

Malone's Back

Sawgrass Wars, Volume 2

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MALONE'S BACK

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"A man can hunt a ghost so long, he forgets which one of them is dead."

—Johnny Malone

CHAPTER ONE

SORRY CHARLIE

The black Firebird came around the corner too fast.

Its rear tires broke loose, shrieking across the pavement before catching again. The car fishtailed once and stopped sideways outside the barricade surrounding what remained of Johnny Malone's house.

Mack Donnelly killed the engine.

Smoke drifted above the shattered walls of the Spanish Colonial home. Firefighters had extinguished the worst of the blaze, but isolated flames still flickered among the ruins. Yellow crime-scene tape snapped in the warm Miami breeze.

Mack's telephone vibrated against his hip.

He pulled it from his belt and looked at the number.

Area code 775.

Nevada.

Mack silenced the call and returned the telephone to its holder.

He remained behind the wheel for several seconds, studying the destroyed house. Then he reached beneath his coat, removed a silver flask, and turned it over in his hand.

He put it away unopened.

The cigarette he lit instead tasted stale.

His DEA badge hung from a thick leather belt. A pistol rode on the opposite hip. He wore faded jeans, a wrinkled shirt, and snakeskin boots scarred by years of bad weather and worse decisions.

There had been a time when those clothes helped him disappear inside criminal organizations. Mack could drink with smugglers, gamble with killers, and sit across from cartel lieutenants without making anyone wonder whether he belonged.

That ability had made him a legend in Dawber County.

It had also taught him how much of himself he could leave out of an official report.

Mack stepped from the Firebird and approached the barricade.

A uniformed Miami police officer hurried toward him.

"Sir, you can't go in there."

Mack continued walking.

The officer reached for his arm, saw the DEA badge, and stopped.

"Sorry, Agent."

"Who found the bodies?"

The officer glanced toward the ruins. "Fire department. Four so far."

"Identification?"

"Nothing official."

"Then it isn't four. It's four so far."

Mack ducked beneath the tape.

The explosion had torn the roof from the house and thrown sections of stucco across the lawn. Palm fronds had been stripped from nearby trees. Pieces of furniture lay scattered among broken roof tiles, shattered glass, and blackened timber.

The remains of an iron balcony had landed near the street.

Mack stopped where the front entrance had once stood.

The blast had originated inside. He could see it in the direction of the damage, the way the walls had folded outward and the debris field widened toward the road.

Someone had wanted to destroy more than the house.

They had wanted to destroy whatever evidence remained inside it.

"I'm surprised you came."

Mack recognized the voice before he turned.

Barbara Roland stood beside a black Suburban with an open laptop resting on its hood. She wore a dark pantsuit cut well enough to conceal a shoulder holster without hiding it completely. Her hair was

shorter than Mack remembered, and the years had sharpened rather than softened her.

She had been beautiful when they were married.

Now she looked powerful.

Mack took a drag from his cigarette.

"I'm surprised Homeland Security is wasting time down here."

"A house explodes in broad daylight after September eleventh, DHS gets called."

"And what? Homeland Security stops bombs now?"

Barbara closed the laptop halfway.

"If we'd been around before September eleventh—"

"The towers still would've come down, Barb."

Her expression hardened.

"Says the career DEA agent."

"Exactly."

She looked at the cigarette.

"You're contaminating my crime scene."

"Your crime scene?"

"My people arrived before yours."

"My people don't know I'm here."

"That doesn't surprise me."

Mack approached the Suburban. "What kind of explosive?"

"We're still determining that."

"You brought me here before determining what blew up?"

"I didn't bring you anywhere."

"You knew I'd come."

"I knew the name on the property records would eventually reach you."

Mack glanced toward the house.

Johnny Malone had spent twelve years living quietly behind those walls. He paid his taxes, avoided Dawber County, and pretended to be

a retired accountant with no interest in the fortune he had helped move through the United States.

Mack had never believed the performance.

Barbara reopened the laptop and brought up a series of crime-scene photographs.

The first showed a burned body beneath a collapsed section of roof.

The second showed another body near what had once been the kitchen.

The third was barely recognizable as human.

Barbara watched Mack's face.

"Recognize any of them?"

"Only if they were jack-o'-lanterns on my mother's porch."

"For God's sake, Mack. Be an agent for once."

"Barb—"

"Director Roland."

Mack smiled. "How's Tucker?"

The question landed exactly where he intended.

Barbara's shoulders stiffened. "Better than ever. He just bought a third home in the Hamptons."

"I bet he still cries over his court-appointed clients."

"He's one of the most respected attorneys in Washington."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"Say what you want about him. He never slept with a stripper connected to one of his cases."

"That you know of?"

Barbara stared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"High-profile litigator. Young interns following him everywhere. Private jets. Foreign conferences. Rich clients with interesting appetites." Mack flicked ash onto the pavement. "You sure he's not worse than me?"

"He isn't a degenerate."

"You used to like that about me."

"Not the part where you slept with a Reno stripper."

Mack studied her.

The same vein had appeared along the side of her neck. It always surfaced when she was angry and trying not to show it.

Some things survived a divorce.

"Why can't we just get along?" Mack asked.

Barbara let out a short laugh. "I wasn't going to show you this."

She reached behind the laptop and lifted a clear evidence bag.

Inside it was a scorched metal lighter bearing a skull and crossbones.

Mack stopped smiling.

He took the bag from her and held it toward the sunlight.

The metal was blackened. One corner had partially melted, but the emblem remained visible.

He knew that lighter.

He had watched Johnny Malone roll it over his knuckles during interrogations. Johnny would flick it open, light a cigarette, and decide how much truth the federal government deserved to hear.

"Malone's," Mack said.

"According to your old reports."

"Where did you find it?"

"In the rubble. Near one of the bodies."

"Which one?"

Barbara selected another photograph.

The corpse lay facedown beneath burned timber. The remains were approximately Malone's height and build, although the fire had destroyed anything that might have allowed an immediate identification.

Mack studied the photograph.

"That isn't him."

"You determined that from a picture?"

"I determined it before I got out of my car."

"Who else would carry Malone's lighter?"

"One of the men who came here to kill him."

"You know who they were?"

"No."

"Then how do you know they came to kill him?"

"Because Johnny blew up the house."

Barbara stared at him.

Mack pointed toward the ruins. "Look at the debris. Whoever set the charge knew exactly where to put it. Johnny spent twelve years waiting for somebody to come through that door. He wouldn't let himself get trapped inside his own house."

"People get old."

"Not him."

"People get careless."

"Not him."

"People die, Mack."

"Johnny Malone makes other people die."

Barbara took the evidence bag from him.

"You sound almost impressed."

"I know what he is."

"Do you?"

"Better than anybody."

"You said that in Reno too."

"This isn't Reno."

"No. In Reno, you were only destroying yourself."

Mack's telephone vibrated again.

He ignored it.

Barbara glanced toward his belt. "Aren't you going to answer?"

"No."

"Who keeps calling?"

"Someone who doesn't understand the word no."

"That narrows it down to everyone you've ever met."

The telephone stopped.

Barbara closed the laptop.

"Dental comparisons are being run. Until we get the results, that body is presumed to be the owner of this house."

"Then your presumption is wrong."

"You always were at your most confident when you had the least evidence."

"I had enough evidence to destroy the Dawber organization."

"You had evidence because you lived with those people for years."

"I did what I had to do."

"You always say that."

Mack looked toward the ruins.

There were entire nights in Dawber County that had never appeared in his reports. Men who disappeared without being entered on a witness list. Orders Mack had followed because refusing them would have exposed him.

The official history called the operation legendary.

Official histories were written from whatever survived the fire.

Barbara stepped closer.

"How long have you continued investigating Malone?"

"I haven't."

"Don't lie to me."

"You haven't been my wife for a long time. You don't get to decide when I'm lying."

"I knew when you were lying before I was your wife."

Mack dropped his cigarette and crushed it beneath his boot.

"I kept my files."

"That wasn't my question."

"I reviewed them occasionally."

"How occasionally?"

"Whenever I had trouble sleeping."

"So every night."

Mack did not answer.

Barbara shook her head. "Oscar knows?"

"He knows I never liked the way the case ended."

"That isn't the same thing."

"No."

"You used agency resources?"

"Nothing anyone was using."

"That means yes."

"I talked to informants."

"DEA informants?"

"People talk to me because they trust me."

"People talk to you because they're frightened of you, indebted to you, sleeping with you, or hoping you'll eventually disappear."

"Still counts."

Barbara gathered the photographs and returned them to the folder.

"I want every Malone file you have."

"Why?"

"Because DHS is opening a domestic-threat investigation."

"Based on one exploded house?"

"Four bodies, military-grade demolition work, and a former federal informant connected to one of the largest narcotics organizations in Florida history."

"He wasn't a federal informant."

"What was he?"

Mack looked at her.

"Protected."

Barbara caught the distinction.

"By whom?"

"Ask the FBI."

"I'm asking you."

"The Bureau made a separate arrangement with Johnny before the Dawber County raid. They kept him off our arrest list and refused to tell us where they put him."

"And you've been angry about it ever since."

"I'm angry because they protected the man who designed the operation."

"Bo Dawber ran it."

"Bo owned the county. Johnny built the machine."

Barbara opened the driver's door of the Suburban.

"Get in."

"Where are we going?"

"To see Oscar."

"He'll be thrilled."

"I'm not asking him to be thrilled."

"You're asking him to surrender jurisdiction."

"I'm giving him concurrent jurisdiction."

Mack smiled. "You always did know how to make theft sound constitutional."

Barbara climbed behind the wheel.

Mack looked back at the smoking house.

Somewhere beyond the barricades, beyond the burned bodies and the lighter planted in the rubble, Johnny Malone was moving.

Mack could feel it.

The feeling was not evidence. It was older and more reliable than evidence.

He walked toward the Suburban.

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OSCAR FUENTES SLAMMED the manila folder onto his desk hard enough to rattle the nameplate.

"This is some real bullshit."

The Special Agent in Charge of the DEA's Miami field office was in his fifties, Cuban-American, wiry, and seemingly incapable of sitting still when angry. He glared at the folder as if it had personally insulted his mother.

Mack sat across from him with his arms folded.

Barbara remained standing beside the window.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" she asked.

Oscar looked at her. "What?"

"For a year, you've been demanding more resources. Congratulations."

"How is Homeland Security going to get me more resources when your shiny new department is vacuuming up every nickel in Washington?"

"Work with us."

Oscar threw his hands into the air.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means DHS supplies forensic personnel and federal funding. DEA supplies its institutional knowledge of the Dawber organization."

Oscar turned toward Mack. "Did she always talk in riddles when you two were married?"

"Barbara has always taken pride in being a professional ball-buster."

"Excuse me?" Barbara said.

Oscar pointed at her. "She talks like a government fortune cookie."

"DEA and DHS have concurrent jurisdiction."

"That's bureaucratic horse shit and you know it."

Oscar dropped into his chair and rubbed his temples.

"The War on Terror is consuming everything. I've got six cartel killings on Calle Ocho and a witness in Hialeah too frightened to testify. My agents are chasing murderers with broken radios, but Homeland Security finds money because some retired accountant blew up his kitchen."

"That retired accountant helped finance one of the largest narcotics pipelines in the southeastern United States," Barbara said.

Oscar looked at Mack. "You told her."

"I didn't tell her anything she couldn't find in the records."

"Those records were sealed."

"Apparently not well enough."

Barbara placed both hands on Oscar's desk.

"A house exploded in broad daylight in Miami. Four unidentified bodies were recovered. The homeowner has documented connections to cartels, organized crime, corrupt law enforcement, and federal intelligence agencies. Post-September eleventh, that qualifies as a potential domestic threat."

"And you conveniently dump it on me when you've got a flight to Washington in two hours."

"Help us close this and I'll be your best advocate in Washington."

"Bullshit. You don't want the explosion blowing back on DHS."

Mack leaned forward.

"We didn't finish it the first time, Oz. Malone is still out there."

Oscar closed his eyes.

"Dios mío. Not this ghost story again."

"We found Malone's lighter," Barbara said. "He was at the house."

Oscar opened the folder and examined the evidence photograph.

"A lighter? You want me to redirect federal agents because of a god-damn Zippo?"

"It's custom," Mack said. "He carried it in Vietnam. Skull and crossbones etched into the casing."

Oscar lowered the photograph.

"You're not helping yourself. You're making it sound like you've continued investigating him."

Mack said nothing.

Oscar stared at him.

Barbara stared at him.

Mack finally shrugged. "On my own time."

Oscar pushed himself slowly out of his chair.

"How much of your own time?"

"Some."

"How much agency time?"

"Depends how you define agency time."

"I define it as any moment when I'm paying you."

"Then very little."

Oscar laughed without humor.

"You disobeyed a direct order."

"I kept up with old sources."

"You used DEA informants?"

"They were already registered."

"Vehicles?"

"Occasionally."

"Databases?"

"Only when necessary."

Oscar looked toward the ceiling.

"Jesus Christ."

"I was right," Mack said. "He's alive."

"You don't know that."

"I know Johnny Malone."

Oscar stabbed a finger toward him.

"No, you knew him. Twelve years ago. Before Dawber County ate whatever good judgment you had left."

"Johnny tipped the FBI."

"We don't know that."

"You knew the night of the raid that he had a deal."

"I knew someone above me had ordered his name removed from our target list."

"And you never asked why?"

"Of course I asked. Then I followed the order because that is what federal agents do."

"That's what bureaucrats do."

Oscar leaned across the desk.

"No one wanted you after Reno. No one. I brought you into this office because we started together and because I believed there was still an agent underneath all that whiskey and self-pity."

"I don't drink whiskey at work."

"You drink before work. Apparently that satisfies your code of ethics."

Barbara glanced at her watch.

"Are you accepting the joint investigation?"

Oscar looked at her. "You planned this."

"I responded to an explosion."

"You used Mack's obsession to create a task force."

"I used the agent most familiar with Johnny Malone."

"That isn't the same thing?"

"No."

Mack smiled faintly.

Oscar saw it.

"And you. Wipe that look off your face. You went around me."

"I didn't go to Barbara."

"The end result is the same."

Barbara picked up her briefcase.

"I need an answer."

Oscar sank into his chair.

"Fine. I'll babysit your bag of shit. But remember something while everyone in Washington is waving flags and chasing terrorists—drugs are killing more Americans than al-Qaeda ever did."

Barbara extended her hand.

Oscar stared at it before reluctantly shaking.

"My office prepares the operational agreement," Barbara said. "DHS retains authority over the explosion. DEA handles the narcotics and organized-crime components."

"And if Malone is alive?" Mack asked.

Barbara looked at him.

"Then we find him."

"We arrest him."

"If the evidence supports it."

"The evidence has supported it since 1991."

"You don't get to retry your old case because you dislike the outcome."

Mack leaned back. "Say hello to Tucker for me."

Barbara paused at the door.

"Still jealous?"

"Concerned. Those Hamptons winters can destroy a man's character."

"He'll be touched."

She left without looking back.

Oscar watched the door close.

"She's something."

"She always was."

"That woman could castrate a bull with a look."

"Tucker probably considers it foreplay."

Oscar laughed despite himself, then caught Mack looking through the glass wall beside his office.

A young agent walked past carrying three case files. She was in her late twenties, Latina, sharply dressed, and moved with the confidence of someone who had already decided where she was going.

"Who's that?" Mack asked.

Oscar followed his gaze.

Then he raised his voice.

"Reyes."

The agent stopped and turned.

"Yeah, Chief?"

"Get in here. Welcome to the circus."

Special Agent Aisha Reyes entered the office and closed the door behind her. A badge and pistol rested on her hip.

"What's up?"

Oscar gestured toward Mack.

Reyes examined him without enthusiasm.

Mack stood and offered his hand.

"Mack Donnelly."

"I know."

"Have we met?"

"You gave a lecture at the academy."

"I've given a lot of lectures."

"You tried to take me back to your hotel afterward."

Mack's hand remained extended between them.

"I think I'd remember that."

"You were drinking heavily."

Oscar covered his mouth to hide a smile.

Reyes looked at Mack's hand until he lowered it.

"You don't remember me," she said. "That's the part I remember."

Oscar sat down.

"Mack, Agent Reyes is your new partner."

Mack turned toward him. "No."

"I wasn't asking."

"I don't work with partners."

"Your last partner is now flying to Washington after taking jurisdiction over my office."

"Barbara was my wife."

"That explains the anger. It doesn't explain the paperwork."

Reyes looked between them. "What investigation?"

Oscar tapped the folder.

"Explosion at the residence of Johnny Malone."

Her expression changed.

"The Johnny Malone?"

Mack looked at her. "You know the name?"

"Everyone at the academy knows the name. Dawber County was required reading."

Mack nodded toward Oscar. "Then she knows who brought it down."

"She also knows who escaped," Reyes said.

Mack studied her more carefully.

Oscar smiled.

"Not only is Reyes your partner, she is the ranking agent on the investigation."

Reyes's smile appeared immediately.

"Thanks, Chief."

Mack looked at Oscar. "You can't be serious."

"I have never been more serious."

"She was in high school when we took down Dawber County."

"Middle school," Reyes said.

Oscar pointed toward her. "She follows orders. She writes complete reports. She hasn't assaulted a prisoner in federal custody, compromised an undercover operation in Reno, or spent twelve years using government resources to chase a man she was ordered to leave alone."

"You left out my commendations."

"I ran out of breath."

Oscar handed the folder to Reyes.

"Read everything. The explosion is now a joint DEA-DHS investigation. You report directly to me. Mack reports to you."

Mack's jaw tightened.

Reyes accepted the folder.

"What's our first move?"

"We locate everyone from the old organization who might know where Malone went."

"Bo Dawber," Mack said.

"He's still at Reform Prison," Reyes said.

"So is Kenny Gregory."

Oscar nodded. "Start there."

Mack stood.

Oscar raised one finger.

"I don't want this becoming a Mack Donnelly shit show."

Mack shrugged.

"Don't give me that look. I saved your ass after Reno, and you've been repaying me by breaking every rule I put in front of you."

"We're friends."

"Then try not to get us indicted. We may be friends, but I'll fire you myself."

Mack headed for the door.

"Reyes, get a car."

She did not move.

Mack looked back.

Reyes held up the folder. "You report to me."

"For administrative purposes."

"For every purpose."

Oscar leaned back in his chair, enjoying himself now.

Reyes tossed Mack a set of government keys.

"You drive. I read."

Mack caught them.

His telephone vibrated again.

The same Nevada number appeared on the screen.

Reyes noticed.

"You answering that?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"Not unless my luck has gotten considerably worse."

He silenced the call and followed Reyes from the office.

The telephone vibrated a final time as they approached the elevator.

This time, the caller left a message.

Mack waited until Reyes stepped inside. He remained in the hallway and raised the telephone to his ear.

A man spoke for less than ten seconds.

"Mister Donnelly, time has not improved your position. We are finished waiting."

The message ended.

Mack deleted it.

The elevator doors began to close.

Reyes stopped them with her hand.

"You coming?"

Mack looked at the blank telephone screen.

Reno had followed him to Miami.

He slipped the telephone onto his belt and entered the elevator.

"Let's go find Johnny Malone."

CHAPTER TWO

THE NIGHT DAWBER FELL

Reform Prison rose from the flat South Florida landscape like a concrete ship run aground.

Razor wire surrounded the outer walls in shining coils. Guard towers stood at each corner, their dark windows reflecting the morning sun. Beyond the perimeter stretched drainage canals, scrub pine, and enough empty land to discourage anyone foolish enough to climb the fence.

Mack parked the government sedan beneath a sign marked FEDERAL AND STATE VISITORS.

Aisha Reyes closed the Johnny Malone file she had been reading since Miami.

“You drove ninety miles an hour.”

“We got here, didn’t we?”

“That isn’t how federal travel regulations work.”

“You going to put it in your report?”

“I’m deciding whether it deserves its own section.”

Mack climbed from the car.

His telephone had remained silent since they left Miami. That should have relieved him. Instead, he found himself checking it every few minutes to make certain the battery had not died.

Reyes noticed.

“Expecting a call?”

“No.”

“You’ve checked that telephone fourteen times.”

“You counted?”

“I investigate things.”

“That’s adorable.”

She locked the car. "Keep talking. Oscar gave me authority to send you home."

"Oscar gave you a folder and an inflated sense of importance."

"He also gave me ranking authority."

"Those words mean less every time you say them."

They crossed the parking lot toward the administration building.

Inside, a corrections officer inspected their badges and directed them through a metal detector. Mack removed his pistol, spare magazine, pocketknife, lighter, flask, and the keys to the Firebird he was not driving.

The officer looked at the collection.

"You carry all that every day?"

"I left the shotgun at home."

Reyes placed her pistol in a lockbox.

"Please don't encourage him."

The officer returned their badges and issued two visitor passes.

A second guard escorted them through a series of steel doors. Each opened only after the previous one slammed shut behind them. The deeper they traveled into the prison, the cooler air of the administration building gave way to heat, disinfectant, and the human odor of too many men confined in too little space.

Inmates watched through reinforced windows as Mack and Reyes passed.

Some recognized the badges.

Others recognized Mack.

He could tell by the way their expressions changed.

His name had once traveled through federal prisons ahead of him. Dawber County had made him famous among agents and infamous among the men they arrested. Reno had added a different kind of reputation.

At the end of the corridor, Warden Vernon Kinder waited beneath a security camera.

Kinder wore a charcoal suit and a broad smile. He had thick silver hair, pink cheeks, and the soft appearance of a man whose meals were prepared by people he could punish.

Sweat glistened along his upper lip despite the air-conditioning.

"Mack Donnelly," Kinder said. "As I live and breathe."

He extended his hand.

Mack shook it.

"How've you been, Vern?"

"Better than the men in my custody."

Kinder laughed at his own joke and turned toward Reyes.

"And who might you be?"

"Special Agent Aisha Reyes," Mack said.

Kinder's smile widened.

"Oh, my. What an exotic name."

Reyes withdrew her hand before Kinder could take it.

"It's a name."

She looked at Mack.

"What is it with you old-timers?"

Mack frowned. "Who are you calling old?"

Kinder dabbed his forehead with a folded handkerchief.

"Well, Agent Reyes, welcome to Reform. How can we assist the Drug Enforcement Administration?"

"We're here to speak with two prisoners," Reyes said. "Bocephus Dawber and Kenny Gregory."

Kinder's smile remained in place, but something behind it shifted.

"I can help you with one."

Mack watched him fold the handkerchief and return it to his pocket.

"What does that mean?"

"Kenny Gregory hanged himself two days ago."

For a moment, the corridor seemed to grow quieter.

Mack looked at Reyes.

She was already opening her notebook.

"Where?" she asked.

"In his cell."

"What time?"

"Shortly before dawn."

"Who found him?"

"Officer Daly."

"Was Gregory in general population?"

"He had recently been moved to administrative segregation."

"Why?"

"Disciplinary reasons."

"What disciplinary reasons?"

Kinder's smile thinned.

"I don't have the complete report in front of me."

"Get it."

The warden studied her.

Mack almost smiled.

Reyes continued.

"Gregory was due for release in less than a month. Why would a man who served nearly twelve years kill himself days before going home?"

"For that, you'd need a séance."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is the only answer Mr. Gregory left us."

"Why wasn't a death notice or coroner's report sent to the DEA?"

"This facility filed all required reports with the Department of Corrections."

"Gregory was convicted in a federal narcotics prosecution."

"He was serving his sentence in a state-managed facility under an interstate placement agreement."

"That doesn't remove federal notification requirements."

Kinder's eyes moved toward Mack.

"Is she always like this?"

"We've been partners for two hours."

"And he's already tired of me," Reyes said. "Imagine how you'll feel by lunchtime."

Kinder's handkerchief returned.

Mack watched him blot his upper lip.

"Where's the body?" Mack asked.

"Transferred for examination."

"To whom?"

"The state medical examiner."

"Which office?"

"I'd have to check."

"Check."

Kinder slipped the handkerchief into his pocket again.

"I was under the impression you came to discuss Johnny Malone."

Neither Mack nor Reyes had mentioned Johnny.

Reyes closed her notebook.

"What makes you think that?"

Kinder hesitated for only a fraction of a second.

"You requested two inmates from the Dawber County organization. Malone was associated with them."

"So were fifty other people."

"Malone's house exploded yesterday. It has been on the news."

"The owner of the house hasn't been identified publicly."

Kinder's smile finally disappeared.

Mack stepped closer.

"You expecting Johnny, Vern?"

"Why would Johnny Malone come here?"

"To see Bo. To see Kenny. To find out which one of them talked."

"No one talked."

"You seem certain."

"I run a secure institution."

"Kenny Gregory died inside that secure institution."

Kinder's jaw tightened.

"We take every death seriously."

"Then you won't mind giving Agent Reyes the housing logs, surveillance recordings, disciplinary reports, visitor records, medical records, and names of every officer working Gregory's unit during the forty-eight hours before his death."

"I will need a formal request."

Reyes produced a folded document from the file.

"Here."

Kinder did not take it.

"This authorizes access to information connected with a joint DEA and Homeland Security investigation," she said. "If you obstruct that investigation, I'll telephone Director Barbara Roland from your office. She can explain the consequences personally."

Kinder looked at the document, then at Mack.

"Homeland Security?"

"A house exploded in Miami," Mack said. "Patriot Act-type thing."

"I admit I don't understand all the particulars of the Patriot Act."

Reyes smiled.

"It means we can make your day considerably worse."

Kinder studied them both.

"How ominous."

"And Bo?" Mack asked. "Are you bringing him out?"

"I can't permit an interrogation without notifying his attorney."

"We're not questioning him about his conviction," Reyes said. "We're investigating a current national-security matter."

"That phrase seems to open an impressive number of doors."

"You're learning."

Kinder removed a walkie-talkie from his belt.

"Looks like I don't have much choice."

"You have choices," Mack said. "You're just running out of good ones."

Kinder pressed the transmission button.

"Bring Bocephus Dawber to Interview Room Three. Federal agents are waiting."

A voice acknowledged the order.

Kinder returned the radio to his belt.

"This way."

As they followed him, Reyes leaned closer to Mack.

"He knew why we came."

"Yep."

"He's lying about Gregory."

"Probably."

"Does everyone you know lie?"

"Everyone worth knowing."

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BOCEPHUS DAWBER SAT with his hands cuffed to a steel ring bolted into the interrogation table.

Prison had taken weight from him without making him smaller. His hair had gone silver at the temples, and the lines around his mouth had deepened, but he remained broad-shouldered and imposing.

He sat upright in his orange uniform as if the prison belonged to him.

Mack stopped inside the doorway.

For twelve years, he had imagined seeing Bo again.

In some versions, Bo looked defeated. In others, he begged. Mack should have known better than to expect either.

Bo smiled.

"Well, well. If it ain't Captain Ahab and his babysitter."

Kinder held the door open behind Mack and Reyes.

"You play nice, Bo."

"Always do, Vern."

The familiarity between them was subtle, but Mack heard it.

Kinder gave Bo an oily smile and stepped into the corridor.

The door closed.

Bo looked at Reyes.

"Who's the pretty young thing? She looks a hell of a lot better than Oscar."

Mack sat across from him.

"She could kick your ass in ways Oscar only dreams about."

Reyes remained standing.

"Special Agent Aisha Reyes."

"Another exotic name."

"It's still just a name."

Bo chuckled.

"You two rehearsing that?"

"We're here to discuss Johnny Malone," she said.

The humor vanished from Bo's eyes, but not from his mouth.

"Twelve years, Mack. Twelve years you leave me sitting in here, and now you show up when I'm less than a month from freedom."

"You make it sound like I forgot about you."

"You forgot to visit."

"I sent a Christmas card."

"Must've gotten lost."

"How tragic."

Bo leaned back as far as the cuffs allowed.

"I don't have to talk without my lawyer."

"You can call him," Reyes said.

"That right?"

"Yes. While you wait, we can request a federal hold based on an active narco-terrorism investigation. Your attorney can spend the next month arguing about whether your release date still applies."

Bo's gaze sharpened.

"Narco-terrorism?"

"A Miami house exploded in broad daylight," Reyes said. "Four bodies were recovered. The dead appear connected to a Haitian criminal organization."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Maybe nothing," Mack said. "Maybe everything."

He placed a clear evidence bag on the table.

Johnny Malone's lighter rested inside.

The skull and crossbones remained visible beneath the scorch marks. On the reverse, the old engraving could still be read.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

Bo stopped moving.

Mack watched his eyes.

"Recognize it?"

Bo looked at the lighter for several seconds before raising his gaze.

"Johnny's."

"We found it inside the house."

"Then maybe the Haitians finally got him."

"You and I both know Johnny has nine lives. He's not even halfway through them."

Bo pushed the evidence bag back with one finger.

"Congratulations. You found your white whale."

"Johnny's alive."

"You sound happy about it."

"I'm going to finish what I started."

Bo gave a low laugh.

"That's what you said in 1991."

Mack felt Reyes watching him.

He ignored her.

"Word is, if you hadn't killed Sanchez, you and Johnny would still be making money."

"I didn't kill Sanchez."

"You gave the order."

"The cartel killed him."

"That story wasn't believable twelve years ago."

"It convinced everyone but Johnny."

"And me."

Bo's smile returned.

"You believed a lot of things back then."

"I believed you were a drug trafficker."

"You were right."

"I believed you were a murderer."

"Couldn't prove it."

"I believed Johnny Malone was the brains of your organization."

Bo looked down at the lighter.

"That one still bothers you, doesn't it? All those medals, all those newspaper stories, and the accountant walked away."

"He turned on you."

"He turned on everybody."

"He tipped the FBI."

"Maybe."

"He traded the organization for protection."

Bo raised his cuffed hands.

"And yet here you sit, asking me where he went. Doesn't sound like the Bureau protected him very well."

Mack leaned forward.

"Johnny didn't leave that lighter accidentally. He put it beside a body so we'd think he died in the explosion. That means he needs time."

"For what?"

"To get back to Dawber County."

Bo's expression remained controlled.

"He hated Dawber County."

"He left something behind."

"Bad memories."

"Five million dollars."

The silence lasted one beat too long.

Reyes noticed.

Mack did too.

"You know where he hid it," Mack said.

"If I knew where five million dollars was buried, do you think I'd still be eating state-issued meat loaf?"

"You couldn't reach it from prison."

"I've got friends."

"You've got Kinder."

Bo's eyes flicked briefly toward the dark glass dome in the ceiling.

Mack followed the glance.

A red light glowed beside the camera lens.

Someone was watching.

Someone was listening.

Bo looked back at him.

"You always did see more than was healthy."

"And you always lied when the truth was cheaper."

"Truth never came cheap in Dawber County."

Reyes opened the file.

"Johnny and Kenny Gregory controlled the emergency cash reserve. Gregory is dead. Johnny's house was destroyed, and Johnny has disappeared. If he's coming back for that money, who does he contact?"

Bo looked at her with renewed interest.

"You're smarter than you look."

"And you're less charming than you think."

Mack almost smiled.

Bo shifted in his chair.

"Johnny and Kenny hid the money in the swamp. Kenny remembered pieces of the route. Markers. Turns. Islands that disappear when the water rises."

"Who knew the complete route?" Reyes asked.

"Pastor Bubs."

"Bubs has the money?" Mack asked.

Bo did not answer immediately.

"Bubs has the way to it."

"That isn't the same thing."

"It's close enough."

"How did a Baptist preacher get involved in drug money?"

"Johnny trusted him."

"Why?"

"Because Bubs was the one man in Dawber County nobody owned."

Mack thought about the preacher he remembered from 1991. A large man with a larger voice, standing in front of grieving families and telling them salvation remained possible even after the federal vans carried their fathers away.

"Johnny gave Bubs access to the money after the arrests," Bo continued. "Told him to use it for the families."

"Did he?" Reyes asked.

"Bubs considered it blood money."

"So he left five million dollars in the swamp for twelve years?"

"A better man than you or me might."

Mack looked at the camera again.

Bo had given the answer loudly and clearly.

Too clearly.

"You want us to go to Bubs," Mack said.

"I want you to find Johnny."

"Why?"

"So I can thank him for the memories."

"You're planning something."

"I'm planning to walk out of this prison next month."

"And Kinder?"

"What about him?"

"You tell me."

Bo's face revealed nothing.

Mack moved the evidence bag closer.

"Johnny blew up his house because someone came for him. If he returns to Dawber County, the people who want that money will follow."

"Then you better find him first."

"You expecting trouble?"

"In Dawber County?" Bo smiled. "Always."

Reyes closed the file.

"We'll need a complete statement concerning Bubs and the route."

"No."

"You were happy to talk a moment ago."

"I gave you a hunch. I'm not signing anything."

"You understand we can interfere with your release."

"You understand my lawyer will have you reassigned to counting aspirin at the Veterans Administration."

Reyes placed both hands on the table.

"You don't frighten me."

"I'm not trying to."

Bo looked at Mack.

"You frighten easily enough for both of you."

Mack held his gaze.

Bo's smile became smaller.

"Atticus knew that."

The room seemed to tighten around them.

Reyes looked from Bo to Mack.

"What does Atticus Shelton have to do with this?"

"Nothing," Mack said.

Bo leaned toward her.

"Your partner ever tell you what he did to prove himself to us?"

Mack's chair scraped against the floor as he stood.

"We're done."

Reyes did not move.

Bo's eyes remained fixed on Mack.

"Did you put all of it in those legendary reports?"

Mack gathered the lighter.

"Enjoy your remaining weeks."

"You should visit more often."

Mack walked toward the door.

Behind him, Bo spoke again.

"Bubs knows the way. But if Johnny's really back, that money is the least dangerous thing he came home for."

Mack opened the door.

Kinder stood several feet down the corridor, pretending to examine paperwork.

Mack looked up at the camera, then at the warden.

Kinder smiled.

"Productive conversation?"

"Turn off the recording," Mack said.

"I'm afraid security recordings are automatic."

"Preserve every second."

"Of course."

"If any part disappears, I'll come back with a warrant and enough agents to take this prison apart one brick at a time."

Kinder's smile weakened.

Reyes stepped into the hallway and closed the interrogation-room door behind her.

"We also want Gregory's complete file."

"I'll have my staff assemble it."

"Now."

"That could take several hours."

"We'll wait."

Kinder wiped his upper lip again.

"I was told you had an urgent investigation."

"We do," Reyes said. "A suspicious prison death just became part of it."

Kinder glanced at Mack.

Mack offered no help.

The warden motioned toward a waiting area.

"I'll see what can be done."

He walked away.

Reyes waited until he disappeared through a steel door.

"Bo was telling the truth about Bubs," she said.

"Part of it."

"He wanted us to hear it."

"He wanted Kinder to hear it."

"You think the warden is looking for the money?"

"I think everyone is looking for the money."

"And Atticus?"

Mack started down the corridor.

"Dead."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"It's the only answer you're getting."

Reyes caught up with him.

"What did you leave out of your reports?"

"Nothing that matters now."

"That usually means it matters more than anything."

Mack stopped beside the first security door.

Through its narrow reinforced window, he could see prisoners moving along the opposite corridor.

One of them paused and stared at him.

Mack remembered another corridor, another year, and Atticus Shelton standing between him and the only exit.

The memory arrived with the force of a fist.

Mack pushed it down.

"Kinder is lying about Kenny," he said.

"I know."

"We get the file, then we visit Pastor Bubs."

"And after that?"

"We find Johnny before everyone else does."

The steel door opened.

Mack stepped through. Behind them, beyond concrete and reinforced glass, Bocephus Dawber remained seated beneath the camera with Johnny Malone's return spreading through the prison like the first tremor of an approaching war.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NIGHT THE MUSIC ENDED

DAWBER COUNTY — 1991

The music outside was loud enough to rattle the walls of the backstage trailer.

Mack Donnelly barely heard it.

Bo Dawber stood three feet from Johnny Malone, his face tight with rage. Kenny Gregory remained between them, one hand raised toward each man as if he could hold back a war that had been building for years.

Johnny was drunk. Not stumbling drunk. Not yet. He was worse than that—angry enough to believe the liquor had made him fearless.

Mack knew better.

Johnny Malone had never needed liquor for that.

“What is he still doing here?” Bo demanded.

“Johnny was just leaving,” Mack said.

“Like hell I am.”

“You’re drunk, Johnny,” Bo said.

“And you’re a damn murderer.”

Johnny lunged.

Mack caught one arm while Kenny grabbed the other. Johnny twisted violently between them, trying to reach Bo. His heel struck a cable on the floor, and he crashed onto his back.

The plywood walls shook.

Outside, hundreds of people applauded the band performing on the main stage.

Bo glanced toward the curtain separating the backstage area from the crowd.

“You watch your mouth, Malone.”

Kenny extended a hand.

Johnny slapped it away and climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"I know it was you who murdered Sanchez."

The accusation landed harder than the music vibrating through the walls.

Bo's expression barely changed.

Mack felt something tighten beneath his ribs.

Sanchez had been dead for six days.

His body had been discovered beside a burning automobile south of Miami. His hands had been removed. Three bullets had been fired into his chest, and another into his head. A Colombian symbol had been carved into the skin above his heart.

It looked like a cartel execution.

It was supposed to.

"Your buddies in the cartel did that, Johnny," Bo said. "Sent a message. To you."

"Bullshit."

"I warned you what would happen."

Kenny moved closer to Johnny.

"Johnny, I've been with Bo all week. He ain't said a word about Sanchez."

Johnny stared at his oldest friend.

"He didn't need to say anything. He's got the Sheltons. He's got the Brodys. Bo knows how to get things done without saying a word."

"I don't know about this one," Kenny said.

Bo's mouth curled into a satisfied smile.

Mack looked away.

He had found the discrepancy three months earlier while examining the operation's ledgers. The numbers were too clean. Johnny and Sanchez claimed that a shipment had earned four million when the payment had been closer to ten.

Once Mack found the first lie, the others followed.

Different books. False invoices. Phantom expenses. Money routed through shell companies before disappearing overseas.

Johnny and Sanchez had been skimming from Bo for years.

Bo demanded sixty percent for allowing them to move narcotics through Dawber County. Johnny and Sanchez had agreed to his terms, then lied about how much the operation made.

Mack had given Bo the numbers because that was what a trusted lieutenant would have done.

It was what an undercover agent had to do to protect his identity.

He had expected threats. Maybe a beating. Bo forcing Sanchez and Johnny to repay what they had taken.

He had not expected Atticus Shelton to appear at Bo's house that night.

Two days later, Sanchez was dead.

Mack had spent six days telling himself that he had not ordered the murder.

Standing backstage now, he no longer believed the distinction mattered.

"You stole from me," Bo told Johnny. "You breached our agreement. You've been skimming from our business."

"Our business?" Johnny laughed bitterly. "You sat in this county and collected sixty percent while Sanchez and I took all the risks."

"It was my county."

"You didn't own it."

"I owned enough of it to keep you alive."

Bo stepped closer.

"I told you the cartel would find out about your double-dipping. I told you they would make you pay. And I told you that if you wanted my protection, you'd have to give me every dollar you owed me."

"I want nothing from you."

"Them cartel boys are still out there, Johnny. All I have to do is tell them you went renegade and ran off with their money."

Johnny's smile vanished.

Bo saw it and pressed harder.

"Then they'll come back for your lovely wife and that little boy of yours."

Johnny's hands closed into fists.

Mack leaned near him.

"This isn't worth it, friend. Sleep it off."

Johnny turned toward him.

For one terrible instant, Mack wondered if Johnny knew everything.

"You think you could've stood in my foxhole?" Johnny asked. "Any of you? Or Sanchez's? You boys ain't got nothing on us."

"No," Bo said. "But we also ain't got a target on our backs like you do."

"Is that right?"

"Empty threats and loose talk. That's all you are these days." Bo pointed a thick finger at Johnny's chest. "Get us our money. You didn't just rob me. You robbed all of us. Otherwise, I call the Colombians and let them finish what they started."

Kenny placed a hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"Mack's right. Go home and sleep it off. I'll check on you tomorrow."

Johnny looked at Kenny with an expression Mack could not understand.

It was anger, certainly.

There was grief in it too.

But beneath both was something else.

A farewell.

"Nah, Ken. We've been asleep for a decade." Johnny looked past him toward the stage. "Not anymore. You'll see, buddy."

Bo spat tobacco juice into an empty beer bottle.

The song outside entered its final chorus.

"Get him the hell out of here."

Mack took Johnny by the arm and guided him toward the rear exit. Johnny allowed it.

That worried Mack more than another fight would have.

Behind them, Bo called out.

"You get me my cut by the end of the week. Then you get your ass out of my county. Do that and your family stays safe. Don't, and the Colombians will do what they do best."

Johnny stopped at the door.

"Kenny and his boys work for me now," Bo continued. "God knows they can't rely on you."

Johnny glanced back at Kenny.

Kenny appeared wounded by the entire exchange, but he still stood beside Bo.

The band struck its final chord.

Bo smiled.

"Sounds like the music's coming to an end."

Johnny opened the door.

"That's one way of putting it."

Kenny followed him for several steps.

"Johnny, let me take you home."

"I'm out, Ken. You won't see me for a while."

"Don't be like that. We've got to stick together."

"Let him go," Bo said. "Your buddy's lost it."

Johnny looked at Mack one final time.

There was no drunkenness in his eyes now.

Only calculation.

Then he stepped outside and disappeared into the darkness.

Mack watched the door close behind him.

Something was wrong.

Johnny had been furious about Sanchez, but he had been too controlled beneath the rage. His accusations had been specific. His good-byes had sounded final.

Mack started toward the door.

Bo caught his shoulder.

"Let him go."

"I should make sure he doesn't do something stupid."

"He's already done something stupid. He stole from me."

Before Mack could answer, Merle Shelton burst through the curtain.

Merle was Atticus Shelton's son, a nervous young man whose wiry frame seemed incapable of containing his panic. His ripped jeans were wet to the knees, and mud covered his boots.

"Bo!"

Bo had already walked through the opposite curtain toward the stage.

Mack blocked Merle's path.

"What is it?"

"I've got to talk to Bo."

"He just walked onstage," Kenny said.

"Dammit. I've got news."

"About what?"

Merle looked between them.

"My daddy called from the marina. The Coast Guard ordered every Dawber County-registered fishing boat back to port half an hour ago."

Kenny laughed.

"You been drinking Shelton moonshine?"

"I ain't playing. The Feds blocked the county road. Nobody's getting in or out."

The last notes of the song faded.

The crowd went quiet.

Sirens rose in the distance.

Not one siren.

Dozens.

Merle's eyes widened.

"There's a goddamn army out there. Looks like the Panama invasion. They're looking for Bo—and the rest of us."

Kenny's smile disappeared.

He ran toward the stage.

Mack followed.

• • • •

BO STOOD AT CENTER stage beneath white floodlights, facing what had been a cheering crowd moments earlier.

Now people were running in every direction.

Federal agents poured through the festival grounds in raid jackets. DEA. FBI. Customs. Coast Guard personnel closed off the marina while helicopters swept spotlights across the surrounding fields.

Oscar Fuentes stood at the foot of the stage with his service pistol trained on Bo.

"Interlock your fingers behind your head!"

Bo stared down at him.

His left eye twitched.

Slowly, he raised his hands. His right hand went behind his head, but his left drifted toward the pistol tucked beneath his shirt.

Kenny emerged from backstage.

Oscar swung the weapon toward him.

"Freeze!"

Kenny raised his hands.

"Easy, pal. I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"Don't move another muscle, Mr. Gregory."

Kenny looked at Bo's hand creeping toward the pistol.

"Bo, don't."

Mack climbed the rear steps and crossed the stage behind him.

Bo's fingers touched the grip.

Mack drew his pistol and pressed it against the back of Bo's head.

"Don't even try it."

Bo went still.

His eyes moved toward Mack.

"What?"

"DEA, prick. You and all your boys are under arrest."

For the first time since Mack had met him, Bocephus Dawber looked completely surprised.

Oscar climbed onto the stage.

"You did real good here, Mack."

"Thanks, Oz."

Agents rushed past them, ordering musicians and stagehands onto the ground. Across the festival grounds, men who had believed they owned Dawber County were being dragged from tents, trucks, boats, and beer stands.

Mack searched the confusion for Johnny.

He was gone.

"Johnny Malone was here," Mack said. "He just slipped out the back."

Oscar lowered his voice.

"Yeah."

"He's the brains behind the whole operation."

Bo laughed.

Oscar ignored him.

"Malone is no longer your concern. Let's get you back to Miami for debriefing."

Mack stared at his oldest friend.

"What do you mean he's no longer my concern?"

"I mean exactly that."

"We have to find him before he disappears."

"I've got hundreds of suspects here. Bo Dawber is the target."

"Johnny Malone built the financial network. He negotiated with the Colombians. He moved the money."

"Mack."

"He's not an accountant. He's the whole goddamn machine."

Oscar took a pair of handcuffs from his belt and pushed them into Mack's hand.

"Cuff Mr. Gregory."

Mack looked at the steel cuffs.

Then at Kenny.

Kenny had stopped smiling.

"You?" Kenny asked.

Mack stepped toward him.

"Give me your hands."

"You're a Fed?"

"Turn around, Ken."

Kenny did not move.

"All those years," he said. "All those nights at Widow's Walk. You sat at my table."

"I know."

"My boys trusted you."

"I know."

"Did Johnny know?"

Mack hesitated.

"I don't know."

That was the truth, but it sounded like another lie.

Kenny slowly turned and placed his hands behind his back.

Mack closed the cuffs around his wrists.

Kenny looked over his shoulder.

"I thought you were my friend."

Mack tightened the cuffs one notch.

"I was."

Agents led Kenny away.

Mack faced Oscar.

"Did Johnny call this in?"

"No."

"Then why isn't he on the arrest list?"

Oscar glanced toward the FBI command vehicle near the edge of the field.

"Someone tipped the Bureau earlier this week. They started building their own operation. We moved tonight before they could shut us out and claim the entire case."

"Someone?"

"The order came from above. Johnny Malone is not ours."

Mack understood.

Johnny had not stumbled out of the backstage trailer defeated.

He had already made his deal.

"You let him walk."

"I didn't let anybody do anything. I'm following orders."

"He traded all of them for protection."

Oscar looked toward the agents loading prisoners into vans.

"Tonight we ended one of the largest smuggling networks in Florida history. Try remembering that."

Bo was still kneeling on the stage, surrounded by agents. He watched Mack with dark amusement.

Mack approached him.

"You think this is funny?"

"I think you spent years crawling around in the mud with us, and the one man you wanted walked right past you."

"Shut up."

"You never understood Johnny."

"I understood him better than you did."

"No. If you had, you'd know he was always going to leave you holding an empty bag."

Oscar motioned for two agents to take Bo away.

Bo allowed them to raise him.

As they reached the edge of the stage, he looked back.

"Just remember one thing, Mack. You'll never find that money without me."

Mack struck him in the stomach.

Bo doubled over.

Oscar grabbed Mack by the collar and hauled him backward.

"Don't you dare! His lawyer will eat us alive."

"He threatened a federal agent."

"He was handcuffed."

Oscar shoved Mack away and pointed toward another agent.

"Get Dawber and Gregory in the wagon."

The rear doors of a prisoner transport slammed shut behind them.

Oscar stepped close enough that Mack could smell coffee on his breath.

"You better get your head straight. Don't ruin this for all of us."

"Johnny has the money."

"Then another team will handle Johnny."

"You know that isn't what's happening."

"What I know is that your assignment is over. You're going back to Miami. You're going to shower, see a doctor, and sit through a debrief."

Mack stared toward the dark road where Johnny had vanished.

"Yeah," he said. "Fine."

• • • •

MACK DID NOT RETURN to Miami.

He drove past the federal convoy and turned onto a shell road leading deeper into Dawber County.

Johnny maintained three safe houses. Mack knew about all of them.

The first was an abandoned bait shop near the county line.
Empty.

The second was a hunting cabin hidden behind a stand of cypress trees.

Empty.

Mack reached the third shortly before dawn.

It was an old fish camp beside a drainage canal, half concealed by sawgrass. A rusted pickup truck sat in the yard. One light burned inside the house.

Mack parked well short of the property and approached on foot.

His pistol remained in his hand.

He climbed the porch steps and tried the door.

Unlocked.

Inside, he found an open bottle of whiskey, two glasses, and blood on the floor.

Not much.

Enough to tell him someone had been hurt.

"Mack."

The voice came from behind him.

He turned.

The knife flashed before he could raise his pistol.

The blade sliced through his shirtsleeve and opened his upper arm. Mack stumbled sideways, striking the doorframe.

Atticus Shelton came at him again.

Atticus was older than Mack by nearly twenty years, but age had done nothing to diminish him. He was built like a man who had spent his life lifting engines, hauling nets, and hurting people with his bare hands.

Stories about him circulated throughout southern Florida.

Men said Atticus kept alligators in a private pit and fed his enemies to them.

Mack had never learned whether that was true.

He had never wanted to ask.

Atticus slashed again.

Mack caught his wrist with both hands. The knife stopped inches from his throat.

"You goddamn traitor," Atticus whispered.

Mack drove a knee into his stomach.

Atticus grunted but did not release the blade. He slammed his forehead into Mack's face.

Light burst behind Mack's eyes.

Atticus threw him through the screen door.

They crashed across the porch and into the yard. The railing splintered beneath Mack's weight. His pistol flew from his hand and landed somewhere in the darkness.

Atticus followed him down.

Mack tried to rise.

A boot struck his ribs and rolled him onto his back.

Atticus stood above him, the knife red with Mack's blood.

"First time Bo brought you around, I told him no outsiders."

Mack kicked at Atticus's knee.

The old man staggered.

Mack scrambled toward the truck. Atticus caught him by the back of his shirt and slammed him facedown across the hood.

The knife rose.

Mack grabbed the whiskey bottle from the truck bed and swung it backward.

Glass shattered across Atticus's face.

Atticus roared and released him.

Mack turned and drove the jagged neck of the bottle toward his throat. Atticus blocked it, grabbed Mack's injured arm, and twisted.

Pain dropped Mack to one knee.

Atticus struck him across the jaw.

Mack fell against an old fence. Rotten boards snapped beneath them as Atticus tackled him through it.

They rolled in splintered wood and mud.

Mack clawed for anything he could reach.

His fingers closed around a rock.

Atticus drew a revolver from beneath his jacket and cocked the hammer.

Mack threw the rock.

It struck Atticus above the eye.

The revolver fired.

The bullet passed close enough for Mack to feel it against his cheek.

He lunged.

They tumbled into the drainage ditch beside the road. Brown water swallowed them. Atticus forced Mack's head beneath the surface.

Mack struck blindly at his face.

Atticus held him down.

The pressure inside Mack's chest became unbearable. His injured arm had begun to fail. His strength was disappearing.

Then his hand struck metal beneath the mud.

His pistol.

Mack closed his fingers around the grip.

He drove the barrel into Atticus's abdomen and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot sounded dull beneath the water.

Atticus released him.

Both men rolled apart.

Mack crawled onto the gravel shoulder, coughing canal water. Blood ran down his arm and dripped from his fingertips.

Atticus made it several feet before collapsing beside the road.

For a long moment, neither man moved.

Dawn began to lighten the eastern sky.

Mack forced himself upright.

His pistol shook in his hand as he walked toward Atticus.

The bullet had entered low in the abdomen. Dark blood spread across the old man's shirt, but he was still conscious.

Atticus looked up at him.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted."

Mack stopped several feet away.

"That's all true."

"DEA rat bastard."

"That too."

Atticus coughed and wiped blood from his mouth.

"Do your bosses know about the men you brought me?"

Mack said nothing.

"Do they know about the two men Bo made you kill yourself?"

"I left that part out of my reports."

Atticus smiled through bloodied teeth.

"Figured."

"I had to make Bo believe me."

"No. You wanted him to believe you. There's a difference."

Mack tightened his grip on the pistol.

Atticus had made him kill the first man to prove he was committed to Bo's operation. The second had been Mack's own idea because refusing twice would have exposed him.

He had told himself both men were killers.

He had told himself their deaths protected the investigation.

He had left their names out of every report.

Atticus shifted painfully on the gravel.

"You came out here looking for Malone."

"Yes."

"He ain't here."

"I can see that."

"He beat you again."

Mack moved closer.

"Where did he go?"

Atticus laughed until the pain stopped him.

"You still don't understand him. Johnny don't run from men. He makes men run after him."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

Mack pointed the pistol at his chest.

Atticus studied the trembling barrel.

"You scared?"

Mack considered lying.

There had already been enough lies that night.

"Truth is, you scared the shit out of me, Atticus. From the first day I met you."

Atticus nodded approvingly.

"Only a fool wasn't afraid of me."

"Johnny wasn't."

"Johnny Malone's a different kind of fool."

"Sanchez wasn't afraid of you either."

The humor left Atticus's face.

"No. He wasn't."

"You killed him."

Atticus looked toward the brightening sky.

"Bo wanted him dead."

"And you did whatever Bo wanted."

"For a long time."

"You made it look like the cartel."

"Did a good job too."

"Johnny knew."

"Johnny always knew too much."

Atticus tried to push himself upright, but the wound stopped him. He fell back, breathing hard.

"You better kill me now, boy."

Mack did not lower the gun.

"If you take me in, I'll tell them everything. Every man you handed over. Every crime you helped us commit. Those two bodies you put in the ground yourself."

"I know."

"And if I get out, I'll find you."

"I know."

"I'll find your family too."

Mack's finger settled against the trigger.

The shot in the ditch had been self-defense.

Whatever happened next would not be.

Atticus recognized the decision in his eyes.

"Go on, then."

Mack raised the pistol.

Atticus spat blood onto the gravel.

"You got lucky once."

"I did."

"You won't get lucky twice."

"That's why I can't take you in."

Atticus smiled.

It was the same smile men in Dawber County had seen before disappearing into the swamp.

Mack pulled the trigger.

The first bullet struck Atticus in the chest.

Mack fired again.

And again.

He continued until the pistol clicked empty.

The gunshots rolled across the sawgrass and disappeared into the coming morning.

Mack stood over the body, covered in mud, blood, and broken glass.

By sunset, his report would say that Atticus Shelton had ambushed him while he pursued a fleeing suspect. It would say Atticus attacked with a knife and fired a revolver. It would say Mack Donnelly discharged his weapon in self-defense.

It would not mention the men Mack had delivered to Atticus.

It would not mention the two men he had killed for Bo.

It would not mention Sanchez.

And it would not mention that Atticus had been wounded and helpless when Mack emptied the rest of the magazine into him.

Mack had survived the most feared man in Dawber County.

It did not feel like winning.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE OTHER BROTHER

The ancient ceiling fan rotated above Willis Childress's head with a tired metallic groan.

It had been turning when he entered the gym that morning. It would probably still be turning after the building collapsed around it.

Willis understood that kind of stubbornness.

Sweat ran from his shaved head and soaked through the waistband of his camouflage trousers. His bare fists struck the heavy bag in a relentless rhythm.

Left.

Right.

Left hook.

The bag jerked violently with every blow.

Suds planted his enormous hands against the opposite side and struggled to hold it steady. He was nearly six and a half feet tall, built like an overturned refrigerator, and wore the same pleasant expression whether he was repairing an engine or breaking a man's legs.

"What's wrong, bro?" Suds asked.

"Hold him steady."

"I'm trying."

Willis drove another fist into the center of the bag.

A muffled scream came from inside.

Suds looked down at the canvas.

"He's still breathing."

"That ain't what I asked."

Suds tightened his grip.

The Maroons had converted the abandoned produce warehouse into something between a clubhouse, a repair shop, and a fortress. Men worked on boat engines in the loading bay. Others guarded the en-

trances with rifles across their laps. A card game continued in the adjoining room despite the cries coming from the gym.

Everyone inside knew the rules.

Business belonged to Willis.

Loyalty belonged to the Maroons.

Betrayal belonged to the bag.

Willis struck it again.

Pain traveled through his swollen right hand and into the old injury in his forearm. For an instant, he was back inside a burning armored vehicle, choking on smoke while metal screamed around him.

He pushed the memory down and hit harder.

The bag swung sideways.

"Suds."

"I got him."

"You don't got him."

The trapped man groaned.

Willis stepped back, breathing heavily. He took a bottle of water from a nearby bench, swallowed twice, and poured the rest over his head.

Then he removed a large combat knife from the sheath at his back.

Suds smiled.

"This my favorite part."

Willis plunged the blade into the bottom of the bag and cut through the canvas.

TED "TEDDY" HENDERSON fell onto the concrete floor.

The University of Miami student landed in a heap, his expensive shirt torn and soaked with blood. One eye had swollen shut. His lip was split, and his wrists remained bound behind his back.

Teddy gasped for air.

Willis crouched beside him.

"You understand why you're here?"

Teddy tried to speak.

Only a dry rasp came out.

Willis grabbed his hair and lifted his head.

"I asked you a question."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I understand."

The Maroons gathered at the gym entrance.

Teddy had been selling their marijuana to wealthy students at the University of Miami, then moving it through country clubs and private parties from Coral Gables to Palm Beach. His family name opened doors that Willis's men could not approach without attracting police attention.

For six months, the partnership had made everyone money.

Then Teddy decided the Haitians could give him a better price.

He had not merely changed suppliers. He had given the Haitian crew names, delivery routes, and the location of two Maroon storage houses to prove his value.

One of those houses belonged to a man with three children.

Willis pulled Teddy closer.

"I thought we were partners."

"We were."

"Then you sold us out."

"I didn't."

Willis drove his fist into Teddy's stomach.

Teddy folded around the blow and vomited onto the floor.

Suds looked down at the mess.

"I just cleaned in here."

"You ain't never cleaned nothing in your life," Willis said.

"I supervised."

Despite himself, Willis nearly smiled.

He turned back to Teddy.

"You thought because you went to some rich-boy university, you were smarter than us. You thought you could make money off our work and hand our people to the Haitians when you found a better deal."

Teddy shook his head.

"That's not what happened."

"What happened, then?"

"I owed them money."

"That supposed to make me feel better?"

"They threatened me."

"And you gave them my people instead."

"I didn't know what else to do."

"You could've come to me."

Teddy began crying.

"My father will pay you."

Willis tilted his head.

"Oh, he's going to pay."

He placed the knife against Teddy's throat.

The young man stopped breathing.

"Please."

Willis pressed the edge hard enough to draw a thin line of blood.

"Teddy, I need you to listen carefully, because I don't like repeating myself."

Teddy stared up at him.

"You're going back to Miami. You're going to tell your daddy that you made a bad business decision. Then he's going to pay every dollar you owe us, plus interest."

"He will."

"You're also going to tell him that the Maroons expect access to the same clubs, parties, and rich customers you promised us."

"Yes."

"You work for us. You don't work for the Haitians. You don't work for yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Willis removed the blade.

Teddy released a sobbing breath.

"If you cross us again, Suds is going to cut you into enough pieces that your daddy will need a map to put you back together."

Suds nodded pleasantly.

"I'm good with puzzles."

Teddy stared at him in horror.

Willis stood.

"Take him home."

Four Maroons lifted Teddy from the floor.

Willis caught one of them by the arm.

"Put him in the back seat. Don't throw him in the truck bed."

The man appeared confused.

"Why not?"

"Because he ain't dead. And don't let him die on the way. His father's no use to us if his son arrives in a coffin."

They carried Teddy out.

Suds watched them go.

"You really would've let me cut him up?"

"No."

Suds looked disappointed.

"Then why'd you say it?"

"Because Teddy believed me."

A voice crackled from the radio clipped to Willis's belt.

"Boss?"

Willis pressed the button.

"What?"

It was Bigz, one of the men guarding the front gate.

"Got a woman out here asking for you."

"I know a lot of women."

"Says her name is Tiana Ross."

Willis wiped his face with an old handkerchief.

"What does she want?"

"She won't tell me."

"Then send her away."

"She says it's about Deon."

Willis stopped wiping his face.

Suds noticed.

"What about him?" Willis asked.

"She said she needs to tell you herself."

Willis clipped the radio back onto his belt.

"Get the floor cleaned."

"That sounds like a job for somebody else."

"Find somebody else, then."

Willis walked toward the front of the warehouse.

His right fist had begun to throb.

He flexed it as he passed through the loading bay. The men working there stopped what they were doing and watched him. Willis gave them nothing.

Deon had probably sent Tiana to lecture him.

That was how his brother handled disagreements now. Lawyers, appointments, and conversations filled with words like liability and consequences.

Deon had used some of those words the last time he represented Willis.

The weapons charge had been serious enough to send Willis away for years. Deon had dismantled the prosecution's case, discredited two deputies, and gotten the charges dismissed.

Afterward, instead of accepting thanks, Deon had told Willis that it was the last time.

It had not been the last time.

With Deon, it never was.

Willis stepped outside.

A battered pickup truck stood beyond the open gate. One of the doors was a different color from the rest, and dried swamp mud covered the tires. Willis recognized it as an old Shelton vehicle.

Tiana Ross stood beside it.

Her clothes were wrinkled and stained. A cut crossed her forehead. Despite that, she held herself with the same confidence she had displayed when Willis first met her in Deon's Miami office.

Bigz stood several feet away with a rifle.

"She wouldn't let me search her," he said.

Tiana looked at him.

"You tried to put your hands under my blouse."

"That's where people hide guns."

"That's where you were going to lose your fingers."

Willis raised a hand.

"Go inside, Bigz."

Bigz hesitated.

"Boss—"

"Go."

Bigz walked away muttering.

Willis stopped in front of Tiana.

"What are you doing in a Shelton truck?"

"It was the only transportation available."

"That don't answer my question."

"It's a long story."

"Then start talking."

Tiana glanced toward the warehouse. Two Maroons loaded Teddy into the rear seat of a waiting sedan.

"What happened to him?"

"My business."

"He looks like he needs a hospital."

"He needs better judgment."

The sedan drove away.

Tiana turned back to Willis.

"Did you receive a call from the prison?"

The question struck him with enough force to make him forget about Teddy.

"What call?"

"From Deon."

"No."

"From anyone?"

"What happened?"

"I need you to come with me."

"You drove all the way out here in a stolen Shelton truck to tell me that?"

"Yes."

"Where is Deon?"

Tiana's composure faltered.

It lasted less than a second, but Willis saw it.

A coldness entered his stomach.

"Where is my brother?"

"He went to Reform Prison to see Kenny Gregory."

Willis stared at her.

"Why the hell was Deon talking to Kenny Gregory?"

"Our firm represented him."

"Why?"

"Because Kenny was our client."

"That ain't an answer."

"It's the only answer that matters. Deon was an attorney. Kenny was scheduled for release and believed the guards were threatening him."

"Kenny Gregory helped destroy this county."

"He still had constitutional rights."

"Those white boys poisoned this place and got rich doing it. Then Johnny Malone burned everything down and left the rest of us to starve. Why would Deon help any of them?"

"Because that was his job."

"That was always Deon's problem. He cared more about doing his job than remembering where he came from."

Tiana's eyes hardened.

"That isn't true, and you know it."

"You come onto my property and tell me what I know?"

"He spent half his career keeping you out of prison."

Willis stepped toward her.

Bigz and the guards at the gate watched carefully.

Tiana did not retreat.

"Be very careful," Willis said.

"I'm not here to fight with you."

"Then tell me where my brother is."

Tiana reached into her jacket.

Every rifle at the gate rose.

"Easy," she said.

She removed a small cellular phone.

"This came in before he went inside the prison."

She pressed a button and held the phone between them.

Static came through the speaker.

Then Deon's voice.

"Tiana, something isn't right. They changed the meeting room, and nobody will tell me why. If I don't call you in ten minutes, call my brother."

The message ended.

Willis stared at the phone.

"Play it again."

Tiana did.

"If I don't call you in ten minutes, call my brother."

The recording stopped.

Willis looked toward the dirt beneath his boots.

"When did he leave that?"

"Yesterday."

"And you're just coming now?"

"I spent most of yesterday trying not to get killed."

"What does that mean?"

"I drove toward the prison after receiving the message. A corrections vehicle followed me onto the old Alligator Alley."

Willis listened without moving.

"They forced my car off the road. It went into the water. They shot at me when I tried to get out."

"Who?"

"Prison guards. Or men dressed like them."

"How'd you get away?"

"Johnny Malone."

Willis laughed once.

It was an empty, humorless sound.

"Johnny Malone is dead."

"No, he isn't."

"Then I'm talking to a crazy woman."

"I've been with him."

"Malone's been gone twelve years."

"He came back."

Willis studied her face, searching for some sign that this was a trick.

Tiana looked exhausted.

She did not look dishonest.

"Where's Deon?"

Her eyes filled, but she held his gaze.

"I think the warden had him murdered."

The world seemed to narrow around Willis.

The guards at the gate disappeared.

The warehouse disappeared.

Even the heat disappeared.

There was only Tiana and the sentence she had just spoken.

Willis shook his head.

"No."

"Kenny Gregory is dead too."

"No."

"The prison says Kenny hanged himself."

"Then he hanged himself."

"He was scheduled to be released."

"Men do stupid things."

"Deon entered that prison to meet with him. He never came out."

"Maybe they detained him."

"The prison claims he was never there."

"Then you went to the wrong prison."

"His car is still in their visitors' parking lot."

Willis walked away from her.

He reached the edge of the road before stopping.

His brother could not be dead.

Deon was the one who survived by avoiding every bad decision Willis made. Deon had studied while Willis fought. Deon had gone to church with Pastor Bubs and Millie while Willis disappeared into juvenile detention. Deon had graduated from college, then law school, then opened an office in Miami with his name printed across the glass.

Willis still carried one of Deon's business cards in his wallet.

He had never told anyone.

On the front, beneath the embossed name, Deon had written a private telephone number and the words:

Anytime. No questions.

Willis had called it more times than he would ever admit.

Tiana approached slowly.

"Willis."

He turned on her.

"No. Guys like me die."

She said nothing.

"Guys like Deon don't die. They become senators. Maybe president. They get their picture on television and come back here wearing some expensive suit, telling everybody how they escaped Dawber County."

His voice broke on the final words.

Willis looked away.

He would not let his men see him cry.

"I'm sorry," Tiana said.

"You don't know he's dead."

"I know."

"You saw his body?"

"No."

"Then you don't know anything."

"I know someone tried to kill me after Deon went inside that prison. I know Kenny Gregory died before he could tell Deon where Johnny Malone hid five million dollars. And I know Deon's last message told me to call you."

"The five million is a ghost story."

"It's real."

"Says who?"

"Johnny."

Willis faced her again.

"Malone was a con man. He destroyed his partners and disappeared with their money."

"He says the money is still here."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because Johnny believes the people who killed Deon are coming to Dawber County to find it."

"Let them come."

"They're working with surviving members of the Brody and Shelton families."

"Those two families spent the last two days killing each other."

"Some of them survived."

"They always do."

"They'll kill anyone between them and that money."

Willis looked toward the warehouse.

"Then they picked the wrong county."

"Johnny has a plan."

"Johnny Malone always has a plan. Everybody else ends up in prison while he walks away."

"He wants to speak with you."

"I don't want to speak with him."

"Then speak to him for Deon."

Willis's jaw tightened.

"Don't use my brother to move me around."

"I'm not. Deon spent his entire life getting you out of trouble. Now I'm asking you to help me find out who killed him."

Willis stepped close enough that their faces were inches apart.

"If you are lying to me, there will not be any law firm, federal agency, or police department capable of protecting you."

"I'm not lying."

"If this is some trick Malone put together to get his hands on my people—"

"It isn't."

"If I don't like what I hear, you won't wake up tomorrow."

"Then you can kill me tomorrow. Today, you're coming with me."

For the first time since she arrived, Willis saw something in Tiana that reminded him of Deon.

Not her education.

Not the expensive language or the belief that the law meant anything in Dawber County.

It was her refusal to back down when common sense told her to run.

Deon had possessed the same infuriating quality.

Willis turned toward the warehouse.

"Suds!"

The large man appeared in the doorway, still smiling.

"Yeah?"

"Bring my car."

Suds looked at Tiana, then at the Shelton truck.

"Where we going?"

"To hear a dead man tell us where my brother is."

Tiana frowned.

"Johnny isn't dead."

"We'll see."

Willis pointed toward the loading bay.

"Bigz and the others follow us in the truck. Rifles, shotguns, everything."

Tiana watched the Maroons move.

"If we arrive with an army, Johnny may think you're attacking him."

"I want him to think about it."

Suds disappeared inside.

Willis took out his wallet and removed Deon's business card.

The edges had softened from years of being carried. The ink on the back had faded, but the words remained visible.

Anytime. No questions.

Tiana saw it.

"He loved you," she said.

Willis returned the card to his wallet.

"We didn't understand each other."

"That isn't the same thing."

"No."

The warehouse doors opened.

A black sedan rolled into the yard, followed by two pickup trucks filled with armed Maroons. Suds parked in front of Willis and climbed out.

"Tank's full."

Willis opened the driver's door.

Tiana walked toward the passenger side.

"You aren't driving," he said.

"Why?"

"Because you put your last car in the Everglades."

"Someone forced me off the road."

"That's what everybody says after an accident."

Under any other circumstances, Deon would have laughed at that.

The thought hurt more than Willis expected.

He climbed behind the wheel.

Tiana sat beside him. Suds and Bigz joined the vehicles behind them.

Willis started the engine but did not put the car in gear.

"If Deon is alive, I'm bringing him home."

Tiana looked ahead.

"And if he isn't?"

Willis stared through the windshield at the road leading deeper into Dawber County.

"Then Johnny Malone is going to give me the names of every person involved."

"And after that?"

Willis shifted into drive.

"After that, I'm going to kill every last one of them."

The gates opened.

Willis drove out first.

The Maroons followed him toward Johnny Malone.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

The Maroon convoy stopped fifty yards from Alex Gregory's boathouse.

Willis Childress counted four vehicles already parked near the marina: a battered Caprice with bullet holes through its body, Alex's pickup, an unfamiliar sedan, and a county utility truck that appeared to have been abandoned beside the road.

Beyond them, the boathouse rested on pilings above the dark water.

Willis killed the engine.

"That where he is?" he asked.

Tiana nodded.

"Johnny, Bones, Alex, and Billy Dawber are inside."

Willis turned toward her.

"A Dawber?"

"Billy helped save my life."

"That don't make him less of a Dawber."

"He isn't his uncle."

"Ain't decided that yet."

Willis climbed from the car.

The Maroons emerged from the vehicles behind him. Suds carried a shotgun across his chest. Bigz and the others spread out instinctively, watching the windows, dock, and surrounding sawgrass.

"Stay out here," Willis ordered.

Suds frowned.

"All of us?"

"If I start shooting, come inside."

"What if somebody else starts shooting?"

"Then come inside faster."

Willis looked at Tiana.

“Lead the way.”

They crossed the marina together.

The air smelled of gasoline, fish scales, and the storm gathering beyond the western horizon. A television played somewhere inside the boathouse. Willis heard a reporter describing another American advance into Baghdad.

He stepped through the door.

Johnny Malone sat on a worn couch facing the television.

He looked smaller than the legend Willis remembered.

His hair had gone gray around the temples. Bandages showed beneath the leg of his borrowed trousers. A pistol rested on the table beside him, close enough to reach but far enough away to appear polite.

Alex Gregory stood over a chart spread across a workbench. Billy Dawber watched from the kitchenette.

Bones Malone leaned against the wall.

Bones moved first.

He pushed away from the wall and placed himself between Willis and his father.

Willis stopped.

Bones had been a small child when Johnny disappeared. Back then, older boys had waited for him after school and punished him for what they believed his father had done to their families.

Bones never ran.

He walked toward them and took his beating.

Then he grew.

By seventeen, he had become a state champion wrestler with shoulders broad enough to fill a doorway. Every boy who had once beaten him eventually received a visit. Afterward, people stopped using Johnny Malone's name when Bones was near.

Willis understood violence.

He recognized it in the young man's eyes.

"You've got a lot of nerve coming back here," Willis told Johnny.

Bones stepped closer.

"I wouldn't come any nearer to my father."

Willis looked him over.

"Why are you protecting him? He hurt you and your mother as much as he hurt everybody else in this county."

"That's between him and me."

"Then move."

"No."

Johnny rose carefully from the couch.

"Bones."

His son did not look back.

"Sit down, Dad."

"I can handle this."

"You've been shot."

"I noticed."

Willis looked at the bandage.

"Somebody beat me to it?"

"Several people tried."

"Maybe they had the right idea."

Bones crossed the remaining distance between them.

Willis held his ground.

The boy was larger, but Willis had fought larger men in the Army, on the streets, and inside rooms where no one followed rules. He also knew that Bones wanted him to make the first move.

"You touch him," Bones said, "and I'm putting you through that wall."

Willis glanced at the thin wooden paneling.

"That ain't much of a threat. A hard sneeze could put me through that wall."

Billy tried to hide a smile.

Bones heard him.

His attention shifted for half a second.
Willis used it to step around him.
Bones caught Willis by the shoulder.
Willis turned sharply.
Johnny moved between them.
“That’s enough.”
Bones stared at his father’s hand on his chest.
“Get out of my way.”
“Not until you calm down.”
“I am calm.”
“You’re breathing like a bull.”
Willis smiled.
Johnny pointed toward the kitchen.
“Go get everyone something to drink.”
Bones stared at him in disbelief.
“What?”
“We’ve got business to discuss.”
“You want me to serve drinks?”
“I want you to give yourself thirty seconds before you do something stupid.”
Willis sat in the large recliner facing the television.
“I’ll take a beer.”
Bones’s face reddened.
“Get it yourself.”
“You ain’t much of a host.”
Bones turned and punched the wall.
The impact sounded like a shotgun blast.
His fist went completely through the paneling.
Silence descended over the boathouse.
Bones withdrew his hand. Splinters clung to his bleeding knuckles.
“That could’ve been your face,” he told Willis.
Willis looked at the hole.

Then at Johnny.

Johnny sighed.

"He takes after his mother."

"I was about to say."

Tiana closed the door before the Maroons outside could rush in.

"Everyone stop measuring themselves," she said. "Deon is dead."

The humor disappeared.

Willis stared at Johnny.

"I want the truth."

Johnny picked up the remote and turned off the television.

"So do I."

"Did Warden Kinder kill my brother?"

"I believe he ordered it."

"Believing ain't knowing."

"Kenny Gregory was murdered shortly before Deon arrived. The prison staged Kenny's death as a suicide. Deon went inside asking questions, and now the prison claims he was never there."

Tiana placed the cellular phone on the table.

"They tried to kill me before I could reach him."

Willis continued watching Johnny.

"Who did it?"

"Vernon Kinder has guards working for him. Daly is one of them. There will be others."

"Give me their names."

"I will when I have them."

"You expect me to wait?"

"I expect you to kill the right men."

Willis rose.

"You don't get to tell me how to handle my brother's murder."

"No. I'm telling you that killing the first prison guard you find will warn everyone else."

"I want them warned."

"Then you'll never learn who gave the order."

"You just said Kinder gave it."

"I said I believe he did."

Willis stepped closer.

"You used to be more certain of yourself."

"I used to mistake certainty for intelligence."

"That supposed to impress me?"

"No."

Johnny looked toward the armed men visible through the boathouse windows.

"I'm impressed you brought an army."

"You said men were coming."

"They are."

"Then why are you sitting around watching television?"

"Because frightened men move too quickly. I'm trying not to be one of them."

Willis looked at the bullet holes in the Caprice outside.

"How's that working out?"

"Still evaluating."

Alex folded the map on the workbench.

"Warden Kinder isn't acting alone."

Willis turned toward him.

"You Kenny Gregory's boy?"

"Alex."

"I know who you are."

"Then you know my father died in that prison too."

"Your father helped Bo Dawber flood this county with cocaine."

"He also helped build half the businesses that disappeared after the arrests."

"Drug money built them."

"Money built them. Drugs destroyed them."

Willis studied him.

Alex carried himself differently from the other young men. He possessed his mother's Battenberg manners, but his eyes belonged to someone raised around docks, card games, and men who lied for a living.

Johnny's kind of eyes.

"You trying to teach me about Dawber County?" Willis asked.

"No. I'm trying to tell you we have the same enemy."

"You ain't got the same enemies I do."

"Warden Kinder killed your brother because he thought Deon knew where my father hid Johnny's money. That makes this the same fight."

Willis glanced at Johnny.

"The boy always talk for you?"

"Usually before I want him to."

"Maybe because he's smarter than you."

Johnny smiled faintly.

"He might be."

Bones heard that.

His wounded knuckles tightened.

Billy emerged from the kitchenette carrying several beers. He gave one to Willis.

Willis accepted it without thanking him.

"You Timmy Dawber's boy?"

Billy nodded.

"Your uncle involved in this?"

"I don't know."

"That ain't a no."

"Bo has been in prison for twelve years."

"And he's run half the county from his cell."

Billy looked toward Johnny.

"He gets released in a few weeks."

"That's exactly why this is happening," Johnny said.

Willis opened the beer.

"Explain."

"Kinder has been giving Bo special privileges for years. Private meetings, alcohol, access to telephones, anything that made Bo useful."

"And what did Bo give him?"

"Names. Favors. Connections. The promise of five million dollars."

Billy shook his head.

"My uncle doesn't share."

"No," Johnny said. "He doesn't."

"Then why work with the warden?"

"Because each man believes he can kill the other after they find the money."

Willis took a drink.

"Maybe I save them both the trouble."

"That would satisfy you for an afternoon. I'm trying to accomplish something larger."

"Here we go."

Willis sat again.

"Johnny Malone's got himself another grand plan."

Johnny lowered himself onto the couch.

"How much money do you need?"

Willis laughed.

"For what?"

"To rebuild the Maroons."

"We don't need rebuilding."

"You're stuffing college students into punching bags because you need access to their fathers' customers."

Willis stopped smiling.

"How do you know about Teddy?"

"I pay attention."

"You been back in Dawber County one day."

"And I already know your distribution network is trapped between county roads watched by the Dawbers and coastal routes controlled by

the Haitians. You've got manpower, but no political protection, no legitimate transportation company, and not enough money to expand."

"You wearing a wire?"

Johnny stood and lifted his shirt.

His chest was covered in gray and black hair. Bandages circled his waist and upper thigh.

Willis recoiled.

"Good Lord. Put that down."

"You asked."

"You look like something Jane Goodall ought to be studying."

"I'm part Italian. What do you expect?"

"I expect grown men to own razors."

Johnny lowered his shirt and sat.

"Are you satisfied?"

"About the wire. Not the hair."

Tiana folded her arms.

"Can we return to the murder conspiracy?"

Willis pointed at Johnny.

"How much?"

"Two million dollars."

No one spoke.

Even the Maroons visible outside seemed to become still.

Willis searched Johnny's face for the trick.

"You offering me two million dollars?"

"I'm offering it to the Maroons."

"For what?"

"Help me stop Kinder and his guards from taking the five million hidden in the swamp."

"So the money is real."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Close enough."

"That ain't an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting until we have an agreement."

Willis leaned back.

"I heard you hid five million. Why do I only get two?"

"Because it's my money."

"According to who?"

"The man who hid it."

"You hid drug money on Maroon land?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Alex looked at Johnny.

Willis caught it.

"The boy knows."

"Alex knows enough to be dangerous," Johnny said.

"I know the routes," Alex replied. "Not the exact location."

Willis turned toward him.

"What routes?"

Alex unfolded the map again.

"Three canals lead toward Gethsemane. Only one stays deep enough this time of year for a loaded skiff. Kinder's men will need trucks to move the cash once they reach dry land. That limits where they can come ashore."

He pointed to a narrow strip of land.

"If they approach from the prison, they'll use the eastern service road. If they're working with the Brodys, they may come through the old hunting lease."

Willis stepped over to the table.

"What about the north canal?"

"Too shallow."

"For a normal boat."

Alex looked at him.

"You have airboats."

"Six."

Johnny joined them.

"That's why I need the Maroons."

Willis studied the map.

"If you know where they're coming, why not call the police?"

Billy laughed.

Everyone looked at him.

"Sorry," he said. "That was funny."

"The sheriff's department still belongs to the Dawbers," Johnny said. "The state police would ask too many questions. The FBI might protect us long enough to seize the money. The DEA would take the money and spend the next ten years trying to prove I touched it."

"And you haven't?" Tiana asked.

"Not since 1991."

Willis looked up.

"You've got more somewhere."

Johnny folded the map.

"We're discussing the five million."

"You didn't live twelve years on nothing."

"I'm an accountant."

"You're a thief with a calculator."

"Those professions overlap more than you'd think."

"How much do you have?"

"Enough."

"Where?"

"Not here."

"Swiss accounts?"

Johnny said nothing.

Willis smiled.

"I knew it."

"The two million is more than enough for your assistance."

"Assistance?"

"You provide men and equipment. We keep Kinder away from the money, identify everyone involved in Deon's murder, and make sure the truth reaches the right authorities."

Willis stared at him.

"You want to arrest them?"

"I want them exposed."

"I want them dead."

"I assumed."

"You got a problem with that?"

"I have a problem with leaving bodies all over Dawber County before we restart the most lucrative enterprise this place ever had."

Billy slowly lowered his beer.

Tiana closed her eyes.

"Johnny."

Alex smiled.

Willis noticed.

"What enterprise?" he asked.

Johnny glared at Alex.

"The boys have an idea."

"It's more than an idea," Alex said.

Bones returned from the kitchen with ice wrapped around his hand.

"We're rebuilding the operation."

Tiana looked at Johnny.

"You agreed to this?"

"I agreed to discuss a tightly controlled investment."

Alex laughed.

"You agreed we could make more than five million."

"That is not the same thing."

"We want to move product through the old routes," Bones said. "Bo, Kinder, the Sheltons, and the Brodys are already fighting each other. When it's over, nobody controls the county."

"We will," Alex said.

Billy remained quiet.

Willis looked at him.

"What does the Dawber think?"

Billy's expression hardened.

"My name is Billy."

"That wasn't my question."

Billy glanced at the map.

"My uncle Bo believes this county belongs to him. My uncle Buck has spent his life enforcing that belief."

"And you?"

"I haven't decided what I believe."

Willis nodded.

"That makes you the most honest Dawber I ever met."

Johnny tapped the map.

"The old operation became too large, too careless, and too violent. Everyone confused fear with loyalty. We would not repeat that."

"You already used the word we," Willis said.

Johnny looked irritated.

"So?"

"Sounds like you made your decision."

"I haven't."

Bones sat across from his father.

"Yeah, you have."

Johnny looked between the young men.

Bones possessed the muscle. Alex possessed the strategy. Billy carried the name that could either unite Dawber County or divide it again.

None of them understood how quickly ambition turned men into corpses.

Johnny did.

That was why they needed him.

It was also why he should have walked away.

Willis extended his hand.

"Two million."

"After the money is recovered."

"And the men who killed Deon?"

"You'll get every name I find."

"No warnings."

"No."

"No police protection."

"I can't control what the government does."

"But you can control what you tell them."

Johnny looked at Willis's outstretched hand.

"I've played that game before."

"You started that game."

Johnny finally accepted the hand.

Willis tightened his grip.

"If you betray me, I won't put you in a bag."

"That's reassuring."

"I'll feed you to the gators myself."

Johnny met his eyes.

"Atticus used to say things like that."

"I ain't Atticus."

"No. He would've tried to kill me before hearing the offer."

"Maybe I'm getting soft."

"You brought twelve armed men."

"Eleven. Suds counts as two."

Outside, Suds smiled through the window as if he had heard them.

Johnny released Willis's hand.

"Tiana, I need you to find out everything you can about Kenny and Deon's deaths. Autopsy reports, guard schedules, surveillance records, prison logs."

"Kinder will bury all of it."

"Then find someone who dislikes him."

"That won't be difficult."

"Billy, you need to learn what your father knows about Bo's arrangement with the warden."

Billy's face changed.

"You want me to spy on my unce?"

"I want you to decide which side you're on."

Billy placed his unopened beer on the table.

"He's still my uncle."

"I know."

Johnny turned to Alex.

"Find every route into Gethsemane that can carry a truck."

"Already working on it."

"Bones, you're with me."

"Where are we going?"

Johnny reached for the pistol on the table.

Willis looked toward the black water beneath the dock.

"You going after the money?"

"I'm going to see whether it's still where I left it."

"You want my men with you?"

"Not yet."

"That smart?"

"Probably not."

Johnny checked the pistol and pushed it into his waistband.

Bones picked up a shotgun.

Alex reached for the map.

Johnny stopped him.

"You stay here."

"If you're going into the swamp, you need me."

"I need someone capable of thinking more than thirty seconds ahead to coordinate with Willis."

Bones frowned.

"You saying I can't think?"

"I'm saying you punched a wall five minutes ago."

"The wall started it."

Willis laughed.

Bones glared at him.

Johnny opened the boathouse door.

Storm clouds gathered over the sawgrass, turning the afternoon sky nearly black. Somewhere beyond the marina waited five million dollars, a corrupt warden, a newly released Bo Dawber, and a DEA agent who had spent twelve years refusing to let Johnny Malone disappear.

Willis followed him onto the dock.

"One more thing."

Johnny stopped.

"If you're wrong about Deon—if he's still alive—you pay the two million anyway."

"Agreed."

"And if you're right?"

Johnny looked back at him.

"Then we make sure his killers regret it."

Willis nodded.

That was the first thing Johnny had said all afternoon that sounded like a promise.

Johnny climbed into the skiff. Bones untied the line and stepped in behind him.

The engine turned over.

"Where exactly are you going?" Tiana called.

Johnny pushed the skiff away from the dock.

"Fishing."

The boat accelerated into the canal.

Willis watched father and son disappear into the approaching storm.

For twelve years, Dawber County had lived with the damage Johnny Malone left behind.

Now Malone was back.

And this time, Willis Childress intended to make certain the destruction fell on the right people.

CHAPTER SIX

THE OUTLAW LIFE

The skiff struck another wave and launched Johnny Malone several inches above the wooden bench.

He came down hard.

Pain shot from the bullet wound high on the back of his thigh and traveled directly into his spine.

Johnny grabbed the sides of the boat and glared at his son.

“Slow down.”

Bones stood at the rear of the skiff with one hand on the motor control. Wind pushed his dark hair away from his face. He looked completely at home guiding the boat through the narrow channel.

“I know how to drive.”

“You know how to go fast. That ain’t the same thing.”

Bones increased the throttle.

The skiff slammed across another line of choppy water.

Johnny winced.

“B.”

Bones laughed.

“We’re not in a race.”

“Somebody might be following us.”

“Then we shoot them.”

“That is not the answer to every problem.”

“It’s worked pretty good so far.”

Dark clouds gathered over the Everglades, swallowing what remained of the afternoon sun. Lightning flickered beyond the trees. The storm was still miles away, but Johnny could smell rain approaching across the sawgrass.

Bones eased the skiff into a channel surrounded by mangroves.

The water became calmer.

Johnny shifted carefully on the bench.

"You're enjoying this."

Bones looked ahead.

"I've got to thank you, Malone."

"You mean Dad."

"Sure."

"I am your father."

"According to Ma."

Johnny ignored the remark.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"For giving me a purpose."

Johnny watched the back of his son's head.

"What purpose?"

Bones turned and smiled.

"I'm an outlaw, Malone."

The words delighted him.

That frightened Johnny.

For years, Johnny had imagined the person his son might become. In those private fantasies, Bones possessed his father's intelligence, his mother's strength, and none of their mistakes.

Maybe he would attend college.

Maybe he would become an attorney, build legitimate businesses, or enter politics. Johnny had accumulated enough money to give his son choices no Malone had ever possessed.

But Bones had grown up without him.

Other people had taught him what the Malone name meant.

"Like you," Bones added.

"I'm a fucking accountant."

"You keep saying that like anybody believes you."

"Because it's true."

"Accountants don't blow up their houses."

"Some do."

"Accountants don't disappear for twelve years."

"I had reasons."

"Accountants don't hide five million dollars in a swamp."

"That was an unusual tax strategy."

Bones laughed.

For a moment, Johnny heard the child he remembered.

Then it disappeared.

"You get us that money," Bones said, "and I might start calling you Dad."

"You called me Dad twenty minutes ago."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Must've been the excitement."

"Maybe you could call me Dad because I'm your father."

"Maybe you could act like one."

Johnny looked toward the water.

That wound hurt more than the bullet.

Bones pulled the throttle back as the channel narrowed.

"What do you expect to get from this?" Johnny asked.

"A shitload of money."

"For what?"

"You heard Alex. This is the down payment on our future."

"Crime isn't a future."

"Not this again."

"I mean it."

"So do I. You can forget about sending me to college or buying me some little house where I can mow the grass every Saturday. School's over."

"You're seventeen."

"I'll be eighteen soon."

"That doesn't make you wise."

"No, growing up in Dawber County did that."

Bones glanced at him.

"What did you think was going to happen? You and Bo and Kenny ran cocaine through here for years. Then you handed everybody to the Feds and disappeared. Half the kids in town blamed you because their fathers went to prison."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

Bones faced forward again.

"The older boys used to wait for me after school. Sometimes five or six of them."

Johnny felt his stomach tighten.

"Your mother never told me."

"She probably figured you were too busy being an accountant."

"What happened?"

"I walked toward them."

"Why?"

"Because they were going to catch me anyway."

Johnny imagined his son as a small boy walking toward a group of older children, knowing what they intended to do.

"Alex and Billy stopped them when they were around," Bones continued. "But they weren't always around."

"Who were they?"

"What?"

"The boys who hurt you."

Bones smiled faintly.

"Doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

"I handled them."

"When?"

"When I got big enough."

The satisfaction in his voice answered everything else.

Johnny looked at his son's shoulders. At the bruised knuckles from the boathouse wall. At the shotgun resting within reach.

Johnny had always believed Bones would become like him.

Instead, Bones had become what surviving Johnny Malone required.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said.

Bones did not respond.

"I mean it."

"Then get us the money."

"You think money fixes everything?"

"No. But I'd like to find out for myself."

Johnny almost smiled.

"You're not dumb, son."

"I know."

"You just don't think through your actions."

"That sounds like something dumb people do."

"It's a skill you can learn."

"Can you teach me?"

"I can try."

Bones looked back at him.

"That might be the first fatherly thing you've said."

The channel divided ahead.

One route curved east into an open stretch of sawgrass. Another narrowed between mangroves whose branches formed a tunnel above the water.

Johnny pointed.

"Take the tunnel."

Bones reduced the throttle.

"You sure?"

"My father took me through here before I could walk. He knew every channel between Gethsemane and the Gulf."

"I thought you grew up in Miami."

"I was born in Dawber County. My father moved us after he got tired of working for the Dawbers."

"Smart man."

"He had his moments."

Bones guided the skiff beneath the mangrove canopy.

The sky disappeared above them. Branches scraped the sides of the boat. Insects moved across the surface of black water.

"How much farther?" Bones asked.

"Slow down."

"I am going slow."

"Slower."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Everything I didn't see coming the first time."

Bones pulled the throttle back until they were barely moving.

Johnny studied the mangrove roots.

The landscape had changed over twelve years. Storms had destroyed some trees and deposited others across the channel. But beneath the growth, he recognized the route.

A split trunk shaped like an open hand.

A limestone ridge rising several inches above the water.

An old iron survey marker nearly consumed by vines.

"There."

Bones followed his finger.

"I don't see anything."

"You're not supposed to."

Johnny motioned toward the center of the tunnel.

"Cut the engine."

Bones switched it off.

The sudden silence felt unnatural.

Water dripped from the mangrove branches. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Johnny stood slowly and removed a long boat hook from beneath the center bench.

"Kenny and I put five containers down here in 1991."

"One million in each?"

"Approximately."

"What does approximately mean?"

"It means we were in a hurry."

"You ever count your own money?"

"That's most of what I did."

Johnny pointed toward five locations surrounding the skiff.

"We sealed the cash inside waterproof bags, placed them in marine containers, and attached each one to a weighted net. The weights kept them underwater. The netting gave us something to catch."

Bones looked doubtful.

"You left five million dollars tied to rocks?"

"Large rocks."

"That was your brilliant plan?"

"No one found it."

"Maybe it floated to Cuba."

"It didn't float."

"How do you know?"

"Because I used the word tethered when I explained it to Kenny."

Bones stared at him.

"What does that mean?"

"Tied."

"Then say tied."

"Tethered is more accurate."

"You always use words like you're charging people by the syllable."

Johnny handed him the hook.

"The first one should be off the bow."

Bones moved to the front of the skiff and lowered the hook into the water.

It struck mud.

He tried again.

Nothing.

"You sure this is the spot?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Because twelve years is a long time."

"I know where I hid five million dollars."

"You forgot you had a son."

Johnny said nothing.

Bones glanced back.

The expression on his father's face made him look away.

He dragged the hook across the bottom.

It caught.

"Got something."

"Don't pull too hard. Find the net."

Bones adjusted the angle and pulled steadily. Muddy bubbles rose around the hook. A length of dark netting appeared beneath the surface.

Bones grabbed it with both hands.

The muscles in his back tightened as he lifted.

A black marine case broke through the surface.

Bones hauled it over the side and dropped it onto the floor of the skiff.

The boat rocked dangerously.

"Easy," Johnny said.

Bones fell to his knees and attacked the latches.

"Wait."

"For what?"

"We make sure the seal held."

"How?"

"By looking before you tear it apart."

Bones ignored him and forced the case open.

Inside rested a thick rubberized bag.

He ripped the bag open.

Bundles of hundred-dollar bills spilled across the floor.

Bones froze.

Johnny watched the anger leave his son's face.

For the first time since returning to Dawber County, Bones looked purely happy.

He picked up two bundles and held them beneath his nose.

"Money doesn't have a smell when it's wrapped in plastic," Johnny said.

"Smells rich to me."

"Keep your voice down."

Bones laughed and raised the bundles above his head.

"We did it."

"That's one million. There are four more."

"One million more than I had this morning."

Bones pressed the money against his chest.

Johnny felt something unexpected.

Relief.

This was a moment they could share. Father and son, alone in the place where Johnny's past had been waiting for both of them.

Then Johnny realized the money had produced the happiness his return could not.

"Put it back," he said.

Bones looked offended.

"We just found it."

"And we'll lose it if you tip the boat. Seal the bag."

Bones reluctantly returned the bundles to the case.

Johnny moved toward the port side and lowered the hook.

The wound in his thigh throbbed as he worked the line across the bottom. When the hook caught the second net, he pulled.

The container felt heavier than he remembered.

Bones watched him struggle.

"You need help, Old Man?"

"I have it."

"You're turning purple."

"I'm fine."

"You look like you're giving birth."

Johnny pulled harder.

Bones laughed until Johnny shot him a look.

Then he grabbed the net and helped lift the container into the skiff.

They checked the seal together.

The second million was intact.

The third container came up more easily. Its outer case had accumulated algae, but the rubberized bag inside remained dry.

Bones counted the three cases.

"Three million dollars."

"Keep your voice down."

"There ain't anybody out here."

"There is always somebody out here."

Bones reached for the hook.

"Where's the fourth?"

Johnny pointed beyond the stern.

Bones lowered the hook and swept it across the bottom.

He caught the net on his third attempt.

As he began pulling, Johnny heard something move beneath the water.

Not a splash.

A displacement.

Something large had changed direction below them.

"Stop."

Bones continued hauling the net.

"What?"

"Let it go."

"I've got the money."

"Bones, let go."

The surface erupted.

A massive alligator surged from beneath the skiff.

Its jaws closed around the rising container.

Bones fell backward as the boat tilted violently. The hook tore from his hands. Johnny caught the gunwale before he went overboard.

The animal rolled.

Its armored back broke the surface. One side of its face carried a deep white scar across the eye.

Johnny recognized it.

"Smiley."

The alligator twisted with the container trapped in its jaws. One tooth punctured the rubberized bag inside.

The seam split.

Bundles of cash burst into the water.

Bones stared in disbelief.

"No."

Smiley released the ruined container.

Hundred-dollar bills floated around the skiff.

"No!"

Bones lunged over the side and began grabbing money.

Johnny seized the back of his shirt.

"Get away from the water."

"That's a million dollars!"

"And that's a fifteen-foot alligator."

"Help me!"

Bones scooped several soaked bundles into the boat.

The water exploded again.

Smiley's jaws snapped inches from his arm.

Johnny pulled Bones backward.

Both men crashed onto the cases.

Bones fought free and reached for the shotgun.

"Don't."

"That thing took our money."

"It almost took your arm."

Bones chambered a shell.

Smiley's scarred head appeared beyond the stern.

Bones fired.

The blast tore through the mangrove tunnel.

Water erupted beside the alligator.

Smiley disappeared.

Bones fired again at the dark shape moving beneath the surface.

"Stop shooting!"

"I'm killing it."

"You can't see it."

"I can see enough."

Johnny knocked the barrel upward before Bones fired a third time.

The shot ripped through the branches above them.

Birds scattered from the mangroves.

Bones shoved his father away.

"Get off me."

"You're going to put a hole through the boat."

"It stole a million dollars."

"It's an alligator. It didn't steal anything."

"Then what do you call that?"

They looked at the water.

Loose bills drifted between the mangrove roots. The punctured container sank slowly beneath them.

Smiley was nowhere in sight.

Johnny took the shotgun from Bones.

"You almost got yourself killed over money."

"Our money."

"Money can be replaced."

"You would say that."

"What does that mean?"

"You've got millions somewhere else."

Johnny did not answer.

Bones looked at him.

"The Swiss accounts are real."

"We have another container to recover."

"How much do you have?"

"Find the fifth net."

"Ten million? Twenty?"

"Bones."

"A hundred?"

Johnny pushed the hook into his hands.

"Find the net."

Bones glared at him before lowering the hook into the water.

He kept the shotgun beside his foot.

They searched for several minutes.

The approaching storm darkened the tunnel until the water became almost impossible to read.

The hook finally caught.

Together, they lifted the fifth container.

The damage became apparent before they opened it.

Several deep scratches crossed the outer shell. One corner had been crushed inward. Water spilled through the broken seal.

Bones stared at it.

"Open it."

"There's no point."

"Open it."

Johnny released the latches.

The rubberized bag inside had collapsed. Gray water filled the space around it.

Bones tore through the material.

The money had fused into a wet, milky mass. Ink stained the water green and black.

Bones lifted what had once been a bundle of hundred-dollar bills. It disintegrated between his fingers.

He dropped it.

"How much can we save?"

"None."

"Some of it has to be good."

"It's been underwater for years."

Bones ripped open another bundle.

The paper came apart in his hands.

He kicked the ruined case.

The skiff rocked.

"Careful."

"Three million."

"That's what survived."

"Three million isn't five."

"It will have to be."

"I promised Willis two."

"You didn't promise him anything. I did."

"That leaves one million for us."

"One million dollars is still money."

"Not for what Alex wants to build."

Johnny began securing the three intact cases.

"Alex has no idea what he wants to build."

"He understands more than you think."

"He understands numbers and routes. He doesn't understand prison."

"Neither did you. You got everybody else sent there."

Johnny stopped.

Bones stood over the ruined money, breathing heavily.

For several seconds, only the approaching thunder moved between them.

"What happened to Sanchez?" Bones asked.

Johnny looked up.

"What?"

"Everybody says his death is why you turned on Bo."

"It was."

"So you destroyed the entire operation for one man?"

"He wasn't one man."

"What was he?"

"My brother."

Bones absorbed the answer.

"You burned everything down for him."

"Yes."

"But not for me."

Johnny looked away.

"I left to keep you alive."

"That's what you tell yourself."

"Bo threatened you and your mother. The cartel believed I had stolen from them. Mack Donnelly was hunting me. If I stayed, every one of them would have used you to reach me."

"You still could've called."

"I watched when I could."

"That ain't being a father."

"No."

Bones appeared surprised by the admission.

Johnny closed the final case.

"I thought staying away protected you. Maybe I was wrong."

"You were."

"I know that now."

The first drops of rain penetrated the mangrove canopy.

Bones looked toward the money floating outside the skiff.

"Bubs knew this was here?"

"Yes."

"You told him?"

"I told him where we put it and how to reach it. I gave him permission to use it."

"For what?"

"Anything Dawber County needed. Food. Medicine. Keeping families from losing their homes after the arrests."

"And he left it underwater."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he considered it blood money."

Bones laughed bitterly.

"Blood money could've helped Ma."

"Bubs believed the smuggling had already poisoned too many people in his congregation. He wouldn't use more poison to heal them."

"That sounds like something people say when they ain't hungry."

"You don't know what Bubs survived."

"I know he watched us struggle while five million dollars sat in his backyard."

"He believed touching it would bring Bo, the cartel, and the government down on everyone he tried to help."

"Maybe he should have asked us."

"You were a child."

"Ma wasn't."

Johnny had no answer for that.

Bones looked toward the direction of Gethsemane.

"I want to talk to him."

"Later."

"Now."

"We have three million dollars sitting in an open boat."

"Willis can protect it."

"We don't know who's watching the church."

"Bubs owes me an explanation."

"Pastor Bubs spent six years in a North Vietnamese prison camp. They starved him, beat him, and broke bones that never healed properly. He never gave them what they wanted."

Bones stared at his father.

"Why are you telling me that?"

"Because if you plan to frighten him, don't waste your time."

"I don't want to frighten him."

"What do you want?"

"The truth."

"You may not like it."

"I'm getting used to that."

An engine growled somewhere beyond the mangroves.

Both men went still.

The sound faded beneath the thunder.

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"That Willis?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Willis said he has six airboats. We would hear all of them."

The engine grew louder.

One boat.

Moving slowly.

Searching.

Johnny returned the shotgun to Bones.

"Load it."

Bones chambered a fresh shell.

Johnny removed the pistol from his waistband and checked the magazine.

The first flash of a searchlight moved across the mangrove branches behind them.

Johnny killed the skiff's small running light.

Darkness closed around the boat.

"Get the cases beneath the benches," he whispered.

Bones moved the three million dollars out of sight.

The approaching engine slowed.

A man's voice carried through the tunnel.

Johnny could not make out the words.

Then a second voice answered.

Bones crouched beside the motor.

"What do we do?"

Johnny watched the beam move across the black water.

For the first time that afternoon, his son was waiting for him to decide.

Johnny raised the pistol.

"Now you learn to think before you shoot."

The searchlight swept closer.

Someone had followed them into the swamp.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAPTAIN AHAB

Pastor Bubs opened the doors of Gethsemane Baptist Church before Mack Donnelly reached the steps.

He stood beneath the entrance light with one hand resting on a wooden cane. Age had bent his shoulders, but it had not diminished him. His white shirt was buttoned at the throat, and his dark trousers appeared freshly pressed.

The scars on his wrists remained visible.

Mack had heard the stories. Six years in a North Vietnamese prison camp. Starvation, beatings, broken bones, and interrogations that ended only when Bubs's captors became too tired to continue.

No one had broken him.

Mack doubted twelve years in Dawber County had accomplished what the North Vietnamese could not.

Aisha Reyes followed Mack up the church steps.

"Agent Donnelly," Bubs said.

"Pastor."

Bubs looked at Reyes.

"And you are?"

"Special Agent Aisha Reyes."

"DEA?"

"Yes."

Bubs stepped aside.

"I suppose you should come in before the storm arrives."

Mack entered.

Gethsemane was smaller than he remembered. Wooden pews faced a plain pulpit. The walls held photographs of church picnics, baptism ceremonies, and families who had lived in Dawber County for generations.

One photograph showed Deon Childress graduating from law school.

Pastor Bubs and Millie stood beside him.

Mack stopped in front of it.

"You raised Deon."

"We helped."

"He went to Reform Prison to see Kenny Gregory."

Bubs's expression did not change.

"So I heard."

"He hasn't been seen since."

"Then perhaps the Drug Enforcement Administration should find him."

"We're working on it."

"Are you?"

Reyes looked at Mack.

Bubs continued toward the pulpit.

"You didn't drive from Miami to discuss Deon."

"No," Mack said. "We came to discuss Johnny Malone."

Bubs stopped.

"Johnny has been gone for twelve years."

"He's back."

"What makes you think that?"

Mack removed a plastic evidence bag from inside his jacket.

The scorched Vietnam lighter rested inside. Its metal case had cracked in the explosion, but the engraved words remained visible.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

Bubs studied it.

"Where did you find that?"

"Inside what was left of Johnny's house."

"Then perhaps he died there."

"He didn't."

"You sound certain."

"I know Johnny."

Bubs looked toward the lighter again.

"I once believed that too."

Mack returned it to his jacket.

"Bo Dawber says you know where Johnny hid five million dollars."

Bubs walked behind the pulpit and rested both hands upon it.

"Bo Dawber has spent his life saying things."

"He was very specific."

"Prison gives a man time to develop his imagination."

"Did Johnny leave the money with you?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

Bubs stared at him.

Reyes moved closer.

"Pastor, two men may already be dead because of that money. Someone tried to murder an attorney on Alligator Alley. If Johnny returns for it, more people will die."

"People were dying long before Johnny Malone returned."

"Help us prevent another killing."

Bubs looked at her for a long moment.

"I have never touched Johnny's money."

"That isn't what she asked," Mack said.

"It is the answer I'm prepared to give."

"Five million dollars could have kept this church open for generations."

"This church was not built with cocaine."

"It could've fed your congregation."

"The same congregation Johnny's business helped poison?"

"You let it sit in a swamp?"

Bubs's gaze hardened.

"There are some things a man cannot use without becoming part of how they were earned."

"That sounds noble."

"It isn't nobility. It's fear."

Mack had not expected that.

"Fear of what?"

"What money makes men willing to do."

Thunder rattled the stained-glass windows.

Mack looked toward the rear of the church.

"Where's the water access?"

Bubs said nothing.

Mack walked down the side aisle.

Reyes followed.

Behind the sanctuary, they found a small kitchen, two classrooms, and an office. A rear door opened onto a covered walkway leading toward the swamp.

Beyond it stood a wooden dock.

One slip was empty.

Reyes pointed toward the water.

"Something left recently."

A trail of disturbed algae ran from the dock into the channel.

Bubs stepped onto the walkway behind them.

"The church keeps boats for floods and emergencies."

"How many?" Mack asked.

"Two."

"Where's the other one?"

"Being used."

"By whom?"

"Someone who needed it."

A gunshot rolled across the swamp.

Bubs turned toward the mangroves.

A second shot followed.

Then a third.

Reyes removed her pistol.

"That sounded like a shotgun."

Mack was already moving toward the dock.

A flat-bottomed airboat occupied the second slip. A large propeller rested inside a metal cage behind the elevated driver's platform.

Bubs blocked the walkway.

"That boat belongs to the church."

"I'll bring it back."

"You do not have my permission."

"Exigent circumstances," Reyes said.

Bubs looked disappointed in her.

"That phrase has excused a great deal of sin."

"People may be in danger."

"People are always in danger when Mack Donnelly follows Johnny Malone."

Mack stepped into the boat.

Reyes opened a storage compartment and found two sets of protective earmuffs. She handed one to Mack.

"Where do the channels divide?" Mack asked Bubs.

"About half a mile west."

"Which one leads toward the mangroves?"

"Both."

Mack put on the hearing protection.

Bubs remained on the dock.

"If Johnny is back," he said, "he didn't return for the money."

"What did he return for?"

"His son."

Mack started the engine.

The propeller roared to life, ending any possibility of conversation.

Bubs raised one hand.

His lips moved, but Mack could not hear him.

He did not need to.

The warning in the pastor's expression said enough.

Mack pushed away from the dock.

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THE AIRBOAT THUNDERED through the channel.

Reyes sat beside Mack wearing the protective earmuffs, her pistol secured in its holster. The church searchlight swept over mangrove roots and walls of sawgrass.

Conversation was impossible.

Mack communicated with gestures.

When they reached the divide, he raised a fist and pulled back the throttle. He switched off the engine.

The roar stopped, but the propeller continued turning behind them.

They waited until it spun down completely before removing their hearing protection.

"You believe Dawber?" Reyes asked.

"About the money?"

"About Bubs."

"Bo lies when the truth won't serve him. This time, it does."

"Bubs said he never touched it."

"I believe him."

"Then why are we out here?"

"Because not touching money isn't the same as not knowing where it is."

Reyes studied the two channels.

"Which way?"

Mack examined the surface.

The channel to the left carried broken leaves and a thin film of fuel. Something had passed through recently.

"Left."

"You sure?"

"No."

"That's comforting."

They replaced the earmuffs.

Mack restarted the engine and guided the airboat beneath the mangrove canopy.

The searchlight found something floating on the water.

Money.

Mack immediately reduced the throttle and shut down the engine again.

The airboat glided forward on its remaining momentum. The propeller slowed behind them.

When it stopped, Mack and Reyes removed their hearing protection.

A hundred-dollar bill floated faceup beside the hull.

Then another.

Dozens drifted between the mangrove roots.

Reyes leaned over the side and retrieved one.

The bill was soaked but real.

"Well," she said. "I guess Bo's imagination is healthier than we thought."

Mack used a push pole stored along the deck to move them quietly through the floating currency.

A ruined black container rested against a mangrove root. Its side had been punctured and torn.

Something large moved beneath the surface nearby.

Reyes pulled her arm back into the boat.

"What did that?"

"Something that lives here."

Mack pushed them around the bend.

A small skiff rested in the center of the tunnel.

Bones Malone crouched near the motor with a shotgun.

Johnny stood at the bow, holding a pistol.

Three black marine cases had been pushed beneath the benches.

Mack saw them anyway.

For twelve years, he had imagined this moment.

Johnny in a Colombian villa.

Johnny stepping from a Swiss bank.

Johnny standing behind Mack in a dark parking garage with a gun against his spine.

Never this.

Johnny Malone looked older, injured, and exhausted.

But he was alive.

Mack forgot about Reyes.

He forgot about the explosion, Oscar's orders, and every official procedure he had promised to follow.

"Johnny."

The name came out quieter than he intended.

Johnny's pistol rose.

Bones aimed the shotgun.

Mack used the pole to bring the airboat closer.

Reyes raised her badge.

"Federal agents! Lower your weapons."

Bones looked at his father.

"Can I shoot them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because shooting federal agents complicates things."

"They followed us."

"Still complicated."

Mack pushed the airboat alongside the skiff.

The two hulls bumped gently.

"Twelve years, Johnny."

Johnny's expression barely changed.

"You look terrible, Mack."

"I was about to say the same thing."

"I've been shot. What's your excuse?"

Reyes kept her weapon trained on Bones.

"Put the shotgun down."

Bones smiled.

"You first."

"Bones," Johnny said.

"What?"

"We're thinking before we shoot."

"I thought about it."

"Think longer."

Mack stared at the cases beneath the bench.

"You found it."

"Found what?" Johnny asked.

"Don't."

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"The money."

Johnny looked at the floating bills.

"Somebody appears to have littered."

"Three cases," Mack said. "One million each?"

"You were always good with numbers."

"I learned from you."

"No, you learned enough to get dangerous."

Mack reached for the skiff.

Johnny aimed the pistol at his hand.

Reyes stepped forward.

"Mr. Malone, lower the weapon."

"Am I under arrest?"

"You are being detained for questioning."

"About?"

"A residential explosion that killed several people."

"Haitians tried to murder me."

"Then come with us and make a statement."

"Do I look healthy enough for an interview?"

"You look healthy enough to recover three million dollars."

Bones's finger tightened against the shotgun trigger.

Mack noticed.

"Easy, kid."

"Don't call me kid."

"So you're Bones."

"You've heard of me?"

"I arrested half the men who used to bounce you on their knees."

"You're Mack Donnelly."

Mack smiled.

"My reputation precedes me."

"My dad says you're an asshole."

Johnny looked at his son.

"I don't remember saying that."

"You didn't have to."

A distant roar entered the mangrove tunnel.

Everyone stopped talking.

Another airboat.

Its engine grew steadily louder, announcing its approach long before the vessel appeared.

Mack turned toward the bend.

Reyes raised her pistol.

Johnny looked at Bones and made a cutting motion toward the skiff's ignition. Bones nodded but did not start the engine.

The second airboat emerged through the mangroves.

A uniformed corrections officer stood behind the controls. His khaki shirt was dark with sweat, and the name above his pocket read WIGGINS.

Waylon Wiggins.

Two armed men rode in front of him. One carried an assault rifle. The other held a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Wiggins saw the DEA badges.

He reduced the throttle.

The boat's momentum carried it into the wider section of the tunnel while the propeller slowed. Wiggins switched off the ignition and waited for the blades to stop turning.

The sudden quiet made the confrontation feel even more dangerous.

Reyes held up her badge.

"DEA. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Wiggins drew his pistol.

"Step away from the money."

Mack moved between Wiggins and Johnny's skiff.

"Corrections Officer Wiggins, lower your weapon."

Wiggins looked at the badge on Mack's belt.

"Warden says nobody takes that money."

Johnny glanced at Wiggins's uniform.

"You boys come straight from work?"

"Shut your mouth, Malone."

"That Bo's order or Kinder's?"

Wiggins leveled the pistol.

"Does it matter?"

The rifleman opened fire.

Bullets tore through the mangroves.

Mack shoved Reyes down as rounds struck the airboat's metal cage.

The searchlight exploded above them.

Wiggins restarted his engine.

The propeller's roar swallowed every other sound.

Johnny threw himself behind the bow and shouted directly toward Bones.

"Start it!"

Bones turned the key.

The skiff's outboard coughed but failed to catch.

Bones fired the shotgun toward Wiggins's airboat.

The blast shattered part of its windshield.

The rifleman fired again.

Bullets punched through the side of Johnny's skiff. One of the marine cases slid into view.

Its lid broke open.

Bundles of hundred-dollar bills spilled across the floor.

Wiggins saw the money.

He pointed toward the case and drove his airboat forward.

Reyes fired twice.

The rifleman spun sideways and fell against the gunwale. His weapon dropped into the water.

Wiggins's airboat struck the rear of Mack's.

The impact threw Mack against the steering platform. His pistol fell onto the deck.

Wiggins's remaining passenger attempted to jump onto Johnny's skiff.

Bones met him with the shotgun stock.

The blow broke the man's nose and sent him into the water.

He surfaced between the boats, screaming.

Something moved beneath him.

A long armored back broke the surface.

The man disappeared.

Bones stared into the water.

"Smiley ain't dead!"

Johnny seized the front of Bones's shirt and shouted into his face.

"Motor!"

Bones turned back to the controls.

Wiggins swung his airboat toward Johnny's skiff.

Mack retrieved his pistol and climbed onto the front deck.

He fired.

One round shattered Wiggins's instrument panel. Another struck the propeller cage.

Reyes joined him, firing at the engine housing.

The airboat coughed and lost power.

Wiggins used what remained of his momentum to reach a wider pocket in the mangroves. He worked the rudders and hit the throttle in short bursts.

The damaged propeller screamed.

The boat began a slow, violent turn.

Mack jumped from the church airboat onto Johnny's skiff.

The hull dropped beneath his weight.

Johnny drove the pistol into Mack's ribs.

Mack caught his wrist.

For an instant, they stood face-to-face.

Twelve years disappeared.

Mack smelled cigarettes, swamp water, and blood. Johnny's eyes held the same contempt Mack remembered from the night of the raid.

"You should've stayed dead," Mack said.

"You should've stayed undercover."

Mack twisted Johnny's wrist.

Johnny struck him with his free hand.

Mack staggered into one of the money cases.

Bones turned from the motor.

"Get off my father!"

He swung the shotgun.

Mack ducked.

The stock passed over his head and struck a mangrove branch.

Johnny drove his shoulder into Mack's chest.

Both men crashed against the gunwale.

The skiff tilted.

Mack grabbed Johnny's shirt.

Johnny's hand found the plastic evidence bag inside Mack's jacket.

For one second, his fingers closed around the scorched lighter.
His eyes changed.

Mack tore the bag away and shoved it back beneath his jacket before Johnny could see the inscription.

Not yet.

Reyes fired toward Wiggins's airboat.

A shotgun blast struck Johnny's skiff.

Johnny pushed Mack away and pointed toward the motor.

Bones tried the ignition again.

The outboard caught.

The skiff surged forward.

Mack grabbed the rear bench to keep from falling.

Johnny kicked his hand.

Mack lost his grip and crashed backward into the church airboat.

Johnny and Bones accelerated through the gap in the mangroves.

Wiggins completed his turn.

His damaged airboat headed back the way it had entered. The propeller rattled violently inside the cage, but it produced enough thrust to carry him away.

Mack raised his pistol.

Reyes grabbed his arm and pointed toward the deck.

Gasoline poured from a bullet hole in the church airboat's fuel line.

One muzzle flash could ignite everything around them.

Mack lowered the weapon.

Wiggins disappeared into the mangroves.

The roar of his engine gradually faded.

Johnny's smaller outboard vanished in the opposite direction.

Silence returned.

Reyes ejected her empty magazine and replaced it.

"You recognize him?"

"Wiggins. Corrections officer."

"He just tried to murder two federal agents."

"He tried to take the money."

"On whose orders?"

"You heard him."

"Warden Kinder."

"And Bo Dawber."

Reyes looked toward the channel where Johnny had escaped.

"You were right."

Mack continued staring into the darkness.

"About which part?"

"Malone's alive."

"I told you."

"And the money is real."

Mack noticed something beside his boot.

A bundle of hundred-dollar bills had fallen from Johnny's open case during the collision.

He picked it up.

A faded bank strap encircled the soaked currency. The date printed across it was twelve years old.

1991.

Reyes looked at the bundle.

"How much do you think they recovered?"

"Three million."

"You sound sure."

"I counted the cases."

"We need to call Oscar."

Mack slipped the bundle inside his jacket.

Reyes noticed.

"That's evidence."

"I know."

"It goes in a bag."

"I don't have one."

"You have one holding Malone's lighter."

Mack touched the evidence bag through his jacket.

"That stays separate."

Reyes studied him.

Before she could respond, Mack's cellular phone vibrated against his belt.

He checked the screen.

A Nevada area code.

775.

He turned away from Reyes before answering.

"What?"

A man spoke softly.

"You have forty-eight hours."

Mack looked toward the mangrove tunnel.

"I'm working on it."

"You said Malone was dead."

"He isn't."

"Then your situation has improved."

"I need more time."

"You had time."

The man paused.

"If we don't hear from you, we visit your daughter."

Mack's grip tightened around the phone.

"You stay away from her."

"Forty-eight hours."

The call ended.

Mack continued holding the telephone to his ear.

Reyes watched him.

"Who was that?"

"Wrong number."

"You told a wrong number you were working on something?"

Mack put the phone away.

"Reno telemarketers are aggressive."

"Mack."

"We need to get back to Gethsemane."

"What about Malone?"

"He has to return to dry land eventually."

"And Wiggins?"

"He'll report to Kinder."

"Then Kinder knows Johnny recovered the money."

"So does Bo."

Reyes looked at the disabled engine.

"And we're stranded in the swamp."

"Temporary setback."

"You've been saying that about your career for ten years."

Mack removed the wet bundle of cash from his jacket.

Three million dollars had just disappeared into the mangroves with Johnny Malone.

The money could make the Russians go away.

Johnny's Swiss accounts could make sure they never returned.

Mack looked at the lighter inside the evidence bag.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

For twelve years, justice had been enough.

Now his daughter's life had a deadline.

Johnny was alive. The money was real.

And Mack no longer had the luxury of deciding which one he wanted more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BLOOD MONEY

Johnny guided the skiff toward the rear dock of Gethsemane Baptist Church. The outboard motor made conversation impossible, but none was needed.

Bones sat at the bow with the shotgun across his knees. Three black marine cases rested beneath the center bench.

He had not looked at his father since they escaped the mangrove tunnel.

Johnny reduced the throttle as they entered the narrow canal behind the church. He switched off the engine and allowed the skiff to glide toward the dock.

Pastor Bubs stood waiting beneath the covered walkway.

He watched Johnny approach without surprise.

Johnny had hoped for surprise.

After twelve years, he would have settled for anything that looked like happiness.

The skiff bumped against the pilings.

Bubs looked at Johnny's gray hair, bloodstained clothes, and bandaged leg.

"You look terrible."

Johnny secured the bow line.

"Everyone keeps saying that."

"Perhaps you should listen."

Bones stepped onto the dock carrying the shotgun.

Bubs studied him.

"Hello Bones."

"Pastor."

"You probably don't remember coming here when you were a little kid."

"I remember enough."

Johnny lifted the first marine case.

Pain from his wounded thigh nearly caused him to drop it.

Bones took the case from him.

"I've got it."

"I can carry my own money."

"Not without making that face."

"What face?"

"The one that looks like you're trying to pass a kidney stone."

Bubs almost smiled.

Johnny noticed.

"Don't encourage him."

"I haven't said anything."

"You were thinking it."

Bones carried the case onto the dock.

Bubs's attention moved to the other two containers.

"You found it."

"Most of it," Johnny said.

"How much survived?"

"Three million."

"And the rest?"

"Smiley."

Bubs looked toward the swamp.

"He's still alive? I thought the trappers killed Smiley for eating Bob-
by Boone last month"

"Unfortunately, they euthanized the wrong gator" Bones said.

"You went into his water."

"He went after our money."

"It was his water before it was your money."

Bones returned for the second case.

Johnny helped him lift it onto the dock.

Bubs placed his cane across the walkway.

"That money does not enter the church."

Johnny stopped.

"Bubs."

"Not one dollar."

"It won't stay here."

"Then it can remain in the boat until it leaves."

"A corrections officer just tried to kill us."

"Then perhaps bringing the money here was unwise."

"We needed somewhere close."

"You needed somewhere sacred enough that your enemies might hesitate."

Johnny looked at the church.

"Will they?"

"No."

Bones set the case down.

"You knew it was out there."

Bubs faced him.

"Yes."

"All five million."

"I knew where your father and Kenny placed it."

"You could've taken it whenever you wanted."

"Yes."

"But you didn't."

"No."

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"He told you to use it?"

"He gave me permission."

"For what?"

"For the county. For families who lost their income after the arrests. Food, medicine, housing—whatever I believed would help."

Bones stepped closer.

"My mother needed help."

Johnny felt the accusation without Bones looking at him.

Bubs held the young man's gaze.

"I know."

"We had weeks when the electricity got turned off. Ma worked two jobs. People in this county treated us like garbage because of him."

Bones pointed at Johnny.

"You had five million dollars sitting in the swamp."

"It wasn't mine."

"My father said you could use it."

"Permission did not make it clean."

"Clean?"

"The money came from cocaine."

"So did half the money in Dawber County."

"That did not make it right."

"It could've kept our lights on."

"It also could have brought Bo Dawber, the cartels, and the federal government to your front door."

"They came anyway."

Bubs lowered his eyes.

"Yes."

"My mother shouldn't have had to ask."

"No, she shouldn't."

The admission momentarily silenced Bones.

Bubs continued.

"Your mother never asked me for Johnny's money. She wanted nothing from the business that took her husband away."

"She wanted him."

Bones pointed toward Johnny again.

"But he wasn't available."

Johnny absorbed the blow.

Bubs moved nearer to Bones.

"I helped your mother whenever she allowed me. So did Millie. We used food purchased with church donations and money earned by people who worked for it. We did not use money that came from destroying other families."

"You decided that for everyone."

"Yes."

"You didn't have the right."

"Perhaps not."

Bones had expected resistance.

Bubs's willingness to accept the accusation left him with nowhere to direct his anger.

"You watched people suffer," Bones said.

"I watched the drug trade destroy people I baptized. I buried children whose parents became addicted. I counseled women beaten by men who owed money to Bo Dawber. I watched families celebrate shipments because the money paid their bills, then curse those same shipments when their sons became customers."

Bubs looked at the cases.

"I could not heal that wound with the knife that made it."

"It's money," Bones said. "It ain't poison."

"Then why has everyone who touched it ended up dead, imprisoned, or hunted?"

Bones looked toward Johnny.

Johnny had no answer that would help either of them.

Bubs turned to him.

"You should have destroyed it."

"Five million dollars?"

"Yes."

"I'm an accountant, not a saint."

"No one has ever confused you with one."

Johnny looked at the empty airboat slip.

"Where's your other boat?"

"A church member took it upriver this morning."

"And the other church boat?"

"Agent Donnelly took it."

"Mack was here?"

"With Agent Reyes."

"How long ago?"

"Not long before the shooting began."

Bones lifted the shotgun.

"They followed us."

"Yes," Johnny said.

Bubs looked between them.

"You left two federal agents in the swamp?"

"Their fuel line was hit."

"By whom?"

"Merle Shelton's cousin, Waylon Wiggins."

"The corrections officer?"

"He brought armed men. He told Mack the warden wanted the money."

Bubs closed his eyes.

"Deon."

Johnny nodded.

"It confirms Kinder is involved."

"Confirms?" Bubs asked. "You believe Deon is dead?"

"I believe anyone who could have exposed the warden was marked for death."

Bubs leaned more heavily upon his cane.

Johnny had seen men receive news of death in jungles, hospitals, and prison yards. Some collapsed. Others cried or shouted.

Pastor Bubs did none of those things.

He became very still.

"Does Willis know?" he asked.

"Tiana told him."

"Where is he?"

"At Alex's boathouse."

"Then why isn't he here?"

"He will be."

Johnny walked toward the church telephone.

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ALEX ANSWERED ON THE second ring.

"Gethsemane," Johnny said. "Bring everyone."

"Did you find it?"

"Three million survived."

"What happened to the other two?"

"Nature collected a fee."

"Are you and Bones all right?"

"We ran into Mack."

"Donnelly?"

"And Kinder's people. Waylon Wiggins was wearing his corrections uniform when he tried to kill us."

"I'll tell Willis."

"Tell him to bring the Maroons."

"How many?"

"All of them."

Johnny hung up.

When he turned, Bubs stood in the office doorway.

"You intend to bring an army onto church property."

"I intend to prevent one from killing us."

"Violence will not enter my sanctuary."

"Violence doesn't ask permission."

"This is still God's house."

"Kinder doesn't believe that."

"Do you?"

Johnny looked through the window toward Bones and the three cases on the dock.

"I stopped believing anyone owned anything in Dawber County."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

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WAYLON WIGGINS ENTERED Warden Kinder's office with blood on his uniform and a piece of glass embedded in his cheek.

Bo Dawber sat on the leather couch drinking Scotch from a heavy glass.

Kinder stood behind his desk.

Neither man offered Waylon a chair.

"Well?" Kinder asked.

"Malone found it."

Bo leaned forward.

"How much?"

"Three cases. Looked like a million in each."

"There should be five."

"Two were lost in the swamp."

Kinder's expression darkened.

"How do you lose two million dollars?"

"One case was floating open. Money everywhere. Something got to it."

"Something?"

Wiggins removed the glass from his cheek and examined it.

"Gator, probably."

Bo smiled faintly.

"Smiley."

Kinder looked at him.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Where are the other three cases?"

"Malone and his boy escaped with them."

"You let an injured accountant and a teenager get away?"

"Mack Donnelly was there."

Bo's smile disappeared.

"With Reyes?"

"Yes."

Kinder moved around the desk.

"You fired on federal agents?"

"Your order was to stop anyone who found the money."

"My order was not to start a war with the DEA."

"It was already a war."

Bo watched Wiggins carefully.

"Did Mack see the cases?"

"Yes."

"Then he knows Johnny has the money."

"He knows everything," Kinder said.

"He doesn't know where Johnny took it."

Bo looked toward Waylon.

"Gethsemane."

Wiggins nodded.

"That would be my guess."

Kinder walked to the window overlooking the prison yard.

"We go tonight."

Bo stood.

"No."

Kinder turned.

"The money is exposed. Donnelly will call Miami, and this county will be crawling with agents by morning."

"You don't touch Bubs."

"Bubs put himself in the middle."

"He stayed out of our business for twenty years."

"He knew where the money was."

"And never spent a dollar."

"That makes him a fool, not innocent."

Bo placed his glass on Kinder's desk.

The room became quiet.

Waylon looked between them.

Bo spoke slowly.

"Take the money from Johnny. Kill Johnny if you have to. But no one harms Pastor Bubs or anyone inside that church."

Kinder smiled.

"You're giving orders in my prison?"

"I'm reminding you of our agreement."

"Our agreement concerns the money."

"Our agreement concerns whatever I say it concerns."

Kinder's smile vanished.

For several seconds, the two men stared at each other.

Bo had spent years allowing the warden to believe the prison belonged to him. Kinder provided liquor, private meals, unrestricted telephone calls, and access to rooms where Bo could conduct business.

In exchange, Bo promised him a fortune.

Both men understood the partnership would end when Bo walked out of prison.

Neither expected the other to survive long afterward.

Kinder looked toward Waylon.

"Officer Wiggins, would you excuse us?"

Waylon did not move.

Bo looked at him.

"Go clean yourself up."

"Yes, sir."

Waylon turned toward the door.

Kinder stopped him.

"Waylon."

He waited.

"Report to the vehicle bay in thirty minutes."

Waylon glanced back at Bo.

"What for?"

"We're recovering state property."

"That money doesn't belong to the state."

"Tonight it does."

Waylon looked toward Bo again.

Bo spoke without raising his voice.

"No one touches Bubs."

Waylon nodded.

"Yes, sir."

He left.

Kinder waited until the door closed.

"Your people seem confused about who runs this prison."

"They know exactly who runs it."

"Then perhaps you should remember."

Bo stepped close enough that Kinder had to raise his chin.

"Two weeks from now, I walk out of here."

"If nothing interferes with your release."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's an observation."

Bo smiled.

"You've enjoyed having me here, Vernon. The Scotch. The conversations. Pretending men obey you because they're frightened."

"They are frightened."

"Of the uniform."

Kinder looked toward the door.

"And Waylon?"

"Waylon is loyal."

"To whom?"

Bo picked up his glass.

"That's the question, isn't it?"

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THE MAROONS ARRIVED at Gethsemane shortly after sunset.

Pickup trucks and battered sedans filled the dirt parking lot. Willis stepped from the lead vehicle with Suds beside him. Bigz and the others opened trunks filled with rifles, shotguns, and ammunition.

Tiana arrived with Alex and Billy.

Pastor Bubs waited on the church steps.

Willis approached him alone.

For the first time that evening, Willis did not look angry.

He looked lost.

Bubs descended one step.

"Willis."

"Pastor."

"Where is Deon?"

Willis looked toward Tiana.

She came forward.

"We don't have his body."

Bubs's hand tightened around the cane.

"But you believe he's dead."

"Yes."

"Tell me."

Tiana described the final message.

She told him about Kenny's death, Deon entering Reform Prison, and the institution's claim that he had never arrived. She explained the attempt on her life and Waylon Wiggins's attack in the swamp.

Bubs listened without interruption.

When she finished, he looked toward the church photograph visible through the open doors.

"Deon believed the law could protect people," Willis said.

"No," Bubs replied. "He believed people were worth protecting."

"And it got him killed."

"It may have."

"You raised him to trust the system."

"I raised him to do what was right when the system failed."

Willis looked away.

"He was better than me."

"He chose a different road."

"He got out."

"He always intended to come back."

Willis faced him.

"For what?"

"For you."

Willis laughed bitterly.

"He spent half his time keeping me out of prison."

"He believed you could become more than what Dawber County expected."

"He was wrong."

"Deon rarely believed that."

Willis's eyes filled.

He wiped them before the Maroons could see.

"When I find Kinder—"

"I know."

"No, you don't."

Bubs descended the final step and placed one hand against Willis's shoulder.

"I know what rage feels like when it convinces you it is love."

Willis looked at the hand.

"It's revenge"

Johnny approached from the rear of the church.

"We need to prepare."

Bubs turned toward him.

"You will not turn Gethsemane into a battlefield."

"Kinder is already coming."

"You don't know that."

"Waylon saw the money. He'll report to the warden. Kinder has one chance before the DEA fills this county with agents."

Willis looked at the skiff tied behind the church.

"The three million still aboard?"

"Yes."

"You want to move it?"

"No."

Alex joined them.

"You're using it as bait."

Johnny nodded.

"Kinder believes we'll hide it or move it before morning. We let him see exactly what he expects."

Bubs looked at the armed Maroons spreading around the church grounds.

"People worship here."

"That's why we keep the fighting away from the sanctuary," Johnny said.

"No fighting belongs anywhere on this land."

Willis pointed toward the road.

"Tell that to the men who killed Deon."

Bubs looked at Tiana.

"You should leave."

"I'm staying."

"Deon would want you safe."

"Deon wanted this exposed."

Billy stood near the church doors.

"What about Mack and Reyes?"

Johnny looked toward the swamp.

"They're stranded."

"Should we get them?"

Willis laughed.

"They're federal agents hunting the same money."

"They were also attacked by Kinder's men," Alex said. "That makes them witnesses."

Johnny considered it.

Mack wanted him in handcuffs. Reyes wanted answers. Neither could be trusted with the money.

But if Waylon had killed them, Kinder could control the story.

Johnny looked toward Suds.

"Take one boat and two men. Follow the western channel until you find the church boat."

Willis frowned.

"We're rescuing the DEA now?"

"We're rescuing Agent Reyes."

"What about Donnelly?"

"If Mack happens to be standing beside her, try not to run him over."

Suds smiled.

"No promises."

"Bring them back here."

Tiana looked at Johnny.

"You want federal agents at the church while we're sitting on three million dollars?"

"I want Kinder to see them."

Alex understood first.

"He can attack us or withdraw. If he attacks while DEA agents are present, he exposes the entire operation."

Willis shook his head.

"Kinder's men already shot at them once."

"Yes," Johnny said. "Which means he may believe he has nothing left to lose."

Bubs looked toward the darkening road.

"That is the kind of man you brought to my church."

"No," Johnny said. "Bo brought him. I'm trying to make sure he doesn't leave."

Suds and two Maroons headed toward the boats.

The remaining men took positions beyond the churchyard.

Johnny opened one marine case and removed several bundles of cash.

He placed them inside an empty canvas bag.

Willis watched.

"What's that?"

"Something Kinder can see."

"You're leaving the rest in the skiff?"

"For now."

"Risky."

"That's why it will look real."

Bones came from behind the church carrying his shotgun.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stay inside with Bubs."

Bones stared at his father.

"No."

"You're injured."

"My hand's injured."

"You nearly shot two federal agents."

"I didn't."

"Because I stopped you."

"Then stop me again."

Johnny lowered his voice.

"I need you to protect Bubs."

Bones looked toward the pastor.

"He doesn't want protection."

"That never stopped anybody in Dawber County."

Bubs approached them.

"You are not putting your son between me and gunfire."

Johnny looked at him.

"My son has spent his entire life paying for my decisions. I'm trying to give one of those decisions a purpose."

Bones absorbed the words.

"I'll stay near the church," he said. "Not inside."

Johnny nodded.

It was the best agreement he was going to receive.

Lightning crossed the sky.

The storm finally reached Gethsemane.

Rain struck the church roof and poured through the oak trees. The armed men outside disappeared into the darkness.

Johnny stood beneath the covered walkway and watched the road.

Three million dollars rested in the skiff behind him.

Willis and the Maroons waited in the swamp.

Suds was bringing Mack Donnelly and Aisha Reyes directly into the trap.

Pastor Bubs entered the sanctuary and began ringing the church bell.

Each heavy toll traveled across the water and through the sawgrass.

Johnny turned toward him.

"What are you doing?"

"Warning anyone close enough to hear."

"About the storm?"

Bubs pulled the rope again.

"No."

The bell rang over Gethsemane.

"I'm warning them that there are still people inside God's house."

Far down the county road, headlights appeared through the rain.

Not one vehicle.

A convoy.

Johnny raised his pistol.

Warden Kinder was coming for the blood money.

CHAPTER NINE

NO SANCTUARY

The call reached Oscar Fuentes twenty-three minutes before Warden Kinder's convoy arrived at Gethsemane.

Aisha Reyes's voice broke through static.

"Shots fired. Two federal agents attacked."

Oscar pressed the telephone closer to his ear.

"Where are you?"

"West of Gethsemane. Church airboat disabled."

"Who attacked you?"

"Corrections Officer Waylon Wiggins and at least two armed accomplices."

Oscar stood.

"Where's Mack?"

"Here."

"Is anyone hurt?"

"Not yet."

"What were corrections officers doing in the swamp?"

A burst of static swallowed her answer.

Then Oscar heard three words clearly.

"Malone is alive."

Oscar closed his office door.

"Repeat that."

"Johnny Malone is alive. We saw him with approximately three million dollars."

Oscar looked through the glass wall toward the overworked Miami field office.

Most of his agents were already assigned to cartel murders, surveillance operations, or post-September 11 task forces. He had two people available without pulling them from active investigations.

"Stay where you are," Oscar said. "I'm bringing support."

"We need someone at Gethsemane. Wiggins will report to Kinder."

"I'll contact the sheriff."

"Mack says Buck Dawber belongs to Bo."

"Mack thinks everybody belongs to Bo."

The connection began to fail.

"Oscar, listen to me. This is bigger than—"

The call dropped.

Oscar tried reconnecting.

Nothing.

He grabbed his coat and stepped into the main office.

"Carson. Lewis. You're with me."

Two agents looked up from their desks.

"Where are we going?" Carson asked.

"Dawber County."

The older agent glanced at the storm outside.

"What happened?"

Oscar picked up the telephone and dialed the Dawber County Sheriff's Department.

"A temporary setback became a Mack Donnelly shit show."

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SHERIFF BUCK DAWBER listened without interrupting.

Oscar explained that two DEA agents had been fired upon by armed corrections officers near Gethsemane Baptist Church. He requested that Buck secure the property, locate Mack and Reyes, and detain Waylon Wiggins.

Then Oscar mentioned Johnny Malone.

Buck rose slowly from behind his desk.

"You're certain?"

"Reyes saw him."

"And the money?"

"Three million, possibly more."

Buck looked through the blinds toward the rain sweeping across the parking lot.

"Where is my brother?"

"Still at Reform Prison."

"You spoke to Bo?"

"Mack did."

Buck understood.

Bo had sent them toward Gethsemane.

"Sheriff?"

"I'm here."

"Can you secure the church?"

"How many corrections officers?"

"At least three. Possibly more."

"Warden Kinder involved?"

"We believe so."

Buck took his hat from the corner of the desk.

"I'll handle it."

"Buck, this is a federal investigation."

"Then you better drive fast."

He hung up.

Four deputies waited in the outer office. Buck selected the three he trusted most.

Then he called Billy.

The telephone rang until voicemail answered.

Buck disconnected and tried again.

Nothing.

"Sheriff," one deputy said, "dispatch has something."

Buck picked up the radio.

A woman's voice reported multiple vehicles traveling south from Reform Prison. One was registered to the Department of Corrections. Another belonged to a company controlled by the Brody family.

Their last known direction was Gethsemane.

"Any units near the church?" Buck asked.

"Negative."

"Billy Dawber's truck been spotted?"

A pause followed.

"It was seen heading toward Gethsemane earlier."

Buck closed his eyes.

"Get the cars."

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ALEX GREGORY TURNED the church office into a command post.

A Dawber County road map covered one wall. Marine charts lay across the desk. A police scanner hissed beside a radio connected to the Maroons stationed around Gethsemane.

Tiana sat at the telephone recording names, times, and everything they knew about Kinder's operation.

Billy watched the front parking lot through the blinds.

Pastor Bubs hung up the second telephone.

"Millie is safe," he said.

"Where?" Tiana asked.

"She drove three elderly congregants to the county storm shelter before sunset. I told her not to return."

"Did you tell her about Deon?"

"I told her enough to keep her away."

Bubs's voice tightened.

"I will tell her the rest face-to-face. That is if we survive the tonight."

The church bell rang above them.

Alex marked the positions of Willis's men on the map.

"South road?" he asked into the radio.

A Maroon answered.

"Four vehicles. Maybe five."

"Canal?"

"Two boats near the eastern crossing. Engines off."

"Do not fire unless they cross the fence."

Alex placed the radio down.

Johnny stood in the doorway watching him.

"You've done this before?"

"No."

"You look comfortable."

"I make plans."

"Plans change when people start shooting."

"Then I'll change the plan."

Johnny smiled faintly.

Kenny's son had inherited his father's confidence and his mother's intelligence. But beneath both, Johnny recognized something that belonged to neither of them.

Alex thought like an accountant.

He identified resources, anticipated loss, and moved people where they produced the greatest advantage.

Bones entered behind Johnny.

"What do you want me doing?"

Alex pointed toward the sanctuary.

"Stay with Bubs."

Bones looked at Johnny.

"You told him to say that?"

"No."

"He doesn't give me orders."

Alex looked up from the map.

"Then stand wherever you want and get shot."

Bones stepped toward him.

Johnny placed himself between them.

"Not now."

"When?"

"After the men trying to kill us leave."

Bones glared at Alex before returning to the sanctuary.

Alex watched him go.

"He's going to be a problem."

"He's my son."

"That doesn't contradict what I said."

Headlights appeared through the rain.

Billy moved away from the window.

"They're here."

Alex picked up the radio.

"All positions. Hold."

Outside, the church bell continued ringing.

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THE CONVOY ENTERED the Gethsemane parking lot with its headlights on high beam.

A Department of Corrections van stopped near the gate. Two unmarked trucks moved behind it. A fourth vehicle blocked the county road.

Warden Kinder emerged from the van wearing a raincoat over civilian clothes.

Waylon Wiggins stepped out beside him. He had changed into a clean corrections uniform, but a strip of tape covered the cut across his cheek.

Ten armed men spread across the parking lot.

Some were corrections officers.

Others belonged to the Brodys.

Kinder raised a loudspeaker.

"Johnny Malone."

His voice traveled across the church grounds.

"We know you have the money. Send it out and no one gets hurt."

Johnny stood beneath the front overhang, protected by darkness.

"You already killed Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress."

Kinder looked toward the sound.

"Those men died inside a correctional institution."

"That's one way of saying it."

"Kenny committed suicide."

"And Deon?"

Kinder did not answer.

Tiana stepped onto the walkway beside Johnny.

"You tried to kill me too."

Kinder lowered the loudspeaker.

"You should've stayed in Miami."

"Thank you," Tiana said. "That sounded almost like a confession."

Kinder motioned toward one of his men.

The man opened the electrical box beside the gate and cut the church's power.

Gethsemane went dark.

The bell continued ringing.

Battery lanterns appeared inside the sanctuary.

Johnny lifted a canvas bag and placed it where Kinder could see.

"This what you came for?"

Kinder raised the loudspeaker again.

"Bring it into the parking lot."

"You come get it."

"I'm not negotiating."

"That's unfortunate. You're surrounded."

Kinder looked toward the trees.

"I don't see anyone."

"That's the point."

"You're bluffing Johnny."

Wiggins leaned toward him.

"Bo said not to touch Bubs."

Kinder covered the loudspeaker.

"Bo isn't here."

"I am."

Pastor Bubs stepped through the church doors.

Bones followed with the shotgun.

Kinder looked at the old pastor.

"This does not concern you."

"You brought armed men onto church property."

"You are harboring fugitives and stolen drug money."

"The only criminals I see are wearing state uniforms."

Several Maroons laughed from the darkness.

Kinder's face hardened.

"Step inside, Pastor."

"No."

Bones positioned himself slightly in front of Bubs.

Wiggins noticed.

"That Malone's boy?" he asked.

Kinder nodded.

"Take them both."

Wiggins did not move.

One of the Brody gunmen crossed the fence line.

Alex's voice came through the Maroons' radios.

"Wait."

The gunman advanced toward the canvas bag.

A second followed.

Johnny remained beneath the overhang.

The first man reached the bag and lifted it.

Inside were several bundles of cash resting atop stacks of cut newspaper.

He looked toward Kinder.

"It's a decoy."

A rifle cracked from the darkness.

The tire beside him exploded.

Then another.

The front of the corrections van dropped as both tires went flat.

Kinder's men opened fire.

Windows shattered across the church.

Johnny pulled Tiana to the floor.

Bones pushed Bubs through the sanctuary doors as bullets tore through the wooden entrance.

The Maroons returned fire from the tree line.

Muzzle flashes surrounded the parking lot.

Kinder dove behind the van.

Wiggins remained beside him.

"You said nobody would be inside!"

"I said get the money."

The church telephone went dead.

Inside the office, Tiana dropped the receiver.

"They cut the line."

Willis spoke into the radio.

"Bigz, move toward the road. Nu Nu, stay hidden. Do not let them reach the dock."

Billy picked up a rifle.

"What about me?"

Alex spoke into the radio.

"Side entrance. Watch Bones."

"Bones doesn't need watching."

"He needs witnesses."

Billy ran from the office.

Alex adjusted the positions on the map as reports came through the radio.

He could no longer see the battle.

He could hear all of it.

THE MAROON BOAT REACHED Gethsemane from the western channel.

Suds shut down the engine before reaching the dock and allowed the vessel to glide into the slip.

Mack and Reyes have arrived.

Gunfire erupted beyond the church.

Suds looked toward the sanctuary.

"We might've missed the quiet part."

Reyes drew her pistol.

"How many men do you have here?"

"Enough."

"That isn't an answer."

"It usually is."

The boat touched the dock.

Reyes stepped off first.

Mack followed.

"Stay behind me," he said.

"I outrank you."

"This isn't paperwork."

They moved toward the rear entrance.

A man appeared from behind the church carrying a rifle.

Mack fired twice.

The man fell beside the walkway.

Reyes checked him.

"Corrections uniform."

"Welcome to Dawber County."

They entered through the fellowship hall.

Tiana was crouched beside the office door.

Reyes grabbed her arm.

"Where's Malone?"

"Outside."

"The money?"

“On the skiff.”

Mack looked toward the rear dock.

Tiana saw the direction of his attention.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“About what?”

“You know exactly what.”

A shotgun blast struck the fellowship hall windows.

Glass covered the floor.

Guard Daly entered through the side door with blood across his forehead and a pistol in his hand.

Tiana recognized the portly, bearded officer from Reform Prison.

“That’s Daly.”

He aimed at her.

Reyes pushed Tiana aside.

The pistol fired.

The bullet struck Reyes beneath the shoulder and spun her into the wall.

Mack shot Daly once in the chest.

Daly’s body armor absorbed most of the round, but the impact knocked him backward.

Bones appeared from the sanctuary.

He fired the shotgun into Daly’s thigh.

The guard collapsed screaming.

Mack knelt beside Reyes.

Blood spread across her blouse.

“Stay with me.”

She pressed one hand against the wound.

“I’m not dying.”

“You don’t know that.”

“It went through.”

Tiana pulled Reyes’s jacket away and examined the wound.

“She’s right. There’s an exit.”

Bubs entered carrying the church medical kit.

Mack looked toward Daly.

The guard attempted to crawl toward his pistol.

Bones kicked it away.

"Move again," Bones said, "and the next one goes through your head."

Daly looked up at him.

"You're Malone's boy."

Bones chambered another shell.

"That sounded like moving."

"Bones," Johnny said from the doorway.

His son stopped.

Johnny looked at Reyes.

"How bad?"

"She needs a hospital," Tiana said.

Reyes grabbed Mack's sleeve.

"Stay on Kinder."

Mack looked through the broken windows.

Kinder's men were retreating toward the road. The Maroons had closed around them.

Then Mack saw Johnny glance toward the rear dock.

Toward the three million dollars.

Reyes followed his eyes.

"Mack."

"I'm securing the evidence."

"You stay here."

"I'll be back."

"Mack!"

He was already moving.

Johnny watched him disappear through the fellowship hall.

For a moment, neither man acknowledged the other.

Then Johnny followed.

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SHERIFF BUCK DAWBER heard the gunfire before he saw Gethsemane.

He accelerated.

Three patrol cars followed him through the storm.

The church appeared beyond the trees, dark except for muzzle flashes and vehicle headlights.

Buck's radio filled with confused reports.

Armed corrections officers.

Brody gunmen.

Maroons in the woods.

Federal agents somewhere inside.

Buck drove through the gate and positioned his patrol car across the parking lot.

The siren continued screaming.

He stepped out with a shotgun.

"Dawber County Sheriff's Department! Put down your weapons!"

No one listened.

A corrections officer turned toward him.

"Sheriff, they've got us pinned."

"Lower your weapon."

"We're under Warden Kinder's authority."

"You're in my county."

The man hesitated.

A figure moved near the side of the church.

Billy.

Buck saw his nephew carrying a rifle.

"Billy!"

Billy turned.

A Brody gunman raised his weapon toward him.

Buck fired.

The blast struck the gunman in the chest and threw him against the prison van.

Billy stared at his uncle.

Buck ran toward him.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Trying not to get killed."

"Put down the rifle."

"Kinder's men murdered Kenny and Deon."

"I said put it down."

Billy lowered the weapon.

Buck looked toward the church entrance.

Pastor Bubs knelt beside an injured woman. Tiana pressed towels against the wound.

"Who's hit?"

"DEA," Billy said. "Agent Reyes."

Buck turned toward Kinder.

The warden emerged from behind the van.

"You shot one of my men."

"I shot an armed man aiming at my nephew."

"Your nephew is assisting drug traffickers."

"My nephew is standing in a church you brought ten gunmen to."

Kinder pointed toward the rear.

"Johnny Malone has three million dollars in narcotics proceeds. I am recovering it under state authority."

"You run a prison, Vernon. You don't seize drug money."

"He's harboring fugitives."

"Johnny isn't a fugitive."

Kinder's expression tightened.

Buck looked toward Waylon.

"Put it down."

Wiggins continued holding his pistol.

"Sheriff—"

"Bo told you no one touches Bubs."

Wiggins glanced toward Kinder.

Buck stepped closer.

"Didn't he?"

"Yes."

Kinder looked at Wiggins.

"You answer to me."

Wiggins slowly lowered his weapon.

"Not about this."

Kinder raised his pistol toward him.

Buck aimed the shotgun at Kinder.

"Your night is over, Vernon."

A voice came from behind the warden.

"Not yet."

Willis Childress stepped from the darkness and pressed a knife against Kinder's throat.

Blood covered Willis's hands.

His eyes held no humor.

"First," Willis said, "the warden is going to tell me what he did to my brother."

CHAPTER TEN

BROTHER'S KEEPER

Willis Childress pressed the knife more firmly against Warden Kinder's throat.

A narrow line of blood appeared beneath the blade.

Kinder stood rigid in the rain.

Sheriff Buck Dawber kept the shotgun aimed at the warden's chest.

"Put down the knife, Willis."

"Not until he tells me about Deon."

"You kill him, he can't tell you anything."

"I ain't planning to kill him quickly."

Kinder tried to smile.

"You hear that, Sheriff? He's threatening a state official."

Buck looked around the churchyard.

Bodies rested between shattered vehicles. Corrections officers and Brody gunmen lay facedown beneath the weapons of Maroon gang members. A DEA agent bled inside the church.

"You stopped being a state official when your men opened fire on Gethsemane."

"I was recovering narcotics proceeds."

"With ten armed men?"

"Malone's people attacked us."

"You cut the church's power and telephone."

Kinder looked toward Waylon Wiggins.

"Officer Wiggins, arrest this man."

Waylon's pistol remained lowered.

"Did you hear me?"

Waylon glanced toward Pastor Bubs.

Then toward Billy Dawber.

Timmy's son stood beside the church entrance holding a rifle. Rain ran through his hair and across a face that looked increasingly like his father's.

For one terrible instant, Buck saw Billy's father Timmy standing there.

The same narrow eyes.

The same stubborn jaw.

The brother Buck had failed to protect.

Then the image became Billy again.

Buck tightened his grip upon the shotgun.

"Waylon," he said, "put your weapon on the ground."

Wiggins obeyed.

Kinder stared at him.

"You work for me."

"I work for the Dawbers."

"I am your commanding officer."

Wiggins looked toward Buck.

"Sheriff Dawber outranks you out here."

Willis smiled.

"Looks like you're running out of friends, Warden."

Tiana appeared in the doorway.

"Daly is alive."

Willis turned toward her.

"The guard?"

"He's wounded. Reyes and Bubs are keeping him from bleeding out."

"Why?"

"Because he knows what happened to Deon."

Willis removed the knife from Kinder's throat.

"Bring him out."

"No," Tiana said. "Bring Kinder inside."

Buck stepped forward.

"You don't give orders at my crime scene."

"It became my crime scene when Daly shot a federal agent and confessed that the warden ordered Deon into the prison mortuary."

Willis looked at Kinder.

The warden's confidence faltered.

Only slightly.

It was enough.

Buck motioned toward one of his deputies.

"Cuff him."

The deputy approached.

Kinder held out his hands.

"Sheriff, before you do something that destroys your career, you should call your brother."

"This has nothing to do with Bo."

Kinder smiled.

"It has everything to do with Bo."

Buck pushed him toward the church.

"Then he can explain it after I finish with you."

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GUARD DALY LAY ON THE fellowship hall floor with a belt tightened around his wounded thigh.

Aisha Reyes sat against the wall nearby. Bubs had cut away part of her blood-soaked blouse and packed the gunshot wound beneath her shoulder. The bullet had passed through without striking bone.

She was pale but conscious.

Bones stood over Daly with the shotgun.

Tiana placed a small recorder on the floor between them and pressed the red button.

Daly watched the reels turn behind the plastic window.

"I want a lawyer."

"You tried to murder me," Tiana said.

"You're a lawyer."

"Not yours."

Willis entered with Buck, Kinder, Billy, and two deputies.

The sight of Kinder gave Daly momentary relief.

It vanished when he saw the handcuffs.

Willis knelt beside him.

"Tell me what happened to my brother."

Daly looked toward Kinder.

The warden said nothing.

"I don't know anything."

Bones drove the shotgun stock against Daly's injured leg.

Daly screamed.

Buck grabbed the weapon.

"Enough."

"He's lying," Bones said.

"He can lie without you killing him."

Willis leaned closer to Daly.

"You know who I am?"

Daly nodded.

"Say it."

"Willis Childress."

"Then you know what happens if you lie again."

Daly's breathing became shallow.

Tiana checked the recorder.

"Start with Kenny Gregory."

Daly closed his eyes.

"He was supposed to tell us where the money was."

"Who ordered you to question him?"

Daly looked toward Kinder.

"The warden."

Kinder laughed.

"This is coerced testimony from a wounded man surrounded by armed gang members."

Reyes raised her head.

"And two federal agents."

Kinder saw her.

"Mack is not here."

"I'm here," Reyes said. "Keep talking, Daly."

Daly swallowed.

"Kenny wouldn't tell us. Said the money belonged to Malone."

"What happened to him?" Tiana asked.

"He fought."

"So you killed him."

"I didn't put the rope around his neck."

"Who did?"

Daly hesitated.

Willis placed the knife against the floor beside his face.

"Another guard," Daly said. "Warden wanted it to look like suicide."

Kinder turned toward Buck.

"You believe this?"

Buck watched Daly.

"What happened when Deon arrived?"

Daly's eyes filled.

Not with remorse.

With fear.

"We took him downstairs."

"To the mortuary?" Tiana asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Kenny's body was there."

"And?"

"Inmate Fester was waiting."

Willis's hand closed around the knife.

"What did Fester do?"

"He cut Deon's throat."

Bubs lowered his head.

Billy looked toward Willis.

Willis remained completely still.

"Did Deon know?" he asked.

"What?"

"Did he know what was happening?"

"He knew something was wrong."

"Did he say anything?"

Daly looked at the recorder.

"He said somebody needed to call his brother."

Willis's face changed.

The rage remained, but something beneath it broke.

Tiana's recording of Deon's final message had said the same thing.

Call my brother.

"Then what?" Reyes asked.

"Fester stabbed him. I caught Deon before he hit the floor."

"You helped murder him."

"I didn't have the knife."

"You knew what was coming."

Daly began crying.

"The warden said Fester would get a transfer and protection."

"What happened to Fester?"

Daly looked toward the blood on his uniform.

"I shot him."

"Why?"

"He was the only witness."

Kinder stepped forward.

Buck's deputy held him back.

"This is absurd."

Daly looked directly at the warden.

"You watched it from your office."

Kinder's face lost its remaining color.

"You watched through the security camera," Daly continued. "You were drinking with Bo."

Buck turned sharply.

"Bo was there?"

"No," Daly said. "Bo was in the warden's office earlier. He left before Deon arrived."

"What did my brother know about this?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing about killing Deon."

Kinder spoke quickly.

"Nothing. Bo had nothing to do with the attorney. Neither did I."

Willis stood.

"You did."

Kinder looked at him.

"Your brother made an unfortunate decision."

"He went to see a client."

"He went looking for money."

"He went looking for the truth."

"And now he's dead."

Willis crossed the room.

Buck moved between them.

"Back away."

"He killed Deon."

"And Daly's confession will put him away."

"I don't want him put away. I want him put down."

Bubs rose from beside Reyes.

"Willis."

"You stay out of this."

"I cannot."

"You raised Deon. You should want him dead too."

"I want justice."

"This is Dawber County. We don't have justice."

"Then someone must be the first to practice it."

Willis pointed toward Kinder.

"That man slit Deon's throat and watched him bleed."

"And if you murder him here, Deon's last act becomes the reason you throw away the rest of your life."

"My life ain't worth what his was."

Bubs moved closer.

"Deon would disagree."

"He ain't here to say it."

"No. That is why you must remember who he was."

Willis's eyes filled again.

Kinder watched him and smiled.

It was a small expression.

A private victory.

Willis saw it.

So did Buck.

"Search him," Buck ordered.

The deputy reached toward Kinder.

The warden drove his shoulder into the man's chest.

As the deputy fell, Kinder lifted his cuffed hands and pulled a small pistol from an ankle holster.

He fired into the ceiling.

Everyone ducked.

Kinder grabbed Bubs by the shirt and pressed the pistol beneath his jaw.

Bones raised the shotgun.

"No!" Buck shouted.

Kinder dragged Bubs toward the rear door.

"Put everything down."

Willis did not move.

Kinder pushed the barrel harder against the pastor's throat.
"Knife."
Willis dropped it.
"Shotgun," Kinder told Bones.
Bones lowered it to the floor.
Kinder backed through the doorway, pulling Bubs with him.
Waylon Wiggins stood outside.
"Move the vehicle," Kinder ordered.
Waylon stared at Bubs.
"Bo said not to touch him."
"Bo isn't your warden."
"And you ain't getting a car."
Kinder fired at him.
Waylon threw himself behind the walkway.
The bullet missed.
Bubs drove the end of his cane into Kinder's injured throat.
The warden released him.
Willis charged.
Kinder fired again.
The bullet passed through Willis's coat.
Willis struck him across the face.
The pistol fell into the mud.
Kinder ran.
"Stay with Bubs!" Buck shouted.
Willis pursued the warden into the darkness.
Buck followed.

• • • •

KINDER CROSSED THE cemetery behind Gethsemane.

Rain turned the ground between the graves into mud. His cuffed hands destroyed his balance, but fear kept him moving.

Willis gained with every step.

Kinder reached the edge of the swamp and tried to turn north.
Willis tackled him.

They rolled down the bank and stopped beside the black water.
Kinder kicked free.

Willis struck him in the mouth.

Kinder fell against a cypress root.

"You want the money?" Willis asked. "You should've taken it."

Kinder spat blood.

"That's what this county understands."

"You killed Deon for it."

"Your brother was in the way."

"He had a family."

"He had you. That was probably punishment enough."

Willis struck him again.

Kinder laughed through broken teeth.

"He thought the law would save him."

"No."

"What?"

"He thought people were worth saving."

Willis lifted him by the front of his shirt.

Kinder drove his head into Willis's face.

Willis fell backward.

The warden crawled toward his pistol.

It rested several feet away in the mud.

Willis drew his own weapon.

Kinder reached for the fallen gun.

Willis shot him in the leg.

The warden collapsed.

Kinder looked toward the pistol.

It remained beyond his fingertips.

"You can't kill me," he said. "Not with the sheriff here."

Willis looked back toward the cemetery.

No one had reached them yet.
“Where is my brother’s body?”
Kinder gripped his wounded leg.
“He was transferred.”
“Where?”
“A crematory we use outside the county.”
“You burned him?”
“We removed a problem.”
Willis raised the pistol.
Kinder saw the decision.
“Bo knew.”
Willis stopped.
“What?”
“Bo knew we were questioning Kenny. He knew Deon was coming.”
“Did he order the murder?”
Kinder smiled.
“You’ll have to ask him.”
“Did Bo order you to kill Deon?”
Footsteps approached through the cemetery.
Kinder reached desperately for the gun in the mud.
Willis fired.
The bullet struck Kinder in the chest.
He fell back against the roots.
Willis fired again.
The warden’s body slipped into the shallow water.
Buck reached the edge of the cemetery with his shotgun raised.
He saw Kinder’s pistol in the mud.
He saw the distance between it and the body.
He looked at Willis.
“He was reaching,” Willis said.
Buck stared at him.

"So you said."

Sirens sounded far down the county road.

Oscar was approaching.

Buck looked toward Kinder's body.

Then toward Timmy's grave in the church cemetery.

For years, Buck had wondered whether Bo was capable of killing their younger brother.

Now another brother had been murdered by men connected to Bo.

Buck lowered the shotgun.

"Go back to the church."

"You arresting me?"

"I haven't decided."

Willis walked past him.

Buck remained beside the water.

The warden's blood moved slowly through the rain.

• • • •

JOHNNY FOLLOWED MACK through the dark fellowship hall.

Gunfire had stopped outside. The church bell no longer rang.

Only the distant sirens and the rain remained. As Johnny passed the office, Alex stepped into the doorway.

"Mack went toward the dock."

"I know."

"He's after the money."

"He's after me."

Alex looked toward the sanctuary.

"Federal agents are coming."

"How long?"

"Minutes."

"Keep Bones inside."

"That won't be easy."

"Nothing involving my son is easy."

Johnny continued toward the rear of the church. The side door stood open.

Beyond it, the covered walkway led toward the dock and the skiff holding three million dollars.

Johnny stepped outside. Mack was nowhere in sight.

"Mack?"

No answer.

Johnny moved down the walkway.

The skiff remained tied to the dock. All three cases were still aboard.

Johnny stopped. If Mack wanted only the money, he would already have taken it.

He turned. Mack stood in the church doorway. A lunatic's grin spread across his face.

He held the scorched Vietnam lighter inside its plastic evidence bag. The words remained visible through the cracked metal.

"Sorry, Charlie."

Johnny's rage disappeared.

Mack seized him by the collar and slammed him against the wall. The impact drove the air from Johnny's lungs.

Mack twisted Johnny's wrists behind his back and snapped on the handcuffs. Hard.

"Where's the money, Johnny?"

Johnny looked toward the three cases in the skiff. Then back at Mack.

"You're standing right beside it."

Mack drove him toward the dock.

"No," he said. "I'm standing beside the down payment."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SORRY, CHARLIE

Mack forced Johnny down the covered walkway toward the dock. Rain blew beneath the roof and struck them sideways. The handcuffs cut into Johnny's wrists every time Mack shoved him forward.

"You can stop pushing."

"Keep walking."

"I've been shot."

"I noticed."

"You also kicked me in the exact place I was shot."

"That was intentional."

"Good. For a moment I thought federal training standards had declined."

Mack shoved him again.

Johnny stumbled against the railing.

The three marine cases remained aboard the skiff. Rainwater collected on their black surfaces.

Mack stared at them.

Three million dollars.

Johnny saw the hunger in his face.

"This isn't an arrest."

"Get in the boat."

"What happened to justice?"

"Justice doesn't pay Russians."

Johnny stopped.

Mack drove the pistol beneath his ribs.

"Move."

Johnny stepped into the skiff. The boat shifted beneath his weight. Mack followed and kept the weapon trained on him.

"Sit."

Johnny lowered himself onto the center bench.

Mack untied the dock line but did not start the engine.

The sirens approaching Gethsemane grew louder.

"You're running out of time," Johnny said.

"So are you."

"What do the Russians want?"

"My money."

"How much?"

"More than I have."

"Reno?"

Mack's jaw tightened.

Johnny smiled.

"I heard about the stripper."

"You don't know anything."

"Russian payroll. Ongoing investigation. Married federal agent makes bad decisions with a witness and ends up owing money to people who don't forgive debt."

"She wasn't a witness when I met her."

"I'm sure Barbara appreciated the distinction."

Mack struck Johnny across the face with the pistol.

Johnny tasted blood.

"Leave Barb out of this."

"She left herself out twelve years ago."

"You always did talk too much."

"Usually because other people don't say enough."

Mack moved closer.

"The Russians threatened my daughter."

Johnny's humor disappeared.

"They know where she lives. Where she goes to school. They sent photographs."

"That changes things."

"It changes everything."

"No. It explains everything. That's different."

Mack pointed toward the cases.

"We take the skiff to an airstrip west of here. I've got a pilot who'll fly us to Vegas."

"With three million dollars?"

"It pays the debt."

"And then?"

"I hand them you."

Johnny stared at him.

"The Russians don't know me."

"They don't need to."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you have accounts in Switzerland."

"You don't know if those accounts exist."

"They believe they do."

"You promised them access codes you don't have."

"I have you."

Johnny shook his head.

"No plan. Just desperation."

"Desperation gets things done."

"It also gets daughters killed."

Mack struck him again.

Johnny nearly fell from the bench.

"You mention her one more time—"

"I'm trying to keep her alive."

"Then give me the codes."

"What happens after I do?"

"The Russians pay themselves."

"And me?"

Mack looked toward the dark canal.

"That depends on how cooperative you are."

"You hand me over, they torture me until I tell them every account, contact, and access code I've ever had."

"Probably."

"Then they kill me."

"Possibly."

"You always were a terrible friend."

"You were never my friend."

"That isn't what you said when you needed Bo to trust you."

Mack raised the pistol.

Johnny continued.

"You drank with us. Ate with us. Sat beside Kenny's boys at Widow's Walk. You gave Bo advice and handed men to Atticus whenever he needed proof you were loyal."

Mack's expression changed.

There it was.

Fear.

Johnny leaned back despite the pain in his wrists.

"Do your superiors know about those men?"

"You're bluffing."

"Atticus asked you the same question before you killed him."

Mack moved closer.

"No one heard that conversation."

"You and Atticus weren't the only people keeping records."

"What records?"

"Sanchez believed every partnership needed insurance."

"Sanchez is dead."

"Insurance matters most after death."

Mack pressed the barrel beneath Johnny's chin.

"Where is it?"

"Switzerland."

For several seconds, neither man moved.

"What's in the file?" Mack asked.

"Names. Dates. Payments. The men you delivered to Atticus. The two Bo made you kill personally."

"They were murderers."

"You left that out of your reports."

"I was undercover."

"You executed Atticus after he was wounded."

"He attacked me."

"The first shot was self-defense. The rest emptied your magazine."

Mack's eyes narrowed.

Johnny could not tell whether he believed the file existed.

That was the advantage of a good lie.

It did not need to be completely true.

It needed to contain enough truth that the other man could not risk testing it.

"You try to charge me," Johnny said, "Oscar gets the Atticus file. So does Barbara. Every newspaper in the country learns how the legendary Mack Donnelly built his Dawber County case."

"You go public and every conviction gets challenged."

"That sounds like your problem."

"Your friends go free."

"The ones who survived."

"Bo goes free."

"He's getting out in two weeks anyway."

Mack gripped the pistol harder.

"If the file exists, why haven't you used it?"

"I never needed it before tonight."

"You're coming with me."

"If you sell me to the Russians, instructions release everything."

"To who?"

Johnny smiled through the blood on his teeth.

"Would you bet your daughter's life that I'm lying?"

Mack stared at him.

The sirens reached the church entrance.

Doors slammed.

Men shouted.

Oscar had arrived.

Mack looked toward the outboard motor.

"Get down."

Johnny remained seated.

"You start this boat, every agent at the church hears us."

"I said get down."

"You still need me alive."

Mack struck him in the stomach.

Johnny doubled over.

A shadow moved across the dock behind Mack.

Johnny saw it but said nothing.

Willis Childress stepped onto the walkway with his pistol held by the barrel.

Mack began to turn.

Willis swung the grip like a hammer.

The blow landed behind Mack's ear.

Mack collapsed into the skiff.

Willis looked toward Johnny.

"Jesus. You two really don't know when to stop."

Johnny raised his cuffed hands.

"A little help?"

Willis stepped into the boat and searched Mack's pockets.

He found the handcuff key and released Johnny.

"You all right?"

"I've had better reunions."

Willis saw the three cases.

"That the stash?"

"Three million survived."

"You sly devil."

"You going to shoot me?"

"Why would I?"

"Tradition."

"You gave me the men who killed my brother."

Willis looked toward the church.

"Daly confessed. Kinder's dead."

"I heard."

"We had an agreement."

Johnny pointed toward two of the cases.

"Take them."

Willis stared at him.

"Two million?"

"Every dollar I promised."

"You ain't going to argue?"

"I'm tired."

Willis lifted the first case.

"You sure this ain't another Malone trick?"

"It is. Just not the one you think."

Willis carried the case onto the dock.

Suds emerged from the shadows and took it from him.

They returned for the second.

"What are you doing with the last million?" Willis asked.

"Taking care of unfinished business."

"Switzerland?"

"Not yet."

Willis glanced at Mack.

"He told me the Russians want my accounts."

"You got Russians now?"

"Apparently."

"Your problem."

"That appears to be the consensus."

Mack groaned.

Willis lifted his pistol.

"Want me to shoot him?"

Johnny looked down at the unconscious agent.

"Tempting."

"He was going to sell you to Russians."

"He also has a daughter they threatened."

"That supposed to make me feel sorry for him?"

"No. It makes him useful."

Johnny rolled Mack onto his stomach and fastened one handcuff around his wrist.

He secured the other cuff around a steel dock support.

Then he removed the plastic evidence bag from Mack's jacket.

His scorched lighter rested inside.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

Johnny opened the bag and took it out.

The lighter felt warm despite the rain.

He placed it in his pocket.

Willis watched him.

"You always steal evidence from federal agents?"

"Only when it belongs to me."

Mack regained consciousness.

He pulled against the cuff.

"What happened?"

"You experienced a temporary setback," Johnny said.

Mack looked toward the missing cases.

"Where's the money?"

"Diversified."

"You son of a bitch."

Johnny knelt beside him.

"If you tell Oscar what happened here, Barbara receives the Atticus file."

"There is no file."

"Maybe."

"The Russians will still come after my daughter."

"Then tell them I escaped with the money."

"They won't believe me."

"You're a professional federal agent. Lie better."

Johnny stood.

Willis and Suds carried the two cases toward the Maroon vehicles.

"You coming?" Willis asked.

"In a minute."

"You trust the sheriff?"

"Not remotely."

Willis smiled.

"Then you understand him."

He disappeared into the rain.

• • • •

SHERIFF BUCK DAWBER found Johnny alone beside the skiff.

Mack remained cuffed to the dock several yards away.

Buck looked at him.

"Federal agent appears to be having a difficult evening."

"He slipped."

"Into handcuffs?"

"Repeatedly."

Buck held the shotgun at his side.

"The money?"

"Two million went to Willis."

"You paid a gang leader at a church?"

"I paid a grieving brother who kept his side of an agreement."

"What about the last case?"

Johnny stepped into the skiff and opened it.

Bundles of hundred-dollar bills filled the waterproof interior.

Buck stared.

Johnny removed half and placed the money into two canvas bags.

"Five hundred thousand dollars."

"For what?"

"To remember tonight exactly the way it happened."

Buck's face revealed nothing.

"And how did it happen?"

"Warden Kinder murdered Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress. His guards tried to kill Tiana Ross. They fired upon two DEA agents and brought armed men to Pastor Bubs's church."

"Every word of that is true."

"That's what makes it easy to remember."

"And you?"

"As far as your report is concerned, I disappeared before you arrived."

"Reyes saw you."

"She's unconscious. When she wakes, she can honestly say she saw Kinder's men attack me, Bones, and the DEA."

"Mack saw you."

Johnny looked toward the dock.

"Mack has reasons to be cooperative."

Buck studied the money.

"You expect me to take that?"

"I expect you to decide what your memory is worth."

"My memory is fine."

"Then consider it a contribution to your retirement."

"You bribed my brother for years."

"Bo demanded payment. You and I are having a conversation."

"What happens when Bo learns you paid me?"

"You'll be five hundred thousand dollars richer when he asks."

Buck looked toward the church.

Billy stood beneath the front overhang with one of Buck's deputies. The boy looked too much like Timmy.

"You brought my nephew into this."

"Billy brought himself."

"He's Timmy's son."

"I know."

"Bo won't forgive him for standing beside you."

"Then protect him."

Buck looked back at Johnny.

"With your money?"

"With whatever works."

For years, Buck had enforced Bo's authority because the family and the county had become impossible to separate. He had accepted favors, ignored shipments, and convinced himself that loyalty prevented worse men from taking control.

Then Timmy died.

Bo called it suicide.

Buck had never completely believed him.

Now Bo's prison partner had brought armed men to Gethsemane and nearly killed Timmy's son.

Buck picked up the canvas bags.

"What happens to the remaining five hundred thousand?"

"I leave with it."

"And if Oscar asks?"

"You never saw the case."

"What about Donnelly?"

"He'll say Kinder's men took the money."

Mack shouted from the dock.

"I'm not saying a goddamn thing for you!"

Buck looked toward him.

Johnny raised his voice.

"Then tell Oscar about Reno."

Mack fell silent.

Buck returned his attention to Johnny.

"What did he do in Reno?"

"Ask him."

Buck carried the bags toward his patrol car.

At the end of the walkway, he stopped.

"You brought the war back with you."

Johnny looked toward the bodies in the churchyard.

"It never left, Buck. You just kept wearing the badge over it."

Buck walked away.

• • • •

BONES AND ALEX REACHED the dock moments later.

Alex carried a county map and a box of ammunition. Bones carried the shotgun.

He saw Mack cuffed to the support.

"What happened to him?"

"He fell," Johnny said.

Bones looked at the handcuffs.

"Must've been a complicated fall."

"Get in the boat."

Alex saw the open case.

"That's all that's left?"

"Five hundred thousand."

"We started with five million."

"Welcome to business."

"What happened to the rest?"

"Willis received two. Buck received half a million."

"You bribed Sheriff Dawber?"

"I invested in local government."

Bones stepped into the skiff.

"What about Billy?"

Johnny looked toward the church.

Billy remained beside Buck.

"He made his choice."

Alex hesitated.

"We're leaving him?"

"He's with his uncle."

"Bo is his uncle too."

"That is something Billy will have to decide."

Alex climbed into the boat.

Bones took the motor controls.

Johnny untied the line.

Mack pulled against the cuff.

"You won't get away with this."

Johnny looked back.

"I already did."

Bones started the outboard.

The engine came to life.

Alex secured the remaining case beneath the center bench.

The skiff pulled away from Gethsemane.

Johnny watched the church recede through the rain.

Tiana remained with Reyes and Bubs.

Willis had Deon's killers and two million dollars.

Buck controlled the local crime scene.

Oscar had arrived with only two agents and no understanding of what had happened.

Mack Donnelly was cuffed to a dock with every reason to lie.

For the first time since returning to Dawber County, Johnny was alone with Bones and Alex.

His son and the young man who thought like him.

Behind them waited Billy, caught between two uncles and the truth about his father.

Ahead lay the dark channels of the Everglades.

Johnny reached into his pocket and removed the scorched lighter.

He struck the wheel.

A small flame appeared.

Bones looked back.

“Where are we going?”

Johnny watched the fire dance above the inscription.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

“Somewhere we can turn half a million dollars into an empire.”

The skiff disappeared into the swamp.

This ending gives us the victory, the cover-up, and the cost. Johnny escapes without being charged, but everyone now owes someone—and Bo Dawber is coming home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE OFFICIAL STORY

Aisha Reyes awakened to the sound of a woman praying. The words came softly at first, little more than whispers beneath the ringing in her ears. She opened her eyes and saw the water-stained ceiling of Gethsemane Baptist Church above her.

For a moment, she could not remember how she had gotten there. Then the pain beneath her shoulder brought everything back.

The boats.

The gunfire.

Tiana falling beside her.

Johnny Malone running toward the canal.

Mack following him.

Reyes tried to sit up.

“Don’t,” Tiana said.

She was kneeling beside the pew where Reyes had been placed. Her blouse was streaked with blood that belonged to other people. A cellular telephone rested on the floor beside her.

“The bullet went through,” Tiana continued. “Pastor Bubs says it missed the bone.”

“He a doctor?”

“No.”

“Then I’d like a second opinion.”

“You’re getting one.”

Outside, sirens approached from the county road.

Reyes turned her head. Pastor Bubs stood near the open church doors, his shirt soaked with sweat and someone else’s blood. He had wrapped a strip of white altar cloth around his forearm where Warden Kinder had cut him.

Beyond him, bodies lay across the churchyard.

Corrections officers.

Sheltons.

Brodys.

Men who had come to Gethsemane believing five million dollars would be waiting for them.

"How long was I out?" Reyes asked.

"Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen."

"Where's Mack?"

Tiana hesitated.

Reyes saw the answer in her face.

"Where is he?"

"He went after Johnny."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Reyes forced herself upright despite the pain.

Tiana placed a hand against her good shoulder. "You need to stay down."

"My partner just ran into a swamp after a man he's been hunting for twelve years."

"Johnny was carrying money."

Reyes looked at her.

"How much?"

"I don't know."

"That wasn't the question."

"Enough to make reasonable men unreasonable."

Reyes swung her feet onto the floor.

"Mack Donnelly has never been reasonable."

• • • •

SHERIFF BUCK DAWBER stood beside the body of Warden Vernon Kinder.

Kinder lay facedown near the edge of the canal. Two bullets had entered his back. A third had struck him behind the ear.

Buck had seen enough shootings to recognize an execution when one was lying at his feet.

Willis Childress stood several yards away, his pistol hanging loosely from his right hand.

Pastor Bubs had already returned to the church.

The surviving corrections officers had surrendered. The surviving Sheltons and Brodys had either fled into the swamp or dropped their weapons when Buck's deputies arrived.

Nobody had seen Willis fire the first shot.

Everybody had heard the last three.

Buck looked toward the tree line. No sign remained of Johnny Malone, Bones, Alex Gregory, or the money.

Five hundred thousand dollars waited beneath an old raincoat in the trunk of his patrol car.

Johnny had not asked Buck to lie.

He had merely paid him to remember events in the correct order.

Buck removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Put the gun down, Willis."

Willis looked at Kinder's body.

"He killed my brother."

"I know."

"He had Deon's throat cut open in a prison morgue."

"I heard Daly confess."

"He deserved worse than this."

"That doesn't change what I said."

Willis turned toward Buck.

For a dangerous moment, neither man moved.

Then Willis placed the pistol on the ground.

Buck motioned for a deputy to collect it.

"You arresting me?" Willis asked.

"Not yet."

"What's that mean?"

"It means Warden Kinder was armed. He had taken Pastor Bubs hostage. He refused to surrender."

Willis studied him.

Buck continued.

"When Kinder reached the canal, he turned toward you with his weapon."

"He didn't turn."

Buck stepped closer.

"He turned toward you with his weapon."

Willis finally understood.

A faint smile crossed his face.

"You're a generous man, Sheriff."

"No," Buck said. "I'm a practical one."

He looked back toward the churchyard.

"Take your people and disappear before the federal agents get here."

"You didn't see me?"

"I saw you defend yourself against an armed fugitive."

"And after that?"

"After that, I was examining the wounded."

Willis nodded toward Kinder's body.

"What about him?"

"He's the answer to every question anybody's going to ask."

Willis started toward the trees.

Buck caught his arm.

"Two million dollars buys a lot of trouble."

Willis's eyes narrowed.

"How much did Johnny give you?"

"Go home, Willis."

"That ain't a denial."

"You've got five seconds before I remember you differently."

Willis smiled and disappeared into the swamp.

• • • •

MILLIE BUBS ARRIVED in an ambulance with two elderly members of the congregation.

She climbed out before the vehicle had stopped moving.

Her husband stood on the church steps.

His white shirt was torn. Blood covered his arm. His face looked twenty years older than it had that morning.

Millie ran to him.

Bubs met her at the bottom of the steps and wrapped both arms around her. She buried her face against his chest.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It's over."

"Where's Deon?"

Bubs closed his eyes.

Millie pulled away enough to look at him.

"Where is he?"

Tiana stood in the church doorway.

Millie saw the answer before either of them spoke.

"No."

Bubs held her tighter.

"No," Millie repeated. "Deon is in Miami."

"He went to the prison," Bubs said.

"He would've called."

"He went to see Kenny Gregory."

"He would've called me."

"Millie—"

"He always calls."

Her knees gave way.

Bubs caught her before she struck the ground.

The cry that escaped her carried across the churchyard. Deputies stopped what they were doing. Paramedics lowered their eyes. Even the handcuffed corrections officers fell silent.

Tiana turned away.

Deon Childress had been her employer, her mentor, and the man she had believed would someday become more than Dawber County had ever allowed him to imagine.

Now he was another body in an official report.

Millie clung to her husband.

"They took our boy."

Bubs looked past her toward the bodies scattered across the property.

"Yes," he said. "They did."

• • • •

OSCAR FUENTES ARRIVED with two DEA agents and the expression of a man realizing every assurance he had received that morning had been wrong.

He climbed from an unmarked sedan and stared at the bullet-scarred church, the burned vehicles, the bodies, and the sheriff's deputies moving through the wreckage.

"Madre de Dios."

Buck met him near the gate.

"You Fuentes?"

"Special Agent in Charge Oscar Fuentes."

"Sheriff Buck Dawber."

Oscar surveyed the scene again.

"My agent said they were taking fire."

"They were."

"From whom?"

"Depends which part of the shooting you're asking about."

Oscar looked at him.

Buck removed a small notebook from his shirt pocket.

"Warden Kinder brought corrupt corrections officers into Dawber County to recover money connected to the old smuggling operation. The Sheltons and Brodys joined them, then turned on each other. Kinder's people killed Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress at Reform Prison. They attempted to murder attorney Tiana Ross on Alligator Alley. Today, they came here looking for the money."

"You got all that in the last hour?"

"One of Kinder's officers confessed."

"Where is he?"

Buck pointed toward the rear of a deputy's cruiser.

Guard Daly sat in the back seat with his hands cuffed behind him. His bearded face was swollen, and dried blood covered his mouth.

"Attorney Ross recorded the confession," Buck said. "Daly gave us the names, the method, and Kinder's orders."

"Where's Kinder?"

"Dead."

"Of course he is."

"He took Pastor Bubs hostage and attempted to escape."

"Who shot him?"

"Willis Childress."

Oscar stared at him.

"Deon's brother?"

"That's right."

"Where is Willis now?"

"He pursued armed suspects into the swamp."

"And you let him?"

"I had wounded people here."

Oscar looked toward the canal.

"Where's Mack Donnelly?"

Buck glanced at his wristwatch.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

• • • •

THEY FOUND MACK HANDCUFFED to the dock behind the church.

He sat with his back against a piling, one wrist secured to an iron support. Mud covered his trousers. Blood ran from a cut above his left eyebrow.

His pistol was gone.

So was Johnny Malone.

Oscar stopped at the edge of the dock.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Mack lifted his head.

"Took you long enough."

Oscar walked closer. "What happened?"

"Malone happened."

"You handcuffed yourself to a dock?"

"He had help."

"Who?"

"Willis Childress."

Buck crouched and unlocked the handcuff with the key Johnny had left beneath Mack's boot.

Mack rubbed his wrist.

"He took the money?" Oscar asked.

"Malone had already pulled it from the swamp."

"How much?"

"Three million. Maybe more."

Buck showed no reaction.

Oscar extended a hand and pulled Mack to his feet.

"Where did they go?"

"Into the swamp."

"You didn't call it in?"

"Malone took my radio."

"What about your phone?"

"Lost it in the fight."

Oscar looked at the handcuffs, then at Mack's injuries.

"You were chasing a suspect alone?"

"I was chasing five million dollars in drug money."

"With no backup?"

"I didn't have time."

"You always have time to call for backup."

"Save the lecture."

Oscar stepped close enough that only Mack could hear him.

"I sent you here because you told me Johnny Malone was alive. I let you reopen a twelve-year-old investigation because I believed you might finally get this obsession out of your system. Now I have dead corrections officers, dead civilians, a wounded agent, a murdered attorney, and Johnny Malone disappearing into the Everglades with millions of dollars."

"That about covers it."

"And you're making jokes?"

"It's been a long day."

Reyes's voice came from behind them.

"It's about to get longer."

She stood at the top of the dock with her wounded arm in a sling. A paramedic followed her, protesting every step.

Mack looked genuinely relieved.

"You all right?"

"I got shot."

"I noticed."

"Then you ran away."

"I went after Malone."

"You left your wounded partner in the middle of a firefight."

"I saw Tiana pull you inside."

"You didn't know whether I was alive."

Mack said nothing.

Reyes descended the dock.

"What happened out here?"

"I arrested Malone."

"For what?"

"Drug proceeds. Obstruction. Conspiracy. Pick one."

"Did you read him his rights?"

"I didn't get that far."

"Did he resist?"

"Willis hit me from behind."

Reyes studied the bruise above his eye.

"And Malone took your gun?"

Mack's hand moved instinctively toward his empty holster.

"Willis did."

"Where are the handcuff keys?"

Buck held them up.

"Found them under his boot."

Reyes looked from Buck to Mack.

Something did not fit.

She had seen Mack's face when he spotted Johnny leaving the church. He had not looked like an agent pursuing a suspect.

He had looked like a starving man watching food being carried from the room.

"Where's Malone's lighter?" she asked.

Mack's jaw tightened.

"What?"

"The lighter Director Roland found at the house. You had it when we left Miami."

"Lost it."

"You lost evidence?"

"Malone took it."

Reyes held his gaze.

"You seem to have lost quite a few things today."

• • • •

THEY GATHERED INSIDE Gethsemane Baptist Church.

Oscar stood near the altar with Buck, Reyes, Tiana, and the surviving federal agents. Pastor Bubs sat beside Millie in the front pew.

Billy Dawber remained near his uncle.

He had said little since Johnny, Bones, and Alex disappeared into the swamp.

Buck watched him from the corner of his eye.

In the shape of Billy's face, he could still see Timmy before Vietnam—handsome, fearless, and convinced the Dawber name meant something better than what Bo had turned it into.

Billy noticed him staring.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You think they're coming back?"

"Who?"

"Alex and Bones."

Buck considered the question.

"Not tonight."

"What about Johnny?"

"Johnny Malone always comes back when it's least convenient."

Oscar placed Daly's recorded confession on the altar beside several evidence bags.

"This gives us Kinder," Oscar said. "It gives us the prison murders, the attempted hit on Ross, and the assault on this church."

"Waylon Wiggins confirms Kinder's orders," Reyes said. "He says Kinder promised the corrections officers a cut of Malone's money."

"Does Wiggins connect Bo Dawber to any of it?" Oscar asked.

Buck looked at her.

"No," Reyes answered. "According to Wiggins, Kinder worked independently."

Buck said, "Bo's still in federal custody."

"For two more weeks," Oscar replied.

"He had nothing to gain by helping Kinder."

"Five million dollars?"

"If Bo knew where that money was, he wouldn't have waited twelve years to collect it."

Oscar turned to Mack.

"What do you have on Malone?"

Mack stood near the back wall, smoking despite the NO SMOKING sign above his head.

"I saw him with the money."

"Did anybody else?"

"His son."

"Not helpful."

"Alex Gregory."

"Also gone."

"Willis."

"Gone."

Oscar turned toward Tiana.

"What did you see?"

Tiana folded her arms.

"I saw armed corrections officers attack a church. I saw Agent Reyes shot while protecting me. I saw Warden Kinder abduct Pastor Bubs. I did not see Johnny Malone carrying drug money."

"You were with Malone."

"I'm an attorney."

"His attorney?"

"As of today."

Mack laughed.

Tiana looked at him.

"Something amusing, Agent Donnelly?"

"You picked one hell of a client."

"I understand he has one hell of a federal agreement."

Oscar's expression changed.

"What agreement?"

"A cooperation agreement executed with the FBI in 1991. My firm has requested a certified copy."

Mack stepped away from the wall.

"That agreement doesn't cover today."

"What happened today?" Tiana asked. "Was Mr. Malone arrested?"

Mack glared at her.

"Was any money seized from him?"

"No."

"Did any federal agent other than you see him possessing illegal proceeds?"

Reyes looked down.

Mack said nothing.

"Did Mr. Malone fire upon law enforcement?"

"No."

"Did he participate in the attack on this church?"

"No."

"Then what exactly are you charging him with?"

"He escaped federal custody."

Tiana looked at the others.

"Was the arrest witnessed?"

Silence filled the church.

Buck finally spoke.

"I saw Agent Donnelly escort Malone toward the rear of the property."

Mack turned toward him.

Buck continued.

"I assumed they were seeking cover from the gunfire."

"You saw the cuffs," Mack said.

"No. I saw two men walking."

Mack understood then.

Johnny had bought the sheriff.

He wondered how much.

Tiana faced Oscar.

"If your agency wants to question my client, contact my office. If you issue a warrant unsupported by evidence, we will challenge it. If Agent Donnelly makes public accusations concerning events covered by Mr. Malone's federal cooperation agreement, we will respond accordingly."

"What does that mean?" Oscar asked.

"It means Johnny Malone helped the federal government destroy the largest smuggling operation in South Florida. Your agency rewarded that cooperation by allowing one of its agents to pursue a personal vendetta against him for twelve years."

Mack's face reddened.

"You have no idea what Malone is."

"No," Tiana replied. "But I'm beginning to understand what you are."

Oscar stepped between them.

"That's enough."

He looked at Reyes.

"Can you support an arrest?"

Reyes thought of Mack leaving her bleeding in the churchyard.

She thought of the strange desperation in his eyes.

She thought of the missing gun, the missing telephone, the missing lighter, and a legendary agent found handcuffed to a dock after pursuing millions of dollars without backup.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

Mack stared at her.

Oscar nodded.

"Then there is no warrant."

"Mack," Reyes said quietly, "if Malone stole evidence from you, we'll include it in the report."

"He did."

"And if something else happened on that dock, this is your last chance to tell us."

Mack glanced at Oscar, Buck, and Tiana.

Johnny's warning returned to him.

Atticus Shelton.

The two men Mack had killed to protect his cover.

The Russians.

His daughter.

A Swiss insurance file that might or might not exist.

If Mack told the truth about the dock, he would lose his badge. He might lose his freedom. If the Russians learned he had failed, he could lose something far worse.

"Malone escaped," Mack said. "Willis Childress helped him. They took the money."

Reyes waited.

"That's your statement?"

"That's what happened."

She nodded slowly.

"Then that's what I'll write."

Mack could hear the doubt beneath every word.

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BY SUNRISE, THE OFFICIAL story had begun to take shape.

Warden Vernon Kinder had operated a criminal conspiracy from inside Reform Prison.

He and several corrections officers murdered Kenny Gregory to discover the location of money hidden after the 1991 Dawber County smuggling investigation.

When attorney Deon Childress discovered the murder, Kinder had him killed as well.

Kinder then ordered an attempt on Tiana Ross's life.

After learning Johnny Malone had returned to Dawber County, Kinder assembled a group of corrupt officers and local criminals and attacked Gethsemane Baptist Church.

The conspiracy ended in a gun battle.

Kinder died attempting to escape.

The remaining officers were arrested.

The missing money was believed lost or removed by unknown parties.

Johnny Malone was considered a witness.

Not a suspect.

Not yet.

Buck signed the preliminary report.

Oscar read it twice.

Reyes refused pain medication until her statement was complete.

Tiana called her law firm in Miami and told them they had acquired a client whose assets might be substantial enough to alter the future of the firm.

Pastor Bubs sat with Millie as morning light entered through the damaged church windows.

Billy remained beside his uncle's patrol car.

He did not know about the money hidden in the trunk.

He only knew that Bones and Alex had left him behind.

"You could've gone with them," Buck said.

Billy looked toward the swamp.

"Johnny didn't ask me."

"Would you have gone?"

"I don't know."

Buck placed a hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"Your father spent his whole life being pulled between men who claimed to know what was best for him."

"Uncle Bo?"

"Among others."

"What was best for him?"

Buck looked toward the rising sun.

"I wish I knew."

A deputy approached.

"Sheriff, federal prison called. They want to know whether somebody should notify Bocephus Dawber about what happened."

Buck looked at the church, the bodies, and the dark water beyond the dock.

"No," he said. "Bo probably knows already."

• • • •

AT REFORM PRISON, BOCEPHUS Dawber sat alone in the interrogation room.

His orange jumpsuit was freshly pressed.

A cup of coffee steamed before him.

The door opened, and Guard Waylon Wiggins entered under the supervision of a federal marshal. His wrists were cuffed. His corrections uniform was stained with mud and blood.

Bo did not rise.

Waylon stopped across the table.

"Kinder's dead," he said.

"I heard."

"Daly talked."

"Daly was always weak."

"They know about Kenny and the lawyer."

"Deon Childress."

Waylon lowered his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"Use his name."

"Deon Childress."

Bo picked up his coffee.

"What about the money?"

"Gone."

"Willis?"

"Gone."

"Johnny Malone?"

Waylon hesitated.

"Gone."

For the first time, Bo smiled.

The federal marshal stepped forward.

"That's enough."

Bo ignored him.

"Sheriff Buck?"

"He controlled the scene."

"Of course he did."

Waylon leaned closer.

"Johnny's back, Bo."

Bo took a slow drink.

For twelve years, prison walls had separated him from Dawber County. During that time, the town had decayed, the families had turned on one another, and frightened men had fought over the remains of the empire he built.

Now Kinder was dead.

Kenny was dead.

Sanchez was long buried.

Atticus was gone.

But Johnny Malone was alive.

Bo set down the cup.

“When do I leave?”

The marshal looked at the paperwork in his hand.

“Fourteen days.”

Bo leaned back in his chair.

Outside the narrow window, the morning sun rose over the prison fences.

“Two weeks,” he said.

He smiled again.

“Tell Dawber County I’m coming home.”

END OF NOVELLA TWO



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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