate.

"Deon told you what to do if something happened."

"He didn't know he was going to be murdered."

"He knew enough to give you the instruction."

"I can't tell Willis over the telephone."

"No."

"You know what he'll do."

"Yes."

"He'll start a war."

"Kinder already started it."

Tiana wiped her face.

"I want proof before I tell Deon's brother."

"You have Trent's telephone."

"That connects Kinder to Trent. It doesn't prove Kinder ordered Deon's murder."

"Then we find proof."

"How?"

"By finishing Deon's work."

"I don't work for you."

Johnny turned toward her.

"Do you still want to practice law?"

"What?"

"Do you want to be a lawyer or not?"

"Deon was murdered tonight."

"Which means somebody has to finish what he started."

"I am not becoming your lawyer."

"You're Ivy League educated, you survived an assassination attempt, and you're already hiding in a boathouse with five criminals."

"I'm not a criminal."

Johnny looked around the room.

"Then we desperately need your diversity."

"You cannot hire me without my consent."

"You're hired."

"I just said—"

"Argue with me later. That'll be your first billable hour."

Tiana stared at him.

"I don't even know whether I still have a job."

"You do now."

"I don't want it."

"Honey, I'm all you've got."

"Honey? I am an Ivy League-educated attorney with a whole hell of a lot of qualifications."

Johnny nodded.

"Exactly why you're hired."

A pause settled over the room.

Tiana almost laughed.

The sound caught in her throat and became another sob.

Bones guided her toward the sofa.

She sat and pressed both hands against her face.

Johnny looked at the three boys.

"What are you going to do with the eighty thousand?"

Bones glanced at the duffel bag.

"Spend it."

"On what?"

"Stuff."

"Excellent financial plan."

Alex unfolded Kenny's coded map across the table.

"We buy land."

"Real estate." Johnny nodded approvingly. "At least one of you listened."

Bones looked offended.

"I listened."

"What did I say?"

"Buy stuff."

Johnny turned back to Alex.

"What kind of land?"

"Near the old Battenberg sugar plantation."

"I'd think waterfront property would be a better investment."

"It is near the water."

"It's near the swamp."

"Exactly."

Johnny studied him.

Alex pointed toward a section of the map outside the sugar property.

"I need a large tract of secluded land that can be reached through the swamp."

Bones looked over his shoulder.

"That describes all of Dawber County."

"It also needs road access."

"For what?" Johnny asked.

"Trucks."

Johnny's approval vanished.

"What trucks?"

"To move product inland."

"What product?"

Alex smiled.

"You know. Yayo."

Bones's face lit up.

"Yes! Like *Scarface*. Get the yayo!"

Johnny placed both hands over his face.

"Oh, for the love of God."

"It's genius," Bones said.

"You're not doing that."

Alex looked genuinely offended.

"Why not?"

"If I give you money, it will be an investment. You'll use it to purchase legitimate property and make the value grow."

"That's exactly what we'd be doing."

"No. You'd be peddling drugs."

"That's what you did."

"I was a financier."

"You ran cocaine for Pablo Escobar."

"The Dawbers, Sheltons, Del Vecchios, and fishermen moved the product. I managed the money."

"You financed and organized an international drug network."

"I'm an accountant."

"Since when did you become such a bullshitter?"

Johnny lowered his hands.

"I have always been a professional bullshitter. That's how I became rich."

Bones stopped smiling.

"Your bullshit had consequences, Dad."

Johnny looked at him.

"For me. For Ma. For everybody in Dawber County."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"Because I do."

"Knowing ain't the same as fixing it."

"No."

Johnny looked at the duffel bag.

"I'll give you the eighty thousand now. When I settle matters here and can safely access the Swiss accounts, I'll give you a million dollars on the condition that you leave Dawber County."

Bones considered it.

"I can live with that."

"No," Alex said.

Bones turned. "Why not?"

"I don't want his handout."

"A million dollars ain't a handout."

"It's an exit payment. He wants us to disappear so he doesn't have to deal with us."

Johnny looked at Alex.

"You really do understand me."

"A million dollars is nothing compared with what we can make."

"It's considerably more than you currently possess."

"We could control this county."

Bones nodded enthusiastically.

"And not just Dawber. The whole state."

Billy stood near the curtained window.

"Both of you have lost your damn minds."

Alex looked at him.

"You want to stay poor?"

"I want to stay out of prison."

"That's why Johnny teaches us."

Billy looked at Malone.

"Because that worked so well for our fathers."

The room became quiet.

Johnny accepted the blow.

Alex refused to let the argument die.

"We won't repeat their mistakes."

"You already are," Billy said.

"How?"

"You think being smarter makes you untouchable."

"It helps."

"So did Bo."

"I'm smarter than Bo."

"That sounds exactly like something a Dawber would say."

"I'm not a Dawber."

"No. You just want to become one with better bookkeeping."

Alex stepped toward him.

Bones moved between them.

"Not now."

Billy looked at his large friend.

"Two days ago, you wanted nothing to do with Johnny's money."

"I met him."

"And that fixed everything?"

"No."

Bones looked at his father.

"But it gave me something I didn't have."

"What?"

"A chance."

Billy shook his head.

"It's a trap."

"Then help us avoid it."

"I'm not moving cocaine."

"Nobody asked you to," Alex said.

"You'll ask."

"And you'll say yes."

"Don't count on it."

Johnny studied the three young men.

Bones had inherited his fearlessness but none of his patience.

Alex possessed Johnny's mind without sharing his blood.

Billy carried the Dawber name while fighting not to become a Dawber.

Together, they contained everything that built the old empire—and everything that might destroy the next one.

"You boys have no boats," Johnny said.

"Widow's Walk," Alex replied.

"No pilots."

"We find one."

"No suppliers."

"You still know people."

"Most want me dead."

"Then start with the ones who don't."

"No protection."

Bones straightened.

"You have me."

Johnny looked at his son.

"I shot Dale Brody," Bones continued. "Killed Trent. Pulled Tiana out of a gator canal."

"That doesn't make you protection."

"What does?"

"Discipline."

"Teach me."

The request struck Johnny harder than any accusation.

"You want me to teach you how to rebuild the operation?"

Alex nodded.

"Yes."

"You follow my instructions exactly."

"Yes."

"You don't improvise."

Alex hesitated.

"Exactly," Johnny repeated.

"Yes."

"You don't lie to me."

"Fine."

"You already lied."

"I said yes."

Johnny turned toward Bones.

"You learn discipline."

"I will."

"You stop pointing guns at people unless you intend to fire."

Bones placed the Colt on the table.

"Yes, sir."

"You control your temper."

Bones hesitated longer than Alex had.

"I'll try."

"Trying keeps you out of trouble for an afternoon. Control keeps you alive."

Bones looked down.

"Yes, sir."

Johnny faced Billy.

"You don't have to participate."

"But?"

"When this begins, people will use you to reach us."

"Bo?"

"Especially Bo."

Billy absorbed that.

"My uncle raised me."

"I know."

"He isn't everything you say."

"I hope you're right."

"You don't."

"No," Johnny admitted. "I don't."

Alex leaned against the table.

"So we're doing this?"

Johnny looked through the window toward the dark swamp.

He had spent twelve years avoiding his accounts, his money, and the county whose empire he destroyed. He understood every reason to refuse.

The boys would proceed without him.

Alex would create the plan. Bones would enforce it. Billy would be pulled between friendship and blood until one side forced him to choose.

Without Johnny, they would be dead or imprisoned within a year.

With him, they might survive long enough to become something worse.

"Yes," Johnny said.

Alex and Bones exchanged a look.

Then they slapped hands.

Johnny pointed at them.

"That is the last celebration until we have something worth celebrating."

"We're back in business," Bones said.

"We are not back in anything."

"You just said yes."

"I agreed to teach you."

"Teach us what?"

Johnny looked at Kenny's coded map.

"How to build an organization nobody can burn down."

Alex smiled.

"Where do we start?"

"Kenny."

"We break him out?"

"We keep him alive first."

"Kinder wants the map."

"We give him one."

Alex's eyes narrowed.

"A false map."

"Now you're learning."

"What about the real money?"

Johnny touched the faded markings.

"Kenny and I hid it. We are the only living men who stood in that boat and watched it sink."

"But Bubs knows."

"He knows that the money exists. I left him a sealed envelope containing the recovery instructions and authorized him to use the reserve for the families."

"Did he?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Because Deon said Bubs considered it blood money."

"What if he opened the envelope?"

"Then Bubs knows how to combine the instructions with Kenny's map."

"And if he didn't?"

"Then it remains sealed inside his Bible."

Alex started toward the door.

"Let's go get it."

Johnny caught his arm.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because Kinder and Bo are watching Gethsemane. We approach Bubs now, we confirm he is the key."

"What do we do?"

"We leave him out of this until we can protect him."

"So the five million stays buried."

"For now."

"What finances the operation?"

"The eighty thousand."

Bones pulled the duffel bag closer.

"Our money."

"Operating capital," Johnny corrected.

"Can I buy a truck?"

"No."

"A boat?"

"No."

"A gun?"

"You have one."

"What can I buy?"

"Breakfast."

Bones considered it.

"Good start."

Tiana lowered her hands.

"What about Willis?"

Johnny turned toward her.

"At sunrise, you go to him."

"Alone?"

"He won't speak honestly if I'm present."

"What do I tell him?"

"The truth. Deon was murdered inside Kinder's prison. Trent was sent to kill you. Kenny is still alive, and the same people are coming for him."

"And Johnny Malone wants his help?"

Johnny nodded.

"Willis hates you."

"Everybody hates me."

"That doesn't trouble you?"

"It saves time when meeting new people."

"Willis may kill me for bringing your name into his neighborhood."

"No. You were important to Deon."

"How does Willis know that?"

"He'll see it on your face."

Tiana picked up Trent's telephone.

"If Willis joins us, he'll want revenge."

"We'll give him a plan."

"And if he refuses?"

"Then we find somebody else."

"You don't believe that."

"No."

"Why Willis?"

"Because Deon spent his life protecting his brother from the law."

Johnny looked toward the distant prison.

"Now Willis can return the favor."

At Reform Correctional, Bo sat alone at a table playing solitaire.

The private wing had gone quiet.

Warden Kinder entered carrying a surveillance photograph.

Bo placed a red queen beneath a black king.

"What?"

"A vehicle connected to Sanchez Properties crossed into Dawber County tonight."

Bo's hand stopped.

"Sanchez is dead."

"His company isn't."

"Who was in the vehicle?"

"Traffic cameras photographed five occupants."

"Names."

"Tiana Ross."

Bo looked up.

"Trent failed."

"Apparently."

"Who else?"

"Alex Gregory. Billy Dawber. Bones Malone."

Kinder placed the photograph on the table.

The image was grainy, but the wounded man sitting beside Bones was unmistakable.

Johnny Malone.

Bo stared at it.

For twelve years, he had imagined this moment.

Sometimes Johnny returned begging forgiveness. Sometimes federal agents brought him back wearing chains. Most often, Atticus dragged him from the swamp and placed him at Bo's feet.

But Atticus was gone.

Sanchez was gone.

Timmy was gone.

Only Bo and Johnny remained from the men who had destroyed one another in 1991.

Kinder poured himself a drink.

"You were right."

Bo gathered the playing cards into a single pile.

"About what?"

Kinder smiled.

"Malone's back."

Outside the private wing, locks engaged one after another with the sound of distant gunfire.

Bo looked toward the narrow window.

Beyond the prison walls, darkness covered the swamp.

Somewhere inside it, Johnny was rebuilding the machinery that once made Dawber County rich—and then destroyed everyone who touched it.

Bo placed the deck on the table.

“No,” he said. “Johnny Malone never came back from Vietnam.”

He looked again at the photograph.

“But whatever’s wearing his face just started another war.”

The End.

Don't miss out!

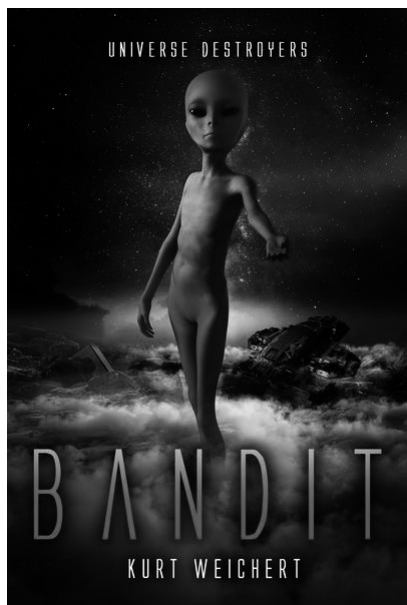
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Did you love *Blood in the Water*? Then you should read *Universe Destroyers: Bandit*¹ by Kurt Weichert!



Most people are familiar with the story of the alien crash in Roswell, New Mexico in July 1947. Fewer people are aware that a similar event occurred a few years earlier in April 1941 in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. According to witnesses of the event, a saucer-like disc had crashed and four abnormally small, gray bodies of beings possessing featureless faces was discovered by authorities. A local pastor was called in by the authorities at the crash site to give the strange, dead beings their last rites. Shortly thereafter, the event was forgotten about; covered up by the US government and buried under the constantly evolving news of the Second World War, which was only just getting started at that time. Yet,

1. <https://books2read.com/u/b5ly9k>

2. <https://books2read.com/u/b5ly9k>

what few people know is that a survivor of the wreck was recovered by US authorities and was shipped to Washington, D.C. for study.

The summer of 1941 was a time of foreboding in the United States. The nation's capital had become a hive of espionage and covert activities. Soviet agents had penetrated President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration at the same time that Nazi spies were running amuck all across the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. War gripped Europe and Asia. It was only a matter of time before the Americans would be pulled into the war as well. During this time, as America was officially neutral, Washington jockeyed for greater strategic position so that when the war did come to America's shores, the US military would have access to the most advanced technology and weapons to beat back their enemies.

Upon meeting the alien survivor in secret and seeing the amazing telekinetic powers the small being exhibited, FDR immediately ordered that the being—which he affectionately nicknamed "Bandit"—be kept in the White House bunker for his own safety. But, the forces of darkness are aware of the existence of the alien, its incredible capabilities, and the technology that it had crashed to the Earth with. Every rival from the Soviet Union to Hitler's Nazi Germany craves access to the creature. When Bandit goes missing from the White House bunker, all seems lost.

But, at a top secret Nazi missile proving ground in northeastern Germany known as Peenemunde, a strange bell-like craft and several smaller orbs of electromagnetic energy (all of which display incredible antigravity technology) are being tested. By 1945, as Berlin is losing the war to America and the Allies, Hitler orders the strange weapons to be deployed against the fleets of Allied bombers scorching the German countryside. FDR immediately realizes that Bandit is at Peenemunde and being forced to create these technological terrors. Together with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and the head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA, General William "Wild Bill"

Donovan, FDR sends an elite unit of commandos to penetrate Peenemunde and bring Bandit back to the United States.

This is a harrowing tale of world war being waged beneath the grand, cosmic war between gray aliens and their reptilian foes. *Universe Destroyers: Bandit's Tale* is a prequel set decades before the events of *Universe Destroyers* and establishes the complex mythology of the series. Readers will be fascinated by the technology, intrigued by the history, and thrilled by the nonstop adventure.

Read more at weichertmedia.com.

Also by Kurt Weichert

Sawgrass Wars

Blood in the Water

Malone's Back

The King Comes Home

Universe Destroyers

Universe Destroyers: Bandit

Universe Destroyers: World War 2

Standalone

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About the Author

Humorist, author, film producer, and sports aficionado Kurt Weichert has devoted his career to producing movies and writing novels, screenplays, sitcoms, and sports comedies.

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