

The King Comes Home

Sawgrass Wars, Volume 3

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THE KING COMES HOME

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Written by Kurt Weichert.

"A king doesn't come home to find his crown. He comes home to learn who had the nerve to wear it."

—Bocephus Dawber

CHAPTER ONE

THE KING COMES HOME

They began gathering before sunrise.

Bocephus Dawber heard them from inside his cell.

At first, the sound was no more than a low murmur beyond the walls of Reform Prison. Then came the truck horns, followed by the blaring of country music from loudspeakers somewhere outside the main gate.

By six o'clock, the crowd had started chanting his name.

Bo sat on the edge of his bunk in a white undershirt and orange prison trousers. Everything he owned had been arranged neatly beside him: a Bible, three letters from Rose, a photograph of Rufus holding a largemouth bass, and the silver watch Buck had given him before the trial.

The watch had stopped working nine years ago.

Bo still wound it every morning.

A guard appeared outside his cell.

"Showtime."

Bo rose.

The guard unlocked the door and stepped aside.

"Never seen anything like this," he said. "Must be two hundred people out there."

"More will be waiting at the county line."

"You running for governor?"

Bo picked up the Bible.

"I already had a better job."

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SHERIFF BUCK DAWBER watched the prison gates from behind the windshield of his patrol car.

The crowd filled both sides of the access road. Old men wore faded DAWBER COUNTY FISHING COMPANY shirts. Women held homemade signs welcoming Bo home. Children too young to remember the smuggling years sat on their fathers' shoulders.

A banner had been stretched between two pickup trucks.
WELCOME HOME, BO.

Someone had painted a second message beneath it.
DAWBER COUNTY REMEMBERS.

Buck wondered what, exactly, they remembered.

The jobs, probably.

The shrimp boats.

The packing houses.

The envelopes of cash that appeared when a roof collapsed or a child needed surgery.

People remembered free Thanksgiving turkeys more easily than they remembered cocaine hidden beneath the decks of fishing boats.

Rose Dawber sat beneath a white canopy near the front of the crowd. She wore a dark blue dress, pearls, and enough makeup to conceal most of what twelve years had done to her. Her silver-topped cane rested against her chair.

Rufus stood beside her in a wrinkled dress shirt and a Florida Marlins cap. Rose had ordered him to wear a tie. He had obeyed, although the knot hung several inches below his open collar.

Billy waited behind them.

He wore a clean white shirt and dark trousers Rose had selected. His hair had been combed flat, but the morning humidity had already begun curling it above his ears.

Rose looked back at him.

"Stand straight."

"I am standing straight."

"You're slouching."

"I'm not."

"You look like you're waiting outside the principal's office."

"That's about how I feel."

Rose tightened her grip around the handle of her cane.

"Today is important."

"To you."

"To this entire family."

Billy looked across the crowd. "Half these people cursed Uncle Bo when he went to prison."

"They were confused."

"They called him a drug dealer."

"They were ungrateful."

"Some of them testified against him."

"And now they're here."

Rose smiled.

"That's power."

Rufus waved toward the patrol car.

"Uncle Buck!"

Buck climbed out.

Rufus hurried over and embraced him. Buck hugged him back.

"You taking me fishing?" Rufus asked.

"Soon."

"You said that last month."

"I've been busy."

"Fish don't care if you're busy."

Buck smiled. "That's true."

Rose extended a hand from beneath the canopy. Buck took it, but she pulled him closer instead of releasing him.

"You brought the right car?"

"The department cleaned it yesterday."

"I meant the Cadillac."

"I'm the sheriff, Rose. I'm taking him home in an official vehicle."

"He shouldn't leave prison in a police car. People might get the wrong idea."

"He's been in prison for twelve years. I think they understand the idea."

Rose withdrew her hand.

"Some things haven't changed."

"Most things haven't."

She glanced toward the crowd.

"Bo will fix that."

Buck looked at Billy.

"You all right?"

"Fine."

"Alex call?"

"No."

"Bones?"

"No."

"Johnny?"

Billy shook his head.

Buck had not expected Johnny Malone to call Timmy's son. Johnny had escaped into the swamp with Bones and Alex two weeks earlier, taking the last of the money with him.

Billy had been left behind.

Buck understood what abandonment could do to a Dawber.

Their father had abandoned all three brothers in different ways. Bo responded by becoming harder than him. Buck responded by following Bo. Timmy responded by going to war.

Billy stared at the prison gate.

"He's going to want something from me," he said.

Rose heard him.

"He wants to give you a future."

"I didn't ask for one."

"You don't know enough to ask."

Buck placed a hand on Billy's shoulder.

"Whatever Bo wants, you can make your own decision."

Rose gave him a sharp look.

"He is eighteen years old."

"Almost."

"He is a Dawber."

"He's Timmy's son."

"That is exactly why Bo wants him close."

Buck studied her.

Rose looked back toward the gate before he could ask what she meant.

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AT SEVEN MINUTES AFTER eight, the prison gates opened.

The chanting stopped.

Bo emerged carrying a small cardboard box beneath one arm.

He wore a charcoal suit that had been tailored before his imprisonment. It hung loosely from his shoulders now, but he walked as if it still fit perfectly.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Then Rufus ran to him.

"Daddy!"

The crowd erupted.

Bo set down the box and caught his son in both arms. Rufus nearly knocked him backward, but Bo steadied himself and held on.

Rose watched from beneath the canopy.

Her mouth trembled.

"Look at you," Bo said.

"I got bigger."

"You certainly did."

"Mama says I'm too big."

"Your mama has always had opinions."

Rufus laughed.

Bo removed the Marlins cap, examined it, and placed it back on his son's head.

"You been taking care of her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you've been doing my job."

Rufus hugged him again.

Bo looked over his son's shoulder and found Rose.

She rose slowly, leaning on her cane.

The cheering continued as Bo approached her.

For twelve years, Rose had imagined this moment. In some versions, she slapped him. In others, she collapsed into his arms. On the worst nights, she imagined turning her back and making him follow her home.

Now that he stood before her, she could do none of those things.

Bo touched her cheek.

"You waited."

Rose stared at him.

"What else was I supposed to do?"

He kissed her forehead.

The crowd applauded.

Buck watched Rose close her eyes.

For one brief moment, she was no longer bitter. She was the beautiful girl who had once sat in the front row at every Dawber High baseball game, cheering for Timmy as he rounded third base.

Then she opened her eyes and saw Bo.

The hardness returned.

"You look thin," she said.

"Prison food."

"I'll fix that."

"I knew you would."

Bo turned toward Billy.

Everything around them seemed to quiet.

Billy had Timmy's height now. He had Timmy's dark hair, his shoulders, and the same level stare Timmy possessed before Vietnam taught him to look through people instead of at them.

Bo stepped closer.

"You look more like your father every day."

Rose inhaled sharply.

Buck looked away.

Billy did not.

"That's what people tell me."

Bo placed both hands on his shoulders.

"Timmy would be proud."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

Billy wanted to believe him.

That was what frightened him.

Bo pulled him into an embrace. Billy's arms remained at his sides for a second before he returned it.

Cameras flashed.

The crowd started chanting again.

Bo raised Billy's right hand into the air.

The reaction grew louder.

Rose stood straighter.

The Dawbers had their future.

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A PROCESSION OF TRUCKS followed Buck's patrol car south from the prison.

Bo sat in the passenger seat. Rufus and Rose rode behind them in a borrowed Cadillac, with Billy at the wheel.

American flags snapped from truck beds. Horns sounded at every intersection. People emerged from gas stations, feed stores, and roadside diners to watch the convoy pass.

Bo lowered his window and let the warm air enter.

"Smells the same," he said.

Buck kept his eyes on the road. "Some of it does."

"What happened to the old packing house?"

"Closed."

"The cannery?"

"Closed."

"Dawber Marine?"

"Bank took it."

Bo watched an abandoned storefront pass.

"And people wonder why they missed me."

"Some people missed your money."

"There a difference?"

"To you?"

"To anybody."

They drove several miles in silence.

Bo rested one hand on the cardboard box in his lap.

"How did Kinder die?"

Buck did not look at him.

"You read the report."

"I want to hear it from you."

"He kidnapped Bubs. Willis Childress pursued him. Kinder turned with a gun."

"And Willis shot him three times."

"That's right."

"Once behind the ear?"

Buck tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

"Bullets do strange things."

"So do sheriffs."

Buck glanced at him.

Bo smiled faintly.

"Relax. Kinder was a greedy fool."

"He was your partner."

"He believed he was."

"He murdered Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress."

"I heard."

"Did you know what he was planning?"

"No."

Buck waited.

Bo turned toward the passing sawgrass.

"You don't believe me."

"I didn't say that."

"You never had to say much."

"Somebody had to listen while you talked."

Bo laughed.

For the first time since the prison gates opened, the sound was genuine.

"I missed you, Buck."

"Did you?"

"Every day."

"What about Timmy?"

The laughter disappeared.

Rose's Cadillac remained close behind them.

Bo watched it in the side mirror.

"What about him?"

"You think about him in there?"

"I thought about everybody."

"That wasn't my question."

Bo turned back toward the window.

"Twelve years is a long time to spend with ghosts."

Buck waited for more.

None came.

"What happened to Johnny?" Bo asked.

"Disappeared."

"With the money?"

"Some of it."

"How much?"

"Nobody knows."

"You know."

"I know what went into the official report."

Bo looked at him again.

"And what didn't?"

Buck's expression remained still.

"Johnny wasn't charged."

"Johnny never gets charged."

"He had an old FBI cooperation agreement."

"He had a deal because he betrayed everyone who trusted him."

"He believed you killed Sanchez."

"Johnny believed a lot of things."

"Mack Donnelly believes Johnny has evidence against him."

Bo's eyes narrowed.

"What kind of evidence?"

"Mack didn't say."

"Where is Mack?"

"Miami."

"Still chasing Johnny?"

"Probably."

Bo leaned back.

"Good."

"Why is that good?"

"Because a man staring at Johnny won't notice what's happening behind him."

THE CONVOY CROSSED the Dawber County line shortly before noon.

The high school marching band waited beside the weather-beaten county sign. They played the school fight song as Buck slowed the patrol car.

Bo looked toward the football field beyond the school.

"They still play baseball here?"

"When they can field a team."

"Timmy's record?"

"Still stands."

Bo nodded.

From the Cadillac behind them, Rose looked toward the baseball diamond.

She could see Timmy there as clearly as she had forty years earlier.
Seventeen years old.

A white uniform stained with red dirt.

The crowd on its feet as he sent a ball sailing over the left-field fence.

Scully had waited beside the dugout that afternoon, laughing and shouting that Timmy belonged in the major leagues.

Less than a year later, Scully persuaded him to enlist.

Rose had hated him ever since.

Billy slowed the Cadillac.

"You all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"You look like you're going to cry."

"I don't cry."

Rufus leaned forward from the back seat.

"Mama cries."

Rose turned.

"Sit back."

"I heard you cry when Daddy went to jail."

"Put on your seat belt."

"It's already on."

"Then stop talking."

Billy looked at her.

"Aunt Rose."

"What?"

"Eileen didn't do anything to you."

Rose stiffened.

"I didn't mention Eileen."

"You didn't have to."

"That girl is Scully's blood."

"She was raised by Pastor Bubs and Miss Millie."

"Blood is blood."

"Then what does that make me?"

Rose stared at him.

Billy continued.

"My father came back from Vietnam sick. Uncle Bo took over everything. Uncle Buck followed him. If blood is all that matters, which one of them am I supposed to become?"

"You become the man your father should have been."

The answer came without hesitation.

Billy turned back toward the road.

Rose reached forward and touched the back of his neck.

Her voice softened.

"You didn't know him before."

"I know."

"He was beautiful."

Billy looked at her in the mirror.

"So were you."

Rose withdrew her hand.

Outside, the marching band played louder.

THE HOMECOMING CELEBRATION filled the Dawber High baseball field.

Barbecue smoke drifted over the bleachers. Volunteers served sweet tea beneath striped tents. The town council occupied folding chairs along the first-base line. Former deputies, fishermen, farmers, and men who had once transported cocaine through the Everglades gathered behind the dugout.

Merle Shelton stood with the remnants of his family near left field.

Dale Brody remained on the opposite side of the diamond.

They watched each other more closely than they watched Bo.

Forbee Battenberg had not come, but a handwritten note and an expensive bottle of Scotch waited on the table beside the podium.

Pastor Bubs was absent.

So were Millie and Eileen.

Bo noticed every empty seat.

He climbed onto the temporary stage erected over home plate.

The cheering lasted nearly two minutes.

Bo stood before the microphone and waited.

He had learned patience in prison.

When the crowd finally quieted, he placed both hands on the podium.

"I left Dawber County twelve years ago in handcuffs."

A few people shouted angrily toward the federal government.

Bo raised one hand.

"Now, I made mistakes."

The admission silenced them.

"I trusted the wrong people. I allowed men from outside this county to bring their poison through our home. I told myself we were creating jobs. I told myself we were protecting families. I told myself we were only taking advantage of a business that would happen with or without us."

Bo looked across the familiar faces.

"But every man can find a way to make greed sound like service."

Buck stood beside the stage.

The speech was better than he expected.

That worried him.

"I paid for those mistakes," Bo continued. "My family paid. This county paid. While I was gone, our businesses closed. Our young people left. Our churches struggled. Families that once worked together began fighting over scraps."

Merle glanced toward Dale.

Dale stared back.

"I cannot change what happened," Bo said. "But I can promise you this: I did not come home to rebuild a smuggling operation."

A murmur moved through the crowd.

"I came home to rebuild Dawber County."

The applause began.

"We will reopen businesses. We will put boats back on the water. We will bring jobs to our children. We will support our churches, our schools, and our sheriff's department. Everything we build will be legitimate, and everything we earn will remain here."

The applause became thunderous.

Rose watched from the front row.

Rufus clapped above his head.

Billy remained still.

Bo extended a hand toward him.

"And we will prepare the next generation to lead."

Everyone turned.

Rose pushed Billy forward.

He resisted for only a moment before walking onto the stage.

Bo placed an arm around his shoulders.

"This is my nephew, Billy Dawber. Timmy's boy."

The crowd cheered again.

Billy looked across the baseball field where his father's name remained painted beneath the scoreboard.

TIMOTHY DAWBER STATE CHAMPION — 1967

Bo leaned close enough that only Billy could hear.

"You start Monday."

Billy kept smiling for the crowd.

"Doing what?"

"Learning."

"I've got other plans."

"Not anymore."

Bo raised Billy's hand.

The cameras flashed.

Billy saw Rose crying in the front row.

This time, she did not hide it.

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THE CELEBRATION CONTINUED after sunset.

By then, Bo had shaken every hand, accepted every apology, and remembered the names of children born while he was in prison.

He found Buck alone behind the visitors' dugout.

The sheriff watched Merle Shelton and Dale Brody leave through separate gates.

"They still trying to kill each other?" Bo asked.

"Not today."

"That changes tomorrow."

"Probably."

"I want them together."

"They won't like it."

"They don't have to."

Buck looked toward the parking lot. Billy stood beside Eileen Scully's Oldsmobile. She had arrived late to collect clothing and donations for Bubs and Millie.

Rose watched them from across the field.

Even at that distance, her disapproval was unmistakable.

Bo followed Buck's gaze.

"Scully's girl?"

"Eileen."

"She grew up pretty."

"She grew up good."

"Bubs and Millie did that."

"They raised her after her father died."

Bo looked at him.

"You still believe Scully's dead?"

"Don't you?"

Bo smiled without answering.

Billy opened Eileen's car door. Before climbing inside, she looked across the field and saw Bo watching her.

Her smile disappeared.

"What do you want with Billy?" Buck asked.

"What Rose wants."

"An heir?"

"A future."

"He's not yours."

"No," Bo said. "He's Timmy's."

"That ought to mean something."

"It means everything."

Buck stepped closer.

"If you hurt that boy—"

"You'll do what?"

The brothers faced each other in the darkness behind the dugout.

For years, Buck had accepted Bo's decisions as though they were forces of nature. Timmy's death had changed that. Prison had widened the distance between them.

The five hundred thousand dollars hidden inside Buck's home had changed it again.

Bo placed a hand on his shoulder.

"We're all that remains, little brother."

"Billy remains."

"That's why I need him."

"For what?"

"To make sure the Dawber name outlives us."

Bo released him and looked across the emptying field.

"Who belongs to Johnny?"

Buck considered lying.

"More people than you think."

Bo watched Billy climb into Eileen's car.

Beyond them, Merle Shelton's truck disappeared down one road while Dale Brody's headed down another. Somewhere in the darkness, Willis Childress possessed two million dollars of Johnny's money. Alex Gregory and Bones Malone were missing. Pastor Bubs had refused to attend the celebration. Johnny himself had vanished into the swamp.

Bo smiled.

"Then we'll remind them who they belonged to first."

CHAPTER TWO

THE LORD'S WORK

Billy's first day working for Bo began at six o'clock Monday morning.

No one had asked whether he wanted the job.

Rose placed a plate of eggs and bacon in front of him before sunrise, then stood over his shoulder until he finished eating. She had already laid out his clothes—a pale blue shirt, pressed khaki trousers, and a pair of Timmy's old boots that had been polished until the leather shone.

Billy stared down at the boots.

"Those were my father's?"

"He wore them before Vietnam."

"They fit me."

"Of course they do."

Rose poured coffee into his cup.

"Your uncle believes a man should arrive before he is expected."

"Uncle Bo doesn't have an office."

"He will."

"He doesn't have a business."

"He will."

"He doesn't have any money."

Rose set down the coffeepot.

"He has a name."

"So do I."

"Yes," she said. "Which is why you are going with him."

Rufus entered the kitchen wearing pajama pants and his Marlins cap.

"Daddy says we're going fishing."

Rose did not look at him.

"Your daddy has work to do."

"He promised."

"Bo promises everybody everything."

The words escaped before she could stop them.

Billy looked at her.

Rose turned toward the sink.

"He'll take you when he has time."

Rufus opened the refrigerator and stared inside.

"You want eggs?" Billy asked.

"No. I want pudding."

"You can't have pudding for breakfast," Rose said.

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Rufus looked at Billy.

Billy slid the unopened cup of chocolate pudding from the refrigerator and handed it to him.

Rose glared.

"What?" Billy asked. "He's a grown man."

"Then he should eat eggs."

Rufus smiled and carried the pudding to the table.

A horn sounded outside.

Rose straightened Billy's collar.

"Remember who you are."

Billy stepped away from her.

"I'm trying to figure that out."

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BO WAITED INSIDE AN old black Lincoln that had once belonged to a county commissioner.

The paint had faded, the passenger window did not close completely, and the engine shook hard enough to rattle the dashboard.

Billy climbed behind the wheel.

"This is what we're driving?"

"For now."

"I thought you owned a Cadillac."

"Your aunt sold it."

"What happened to all the other cars?"

"Lawyers."

"The house on River Road?"

"Lawyers."

"The marina?"

"Federal government."

Billy started the engine.

"What do you still own?"

Bo placed a leather folder on his lap.

"People's confidence."

"You can't drive that."

"No," Bo said. "But it can buy a better car."

Billy pulled onto the county road.

"Where are we going?"

"Gethsemane."

Billy looked at him.

"Pastor Bubs didn't come to your homecoming."

"I noticed."

"Miss Millie just lost Deon."

"I know."

"They don't want to see you."

"Most people don't know what they want until somebody explains it to them."

Billy tightened his hands around the steering wheel.

"Is that what I'm doing with you?"

"Learning."

"You keep saying that."

"And yet you keep asking questions."

Bo looked through the cracked passenger window.

Dawber County passed in shades of gray and brown. Empty storefronts lined the road into town. Weeds grew through the parking lot of the old packing house. The remains of a seafood restaurant leaned toward the canal, its roof partially collapsed.

"We used to employ four hundred people between here and the water," Bo said.

"Smuggling drugs."

"Fishing. Packing. Trucking. Cold storage. The drugs came later."

"And ruined everything."

"The arrests ruined everything."

Billy glanced at him.

"You don't think the drugs had anything to do with it?"

"Drugs didn't close those businesses. Federal agents did."

"Because you were using them to move cocaine."

Bo smiled faintly.

"You sound like Bubs."

"He raised me too."

"No. Buck and Rose raised you."

"Pastor Bubs helped."

"Bubs helps everyone. That's how a church works."

"He helped Eileen."

Bo turned toward him.

"So that's where this is going."

"Where?"

"The Scully girl."

"This isn't going anywhere."

"You left my homecoming with her."

"She was taking supplies back to the church."

"And you helped."

"Yes."

"Did you spend the night?"

Billy's head snapped toward him.

"No."

"Keep your eyes on the road."

Billy faced forward again.

"You don't get to ask me that."

"If you work for me, I get to ask anything that might become a problem."

"Eileen isn't a problem."

"Every beautiful woman eventually becomes somebody's problem."

Billy's face reddened.

Bo saw it and smiled.

"Relax. I'm not Rose."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I don't blame children for their fathers' sins."

Billy looked at him again.

"Do you blame fathers for their own?"

Bo's smile disappeared.

"Drive."

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THE DAMAGE AT GETHSEMANE looked worse in daylight.

Bullets had chewed through the white siding. Three windows were covered with plywood. A section of the churchyard remained scorched where one of Kinder's vehicles had burned. Yellow crime-scene tape still clung to a cypress tree beside the canal.

Volunteers moved around the property carrying lumber, paint, and tools.

Eileen stood on a ladder above one of the damaged windows. She wore denim shorts, an oversized Gethsemane Baptist Church T-shirt, and a red bandanna tied around her hair.

Billy slowed the Lincoln.

Bo noticed.

"Careful."

"What?"

"You nearly drove into the ditch."

"I saw it."

"You were looking at her."

"I was looking at the church."

"The church isn't wearing shorts."

Billy pulled into the gravel parking lot and stopped.

Bo climbed out carrying the leather folder.

Eileen looked down from the ladder.

Her expression changed when she recognized him.

Bo Dawber crossed the churchyard as if he owned it.

Billy followed several steps behind.

Pastor Bubs emerged from the open front doors holding a hammer.

A fresh bandage covered his forearm.

He saw Bo and stopped.

The volunteers became quiet one by one.

"Morning, Bubs," Bo said.

"Bo."

"I came to see what you need."

"What makes you think we need anything from you?"

Bo looked at the shattered windows and bullet holes.

"I have eyes."

"This church has survived worse."

"I remember."

Bubs placed the hammer on a stack of lumber.

"What do you want?"

"To talk."

"We're talking."

"In private."

"Anything you have to say can be said in front of my congregation."

Bo glanced toward the volunteers.

"Some things belong between men who have known each other a long time."

Bubs stared at him.

Then he turned toward the church.

"My office."

Bo followed.

Before entering, he looked back at Billy.

"Make yourself useful."

Billy watched the door close behind them.

Eileen climbed down from the ladder.

"Your first day?" she asked.

"How can you tell?"

"You look miserable."

"He wants me to learn."

"Learn what?"

"He hasn't told me."

"That sounds like Bo."

"You barely know him."

"Everybody here knows Bo Dawber."

Billy took the hammer Bubs had left behind.

"What needs doing?"

Eileen pointed toward the damaged window.

"You know how to frame?"

"No."

"I thought Dawber men knew how to do everything."

"That's what we tell people."

She smiled.

Billy looked at the plywood, then at her.

"I'm sorry about Deon."

The smile disappeared.

"Thank you."

"You were close?"

"He was my brother."

"I thought Willis was his brother."

"He was."

Eileen picked up a piece of lumber.

"Pastor Bubs and Miss Millie took me in after my father died. Deon was already older, but he never treated me like some child they brought home because they felt sorry for her. He helped me with school. Taught me how to drive. Scared away every boy who came near the house."

Billy tried to smile.

"Sounds useful."

"It was not."

"Maybe he knew something."

"About boys?"

"About Dawber boys."

Eileen glanced toward the church.

"I don't think Deon would approve of this."

"Of what?"

"You standing this close to me."

Billy stepped closer.

"What about you?"

"I haven't decided."

He handed her the hammer.

"You left the homecoming with me."

"You were driving my car."

"You let me."

"Alex needed help."

"Alex always needs something."

Eileen's expression softened at the mention of him.

"He didn't use to."

"You still haven't heard from him?"

"No."

"Me either."

"Do you think he's safe?"

"If he's with Johnny, probably not."

"Bones will protect him."

"Bones would throw himself in front of a bullet for Alex."

"And you?"

Billy looked toward the swamp.

"I don't know if Alex would let me."

Eileen studied him.

The three boys had grown up like brothers until Johnny Malone returned and reminded them who their fathers were. Bones had followed his father. Alex had followed the promise of an empire.

Billy had remained behind with a sheriff, a bitter aunt, and an uncle who expected obedience.

"You had a choice," Eileen said.

"Did I?"

"We always have a choice."

"That sounds like Pastor Bubs."

"He raised me."

Billy nodded toward the church.

"Aunt Rose blames your father for what happened to mine."

"I know."

"She says Scully talked him into going to Vietnam."

"My father flew missions that saved Timmy's life."

"He also brought him home."

"I was a baby when my mother died. I hardly remember my father. Everything I know comes from stories told by people who either loved him or hated him."

"What do you believe?"

Eileen considered the question.

"I believe dead men are easy to blame because they can't defend themselves."

Billy looked toward Bubs's office.

“My family does that a lot.”

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MILLIE SAT ALONE IN the first pew.

She had not attended Bo's homecoming. She had not left the church since learning Deon was dead except to identify his body.

A framed photograph rested beside her.

Deon stood outside his Miami law office wearing an expensive suit and the broad smile he reserved for Millie. The photograph had been taken the day he made partner.

Bo saw her through the open sanctuary doors.

He stopped.

Bubs waited beside his office.

“You wanted privacy.”

Bo looked at Millie again.

“Does she know I'm here?”

“She knows.”

“She doesn't want to see me.”

“No.”

Bo entered the office.

The room had been searched after the attack. Desk drawers remained open. Books and papers covered the floor. A bullet had passed through one wall and lodged in the wooden cross behind Bubs's chair.

Bo touched the hole with one finger.

“Kinder did all this?”

“Men working for him.”

“I told him not to come here.”

Bubs closed the door.

“You told him the money might be here.”

Bo lowered his hand.

“I gave him an opinion.”

"You sent a wolf to my door and told him not to bite."

"I didn't send him."

"You gave him a reason to come."

"Kinder would've come with or without me."

"That what you told yourself when you worked with the Colombians?"

Bo looked at him.

"I came to help rebuild your church."

"Why?"

"Because this county needs it."

"This church was here while you were in prison."

"And look what happened."

Bubs stepped closer.

"What happened was a man you empowered murdered the boy Millie and I raised."

"I didn't know Kinder would touch Deon."

"You knew what kind of man he was."

"I knew he wanted the money."

"You encouraged him."

"I warned him to leave you alone."

"But Deon wasn't important enough to mention?"

Bo did not answer.

Bubs's voice lowered.

"You sat in that prison with Kinder. You drank with him. You used his privileges. You let him believe the money belonged to both of you."

"Kinder believed whatever benefited Kinder."

"And now he's dead, so you get to place everything on him."

"He murdered Kenny and Deon."

"And you put him on the road that led here."

Bo opened the leather folder.

Inside were contractor estimates, handwritten pledges, and plans for the formation of the Dawber County Restoration Fund.

"I can have the windows replaced by Friday," he said. "A new roof within a month. Forbee Battenberg will contribute lumber and equipment. I've spoken to three business owners willing to cover the rest."

"In exchange for what?"

"Nothing."

Bubs laughed once.

"I have known you since you were a boy. You have never done anything for nothing."

"I want the church strong again."

"You want to stand beside it."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You want people to see you rebuilding what your greed helped destroy."

Bo closed the folder.

"I stood before this county yesterday and promised legitimate business."

"I heard."

"I meant it."

"Then conduct legitimate business."

"I need the community behind me."

"There it is."

"I'm asking you to support jobs, not crimes."

"You're asking me to lend you God's credibility."

"I'm asking you to help save this county."

Bubs looked toward the photograph in the sanctuary.

"I was a prisoner for six years," he said. "Longer than you were held without freedom, even if not longer in years. Men offered food if I would cooperate. Medicine if I would give them names. Dry clothing if I would repeat their lies."

"This isn't Vietnam."

"No. In Vietnam, my enemies were honest about what they wanted."

Bo's jaw tightened.

"I'm not your enemy."

"You are when you mistake forgiveness for permission."

The office door opened.

Millie stood there.

Bo rose.

She looked smaller than he remembered, but grief had sharpened her eyes.

"I'm sorry about Deon," Bo said.

Millie stared at him.

"He loved you."

Bo had expected anger.

The words struck harder.

"He believed there was something good in every person," she continued. "Even you."

"Millie—"

"He said prison might change you."

"It did."

"Then tell me the truth. Did you know Kinder was looking for Johnny's money?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell him it might be here?"

Bo looked at Bubs.

Then back at her.

"Yes."

Millie nodded slowly.

Bubs moved toward her.

She raised one hand and stopped him.

"My boy went into that prison because Kenny Gregory needed help. Kinder killed him because of money you helped him find."

"I never wanted Deon hurt."

"That is how men like you excuse the bodies. You never want anyone hurt. You only create the reason."

Bo lowered his eyes.

For the first time since leaving prison, he appeared uncertain.

Millie picked up the leather folder.

She looked through the estimates and pledges.

Then she handed it back.

"We will not take money stolen from anyone."

"It's legitimate."

"We will verify every dollar."

"Fine."

"No Dawber name on the building."

"I didn't ask for one."

"No speeches from this pulpit."

Bo looked at Bubs.

Bubs remained silent.

Millie continued.

"No campaign signs. No photographs of you handing Pastor Bubs a check. No telling people this church owes you."

"And if I agree?"

"We will accept help from anyone willing to give it honestly."

Bo extended his hand.

Millie did not take it.

"You don't get forgiveness because you bought lumber," she said.

"I know."

"Do you?"

Bo closed the folder.

"I'll have the contractor here tomorrow."

Millie stepped aside.

The meeting was over.

BILLY AND EILEEN HAD finished framing the first window when Bo emerged.

Sweat darkened Billy's shirt. Sawdust covered his hair.

Bo examined the crooked wooden frame.

"Who taught you to measure?"

"Eileen."

Bo looked at her.

"Then who taught you?"

She handed Billy the tape measure.

"Pastor Bubs."

"That explains it."

Bubs followed Bo into the churchyard.

"The frame is fine."

"It leans."

"The church leans."

"Then we'll straighten both."

Bo walked toward the Lincoln.

Billy remained beside Eileen.

Bo stopped.

"You coming?"

"I want to finish."

"You work for me."

"I'm helping the church."

"That is working for me."

Bubs stepped between them.

"No. It's working for the church."

Bo looked from Bubs to Billy.

"Ten minutes."

He continued toward the car.

Eileen waited until he was out of earshot.

"You don't have to go."

"Yes, I do."

"You said that Saturday."

"He's my uncle."

"That doesn't make him your owner."

Billy drove a nail into the frame harder than necessary.

"He knows things about my father."

"So does Sheriff Buck. So does Rose. So does Pastor Bubs."

"They only tell me the parts they want me to know."

"And Bo won't?"

Billy looked toward the Lincoln.

"At least with him, I know there's a price."

Eileen touched his arm.

"You don't have to become Timmy."

"Aunt Rose wants me to."

"You don't have to become Uncle Buck."

"Buck wants me to stay away from Bo."

"You don't have to become Bo either."

Billy looked into her eyes.

"Then who am I supposed to be?"

Eileen smiled gently.

"Billy would be a good place to start."

For several seconds, neither moved.

Then Rufus's voice came from the Lincoln.

"Billy! Daddy says ten minutes is done!"

Billy laughed despite himself.

He set down the hammer.

"I'll see you tonight?"

"Maybe."

"That means yes?"

"It means maybe."

He started toward the car.

Bubs waited beside the church steps.

As Billy passed, Bubs spoke quietly.

"Your uncle doesn't offer anyone a future."

Billy stopped.

Bubs looked toward Bo.

"He offers them a debt."

Billy glanced back at Eileen.

Then he climbed behind the wheel.

Bo sat in the passenger seat, reading the contractor estimates. Rufus had somehow joined him and now occupied the back seat with a bag of donated cookies.

"What did Bubs say?" Bo asked.

"That I should watch myself around you."

"Good advice."

Billy started the engine.

"You heard him?"

"I didn't need to."

Bo looked toward the church.

Millie stood in the doorway with one hand resting against Bubs's shoulder. Eileen returned to the ladder, but her eyes remained on Billy.

"Pretty girl," Bo said.

Billy's hands tightened around the wheel.

"Don't."

Bo smiled.

"There's hope for you yet."

"Where are we going now?"

"Battenberg Plantation."

"Why?"

Bo closed the folder.

"To see an old friend before his family destroys everything he built."

CHAPTER THREE

THE OLD ALLIANCE

Battenberg Plantation began at a pair of iron gates taller than the church at Gethsemane.

A tarnished crest decorated their center: two lions supporting a shield divided by a field of sugarcane and a merchant ship under sail.

Beneath it, a stone marker bore a single date.

1824.

Billy stopped the Lincoln beside the intercom.

The gates remained closed.

He pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

He pressed it again.

A man's voice crackled through the speaker.

"State your business."

Bo leaned across Billy.

"Tell Forbee that Bocephus Dawber has come to call."

The speaker went silent.

Several seconds later, the gates opened.

Billy drove through.

Sugarcane stretched toward the horizon on both sides of the private road. The stalks rose higher than the car, their green blades bending beneath the morning wind.

In the distance, smoke drifted from the plantation mill. Heavy trucks moved between warehouses. A crop-dusting plane passed low above the fields before banking toward the south.

Billy watched a group of migrant laborers climbing from the back of a flatbed truck.

Their housing stood beyond the cane—small concrete buildings with rusted metal roofs and laundry hanging between them.

"I thought machines did most of this now," Billy said.

"They do," Bo replied.

"Then what are all those people doing?"

"The work machines can't."

The Lincoln crossed a narrow bridge.

Below it, the canal water was the color of strong coffee. Several dead fish floated near the bank.

Billy looked at them.

"What killed those?"

"Could be anything."

"Looks like runoff."

Bo glanced toward the canal.

"You planning to become an environmentalist?"

"I'm asking a question."

"Questions are useful when you ask the right person."

"Who's the right person?"

"The one who benefits from the answer."

The plantation house appeared beyond a line of royal palms.

It was enormous.

Three stories of faded coral stucco rose above a circular drive. White columns supported broad verandas on the first and second floors. Green shutters framed tall windows. A copper roof, oxidized nearly turquoise, reflected the morning sun.

Stone fountains stood in the gardens, although none contained water.

Billy slowed near the front steps.

"This doesn't look like Dawber County."

"That was the idea."

A thin Black man in a white jacket opened Bo's door before the Lincoln had fully stopped.

"Mr. Dawber."

"Good morning, Charles."

The man appeared surprised that Bo remembered him.

"Mr. Battenberg is waiting in the library."

Bo stepped out.

Billy followed.

Charles looked toward the Lincoln.

"Would you like me to have someone move the automobile?"

Billy glanced at Bo.

Bo handed him the keys.

"Park it wherever you hide things from the guests."

Charles accepted the keys without smiling.

"This way."



THE ENTRANCE HALL HAD been built to make visitors feel small.

Portraits covered walls two stories high. Pale men in military uniforms, judges' robes, and formal evening clothes looked down upon Billy as he followed Bo across a black-and-white marble floor.

A crystal chandelier hung beneath a painted ceiling filled with angels, ships, and storm clouds.

Billy stopped beside the portrait of two young women standing near the plantation fountain.

One wore a pale yellow dress and looked directly into the camera with a confident smile.

He recognized her.

"Alex's mother?"

Bo stopped.

"Mary Lee."

Beside her stood an older girl with darker hair and a guarded expression.

"Who's that?"

"Her sister, Abigail."

"Vinnie's mother?"

"Yes."

Billy looked at Mary Lee again.

Alex had her eyes.

"She looks happy."

"She hadn't married Kenny yet."

Billy turned toward Bo.

"You think marrying Kenny made her unhappy?"

"Forbee did."

"What do you think?"

"I think Forbee made both daughters choose between their husbands and their inheritance."

"Who did they choose?"

"Their husbands."

Bo looked toward the upper balcony.

"For a while."

Charles waited beside a pair of mahogany doors.

"Mr. Battenberg does not like to be kept waiting."

"He waited twelve years," Bo said. "Another minute won't hurt him."

The doors opened.

• • • •

FORBEE BATTENBERG SAT behind a desk large enough to land a small airplane on.

Age had reduced him but had not softened him.

His white hair was combed straight back from a narrow face. A burgundy robe covered his shirt and trousers, although it was nearly noon. One hand rested on a silver-headed cane. The other held a glass containing two fingers of Scotch.

Shelves rose from floor to ceiling. Leather-bound books shared space with photographs of governors, senators, foreign businessmen,

and men whose names had appeared in organized-crime investigations from New York to Havana.

A wooden model of the plantation's first sugar ship occupied a table near the window.

Forbee looked at Bo.

Neither man spoke.

Then Forbee rose.

"You look terrible."

Bo crossed the room and embraced him.

"You look dead."

"I've felt dead since you went to prison."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

Forbee gripped Bo's shoulders.

"Let me see you."

"I'm not a racehorse."

"No. Racehorses have better teeth."

Bo laughed.

Forbee did too.

Billy had never heard either man laugh that way. For a moment, they were not an imprisoned crime boss and a decaying aristocrat. They were boys reunited after a long separation.

Forbee noticed Billy.

His laughter faded.

"Timothy's son."

"Billy," Bo said.

"I know his name."

Forbee studied him from across the room.

"Come closer."

Billy approached the desk.

Forbee examined his face.

"The resemblance is extraordinary."

"That's what everyone says."

"Your father once hit a baseball through the window of my Rolls-Royce."

Billy looked at Bo.

"He never told me that."

"He was seventeen. Your grandfather wanted him arrested. I convinced him otherwise."

"Why?"

"Timothy hit three home runs for Dawber High the following afternoon. Talent should not be wasted over broken glass."

Forbee lowered himself into his chair.

"Sit down."

There were two chairs before the desk.

Bo took one.

Billy took the other.

Forbee looked at him.

"That chair is for Mr. Dawber's attorney."

Bo settled back.

"He's with me."

"He's a child."

"He's a Dawber."

Forbee's eyes moved between them.

Then he reached beneath the desk and removed another glass.

"What are you drinking, boy?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing is not a drink."

"He's not eighteen," Bo said.

Forbee poured the Scotch anyway and placed it before Billy.

"Then he should begin learning moderation."

Billy left the glass untouched.

Forbee noticed.

“Good,” he said. “Your father would have emptied it before I finished pouring.”

The room became quiet.

Bo looked toward the plantation fields through the window.

“What happened here?”

Forbee’s face hardened.

“Vincent Del Vecchio happened.”

“Your son-in-law.”

“My punishment for allowing Abigail to attend college in New Jersey.”

“You could have disowned her.”

“I did.”

“Didn’t stop her from marrying him.”

“No. It merely ensured I was not invited.”

Forbee opened a drawer and removed a folder thick with financial statements.

“He began with transportation contracts. Then fertilizer. Equipment leasing. Distribution. Every time the plantation encountered a difficulty, one of Vincent’s companies appeared with a solution.”

“For a price,” Bo said.

“Always.”

“What does he own?”

“Not the land.”

“Forbee.”

“Not yet.”

Bo held out his hand.

Forbee passed him the folder.

Billy watched Bo scan the documents.

The man who had left prison with a Bible and a dead watch read balance sheets as quickly as most people read newspapers.

“Three loans secured against next year’s harvest,” Bo said.

“Yes.”

“A distribution agreement giving Del Vecchio Imports first right of refusal on all processed sugar.”

“Temporarily.”

“Seven years isn’t temporary.”

“It was the only way to keep the mill operating.”

Bo turned another page.

“Who is Ray?”

“My chief financial officer.”

“Vincent’s man?”

“Mine.”

“He authorized this equipment lease.”

“At my direction.”

“The rate is criminal.”

Forbee took a drink.

“I know.”

“Then why sign it?”

“Because our primary harvester failed three weeks before cutting season. The bank refused to extend additional credit. Vincent had a replacement here in four days.”

Bo closed the folder.

“So he owns the transportation, the equipment, and the buyer.”

“He does not own Battenberg.”

“He owns everything Battenberg needs to survive.”

Forbee’s hand tightened around his cane.

“That is why I asked you here.”

“You didn’t ask me.”

“I sent six letters to prison.”

“They returned four.”

“You received two.”

“I came.”

“Twelve years late.”

Bo leaned forward.

“What do you want?”

“I want Vincent out of my plantation.”

“Abigail won’t like that.”

“Abigail has not spoken to me in nine years.”

“She’ll speak to you when you start hurting her husband.”

“I am counting on it.”

Bo smiled.

There was the Forbee he remembered.

“What do I get?”

Billy looked at him.

Forbee seemed offended.

“Our families have stood together for nearly a century.”

“Our grandfathers stood together because yours had capital and mine had guns.”

Forbee glanced at Billy.

“Certain family discussions should remain private.”

“He needs to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Why a Battenberg calls a Dawber when the lawyers stop working.”

Forbee looked toward the portrait of his grandfather above the fireplace.

“The Battenbergs brought sugar expertise from the Caribbean,” he said. “We brought engineers, financing, and access to international markets.”

“And the Dawbers cleared the opposition,” Bo added.

“That is an inelegant description.”

“Accurate, though.”

Forbee’s grandfather had wanted thousands of acres west of the original plantation. Families already lived there. Indigenous families who did not recognize the property maps drafted in Tallahassee and had no intention of leaving because a judge signed a document.

The Battenbergs brought the deeds.

The Dawbers brought rifles.

Within five years, the plantation had tripled in size.

The Dawbers received canal access, warehouse space, and a social connection that transformed them from Kentucky migrants into men invited through the front doors of Florida's most important homes.

During Prohibition, sugar boats carried more than sugar.

Forbee looked at Billy.

"Our families built this county."

"On somebody else's land," Billy said.

Forbee stared at him.

Bo's mouth twitched with amusement.

"You brought an idealist."

"I brought Timmy's son."

"Timothy understood loyalty."

"Timmy understood a lot before Vietnam."

Forbee turned toward the window.

"And then Scully destroyed him."

Billy sat straighter.

"My father made his own decision."

Forbee looked back.

"You think eighteen-year-old boys make decisions? They follow the loudest man in the room."

Bo's voice cooled.

"Careful."

Forbee raised one hand.

"I meant no disrespect."

"Yes, you did."

Bo placed the financial folder on the desk.

"But Billy will learn that disrespect only matters when it costs something."

Forbee looked at him for a long moment.

Then he smiled.

"You have been home less than forty-eight hours."

"Long enough."

"What do you want?"

"Reopen the old packing house."

"That property belongs to the federal government."

"It goes to auction in six weeks."

"You have no money."

"You do."

Forbee laughed bitterly.

"Did you not read the folder?"

"I did. You have land, equipment, and a name the banks still pretend to respect. What you don't have is cash flow independent of Vincent."

"And the packing house provides that?"

"Not by itself. We reopen Dawber Marine. Cold storage. Trucking. Repair. We put men back to work and give this county a reason to depend on us again."

"Legitimate businesses?"

"Every one."

"No smuggling."

"No drugs."

Forbee searched his face.

"Do you expect me to believe prison reformed you?"

"No. I expect you to believe prison taught me what gets seized."

Billy looked from one man to the other.

Forbee laughed.

"God, I have missed you."

"You fund the acquisitions," Bo continued. "I rebuild operations. Battenberg trucks stop paying Del Vecchio companies to carry your sugar. Battenberg equipment gets repaired here instead of leased from

Vincent. We control the county road, the canals, the storage, and the labor."

"And when Vincent objects?"

"He can object from New Jersey."

"He has people in Florida."

"So do I."

"You had people. Half are dead, imprisoned, or working for Johnny Malone."

"Then I'll bring them home."

Forbee poured more Scotch.

"What percentage?"

"Half."

"For providing no capital?"

"For providing the county."

"Thirty."

"Forty-nine."

"Forty."

"Forty-five, and Battenberg contributes to my restoration fund."

"How much?"

"Two hundred thousand the first year."

"For that church?"

"For the county. Gethsemane gets the first lumber shipment."

Forbee shook his head.

"You become charitable in prison?"

"I became aware of presentation."

"Forbee Battenberg does not buy public affection."

"No. You purchase politicians. This is cheaper."

Billy looked down to hide a smile.

Forbee saw him.

"You find something amusing?"

"No, sir."

"You have your father's terrible manners."

"He has better judgment," Bo said.

"We shall see."

Forbee lifted his glass.

"Forty-three percent."

Bo extended his hand.

"Done."

Forbee stared at it.

"You always did negotiate like a thief."

"You always did surrender like a gentleman."

They shook hands.



FORBEE INSISTED ON showing Bo the plantation before he left.

They stood on the second-floor veranda overlooking the sugar fields. Wind moved through the cane in long waves.

From that height, the labor housing could not be seen.

Neither could the dead fish in the canal.

Forbee rested both hands on the silver head of his cane.

"When my grandfather stood here, everything to the western horizon belonged to Battenberg."

"Most of it still does."

"Land is meaningless when another man controls what leaves it."

Bo looked toward the mill.

"Then stop letting him."

"You make that sound simple."

"It is."

"Vincent is married to my daughter."

"You've spent twelve years asking permission from a son-in-law you despise."

Bo faced him.

"Stop asking."

Forbee looked across the fields.

"I have two daughters who believe I ruined their lives."

"You probably did."

"Mary Lee is dead."

"I know."

"She died poor."

"She died with Kenny."

"That is not the comfort you think it is."

"And Abigail?"

"Lives in New Jersey surrounded by Del Vecchios."

"She made her choice."

Forbee's expression tightened.

"Her son comes here sometimes."

"Vinnie."

"Vincent Junior. He prefers Vinnie."

"Smart boy?"

"Cunning. Vulgar. Undisciplined."

"So, yes."

"He has none of the Battenberg refinement."

"He has Battenberg blood."

"Diluted."

Bo looked toward Billy, who stood inside the library studying Mary Lee's portrait.

"What about Alex?"

Forbee snorted.

"What about him?"

"Your other grandson."

"He is a Gregory."

"He has Mary Lee's mind."

"He has Kenny's criminal instincts."

"Forbee, you're describing every successful man in this house."

Forbee ignored him.

"I received formal notification this morning. Kenny Gregory is dead."

"Alex knows."

"He knows what people have told him. He has not received the death certificate or probate documents."

"You planning to give him something?"

"Mary Lee's personal effects."

"What about her share?"

"She forfeited any claim when she married Gregory."

"That isn't what she believed."

"She was mistaken."

Bo studied him.

"Why summon Alex?"

"I did not say I would."

"You will."

"Why?"

"Because he's seventeen, angry, and tied to Johnny Malone. Better to bring him through your front door than wait for him to come through a window."

Forbee looked toward Mary Lee's portrait.

"I will consider it."

"No. You'll do it."

"This is still my house."

"Then act like it."

Bo returned inside.

Forbee remained on the veranda.

For the first time in years, he did not feel trapped inside his own plantation.

Bo was home.

The Dawbers would reopen the county. Vincent's transportation contracts could be broken. His equipment could be returned. His threats could be answered.

Forbee entered the library and crossed to his desk.

Billy and Bo waited near the doors.

Forbee picked up the telephone and dialed a number from memory.

A secretary answered.

"Del Vecchio Imports."

"This is Forbee Battenberg. Put Vincent on."

The secretary hesitated.

"Mr. Del Vecchio is in a meeting."

"Interrupt him."

Several seconds passed.

Vincent Del Vecchio came onto the line.

"Forbee."

"I reviewed the plantation agreement."

"And?"

"I will not be signing it."

Silence.

Vincent's voice hardened.

"You owe my companies eight million dollars."

"I owe considerably less once the equipment leases are properly audited."

"You agreed to those leases."

"Under duress."

"Be careful using words you don't understand."

Forbee looked at Bo.

"I understand them perfectly."

"What changed?"

Forbee smiled.

"Bocephus Dawber came home."

The line went quiet.

When Vincent spoke again, the anger had disappeared.

"That convict can't protect you."

“No,” Forbee replied. “But my partner can.”

He hung up.

The old man stood straighter.

He pressed another button on the telephone.

Charles answered from downstairs.

“Yes, Mr. Battenberg?”

“Find Alexander Gregory.”

Bo smiled.

Forbee looked toward Mary Lee’s portrait.

“Tell my grandson that his father is officially dead-and that his grandfather requires his presence.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GRANDSONS

Alex Gregory returned to Battenberg Plantation because dead men deserved witnesses.

Alex Gregory returned to Battenberg Plantation because dead men deserved witnesses.

FORBEE BATTENBERG REQUESTS YOUR PRESENCE.

OFFICIAL NOTIFICATION CONCERNING KENNETH GREGORY.

Alex read it twice before crushing it inside his fist.

He had known his father was dead for more than two weeks. He had seen what Warden Kinder's men did to the people who discovered the truth. He had carried that knowledge through the swamp while Johnny Malone planned their escape and Bones stood guard over the money.

But knowing was not the same as seeing Kenny Gregory's name on a death certificate.

Officially dead meant no possibility of a clerical mistake.

No secret transfer.

No last-minute telephone call.

No father walking through the door complaining about prison food and asking whether Widow's Walk still served cold beer.

Officially dead meant the world had finished with Kenny Gregory.

Alex had not.

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HE ARRIVED AT BATTENBERG Plantation shortly before noon.

Kenny's old Ford Bronco rattled beneath him as he passed through the iron gates. The air conditioner had stopped working years ago, and the driver's window remained open despite the heat.

Alex wore a white button-down shirt his mother had bought him before she died. It was too small across the shoulders now, but it was the only thing he owned that would have met Mary Lee Battenberg's definition of presentable.

A black Cadillac Escalade waited in the circular drive.

The vehicle had New Jersey plates.

Two men in dark suits stood near the front steps. Neither looked like a plantation employee.

Alex parked beside them.

One of the men approached.

"You Alexander Gregory?"

"Who wants to know?"

The man looked him over.

"Mr. Battenberg is expecting you."

"Then I guess that answers your question."

Alex stepped around him.

The second man blocked his path.

"Hold up."

"For what?"

"We need to check you."

Alex looked toward the plantation doors.

"Does my grandfather search all his relatives now, or only the poor ones?"

"They're with me," a voice called from the veranda.

Alex looked up.

Vincent Del Vecchio Jr. stood between two white columns wearing sunglasses, a pink dress shirt, and dark trousers. He held a hamburger in one hand and a bottle of imported beer in the other.

At twenty-four, Vinnie had inherited his father's dark hair and his mother's Battenberg features. He was handsome enough to be trusted and amused enough to make that a mistake.

He raised the hamburger.

"Let him through. He's family."

The two men stepped aside.

Alex climbed the stairs.

Vinnie embraced him with one arm.

"Look at you."

"Look at you."

"I look fantastic."

"You look like a nightclub threw up."

Vinnie laughed.

"There he is."

Alex nodded toward the men below.

"Your father's?"

"My babysitters."

"You need two?"

"One keeps people from killing me. The other keeps me from embarrassing the family."

"Which is which?"

"They're still figuring it out."

Vinnie offered him the hamburger.

"You hungry?"

"No."

"Good. Forbee had the kitchen make it for me and then complained when I ate it."

"Why are you here?"

"My father sent me."

"Forbee summoned me."

"I know. He's been announcing it like the British Empire recalled a rebellious colony."

Alex looked through the open doors.

"You see him yet?"

"Oh, yes."

"How bad?"

"He has discovered courage."

"From where?"

"Bo Dawber."

Alex's expression changed.

"Bo came here?"

"Yesterday."

"What did he want?"

"Based on the contracts scattered across the library, I'd say everything."

Vinnie took another bite.

"My father is not happy."

"Good."

"You still hate him?"

"Your father?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know him well enough to hate him."

"That never stopped Forbee."

Alex smiled despite himself.

Vinnie's expression softened.

"I heard about Uncle Kenny."

Alex looked away.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"My mother wanted to call."

"Why didn't she?"

"Because my father told her not to."

Alex nodded.

"That sounds more familiar."

"Abigail cries when she talks about Mary Lee."

"My mother stopped talking about this place before she died."

"They both chose badly."

Alex looked at him.

"You mean our fathers?"

"I mean they chose men Forbee could punish them for loving."

A bell rang inside the house.

Vinnie checked his watch.

"That means His Majesty is ready."

"You coming?"

"I've been ordered to attend."

"Why?"

Vinnie finished the beer.

"Apparently Forbee wants to disappoint both grandsons at the same time."

• • • •

FORBEE WAITED BEHIND his desk.

The morning robe had been replaced by a white linen suit. A dark blue tie rested against his shirt. His silver-headed cane leaned within reach.

Charles stood near the windows holding a tray of iced tea.

Forbee examined Alex from the moment he entered.

"You are late."

"Your message didn't include a time."

"When I summon someone, I expect them immediately."

"I was out of town."

"Where?"

Alex sat without being invited.

"Out."

"Were you with Johnny Malone?"

"No."

It was not entirely a lie.

Johnny had separated from Alex and Bones the previous evening. He had provided no destination, only instructions to remain near Dawber County and wait for Tiana to contact them.

Forbee looked toward Vinnie.

"Remove the food."

"I'm still eating."

"You are in my library."

"I noticed."

"Food is consumed in the dining room."

Vinnie looked at his hamburger.

"This is why your staff hates you."

"My staff understands standards."

"Charles brings me extra fries."

Charles remained expressionless.

Forbee pointed toward a wastebasket.

Vinnie dropped the remaining hamburger into it and sat beside Alex.

Forbee opened a folder.

"You both know why Alexander is here."

"His father," Vinnie said.

"I asked whether you knew. I did not request your participation."

"Then why am I in the room?"

"Because your father sent you to intimidate me."

Vinnie leaned back.

"My father sent revised terms."

"Which I rejected."

"You haven't read them."

"I rejected the previous agreement. Changing the date does not improve it."

"He removed the equipment surcharge."

"After your companies collected it for four years."

Vinnie glanced at Alex.

"Family dinner is usually worse."

Forbee ignored him.

He removed a certified document from the folder and slid it across the desk.

Alex did not touch it.

The seal of the Florida Department of Corrections occupied the upper corner.

Kenny Gregory's name appeared beneath it.

DATE OF DEATH.

CAUSE OF DEATH: SUICIDE BY HANGING.

Alex read the words.

His face remained still.

"That's a lie."

Forbee folded his hands.

"It is the official finding."

"He didn't hang himself."

"The warden responsible is dead."

"Doesn't change what they wrote."

"No."

"Then why show it to me?"

"Because you are his next of kin."

Alex finally picked up the document.

Kenny had survived twelve years in prison. Two weeks before his scheduled release, corrupt guards murdered him in a mortuary and recorded the death as suicide.

An administrative signature rested beneath the lie.

Alex folded the certificate once.

Then again.

"Careful," Forbee said. "That is a certified copy."

"It's a certified lie."

"You may need it for probate."

"What probate?"

"Your father possessed certain property."

"Widow's Walk belongs to me."

"It belonged to Kenny."

"And now it belongs to me."

"Ownership is rarely that simple."

"It is when there's one heir."

Forbee opened a second folder.

"The marina carries debt."

"I know."

"Substantial debt."

"I know how much."

"The property taxes are delinquent."

"Three months."

"The fuel supplier has filed a lien."

"Which disappears when I pay him."

"With what money?"

Alex looked at him.

Forbee continued.

"I am prepared to purchase Widow's Walk. You would receive enough to complete your education and establish yourself somewhere other than Dawber County."

"No."

"You have not heard the offer."

"I don't need to."

"Your father's marina is failing."

"My father kept it alive from prison."

"Your father used it to conceal smuggling income."

"So did you."

Forbee's eyes hardened.

"Be careful."

"Your sugar went out on the same boats."

Vinnie looked from one to the other.

"This is going well."

Forbee gripped his cane.

"Your mother disgraced this family when she married Kenny Gregory."

Alex leaned forward.

"My mother died poor while you lived here surrounded by paintings of people who stole half this county."

"She made her choice."

"She chose somebody who loved her."

"She chose beneath herself."

Vinnie stopped smiling.

Forbee looked toward him.

"Abigail made the same mistake."

"My father saved this plantation," Vinnie said.

"Your father attached himself to it like a parasite."

"He lent you money when no bank would."

"At criminal rates."

"You signed the papers."

"Your father exploited my daughter."

Vinnie stood.

"My mother hasn't asked you for anything in nine years."

"She will when Vincent loses access to my land."

"You think Bo Dawber changes that?"

Forbee rose with the help of his cane.

"Bo Dawber understands the difference between partnership and extortion."

Alex laughed.

Both men looked at him.

"What?" Forbee demanded.

"You found the only man in Florida who could make Vincent Del Vecchio look honest."

Forbee pointed his cane toward the door.

"You may leave."

"I came for my father."

Forbee opened a lower drawer.

He removed a small cardboard box and placed it on the desk.

The Department of Corrections had written KENNETH GREGORY across the top in black marker.

Alex stared at it.

Forbee pushed it toward him.

"These were forwarded to my attorney because your location was unknown."

Alex opened the box.

Inside lay Kenny's reading glasses, a cheap plastic comb, three letters, a wristwatch, and his wedding ring.

Alex picked up the ring.

His mother's name had been engraved inside.

MARY LEE.

The edges blurred.

He blinked until they became clear again.

Vinnie sat beside him.

Forbee remained standing behind the desk.

"There is one additional item," he said.

He removed an envelope.

Kenny had written Alex's name across the front.

The handwriting leaned sharply to the right.

Alex reached for it.

Forbee did not release the envelope.

"Your father expected you to become better than him."

"You read it?"

"No."

"Then how would you know?"

"Because every disappointing father eventually makes that request of his son."

Alex pulled the envelope from his hand.

Forbee lowered himself into the chair.

"You will sell Widow's Walk."

"No."

"You cannot operate it alone."

"I won't be alone."

"Johnny Malone?"

Alex placed the letter inside the box.

"You're scared of him."

"I am not scared of an accountant."

"Then why did you ask?"

Forbee's face reddened.

Vinnie stood and placed one hand on Alex's shoulder.

"We're done."

"I did not dismiss you."

"No," Vinnie said. "You just told both of us our mothers ruined the family by having us."

"That is not what I said."

"It's what you meant."

Forbee lifted his cane and pointed it at Vinnie.

"You are here to deliver your father's agreement."

Vinnie removed a document from inside his shirt and dropped it on the desk.

"There. Delivered."

"Tell Vincent I will not sign."

"Tell him yourself."

"I did."

"Then why am I still here?"

Forbee's gaze moved between his grandsons.

Alex held Kenny's belongings against his chest.

Vinnie stood beside him.

Forbee had summoned them to demonstrate that Battenberg authority had returned.

Instead, the two young men appeared united against him.

"Neither of you understands what your fathers have done," Forbee said.

Alex moved toward the door.

"No. We understand what you did to our mothers."

He left the library.

Vinnie followed.

The doors closed behind them.

Forbee listened to their footsteps recede across the marble entrance hall.

Then he reached for the Scotch.

• • • •

ALEX CARRIED KENNY'S box to the old fountain.

The stone basin was empty. Brown leaves covered its bottom. One of the carved dolphins had lost its head.

He sat on the edge.

Vinnie dismissed his bodyguards with a wave and joined him.

For several minutes, neither spoke.

Alex opened the envelope.

Dear Alex,

If you are reading this, then either I am dead or the prison has finally become efficient enough to deliver mail, and I know which one is more likely.

Alex stopped.

He laughed once, but the sound broke in his throat.

Vinnie looked toward the fields.

Alex continued reading.

I won't tell you to stay away from trouble because trouble is the only Gregory inheritance worth anything. I will tell you that Johnny Malone is the smartest man I ever knew and the most dangerous friend I ever had. Learn from him. Don't become him.

Your mother believed you could be anything. I believed you could own everything. She was probably the better parent.

Whatever happens, Widow's Walk is yours. Don't sell it to Forbee. He will call that place worthless right up until the moment you sign it over.

I am sorry I left you alone.

Dad

Alex read the final sentence again.

Then he folded the letter carefully and returned it to the envelope.

Vinnie waited.

"What did he say?"

"Not to sell."

"Good advice."

"He said Johnny was dangerous."

"Also good advice."

"He said my mother thought I could become anything."

"What do you think?"

Alex looked toward the sugar mill.

"I think anything is too small."

Vinnie smiled.

"There he is."

Alex placed the death certificate inside the box.

"How much money does your father make from this plantation?"

"Depends whether you ask him or the government."

"How much?"

"Millions."

"Moving sugar?"

“Moving everything. Food, liquor, cigarettes. Anything that fits in a truck or a shipping container.”

“Drugs?”

Vinnie looked at him.

“Not through Battenberg.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“My father isn’t stupid.”

“Neither was mine.”

Alex stood and looked toward the endless fields.

“Johnny says the old business failed because too many people touched the product. Colombians, boats, pilots, Dawbers, cops, warehouses, distributors. Every hand created another person who could steal, talk, or get arrested.”

Vinnie leaned against the fountain.

“What business?”

“Medicine.”

“You want to sell medicine?”

“I want doctors to sell it.”

Vinnie laughed.

Alex did not.

“You’re serious.”

“There are pain clinics opening along the coast. Patients pay cash. Doctors write prescriptions. Pharmacies fill them. Everything looks legal because every bottle has somebody’s name printed on it.”

“That’s not new.”

“The scale is.”

Alex had listened while Johnny described the changing drug trade. Cocaine required airplanes, boats, armed crews, and relationships with men who murdered over percentages. Prescription pills arrived in cardboard boxes from licensed manufacturers.

No Coast Guard.

No radar.

No midnight landings.

No cartel demanding sixty percent.

"People are lining up outside clinics," Alex continued. "Workers with bad backs. Rich kids. Dealers. Anybody who can describe pain."

"What do you need from me?"

"Doctors."

"I don't know doctors."

"Your family knows gamblers."

Vinnie's smile slowly returned.

"My father knows everybody who owes money."

"A doctor with debt is a business partner."

"Where do we put the clinics?"

"Miami first. Then Broward. Somewhere near the interstate."

"Why not Dawber County?"

"Too small. Too many people know us."

"How do we move the pills?"

Alex nodded toward the cane trucks leaving the plantation.

"The same way everything else moves."

Vinnie followed his gaze.

"You want to use my father's distribution network."

"I want to use what he doesn't know he has."

"You are seventeen."

"Turning eighteen."

"That doesn't make this less insane."

"No," Alex said. "It makes it harder to prosecute me if we start now."

Vinnie laughed.

"You really are Aunt Mary Lee's kid."

"You barely knew her."

"My mother talks about her every Christmas after the second bottle of wine."

Alex looked toward the plantation house.

Forbee stood behind the library window, watching them.

“What would our grandfather do if he knew?”

Vinnie glanced back.

“He’d call us an embarrassment.”

“He already does.”

“He’d try to stop us.”

“He already will.”

Vinnie extended his hand.

“How much does a crooked doctor cost?”

Alex looked at it.

“Depends how crooked.”

He shook Vinnie’s hand.

“Good,” Alex said. “Find me one.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GHOST

The safe house stood on a private stretch of beach north of Miami. Three stories of white stucco and blue glass overlooked the Atlantic. A swimming pool occupied the rear terrace. Beyond it, a wooden walkway crossed the dunes to the water.

Bones stood barefoot in the kitchen, staring through windows taller than the house where his mother had raised him.

Italian marble covered the floor. Copper pots hung above a restaurant-sized stove. The refrigerator contained champagne, imported cheese, and enough steak to feed the Dawber High football team.

He opened one of the cabinets.

Crystal glasses.

Another contained bottles of Scotch older than he was.

Johnny sat at the dining table surrounded by bank records, passports, airline schedules, and a satellite telephone.

Bones closed the cabinet harder than necessary.

Johnny looked up.

"Something wrong?"

"Whose place is this?"

"A friend's."

"What friend?"

"One who values privacy."

"What's his name?"

"You wouldn't know him."

"Try me."

Johnny returned to the papers.

Bones walked toward the table.

"Alex went back to Dawber County in a truck held together with duct tape. Billy is probably sleeping in Aunt Rose's rotting house. Ma spent years clipping coupons—and you had friends with places like this?"

"It isn't mine."

"You had the key."

"I have keys to a lot of things I don't own."

Bones picked up one of the crystal glasses.

"How much does this cost?"

"Put it down."

"That much?"

"Bones."

He placed it on the table.

"You could've brought us here."

"No."

"You could've brought Ma."

"No."

"She thought we were broke."

"That kept her alive."

"She died believing you left us with nothing."

Johnny's face hardened.

"I left because people were watching every account connected to me. The DEA, the Colombians, Bo's people—any one of them would've followed the money to you."

"You could've called."

"And told her what? That I loved her from a safe house while she raised my son alone?"

"That would've been something."

Johnny looked down.

Bones immediately regretted the words.

He did not take them back.

A black sedan appeared beyond the front gate.

Johnny reached for the pistol beside the bank records.

Bones moved toward the window.

"You expecting somebody?"

"I've been expecting him for twelve years."

The sedan stopped.

A tall man climbed out carrying a weathered leather flight bag. His hair had gone silver, and the tropical sun had darkened his skin. He wore aviator sunglasses, faded khakis, and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows.

He looked toward the house.

Then toward the sky.

A surveillance camera followed him along the path.

Johnny lowered the pistol.

"Open the door."

"Who is he?"

"An old friend."

Bones remained still.

Johnny looked at him.

"Please."

Bones crossed the living room and unlocked the door.

The stranger stepped inside and removed his sunglasses.

He studied Bones.

"You got big."

Bones blocked the doorway.

"Do I know you?"

"No."

"You know me."

"I changed your diaper once."

"That doesn't answer the question."

The man smiled.

"You have your father's hospitality."

Johnny entered the living room.

"Tommy."

The stranger looked past Bones.

"Broken Arrow."

The two men stood several feet apart.

Then Johnny embraced him.

Neither spoke.

Bones looked between them.

There was something different in the way Johnny held this man. No calculation. No guarded smile. Whatever had bound them together existed before money, prison, and Dawber County.

Johnny finally stepped back.

"You took your time."

"I was in Bolivia."

"You were supposed to be in Colombia."

"I was. Then somebody needed a plane moved."

"Cartel?"

"Government."

"Which government?"

Tommy smiled.

"Exactly."

He noticed the pistol in Johnny's hand.

"You expecting trouble?"

"I'm awake."

"That bad?"

"Worse."

Bones stared at the man's face.

He had seen it before.

A photograph sat on the piano at Pastor Bubs's house: a younger version of this man holding a baby girl beside a small airplane.

Eileen's father.

Bones stepped closer.

"What did he call you?"

The man looked at Johnny.

Johnny said nothing.

Bones grabbed the front of the stranger's shirt.

"You're Scully."

Tommy did not resist.

"Yes."

"You're dead."

"Not consistently."

Bones shoved him against the wall.

Johnny caught his son's arm.

"Let him go."

"Eileen thinks he's dead."

"I know."

"Everybody thinks he's dead."

"That was the point."

Bones released Scully and turned on Johnny.

"You knew."

"Yes."

"All these years?"

"Yes."

"Pastor Bubs?"

"No."

"Miss Millie?"

"No."

"Eileen?"

"Especially Eileen," Scully said.

Bones faced him again.

"She was raised believing both her parents were dead."

"I know what she believes."

"She deserved the truth."

"She deserved to live."

Bones's fists closed.

Scully saw it.

“So that’s the temper.”

Johnny stepped between them.

“Sit down.”

“I’m not sitting.”

“Then stand quietly.”

Bones looked ready to strike him.

Scully removed his flight bag and placed it near the door.

“Let him ask.”

Johnny studied his son.

Then he nodded.

Bones looked at Scully.

“Why did you leave her?”

Scully walked toward the ocean windows.

“My wife died in an accident when Eileen was a baby. For years, it was just the two of us. I flew. I gambled. I made enough bad decisions to fill this house.”

“You abandoned her because you owed money?”

“No. I disappeared because men came to Dawber County to kill me. When they couldn’t find me, they tried to take her.”

Bones glanced at Johnny.

“Del Vecchios?”

Scully turned.

“You know the name.”

“Alex just went to see his cousin Vinnie.”

“Vincent Junior?”

“Yeah.”

Scully’s expression darkened.

“Then Johnny has more explaining to do than I thought.”

Johnny motioned toward the table.

“Start with the bar.”

Scully looked at the untouched bottle of Scotch.

"That story usually requires a drink."

Bones pulled out a chair.

"Start talking."

• • • •

DAWBER COUNTY — SPRING 1991

The Royal Palm Lounge stood where the county road met the Everglades.

It had no royal palms.

The lounge occupied a concrete building with a rusted roof, two broken windows, and an air conditioner that rattled without cooling anything. Fishermen drank beside smugglers. Deputies drank beside both.

Tommy Scully sat at a card table beneath a cloud of cigarette smoke.

A pile of cash occupied the center.

None of it belonged to him.

Across the table sat three men from the Del Vecchio crime family. They had come south to meet Kenny Gregory at Battenberg Plantation and review new shipping routes.

FRANKIE CARUSO, a made man with thick hands and a diamond pinkie ring, gathered the final pot.

"You're done."

Scully looked at his empty place on the table.

"I was getting warm."

"You're getting broke."

"Same feeling if you do it right."

The two men beside Frankie laughed.

Frankie did not.

"You owe me twenty-two thousand."

"I thought this was a friendly game."

"It was friendly when you had money."

Scully checked his pockets.

He produced a book of matches, an aircraft key, and sixty-three cents.

"Good news. I can get you as far as Belize."

Frankie stared at him.

"You said Kenny Gregory would cover your losses."

"Kenny says a lot of things when he's sober."

"You vouched for him," one of the men said.

Scully pointed toward the bar.

Timmy Dawber sat alone with a glass of bourbon.

"He did."

Every man at the table looked toward Timmy.

He wore an old Army jacket despite the heat. His hair had grown past his collar. A scar ran from the corner of his mouth toward his jaw.

He had been the most popular young man in Dawber County before Vietnam.

Now people lowered their voices when he entered a room.

Timmy raised his glass.

"Leave me out of it."

Scully smiled.

"See? That's practically a guarantee."

Frankie pushed back his chair.

"Pay me."

"Double or nothing."

"No."

"One hand."

"You have nothing to bet."

"I have a plane."

"The plane belongs to Malone."

"He lets me fly it."

"That isn't ownership."

"Depends who has the key."

Scully held it up.

Frankie snatched the key from his fingers.

"There. Debt reduced."

Scully's smile disappeared.

"Give it back."

"Pay me."

"That plane isn't part of the game."

"It is now."

Scully stood.

Frankie's two men rose with him.

Timmy watched from the bar.

Scully pointed at Frankie's suit.

"You know what your problem is?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"You came all the way from New Jersey dressed like a funeral director and expected people not to notice you're compensating for something."

The room went quiet.

One of Frankie's men laughed before catching himself.

Frankie struck Scully across the face.

The blow sent him into the card table. Cash and glasses scattered across the floor.

Scully touched the blood beneath his nose.

"I suppose double or nothing is off the table."

Frankie hit him again.

Timmy stood.

The bartender saw him and reached beneath the counter.

"Timmy, don't."

Frankie grabbed Scully by the hair.

"You think you're funny?"

"Usually."

Frankie drove a knee into his stomach.

Scully collapsed.

Timmy crossed the room.

“Let him go.”

Frankie looked toward him.

“Sit down.”

“He’s my friend.”

“He owes me money.”

“Kenny will pay.”

“Then Kenny can collect his body.”

Frankie drew back his foot to kick Scully.

Timmy struck him first.

The punch broke Frankie’s nose and sent him across the card table.

One of the other men reached beneath his jacket.

Timmy grabbed his wrist, twisted the pistol free, and fired twice into his chest.

The sound changed everything.

For one second, nobody moved.

Then the third man pulled a revolver.

Scully tackled him into the wall.

The bartender ducked behind the counter.

Customers ran for the exits.

Frankie crawled toward the fallen pistol.

Timmy stepped on his hand.

“Don’t.”

Frankie looked up.

“You know who I am?”

“No.”

“Vincent Del Vecchio will kill every Dawber in this county.”

Timmy pressed the pistol against his forehead.

Scully grabbed his arm.

“It’s done.”

“He threatened my family.”

"He's angry."

"He'll come back."

"So will the cops."

"Timmy."

Frankie spat blood onto Timmy's boot.

"You crazy swamp bastard."

Timmy pulled the trigger.

Scully flinched.

The last surviving Del Vecchio man broke free and ran through the rear door.

Scully started after him.

Timmy caught his shoulder.

"Let him go."

"He'll tell them."

"Good."

Scully looked at the bodies.

"This wasn't supposed to happen."

Timmy stared at Frankie's blood spreading across the floor.

"He shouldn't have hit you."

• • • •

KENNY GREGORY ARRIVED twenty minutes later.

He stopped inside the entrance and surveyed the bodies.

"Jesus Christ."

Scully pressed a bar towel against his nose.

"Before you get angry, the game got out of hand."

"You think?"

Timmy sat at the bar finishing his bourbon.

Kenny grabbed Scully.

"Those men came here under my protection."

"They weren't very protected."

"Vincent is my brother-in-law."

"I know."

"He sent them to inspect the new route."

"They inspected it."

Kenny looked toward Timmy.

"What happened?"

Timmy poured another drink.

"He hit Scully."

"So you killed three men?"

"They pulled guns."

"After you attacked them!"

"They shouldn't have hit Scully."

Kenny released him.

Outside, engines approached.

Bo Dawber entered with Atticus Shelton and two deputies.

Bo saw the bodies.

Then he looked at Timmy.

"What did you do?"

Timmy faced his older brother.

"What needed doing."

Bo crossed the room and slapped him.

Timmy did not move.

"You think you can start a war with the Del Vecchios because somebody punched your friend?"

"He threatened our family."

"You're the one threatening this family!"

Scully stepped between them.

"It was my fault."

Bo looked at him.

"Everything is your fault."

"Bo—"

"You brought him to the recruiter. You brought him into your war. Now you bring him here and let him murder three men whose boss controls half our distribution."

Timmy rose.

"He didn't let me do anything."

Bo faced his brother.

The two men stood inches apart.

Before Vietnam, Timmy had worshipped Bo.

That man was gone.

"You don't give me orders anymore," Timmy said.

Bo's eyes changed.

Atticus saw it.

So did Scully.

Bo looked toward Kenny.

"Call Vincent."

"What do I tell him?"

"The truth. His men drew weapons over a card debt."

"He won't accept that."

"Then remind him who grows his father-in-law's sugar and controls every road leading out of this county."

Bo turned toward Timmy.

"You're coming with me."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Atticus stepped forward.

Timmy looked at him.

Even Atticus Shelton hesitated.

Bo lowered his voice.

"You embarrassed me tonight."

"You've been embarrassing this family for years."

The words landed harder than the slap.

Bo smiled without warmth.

"Get in the car, little brother."

Scully touched Timmy's arm.

"Go home. Sleep it off."

Timmy looked at him.

For an instant, the madness cleared.

He was seventeen again, standing on the pitcher's mound at Dawber High, laughing because Scully had told him they could become anything if they escaped the county together.

"Take care of Eileen," Timmy said.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

He followed Bo and Atticus outside.

Scully watched the taillights disappear.

It was the last time he saw Timmy alive.

• • • •

KENNY BROKERED THE peace.

He called Vincent Del Vecchio before sunrise. Vincent was married to Abigail Battenberg. Kenny was married to her sister, Mary Lee. Neither man wanted three dead soldiers to interfere with the money moving through Battenberg Plantation.

Vincent accepted repayment of the gambling debt, compensation for the families, and a new percentage of the transportation contracts.

Officially, the matter ended.

Three days later, Timmy Dawber was found dead.

Bo called it suicide.

The sheriff's office called it suicide.

Most of Dawber County believed it.

Scully did not.

Neither did Johnny Malone or Sanchez.

They had no proof.

The surviving members of Frankie Caruso's crew did not care about the peace agreement. They wanted Scully.

Johnny moved him to Widow's Walk while Sanchez arranged a flight out of the country.

Kenny closed the marina early.

Mary Lee took Alex home.

Eileen remained because Scully refused to leave without seeing her one final time.

She was six years old.

Alex was six too.

He returned through the back door after telling his mother he had forgotten a baseball glove.

Instead, he found Eileen sitting beside her father on the floor of Kenny's office.

Scully held her tightly.

"When are you coming home?" Eileen asked.

"Soon."

"You said that last time."

"I mean it now."

"You always mean it."

Scully closed his eyes.

Alex stood in the doorway.

Eileen saw him.

"Alex!"

Scully released her.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came for my glove."

"You don't have a glove here."

"I might."

A boat engine sounded outside.

Sanchez crossed to the window.

"No lights."

The engine stopped.

Kenny entered from the marina.

"Could be fishermen."

"We're closed," Sanchez said.

The first bullet shattered the window.

Sanchez threw Kenny to the floor.

Scully grabbed Eileen and pulled her behind the desk.

Alex froze in the doorway.

"Down!" Kenny shouted.

A second volley tore through the office walls.

Scully crawled toward Alex, seized the back of his shirt, and dragged him into cover.

Men rushed along the dock.

Sanchez fired through the broken window.

One attacker fell into the water.

Kenny reached beneath his desk and pulled out a shotgun.

"How many?"

"Five," Sanchez said.

"Six," Scully corrected. "One near the fuel pumps."

The man near the pumps fired.

A gasoline can erupted.

Flames rolled across the dock.

Kenny fired through the doorway.

Scully placed both children inside a storage closet.

"Stay here."

Eileen clung to him.

"Daddy."

"I'll come back."

"You promise?"

Scully kissed her forehead.

"I promise."

He closed the door.

The fight lasted less than four minutes.

To Alex, it lasted forever.

Gunfire shook the walls. Men screamed outside. Glass fell from broken windows. Smoke entered beneath the closet door.

Eileen covered her ears.

Alex held her hand.

The door opened.

A wounded man stood there.

Blood covered his shirt. One hand held a pistol. The other seized Eileen by the arm.

She screamed.

Alex grabbed her.

The man struck him with the pistol.

Alex fell.

The wounded man dragged Eileen into the office and pressed the gun against her head.

Scully stood near the broken window.

Sanchez was behind the bar.

Both lowered their weapons.

“Put them down,” the man said.

Scully did.

Sanchez followed.

“Let her go.”

“You’re coming with me.”

“I’ll come.”

“Daddy!” Eileen cried.

“Everything’s all right.”

The man backed toward the dock.

Alex crawled across the floor.

Kenny’s shotgun lay beneath the desk.

It was too heavy.

Alex pulled it toward him with both hands.

The wounded man saw the movement.

He turned the pistol.

Alex fired.
The blast threw him backward.
The shotgun struck the floor.
Eileen slipped from the man's arms as he collapsed.
For several seconds, the only sound came from the burning dock.
Scully ran to his daughter.
Sanchez picked up the shotgun.
Alex sat against the desk, staring at the body.
Kenny entered through the rear door.
He saw his son.
Then the dead man.
"Oh, God."
Alex looked at him.
"I didn't let him take her."
Kenny dropped to his knees and pulled him close.
"No," he said. "You didn't."

• • • •

JOHNNY ARRIVED BEFORE dawn.

Five bodies lay beneath tarps near the marina.
The sixth had disappeared into the swamp.
Sanchez stood beside the water. Scully sat inside the office holding Eileen while she slept.
Alex had gone home with Kenny and Mary Lee.
Johnny examined the bullet holes and blood.
"This doesn't end."
"Kenny's talking to Vincent again," Sanchez said.
"Vincent didn't order this."
"No."
"That makes it worse."
Johnny looked toward Scully.
"He has to die."

Scully lifted his head.

"Excuse me?"

"By noon, Tommy Scully needs to be dead."

Sanchez understood.

"We give them a body?"

"No face. Burned aircraft."

"I need an aircraft."

"Kenny has one registered through a company in Belize."

Scully stood.

"What about Eileen?"

Johnny looked at the sleeping child.

"She stays with Bubs and Millie."

"No."

"You take her with you, she spends her life running."

"She's my daughter."

"That's why you leave her."

Scully carried Eileen to the office sofa.

He covered her with a blanket.

"Where do I go?"

"South America."

"The cartel?"

"At first."

"And then?"

Johnny looked toward Sanchez.

"Scully always finds somebody who needs a plane flown somewhere it shouldn't go."

Sanchez nodded.

"The CIA still owes him."

"The CIA never pays its debts," Scully said.

"Neither do you," Johnny replied. "You'll understand each other."

Scully knelt beside Eileen.

He touched her hair.

"When do I come back?"

Johnny did not answer.

• • • •

THE OCEAN HAD DARKENED outside the safe house.

Bones remained at the table.

Scully stood near the windows with both hands in his pockets.

"You let her believe you died," Bones said.

"Yes."

"For twelve years."

"Yes."

"You ever see her?"

"From a distance."

"When?"

"Birthdays. School events. Once at Gethsemane."

"She never saw you?"

"No."

"You watched your own daughter and walked away?"

Scully's eyes filled.

"Yes."

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"Is that what you two call protecting people?"

Johnny closed the folder before him.

"It worked."

"For who?"

Neither man answered.

Bones stood.

"I'm telling her."

Scully moved between him and the door.

"No."

"She deserves to know."

"She deserves to hear it from me."

"Then go tell her."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because the people who wanted me dead still exist. Vincent Del Vecchio may have accepted the peace, but men inside his family didn't. The cartel believes I belong to them. The CIA believes I belong to them. If I return without knowing who is watching, I put Eileen in danger again."

"She's already in danger. She lives in Dawber County."

"I need one more trip."

"Where?"

"Switzerland," Johnny said.

Bones turned.

Johnny spread several documents across the table.

"The money in the swamp was never my real fortune. It was operating cash. The rest has been sitting in numbered accounts since 1991."

"You said the DEA was watching it."

"They were."

"Were?"

"Mack's compromised. His investigation is buried beneath Kinder, the church, and his own lies. We have a small window before somebody starts looking again."

Scully tapped one of the passports.

"I fly us out tomorrow night."

Bones looked at the two passports.

"Where's mine?"

Johnny did not answer.

"Where's my passport?"

"You're not coming."

Bones laughed in disbelief.

"You drag me across the state, get me shot at, introduce me to a dead man, and now I'm supposed to stay here?"

"Yes."

"What am I supposed to do while you two go halfway around the world?"

"For once in your life?" Johnny said. "Exactly what I tell you."

Bones struck the table.

The crystal glass jumped and shattered on the floor.

Scully looked down at it.

"I suppose that answers whether it was expensive."

Johnny did not look away from his son.

"I need you in Dawber County."

"For what?"

Johnny removed a sealed envelope from the leather folder.

"Take this to Willis Childress."

"What is it?"

"Instructions."

"What instructions?"

"They're for Willis."

"You gave him two million dollars. That makes him my business partner too."

"No. It makes him a man who accepted two million dollars."

"What's the difference?"

"Whether he does what I tell him."

Bones took the envelope.

"What do I say?"

"Tell Willis to stabilize his people. No expansion into Miami. No retaliation against the Haitians. No new suppliers until I return."

"He'll love that."

"He doesn't have to."

"And after I deliver it?"

"Come back here."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Stay inside your beach house and wait?"

"Stay out of trouble."

Bones looked at Scully.

"When are you telling Eileen?"

"When I return."

"You promise?"

Scully's face tightened.

"I promised her once before."

"That isn't an answer."

"Yes," Scully said. "I promise."

Bones placed the envelope inside his jacket.

"If you don't tell her, I will."

Scully nodded.

"Fair."

Bones walked toward the stairs.

Johnny called after him.

"Where are you going?"

"To sleep."

"We need to leave before sunrise."

"You need to leave before sunrise."

Johnny stepped forward.

"Bones."

His son turned.

"You don't get to disappear for twelve years and come back expecting me to follow orders."

"I'm trying to keep you alive."

"No. You're trying to control everything you missed."

Bones continued upstairs.

A door slammed.

Scully looked toward the broken glass.

"Good kid."

"He hates me."

"He wants to."

"What's the difference?"

"He hasn't left."

Johnny gathered the passport documents.

Scully watched him.

"You really think he'll deliver the message and come straight back?"

"No."

"Then why send him?"

"Because Willis needs the instructions."

"And your son?"

Johnny looked toward the stairs.

"My son needs to discover which parts of me he inherited."

• • • •

UPSTAIRS, BONES STOOD on a balcony overlooking the Atlantic.

The sealed envelope rested in his hand.

Below him, waves broke against the empty beach. Somewhere beyond that black horizon, Johnny and Scully intended to fly toward Switzerland and recover enough money to rebuild an empire.

Bones had been ordered to deliver a message.

Then wait.

He tore open the envelope far enough to see the first line.

WILLIS—

FIRST RULE: SURVIVE.

Bones smiled.

He sealed the opening with his thumb and placed the envelope back inside his jacket.

Staying out of trouble had never been a Malone family tradition.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MAROONS

The heavy bag no longer screamed. Bones noticed the repaired seam across its bottom as soon as he entered the gym room at the Maroon Gang's headquarters.

Someone had stitched the canvas together with fishing line.

Dark stains remained near the floor beneath it.

Suds stood behind the bag with both hands pressed against the leather while a younger gang member threw combinations. The man punching wore no gloves. Each strike sent the bag swinging toward Suds, who absorbed its weight without moving.

He saw Bones in the doorway and smiled.

"You lost?"

"I'm looking for Willis."

"Most people looking for Willis don't walk through the front door."

"I knocked."

"Nobody answered?"

"A guy with an AK told me to come inside."

"That was Mega Man. Means he likes you."

"What does he do when he doesn't?"

"Shoots through the door."

Suds released the bag.

The younger man stopped punching and looked Bones over.

"This Johnny Malone's boy?"

Bones stared back.

"You got a name?"

"Peanut."

"That unfortunate."

Several Maroons laughed.

Peanut stepped closer.

“What you say?”

“I said your parents quit early.”

The room became quiet.

Suds continued smiling.

“You always talk like that?”

“Usually.”

“You always ready to back it up?”

“Usually.”

Peanut shoved Bones.

Bones caught his wrist, turned beneath the arm, and sent him facedown onto the floor.

The movement happened so quickly that several men missed it.

Peanut tried to rise.

Bones placed one knee between his shoulder blades and tightened the hold.

Peanut slapped the floor.

“Get off!”

“You done?”

“Fuck you!”

Bones increased the pressure.

Peanut slapped faster.

“I’m done!”

Bones released him and stood.

Suds looked delighted.

“What was that?”

“Wrestling.”

“That ain’t the wrestling they show on television.”

“No. That’s fake.”

Peanut climbed to his feet rubbing his shoulder.

“You broke my arm.”

“If I broke it, you wouldn’t have to ask.”

Suds laughed and placed one enormous hand on Bones's shoulder.

"I like you."

A door opened behind them.

Willis Childress entered.

The smile vanished from every face except Suds's.

Willis wore black trousers and a sleeveless shirt. A pistol rested beneath his waistband. He had shaved since Gethsemane, but grief remained across his face like something that could not be washed away.

He looked at Peanut.

"What happened to you?"

"Malone's boy jumped me."

"He shoved me," Bones said.

Willis looked toward Suds.

Suds nodded.

"Peanut got educated."

Willis pointed toward the door.

"Everybody out."

The younger Maroons filed from the room. Peanut glared at Bones before following them.

Suds remained.

Willis looked at him.

"That includes you."

"You sure?"

"Do I sound uncertain?"

Suds moved toward the door.

Bones said, "You can stay."

Willis stared at him.

"You giving orders in my house now?"

"No. But this concerns him too."

Suds stopped.

Willis looked between them.

"What concerns him?"

Bones removed the envelope from inside his jacket.

"My father sent instructions."

Willis took it.

He examined the damaged seal.

"This been opened?"

"No."

"The corner's torn."

"Humidity."

"You came from an air-conditioned beach house."

Bones said nothing.

Willis smiled without amusement.

"Johnny's boy, all right."

He opened the envelope and read.

Suds leaned toward him.

"What it say?"

"Not to spend the money."

"All of it?"

"More than two hundred thousand."

"That still leaves a lot."

"Thank you, Suds. I understand subtraction."

Willis continued reading.

His expression worsened.

"No expansion into Miami. No retaliation against the Haitians. No new suppliers. Stabilize Dawber County and wait for Malone to return."

"Sounds reasonable," Suds said.

"Did I ask?"

"No."

"Then stop helping."

Willis crushed the letter in his fist.

Bones leaned against the wall.

"He invested two million dollars."

"He paid me for helping him."

"He called it an investment."

"He can call it Christmas money. Once he handed it over, it became mine."

"Then why are you angry about the instructions?"

Willis stepped closer.

"Where is your father?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"He didn't tell me."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care what you believe."

Willis looked at Suds.

"Why is he still here?"

"Because you told everybody else to leave."

Suds smiled.

Willis returned his attention to Bones.

"You delivered the message. Go back to the beach."

"My father's gone."

"That sounds like a Malone family problem."

"He told me to wait at the safe house."

"For once, Johnny and I agree."

"I'm not sitting alone in a house staring at the ocean."

"Then stare at television."

"I came to help."

"Nobody asked you."

"You took his money."

"I didn't take you."

Bones stepped forward.

They were nearly the same height. Willis was broader through the chest, but Bones carried the compact strength of someone who had spent years forcing larger boys onto their backs.

"You need people," Bones said.

"I have people."

"Peanut?"

From the hallway, Peanut shouted, "I can hear you!"

Willis looked toward the door.

"Get farther away!"

Footsteps retreated.

Bones continued.

"My father trusts you."

"Your father trusts people until the second it becomes useful not to."

"He still gave you two million."

"He gave me that because I saved his ass."

"And because he thinks you can build something."

Willis's jaw tightened.

Bones pointed toward the crumpled letter.

"You going to prove him wrong because you don't like being told what to do?"

Suds made a low sound of appreciation.

Willis looked at him.

"You can leave too."

"I ain't said nothing."

"You made a sound."

Suds crossed his arms.

"I'm staying."

Willis shook his head and walked toward the office.

"Both of you."

Bones followed him.

• • • •

THE OFFICE HAD ONCE been a storage room.

Maps of Dawber County and Miami covered one wall. Colored pins marked roads, canals, farms, clubs, and neighborhoods. A desk sat beneath a boarded window. Two assault rifles rested in an open cabinet.

A photograph stood beside the telephone.

Willis and Deon were children in it.

Deon wore a white church shirt and held a book against his chest. Willis wore a stained T-shirt and had one arm wrapped tightly around his younger brother's neck.

Both were smiling.

Bones looked at the photograph.

Willis placed the crumpled letter in a desk drawer.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You keep staring."

"That Deon?"

Willis glanced at the picture.

"Yeah."

"Younger than you."

"Two years."

"He was raised by Bubs?"

"We both lived with him for a while."

"I thought you stayed with the gang."

"I did."

Willis sat behind the desk.

"After our father killed our mother, Bubs and Millie took us in. Deon stayed. I kept running back to the street."

"Why?"

"Because church people looked at me like I was broken."

"Maybe they were trying to help."

"Maybe I didn't want help."

Suds leaned against the wall.

"Willis never liked rules."

"Neither do you," Willis said.

"I like some rules."

"Name one."

Suds thought.

"No shoes on the bed."

Bones looked at the photograph again.

"Deon get you out of trouble?"

"All the time."

"You ever thank him?"

Willis's eyes moved toward him.

"No."

Bones nodded.

"Me either."

"For what?"

"My mother. Alex. Billy. Everybody kept me alive when my father left."

Willis picked up the photograph and placed it facedown.

"You didn't come here to talk about dead relatives."

"I came because Johnny told me to."

"You said you don't follow orders."

"I don't."

"Then why deliver the letter?"

Bones considered the question.

"Because sometimes he's right."

Willis smiled faintly.

"That's the problem with men like him. They're right just often enough to make you forget what happens when they're wrong."

• • • •

TEDDY HENDERSON WAITED in the kitchen.

The swelling around his left eye had faded from purple to yellow. A thin cut crossed his throat where Willis's knife had drawn blood two weeks earlier.

He wore an expensive green polo shirt, pressed shorts, and loafers without socks. He looked as if he belonged at a country club except for the bruises.

When Bones entered with Willis and Suds, Teddy rose.

"You said ten minutes."

"I got busy," Willis replied.

"I have class."

"You ain't going to class."

"I have an exam."

"You gonna fail."

"I go to the University of Miami."

"And yet here you are."

Teddy looked at Bones.

"Who's he?"

"Bones Malone," Suds said proudly.

Teddy's eyes widened.

"Johnny Malone's son?"

Bones opened the refrigerator.

"Everybody knows everybody around here."

"My father knows your father."

"I doubt it."

"Phil Henderson."

Bones removed a beer.

Willis took it from him.

"Not in my house."

"You run a drug gang."

"And I don't need drunk people handling guns."

Suds opened the refrigerator and removed a bottle of water for Bones.

"Phil Henderson owns Gordy Sound," Teddy said. "One of the biggest independent music companies in Miami."

"Congratulations."

"He knew your father in the eighties."

"Everybody knew my father in the eighties."

Teddy looked toward Willis.

"Why is he here?"

"He brought a message."

"From Johnny Malone?"

"Stop asking questions."

"I'm trying to understand the organization."

Willis laughed.

"You ain't part of the organization."

"You told me you wanted access to my customers."

"You are access."

"I can help with strategy."

"You sell marijuana to fraternity boys and women who get bored at tennis lessons."

"They spend money."

"That's why you're alive."

Teddy touched the cut on his neck.

"My father paid you."

"Your father paid the debt you created. That bought you another opportunity to work."

"You can't force me to sell for you."

Willis leaned across the table.

"I can put you back inside that bag."

Teddy sat down.

Suds handed Bones the bottle of water.

"You eat?"

"No."

Suds opened the pantry.

"I make a good sandwich."

"He really does," Willis said. "Used to wash dishes at the diner."

Bones looked at Suds.

"That why they call you Suds?"

"Diner during the day. Car wash at night."

"You still work there?"

"Own part of the car wash now."

"Working for Willis pays that good?"

"No. Owner got caught with somebody else's wife."

"What happened?"

Suds smiled.

"He decided to retire."

Bones accepted the sandwich.

Teddy watched him.

"You really his son?"

Bones took a bite.

"Yes."

"Is the money real?"

Willis slapped the table.

Teddy jumped.

"What did I say about questions?"

"Everyone in Miami is talking about it."

"Who?"

"People."

"What people?"

"People who know things."

"You mean the Haitians."

Teddy hesitated.

Willis stood.

"You been talking to them again?"

"No."

"Teddy."

"They contacted me."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"And you waited until now?"

"I didn't want you to overreact."

Suds smiled at Bones.

"He overreacts."

"I heard that," Willis said.

Teddy reached into his pocket.

Willis drew his pistol.

Teddy froze.

"My phone."

"Slow."

Teddy removed a silver flip phone and placed it on the table.

"They called from a blocked number. They know you're trying to rebuild. They know you have money."

"How?"

"I don't know."

Willis pressed the pistol against Teddy's forehead.

"You told them."

"No."

"You tried to cut a deal with them before."

"That was different."

"How?"

"I didn't know you were going to put me inside sporting equipment!"

Bones looked at the repaired heavy bag visible through the kitchen doorway.

"That was him?"

Suds nodded.

"He learned."

Willis cocked the pistol.

Teddy raised both hands.

"They want to meet."

"Why?"

"To settle territory."

"You believe that?"

"No."

"Then why are we still talking?"

"Because they said they'll give up the college and country-club market if you stay out of Little Haiti."

Willis lowered the pistol slightly.

"What do they want in return?"

"A percentage."

"How much?"

"Twenty."

Willis laughed.

Teddy did not.

"They're serious."

"Where's the meeting?"

"An old beverage warehouse near Miami River."

"When?"

"Tonight."

Suds's smile faded.

"That's their ground."

Teddy nodded.

"They said you can bring one man."

Willis looked at him.

"And you."

"They didn't say that."

"You arranged the meeting. You're coming."

"No."

Willis pointed the pistol again.

Teddy sighed.

"Fine."

Suds stepped away from the wall.

"I'm your one man."

"I know."

Bones swallowed the last bite of the sandwich.

"I'm coming."

Willis looked at him.

"No."

"You need another gun."

"I got plenty of guns."

"You need somebody to use one."

"You wrestled Peanut. Don't make you a soldier."

"I've been shot at more times in the last month than half the people in this house."

"That ain't experience. That's bad luck."

"My father told me to deliver instructions."

"You did."

"He also said to make sure you understood them."

"I understand that he wants me to hide in Dawber County while the Haitians take Miami."

"He said not to retaliate."

"This is a meeting."

"Sounds like retaliation waiting to happen."

Willis considered him.

Suds said, "He could drive."

"I have a driver."

"I don't mean good, though."

Willis looked at Teddy.

Teddy shook his head.

"Do not look at me."

Bones leaned against the table.

"I'll stay outside."

"No."

"In the car."

"No."

"You won't even know I'm there."

"I know you're here now, and it's already aggravating."

Suds placed a hand on Willis's shoulder.

"Boy can handle himself."

"He's Johnny Malone's son. Something happens to him, Malone comes back thinking I did it."

"Then keep me close," Bones said.

"That sounds like babysitting."

"I don't need a babysitter."

Willis stared at him.

Bones did not look away.

Finally, Willis returned the pistol to his waistband.

"You stay in the car."

"All right."

"You hear gunfire, you stay in the car."

Bones nodded.

"You see people running, you stay in the car."

"I understand."

"You see Suds's giant ass come flying through a window, you stay in the motherfuckin' car."

Suds frowned.

"Why I got to come through the window?"

"It was an example."

"Use Teddy."

Teddy looked offended.

Willis pointed at Bones.

"I need to hear you say it."

"I'll stay in the car."

Suds started laughing.

Willis looked at him.

“What?”

“He lying.”

“I know.”

Bones smiled.

“Runs in the family.”

• • • •

THEY LEFT FOR MIAMI shortly before sunset.

Suds drove Willis’s black Cadillac. Willis sat beside him. Teddy occupied the rear seat with Bones.

Two Maroon vehicles followed at a distance but would remain several blocks from the meeting.

As the highway carried them east, sawgrass gave way to concrete. The setting sun burned orange across the windshield.

Teddy leaned toward Bones.

“Your father really has money in Switzerland?”

Bones looked at him.

“What makes you think that?”

“Everybody says it.”

“Everybody says you got stuffed inside a punching bag.”

Suds laughed from the front seat.

Teddy lowered his voice.

“I can help you.”

“With what?”

“Miami. Clubs. Women. People with real money.”

“You think I don’t know people with money?”

“You grew up in Dawber County.”

“So did my father.”

“And then he left.”

Bones turned toward the window.

Teddy had found the wound without knowing it existed.

Willis watched them in the mirror.

"You two done planning your future together?"

Teddy sat back.

"I was making conversation."

"Save your breath."

The skyline appeared ahead.

Suds adjusted the mirror.

"We being followed?"

Willis looked behind them.

A dark sedan had remained three cars back for the last five miles.

"Could be."

Bones turned.

"Same car since the toll."

Willis looked at him.

"You noticed?"

"Yes."

Teddy sank lower in his seat.

"Is it them?"

"Sit up," Willis said.

"I don't want to be visible."

"You should've thought about that before arranging the meeting."

Suds changed lanes.

The sedan remained behind them for another mile, then continued toward downtown when the Cadillac exited.

Teddy exhaled.

Willis faced forward.

"Tonight, nobody improvises. We go in, we listen, and we leave. No threats unless they threaten first. No guns unless they draw."

He looked into the mirror at Bones.

"And you stay in the car."

Bones nodded.

The envelope inside his jacket pressed against his chest.

FIRST RULE: SURVIVE.

Ahead of them, Miami waited beneath the approaching darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STAY IN THE CAR

The warehouse stood beside a dead stretch of the Miami River.

Faded lettering remained above the loading bays.

GOLD COAST BEVERAGE DISTRIBUTORS.

The company had closed years ago. Its parking lot was cracked, its windows were painted black, and rust covered the corrugated loading doors facing the water.

Suds stopped the Cadillac beneath a broken security light.

Two men waited near the entrance.

Neither appeared armed.

Bones counted four more shadows moving behind the painted windows.

"There's more than two," he said.

Willis looked toward the building.

"How many?"

"Four inside. Maybe five."

"You see guns?"

"No."

"They got guns," Suds said.

Teddy leaned forward from the back seat.

"This is the address they gave me."

"That supposed to make me feel better?" Willis asked.

"No."

"Good."

A black van entered the parking lot and stopped behind the Cadillac.

Bones turned.

Two men climbed out.

"They closing the exit," he said.

Willis looked in the side mirror.

"They making sure nobody interrupts."

"That is not better," Teddy said.

Willis opened his door.

"Meeting ain't supposed to feel good."

Suds reached beneath his seat and removed a pistol.

Willis stopped him.

"They said one man."

"They also said twenty percent."

"Leave it."

Suds returned the weapon beneath the seat.

Willis looked at Bones.

"You remember what I said?"

"Stay in the car."

"Even if you hear gunfire."

"I remember."

"This ain't Dawber County. You don't know these streets. You don't know these people."

"I said I remember."

"You didn't say you'd do it."

Bones looked at him.

"I'll stay in the car."

Suds smiled.

Willis pointed at him.

"Don't start."

"I ain't said nothing."

"Your face did."

Teddy remained seated.

Willis opened his door.

"Move."

"I thought I was staying with Bones."

"You arranged this."

"They know me."

"That's why you're going first."

Teddy climbed out.

Willis and Suds followed him toward the warehouse.

Bones watched them enter.

The metal door closed.

The two men from the black van remained outside.

One lit a cigarette.

The other looked directly at Bones.

• • • •

THE WAREHOUSE SMELLED of mildew, old syrup, and river water.

Empty bottle crates rose in crooked stacks along the walls. A conveyor belt crossed the center of the building beneath hanging fluorescent lights.

LUCIEN BAPTISTE waited beside a folding table.

He wore a dark suit without a tie. His head was shaved, and a gold cross rested against his black shirt. He had the calm voice of a man who allowed other people to become emotional for him.

Six men stood nearby.

Willis stopped.

"You said I could bring one."

Lucien looked toward Suds.

"You brought enough for three."

Suds smiled.

"Thank you."

Lucien's men did not.

Teddy stepped forward.

"Lucien, I told Willis about the terms."

Lucien raised one hand.

Teddy stopped talking.

"I was disappointed when you left us," Lucien said.

"I didn't leave."

"You took our product and returned to the Maroons."

"They found out."

"Yes. I saw what they did to your face."

Teddy touched the fading bruise.

Lucien looked at Willis.

"Was the bag necessary?"

"Worked."

"Fear usually does."

"It ain't fear if you prove you'll do it."

Lucien smiled slightly.

"Then we understand each other."

He motioned toward the table.

A map of Miami had been divided with red and blue lines.

Lucien placed one finger on the wealthy neighborhoods south of the university.

"Teddy's customers remain yours. The clubs along the beach remain open to both organizations. Little Haiti and the river remain ours."

"And you get twenty percent of my business," Willis said.

"For protection."

"From who?"

"Us."

Willis laughed.

Lucien remained still.

"You find something amusing?"

"I already got protection from you."

"What protection?"

"Suds."

Suds smiled wider.

Lucien looked toward him.

"Does he always smile?"

"Even at funerals."

"Not Deon's," Suds said.

The smile disappeared.

Lucien nodded respectfully.

"Your brother's death was unfortunate."

"Don't speak his name," Willis said.

"I meant no offense."

"Then get to the business."

Lucien folded the map.

"The business is larger than marijuana."

"Not mine."

"You received two million dollars from Johnny Malone."

Teddy looked at Willis.

Willis turned toward him.

"I didn't tell them," Teddy said.

Lucien continued.

"Money creates sound. Men hear it moving."

"Who told you?"

"A corrections officer spoke before the federal agents found him."

"Waylon?"

Lucien did not answer.

Willis looked around the warehouse.

"This ain't a territory meeting."

"No."

"What do you want?"

"One million dollars."

Suds laughed.

Lucien glanced at him.

"He still finds this amusing."

"Numbers get funny when they stupid," Suds said.

Lucien looked back at Willis.

"You bring one million tomorrow. In return, the Maroons may continue operating in Miami."

"And if I don't?"

"You return to Dawber County and remain there."

Willis stepped toward the table.

"My people been selling in Miami longer than half these boys been alive."

"Your people sell to students and country clubs because we allow it."

"You didn't allow shit."

Lucien sighed.

Two men moved behind Willis.

Suds noticed.

His smile returned.

"Willis."

"I see them."

Lucien placed both hands on the table.

"Where is Johnny Malone?"

Willis said nothing.

"Does he still possess the other three million?"

"Ask him."

"We would if we could find him."

"That sounds like your problem."

"Where are his Swiss accounts?"

Willis looked at Teddy.

Teddy raised his hands.

"I never said anything about Switzerland."

Lucien's expression changed.

Willis realized the mistake.

Lucien looked toward Teddy.

"Switzerland?"

Teddy stepped backward.

"I heard a rumor."

"From whom?"

"Nobody."

Lucien's men seized him.

Willis reached beneath his shirt.

A pistol pressed against the back of his neck.

Suds lunged.

Three men struck him at once.

The first blow caught him across the temple. The second drove into his ribs. The third man wrapped a chain around his throat and pulled him backward.

Suds remained standing.

It took two more men to bring him down.

Lucien watched.

"I wanted this conversation to remain civil."

Willis was forced onto his knees.

"You asked for a million dollars."

"And you refused."

"I laughed."

"That was the refusal."

Teddy struggled as two men dragged him toward the conveyor belt.

"I didn't tell them anything!"

Willis looked at him.

"For once, I believe you."

Lucien removed his jacket and folded it across the back of a chair.

"Where is Johnny Malone?"

Willis smiled through clenched teeth.

"Switzerland."

Lucien studied him.

"You are lying."

"No. He's opening a chocolate shop."

One of Lucien's men struck him across the mouth.

Blood ran down Willis's chin.

Lucien looked toward Suds.

"Perhaps your friend is more reasonable."

Suds sat on the floor with his hands bound behind him. Blood covered one side of his face.

He smiled.

Lucien shook his head.

"I find that deeply irritating."

• • • •

BONES WAITED EIGHT minutes.

The men outside smoked another cigarette.

One of them walked to the Cadillac and tapped the passenger window.

Bones lowered it two inches.

"You Malone?"

"Maybe."

The man smiled.

"You got his face."

"You knew him?"

"Everybody knows Johnny Malone."

"Then you know better than to lean against his car."

The man looked at the Cadillac.

"This his?"

"No."

"Then why you care?"

"I don't like you."

The smile faded.

"Stay inside."

Bones raised the window.

The man returned to the entrance.

Bones checked the dashboard clock.

Ten minutes.

No one came out.

He removed Teddy's flip phone from beneath the rear seat. Teddy had dropped it when Willis forced him from the car.

Bones called the number Willis had given the Maroon vehicles following them.

Nobody answered.

He called again.

Nothing.

He looked behind the Cadillac.

The black van remained across the exit.

One of its rear doors stood open.

Eleven minutes.

Bones climbed into the front seat and reached beneath it.

His fingers closed around Suds's pistol.

He removed it and checked the magazine.

Full.

A pump shotgun rested inside the trunk. He had seen Suds place it there before leaving Dawber County.

Bones opened the driver's door.

Both men outside turned.

"Bathroom," Bones said.

"Use a bottle."

"I need a big bottle."

"Get back in the car."

Bones raised both hands.

"All right."

He returned to the driver's seat and closed the door.

The men watched until he appeared to settle.

Then Bones reached beneath the dashboard and opened the trunk release.

He waited.

The men turned toward the warehouse again.

Bones slipped through the passenger side, moved around the rear of the Cadillac, and lifted the trunk just far enough to reach inside.

He removed the shotgun.

The two men heard the trunk close.

They turned.

Bones fired into the broken security light above them.

Glass exploded.

The parking lot went dark.

One man reached beneath his jacket.

Bones struck him across the face with the shotgun stock. The man collapsed against the Cadillac.

The second drew a pistol.

Bones dropped beneath the first shot and drove his shoulder into the man's waist.

They crashed onto the pavement.

The pistol slid beneath the car.

The man punched Bones behind the ear.

Bones caught his arm, rolled, and locked it against his chest.

The man tried to reach the shotgun.

Bones tightened the hold until the elbow snapped.

The scream carried across the parking lot.

Bones struck him with the shotgun and left him unconscious beside the car.

He picked up Suds's pistol and moved toward the warehouse.

The front door was locked.

Bones circled the building.

A narrow alley separated the warehouse from the river. Wooden pilings supported a rear loading platform above the water. A rusted service ladder climbed to the second floor.

Bones placed the pistol in his waistband and climbed.

At the top, he found a window painted black from the inside.

A crack near the frame allowed him to see through.

Willis was on his knees.

Teddy had been strapped to the conveyor belt.

Suds sat tied to a support column while a man pressed the heated end of a metal tool against his shoulder.

Suds screamed.

The sound that escaped Bones was not a word.

He climbed onto the roof.

• • • •

LUCIEN STOOD BEFORE Willis.

“Your brother believed the law protected him.”

Willis spat blood onto the floor.

“My brother believed people could be better than they were.”

“And you?”

“I know better.”

Lucien nodded toward Suds.

The heated metal touched him again.

Suds’s body strained against the rope.

His smile was gone.

“Tell me where Malone went,” Lucien said.

“I don’t know.”

“Where is his son?”

Willis looked toward the entrance.

Lucien saw it.

“The boy in the car?”

Willis said nothing.

Lucien turned toward one of his men.

“Bring him inside.”

The man moved toward the front door.

The warehouse lights went out.

Darkness swallowed the room.

Lucien froze.

“What happened?”

A red emergency light flickered above the loading bays.

The man near the front door drew his pistol.

Something crashed through the skylight.

A tear-gas canister struck the floor and rolled beneath the conveyor.

White smoke filled the room.

Teddy began coughing.

Lucien covered his mouth.

“Find him!”

Bones had found the canister inside an emergency cabinet on the roof. He had not known whether it still worked.

It did.

He descended through the broken skylight and landed on the upper catwalk.

A man below fired toward him.

Bullets tore through the metal railing.

Bones fired the shotgun.

The blast struck the light above the shooter and showered him with glass.

Bones ran along the catwalk.

A second man climbed the stairs.

Bones dropped the shotgun, caught him at the top, and drove his head into the railing. The man fell backward down the steps.

Bones picked up the shotgun and jumped the final six feet to the warehouse floor.

Lucien's men fired through the smoke.

Bones rolled behind a stack of bottle crates.

Rounds tore the plastic apart.

Willis threw himself sideways, knocking the man guarding him off balance.

Suds drove both feet into the knees of the man holding the heated tool.

The man fell.

Suds brought his bound hands beneath his legs and looped them forward. He seized the man by the throat.

Bones emerged from behind the crates.

A gunman turned toward him.

Bones fired.

The man spun into the conveyor belt.

"Behind you!" Teddy shouted.

Bones turned.

The man who had fallen down the stairs charged with a knife.

Bones caught his wrist.

The blade stopped inches from his chest.

The man forced it closer.

Bones released the shotgun, stepped inside the attacker's reach, and threw him over his hip. The man struck the concrete.

Bones drove one knee down on his arm and tore the knife free.

Across the warehouse, Willis had reached the pistol beneath his shirt.

He fired twice.

The man guarding him collapsed.

Willis cut the rope around his wrists with a broken piece of metal and tossed the pistol to Suds.

Suds caught it.

His smile returned.

"Now it's a meeting."

He shot the man who had burned him.

Lucien moved toward the rear loading doors.

Bones saw him.

"Willis!"

Willis turned.

Lucien fired.

The bullet struck the conveyor beside Teddy's head.

Teddy screamed and pulled against the straps.

Willis returned fire.

Lucien disappeared through the loading doors.

Bones ran after him.

"Leave him!" Willis shouted.

Bones reached the platform in time to see Lucien leap into a waiting speedboat.

The engine roared.

The boat pulled into the river.

Bones raised the pistol.

Willis grabbed his arm before he could fire.

"Too far."

"I can hit him."

"You hit him, the boat keeps going and everybody on the river hears the shots."

"He tried to kill you."

"He'll try again."

Lucien stood at the rear of the speedboat and looked back.

He pointed two fingers toward his own eyes.

Then toward Bones.

The boat vanished beneath the bridge.

• • • •

SUDS CUT TEDDY FREE.

Teddy slid from the conveyor belt and collapsed onto the floor.

"You knew," Willis said.

Teddy looked up.

"I swear I didn't."

"You arranged an ambush."

"I arranged a meeting."

"They knew about Switzerland."

"I heard people at a club talking about Malone's Swiss accounts. I repeated it to one of Lucien's people before Willis brought me back. I thought it was another Dawber County legend."

Willis raised his pistol.

Bones stepped between them.

"He warned me."

"What?"

"When the lights went out, he yelled that somebody was behind me."

"That don't make him innocent."

"No. It makes him useful."

Teddy nodded rapidly.

"I can fix this."

Willis stared at him.

"You said that before."

"I know who carries money for Lucien. I know which clubs wash it. My father's company handles performers at half the places he uses."

Suds held one hand against his burned shoulder.

"He might be useful."

Willis looked at him.

"You need a hospital."

"I need a sandwich."

"You just got burned."

"Still hungry."

Bones picked up the shotgun.

Willis looked around the warehouse.

Three men were dead. Two were wounded. The remaining Haitians had escaped through the loading bays during the fight.

Sirens sounded in the distance.

"We need to move," Willis said.

They collected their weapons and hurried toward the front entrance.

Outside, the two men Bones had disabled remained beside the Cadillac.

Suds looked down at them.

"You do this?"

Bones opened the passenger door.

"They wouldn't let me use the bathroom."

Suds began laughing.

The sound caused him to clutch his injured shoulder.

Willis stopped beside the car.

"You disobeyed me."

Bones looked at him.

"You're alive."

"That ain't the point."

"Feels like the point."

"I told you to stay in the car."

"I stayed as long as I could."

"Eleven minutes," Bones said.

Willis stared at him.

"You counted?"

"Yes."

"You came into a warehouse alone against eight armed men."

"You brought Suds."

Suds nodded.

"That was insulting."

Willis looked at the broken security light, the unconscious men, and the shotgun in Bones's hand.

"What did your father tell you?"

"To deliver the message and stay out of trouble."

"How'd that work?"

"About like it worked for him."

The sirens grew louder.
Willis opened the driver's door.

"Suds can't drive."

"I can drive," Suds said.

"You got one working arm."

"I only use one."

"Get in the back."

Teddy climbed beside Suds.

Bones moved toward the passenger side.

Willis stopped him.

"From now on, Teddy goes somewhere, you go with him."

Teddy looked horrified.

"What?"

Willis pointed toward him.

"I don't trust that rich little bastard. He makes a call, you know who answered. He goes into a club, you stand beside him. He meets a customer, you count the money."

Bones looked at Teddy.

"What if he tries to run?"

"Break something he needs."

Teddy shook his head.

"This is ridiculous."

Suds placed his good arm around Teddy's shoulders.

"You two gonna be great friends."

Bones climbed into the Cadillac.

Willis started the engine.

As they sped from the warehouse, Bones looked back toward the Miami River.

Lucien Baptiste was gone.

The Haitian gang knew Johnny Malone had money in Switzerland.

Johnny did not know.

Bones reached inside his jacket and touched the envelope.

FIRST RULE: SURVIVE.

Willis glanced at him.

"You ain't one of us."

"Didn't ask to be."

"Suds likes you."

"Suds likes everybody."

"Not like this."

Bones looked toward the back seat.

Suds was smiling despite the blood and burned flesh covering his shoulder. Teddy sat trapped beneath his arm, staring at Bones with equal parts fear and resentment.

Willis continued.

"You saved our lives. That earns respect."

"What does it earn me?"

"A place in the car."

Bones looked through the windshield at the Miami skyline.

For the first time since Johnny returned, he was not following his father.

He was building a reputation of his own.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NEW CLIENT

Deon's name remained on the nineteenth-floor directory.
CHILDRESS LEGAL GROUP.

Tiana stood in the lobby and stared at the letters.
Someone would eventually remove them.

A building manager would arrive with a ladder and a screwdriver.
Deon's name would be placed inside a cardboard box with the
photographs, law books, and framed diplomas from his office.

The firm would continue.

That was what institutions did when the people who built them
died.

Tiana stepped into the elevator.

Her reflection stared back from the brass doors.

She wore the same black suit she had worn to Deon's funeral. She
had changed the blouse and shoes, but the suit still carried the faint
smell of incense from Gethsemane.

The elevator stopped on nineteen.

The receptionist rose when Tiana entered.

"Tiana."

"Morning, Denise."

"I didn't know you were coming in."

"Neither did I."

"There's a partners' meeting."

"I know."

Denise lowered her voice.

"They're discussing the firm."

"They've been discussing the firm since before we buried him."

"They want to know what happens next."

"So do I."

Tiana moved toward the hallway.

Flowers filled the reception area. White lilies from judges. Roses from clients. An enormous arrangement from a professional football player Deon had represented after an arrest in South Beach.

Beside it stood a smaller basket from Pastor Bubs and Millie.

A handwritten card rested among the flowers.

THANK YOU FOR LOVING OUR BOY.

Tiana looked away.

Denise stepped from behind the desk.

"Do you want coffee?"

"No."

"Tea?"

"No."

"Anything?"

Tiana stopped.

"I want everybody to quit looking at me like I'm going to fall apart."

Denise nodded.

"I can do that."

"Thank you."

Tiana continued down the hallway.

Every conversation stopped as she passed.

• • • •

DEON'S OFFICE DOOR remained closed.

A strip of black ribbon had been tied around the handle.

Tiana removed it.

The office looked exactly as he had left it.

His jacket hung behind the door. A yellow legal pad lay open on the desk. A cup of coffee had dried into a dark ring beside the telephone.

The wall behind his desk displayed photographs instead of legal awards.

Deon graduating from law school with Pastor Bubs and Millie beside him.

Deon standing outside Gethsemane with a teenage Eileen.

Deon and Willis as children, their arms around one another.

A more recent photograph showed Tiana and Deon outside the county courthouse after winning a civil-rights case. Tiana held a stack of files against her chest. Deon stood beside her, smiling as if the victory belonged entirely to her.

Tiana closed the door.

She touched the back of his chair.

The last time she had entered this office, Deon was preparing to visit Kenny Gregory at Reform Prison.

He had called her from the road.

Kinder's people were giving him trouble.

Kenny was frightened.

Deon had told her to meet him there.

If she had arrived earlier, she might have died beside him.

If she had arrived later, she might never have learned the truth.

Tiana sat in his chair.

She opened the yellow legal pad.

Deon's handwriting covered the first page.

GREGORY:

— Demand private medical examination.

— Obtain Kinder visitor logs.

— Ask Kenny about Malone money.

— If anything happens, call my brother.

The final line had been underlined twice.

Tiana pressed her fingers against the words.

"I called him," she whispered.

Her voice broke.

She lowered her head and cried.

Not the restrained tears she had allowed herself at the funeral. Not the careful grief she had shown Bubs and Millie.

This was anger.

At Kinder.

At Mack.

At Johnny Malone.

At Deon for walking into that prison without waiting for her.

She picked up his coffee cup and threw it against the wall.

It shattered beneath the photograph of his law-school graduation.

Tiana stood breathing hard.

A knock came at the door.

She wiped her face.

"What?"

The door opened.

Howard Cole, the firm's senior partner, looked at the broken cup.

He was sixty-two, silver-haired, and permanently dressed for court. He had joined Deon six years earlier, bringing corporate clients and the belief that every crisis could be reduced to billable hours.

"The partners are waiting," he said.

"Let them."

"We have decisions to make."

"You started without me?"

"You're not a partner."

Tiana looked at him.

Howard immediately understood the mistake.

She gathered the Johnny Malone file from her bag.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

• • • •

FIVE PEOPLE SAT AROUND the conference table.

Howard took the chair at the head.

Tiana remained standing.

Marianne Rivera, head of criminal defense, looked toward the file beneath Tiana's arm.

"Is that the Malone matter?"

"It is."

Howard folded his hands.

"Before we begin, I want to express how deeply—"

"Don't."

He stopped.

"We all loved Deon," Marianne said.

"No, we didn't."

"Tiana."

"Some of you loved him. Some respected him. Some resented that his name came first on the door. Right now, none of that helps us."

Howard glanced toward the other partners.

"We agree. That's why we need to discuss an orderly transition."

"Who takes Deon's clients?"

"They will be divided according to specialty."

"And his office?"

Howard hesitated.

"We haven't decided."

"You have. You just haven't told me."

Marianne leaned forward.

"Tiana, nobody expects you to deal with this today."

"You scheduled a meeting about replacing Deon on the morning I returned."

"We did not know you were returning."

"That makes it worse."

Tiana placed the file on the table.

Howard looked at it.

"Johnny Malone is not currently a client of this firm."

"Yes, he is."

"Did he sign an engagement agreement?"

Tiana removed the document.

“Yesterday.”

Every partner looked toward it.

Marianne reached for the agreement.

Howard took it first.

“He signed this?”

“In front of two witnesses.”

“Where?”

“I’m not disclosing my client’s location.”

“We need to perform a conflict check.”

“Already completed.”

“Source-of-funds review?”

“Required before accepting any retainer. Mr. Malone agreed.”

Howard read the agreement.

“What assets does he claim?”

“Domestic real estate held through corporations, investment accounts, and substantial overseas holdings.”

“How substantial?”

“Eight figures.”

The room became quiet.

One partner removed his glasses.

“Verified?”

“Verification is part of the engagement.”

Howard looked toward Tiana.

“You met with Malone after Gethsemane?”

“I have been with him several times.”

“You understand his history.”

“Better than anyone at this table.”

“He financed a cocaine operation.”

“He entered a federal cooperation agreement in 1991 and was never charged.”

“He disappeared with millions.”

“Allegedly.”

“The DEA believes he recovered drug proceeds from the swamp.”

“The DEA did not seize any money.”

Marianne opened a second copy of the agreement.

“What does he want?”

“Representation involving federal criminal exposure, asset protection, international banking, corporate acquisitions, and estate planning.”

Howard looked up.

“Estate planning?”

“He has a son.”

“The boy involved in the Gethsemane shooting?”

“The young man who survived the attack.”

“We cannot allow you to turn this firm into a defense operation for Dawber County criminals.”

Tiana placed both hands on the table.

“Deon represented Kenny Gregory.”

“That was different.”

“Why?”

“Kenny was already incarcerated.”

“So convicted criminals are acceptable, but uncharged clients are morally troubling?”

“That isn’t what I said.”

“It is exactly what you said.”

Howard closed the file.

“Even if the firm accepts Malone, you are not qualified to control a matter of this size alone.”

“I survived an assassination attempt ordered by a prison warden. I uncovered the murders of Deon and Kenny. I obtained Guard Daly’s confession. I kept Johnny Malone from being arrested without probable cause, and I forced the DEA to recognize his federal agreement.”

“Tiana—”

“I brought you the largest private client this firm has ever represented.”

“You brought us a potential federal indictment.”

“I brought both. That’s why he needs lawyers.”

Marianne concealed a smile.

Howard noticed.

“What are you asking for?” he said.

Tiana looked toward Deon’s empty chair at the opposite end of the conference room.

“I take control of Malone’s representation.”

“Subject to oversight.”

“No.”

“You’re an associate.”

“I become an equity partner.”

One of the others laughed in disbelief.

Tiana turned toward him.

“Something funny?”

“You have been here four years.”

“And in four years, I have tried more cases than you have in twelve.”

Howard raised one hand.

“Enough.”

“No,” Tiana said. “Not enough. I inherit Deon’s litigation docket, his office, and authority to assemble my own team. Nobody communicates with the DEA, DHS, FBI, or any other agency concerning Johnny Malone without my approval.”

“You cannot prohibit partners from responding to federal inquiries.”

“I can require that counsel for the client be present.”

“What else?”

“The firm represents Pastor Bubs and Millie regarding any civil claims arising from the attack on Gethsemane. Pro bono.”

Howard leaned back.

“That could become extensive.”

“Kinder’s estate, the prison system, and the state will all be defendants.”

“Which makes it expensive.”

“It also makes it important.”

“Tiana—”

“I’m not finished. We advise Eileen Scully, Alex Gregory, Billy Dawber, and Bones Malone if they are questioned regarding Gethsemane or the missing money.”

“Willis Childress?” Marianne asked.

Tiana looked at Deon’s photograph displayed on the credenza.

“If Willis asks for help, we give it.”

Howard shook his head.

“This is emotional.”

“My client list is emotional?”

“Your judgment.”

“Deon’s brother is alive because Johnny Malone and Willis stopped Kinder.”

“Willis executed Kinder.”

“According to Sheriff Dawber’s report, Kinder turned with a weapon.”

Howard looked around the table.

Every partner understood what Tiana was doing.

Johnny Malone’s representation would bring enormous risk. It would also bring money, attention, and access to one of the most closely guarded fortunes in Florida.

If they refused, another firm would accept before the elevator reached the lobby.

Marianne closed the agreement.

"I move that Tiana be made temporary lead counsel pending verification of Malone's assets and completion of our compliance review."

"Temporary?" Tiana asked.

"And admitted to the partnership," Marianne added.

Howard looked at her.

"You cannot be serious."

"Deon trusted her."

"This is not a memorial vote."

"No. It's a business decision."

The partner who had laughed earlier raised his hand.

"I second."

Howard stared around the table.

"You are allowing a criminal to purchase control of this firm."

Tiana sat in Deon's empty chair.

"No. You're allowing his lawyer to earn it."

• • • •

THE VOTE WAS FOUR TO one.

By lunchtime, Tiana possessed Deon's office, control of his litigation files, and a conditional equity interest in the firm.

She also possessed three voicemail messages from the DEA.

Two came from Oscar Fuentes.

The third came from Mack Donnelly.

She deleted Mack's without listening.

Denise entered carrying a cardboard box.

"I thought you might want this."

Inside were replacement coffee cups.

Tiana laughed for the first time since the funeral.

"I broke one."

"I heard."

"Did the whole floor hear?"

"Only the east side."

Denise set the box on the desk.

"Someone is waiting to see you."

"Who?"

"She wouldn't give me her name."

"Then she can make an appointment."

"She has a DEA badge."

Tiana's smile disappeared.

"Send her in."

Aisha Reyes entered with her wounded arm supported by a sling.

She closed the door behind her.

Tiana remained seated.

"If you're here officially, contact the firm's general counsel."

"I'm not."

"That creates a different problem."

Reyes looked at the stain where Deon's coffee had struck the wall.

"Bad morning?"

"Bad month."

"Can we speak privately?"

"My office. My privilege."

"I'm not your client."

"Then assume I will repeat anything relevant to mine."

Reyes sat across from her.

"I read Mack's report."

"And?"

"It doesn't make sense."

"I could have told you that."

"He says Malone fled after Willis attacked him."

"That is what he told everyone."

"Mack's wrist was bruised on both sides."

"Handcuffs."

"Yes."

"You think Johnny arrested him?"

"I think someone did."

Tiana said nothing.

Reyes continued.

"Mack claimed Malone stole his service weapon, phone, radio, and an evidence bag containing the lighter. The gun appeared in the trunk of Mack's government car the next morning."

"Convenient."

"The phone was beneath the passenger seat."

"More convenient."

"The radio was still attached to his belt."

Tiana leaned back.

"What are you asking me?"

"What happened on that dock?"

"I wasn't there."

"Malone told you."

"Anything he told me would be privileged."

"So he did tell you."

"I did not say that."

Reyes looked toward Deon's photograph.

"Mack left me bleeding inside that church."

"He was pursuing Johnny."

"That's what he says."

"You don't believe him?"

"I saw his face. He wasn't chasing an escaped suspect. He was chasing something he needed."

"The money."

"Maybe."

"What else?"

"That's why I came."

Tiana studied her.

"You want me to help investigate your partner?"

"I want to know whether he is going to get me killed."

"Mack's obsession with Johnny is not new."

"No. But something changed."

"Reno?"

Reyes's expression sharpened.

"What do you know about Reno?"

"Enough to know his career ended there."

"It didn't end."

"It came to Miami to die quietly."

Reyes glanced toward the closed door.

"Mack owes money."

"To whom?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know?"

"I ran his credit after Gethsemane."

"That sounds official."

"It wasn't."

Tiana smiled slightly.

"We all seem to be working outside our job descriptions."

"His salary disappears within hours of every deposit. Cash advances. Wire transfers to Nevada. One payment routed through a company linked to Russian organized crime."

"The stripper."

Reyes looked at her.

"You know about her too?"

"Johnny knows things."

"Does Malone have money in Switzerland?"

Tiana's face revealed nothing.

"That sounds like a question for my client."

"If he accesses it, financial crimes may see the movement."

"Is that a warning?"

"Yes."

“Why?”

“Because Mack believes that money can solve whatever happened in Reno.”

“And you think he’ll go after Johnny again.”

“I think he never stopped.”

Tiana rose.

“Then control your agent.”

“He was a legend before I finished high school.”

“So was Atticus Shelton. Legends still bleed.”

Reyes stood.

“You think Malone has something on him.”

“I think Mack Donnelly lied about what happened at the dock.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting.”

Reyes moved toward the door.

“Tiana.”

“What?”

“If Malone contacts you, tell him Mack is watching every airport, bank, and known property connected to him.”

“I thought you said this wasn’t official.”

“It isn’t.”

“Then why help?”

Reyes looked at her wounded shoulder.

“Because next time Mack abandons his partner, I want to know why.”

She opened the door.

Tiana spoke before she left.

“Agent Reyes.”

Reyes turned.

“Thank you.”

Neither woman smiled.

THE TELEPHONE RANG shortly after six.

Everyone else had gone home.

Tiana sat alone in Deon's office reviewing the FBI agreement from 1991. Whole sections remained classified. Johnny's name appeared only twice, identified as a confidential cooperating witness.

She answered.

"Childress Legal Group."

"How does it feel?"

Johnny's voice came through a poor connection.

"How does what feel?"

"Sitting in Deon's chair."

Tiana looked toward the photograph.

"Wrong."

"It won't always."

"You don't know that."

"No. But Deon knew you'd get there."

"You don't get to tell me what Deon thought."

Silence followed.

Johnny's voice softened.

"You're right."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere warm."

"That describes half the world."

"How was the partners' meeting?"

"You already know."

"I know they voted."

"How?"

"I'm an accountant."

"That explains absolutely nothing."

"Did you get the office?"

"Yes."

"Partnership?"

"Conditional."

"We'll fix that."

"You will not tell me how to run my firm."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"You've done nothing but tell people what to do since I met you."

"That's leadership."

"That's narcissism."

"Can't it be both?"

Tiana looked at the clock.

"What do you need?"

"International banking counsel in Switzerland. Someone outside Geneva."

"Why outside Geneva?"

"Because everyone looks in Geneva."

"Tax attorney?"

"Two. One here, one there."

"Corporate acquisitions?"

"Florida, Nevada, and Delaware."

"Why Nevada?"

"Old business."

"Mack?"

Johnny did not answer.

Tiana leaned forward.

"Agent Reyes came to see me."

"Is she all right?"

"She thinks Mack is hiding something."

"She's right."

"What?"

"Something he'd kill to protect."

"What happened on the dock?"

Johnny remained silent.

"I'm your lawyer," Tiana said.

"That's why I'm not telling you over this telephone."

"Is the line compromised?"

"Assume every line is compromised."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll call tomorrow."

"Johnny."

"I also need aviation counsel."

Tiana looked at the list she had written.

"Commercial?"

"Private."

"Domestic?"

"No."

The connection crackled.

In the background, she heard an aircraft engine turning over.

"Who is flying you?" she asked.

"An old friend."

"What exactly do you want this firm to do?"

Johnny paused.

"Help me turn everything they call dirty into something they have to call legal."

The line went dead.

Tiana slowly lowered the telephone.

Outside her window, Miami glowed beneath the evening sky.

Nineteen floors below, Mack Donnelly sat inside an unmarked car with a cigarette burning between his fingers.

He watched the lights in Deon's office.

Then he lifted a cellular telephone and made a call.

"She heard from him," Mack said.

A man answered in Russian.

Mack closed his eyes.

"I told you I'll find the money."

He listened.

His grip tightened around the telephone.

“Leave my daughter out of this.”

The man disconnected.

Mack looked up at Tiana’s window.

Johnny Malone was preparing to move.

This time, Mack intended to be waiting.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PEACE TABLE

Dale Brody had a pistol against Merle Shelton's stomach when Bo entered the packing house.

Merle held a hunting knife beneath Dale's jaw.

Sheriff Buck Dawber stood ten feet away with his service weapon pointed at both men.

Billy remained near the door.

"Put them down," Buck said.

Neither moved.

Dale's injured leg trembled beneath him. A steel brace surrounded his knee, and a healing scar crossed the side of his face. He leaned against a cane whenever he walked, but he had abandoned it beside the folding table.

Merle pressed the knife closer.

A thin line of blood appeared beneath Dale's chin.

"You killed Jasper," Merle said.

"And your people killed my brother."

"You started it."

"Your family had it coming."

Bo closed the packing-house door.

The sound echoed through the abandoned building.

Dale glanced toward him.

Merle did not.

Bo removed his jacket and draped it across the back of a chair.

"I told both of you to come unarmed."

"He brought the knife," Dale said.

"He brought the gun," Merle replied.

"I didn't ask who started this particular disappointment."

Bo approached them.

Buck kept his pistol raised.

“Bo.”

“I see it.”

“Then stay back.”

Bo walked between the gun and knife.

Dale moved the pistol away to keep from pointing it at him.

Bo took it from his hand.

Then he looked at Merle.

Merle lowered the knife.

Bo extended his hand.

Merle hesitated.

“Your father never made me ask twice.”

Merle placed the knife in Bo’s palm.

Bo set both weapons on the folding table.

Buck lowered his pistol.

“You searched them?” Bo asked.

“They arrived before me.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

Buck looked at the two men.

Merle removed a small revolver from behind his back.

Dale reached inside his boot and produced a folding knife.

Billy stared.

Bo shook his head.

“Any more?”

Neither answered.

Bo looked toward Dale.

Dale removed a second pistol from an ankle holster attached above his leg brace.

Buck exhaled.

“Anything else?”

“That’s it.”

Bo looked at Merle.

Merle reached inside his jacket and placed brass knuckles on the table.

Bo pulled out a chair.

“Sit.”

They obeyed.

• • • •

THE DAWBER COUNTY PACKING Company had been empty for eleven years.

Dust covered the conveyor belts. Rust spread across the sorting machines. Pigeons nested in the rafters above the loading floor.

Faded safety signs remained on the walls.

Workers had once packed fish there during the day.

At night, trusted crews unloaded cocaine beneath the same fluorescent lights.

Bo sat at the head of the folding table.

Merle and Dale faced each other.

Buck remained standing behind Bo. Billy stood beside a county map covered by a sheet of brown paper.

“No speeches,” Bo said. “No stories about who suffered more. Dale killed Jaspar. The Sheltons retaliated. Brodys died. Sheltons died. Dale lost his brother and nearly lost his leg.”

Merle glared across the table.

“He should’ve lost more.”

“You lost enough,” Bo said.

“Jaspar was blood.”

“So was Dale’s brother.”

“He started it.”

“Yes, he did.”

Dale looked toward Bo.

“Jaspar was stealing from our grove crews.”

“Then you should have come to me.”

"You were in prison."

"You had Buck."

Dale glanced toward the sheriff.

"Buck's the law."

Buck's expression hardened.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means this was family business."

Bo leaned forward.

"Family business is Dawber business."

Dale said nothing.

"Why did you kill Jaspar?"

"He crossed us."

"Why then?"

Dale looked away.

Bo waited.

The silence became unbearable.

Finally, Dale said, "Atticus was gone."

Merle pushed back from the table.

Bo raised one finger.

Merle stopped.

Bo kept his eyes on Dale.

"You believed the Sheltons were weak."

"I believed Merle couldn't hold them together."

Merle stood.

Bo pointed toward the chair.

"Sit down."

Merle remained standing.

Bo looked at him.

That was enough.

Merle sat.

Bo turned back to Dale.

"Would you have killed Jaspar if Atticus were alive?"

Dale's jaw tightened.

"Answer."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because Atticus would've come for everybody."

"You were afraid of him."

"Everybody was."

"Say it."

Dale looked toward Merle.

"I was afraid of Atticus."

Merle smiled.

Dale faced Bo again.

"But Atticus ain't alive."

Bo leaned across the table.

"No," he said. "I am."

Dale's smile disappeared.

The building became silent.

Bo did not raise his voice.

"You mistook my imprisonment for the absence of authority. You believed twelve years behind a wall made me irrelevant. That mistake cost your brother his life, crippled your leg, and nearly wiped out both families."

Dale looked down.

"If Atticus were sitting where I am," Bo continued, "you'd already be hanging above his gator pit. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I didn't hear you."

"Yes, sir."

Bo turned toward Merle.

"And you."

"What did I do?"

"You responded to Jaspar's murder like an animal."

"He was my cousin."

"You killed without permission. You burned equipment we could have used. You sent frightened boys into a war they were not prepared to fight."

"They were Sheltons."

"They were children wearing Shelton names."

Merle's face reddened.

"My father would've killed every Brody."

"Your father killed when I needed someone dead."

Merle stared at him.

"You killed because you were angry. Don't confuse the two."

"My father wasn't your servant."

"No. He was my friend."

Bo looked toward Buck.

"And when friendship wasn't enough, he understood who made the decisions."

Merle's voice lowered.

"My father spent his whole life cleaning up Dawber family problems."

Buck stepped closer.

"What problems?"

Merle looked at him.

Bo answered first.

"The kind that kept you sheriff."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"This isn't your investigation, Buck."

"Everything in this county is my investigation."

Bo smiled.

"Then investigate the men still alive."

Billy looked between his uncles.

The name neither man spoke filled the space between them.

Timmy.

Bo returned his attention to Merle.

"You want to become Atticus?"

"I want the respect he had."

"Then earn it through discipline."

Merle looked toward Dale.

"What about Jaspar?"

"Dale will pay a blood debt."

"How much?"

"One hundred thousand dollars from the first profits earned through the Brody property."

Dale looked up.

"You can't take a hundred thousand dollars from me."

"You don't have a hundred thousand dollars."

"That grove is mine."

"The bank owns more than you do."

Dale gripped the edge of the table.

"You've been out of prison three days."

"And I already know your finances better than you."

Bo turned toward Merle.

"The money goes to Jaspar's family. You accept it on behalf of the Sheltons. Once accepted, the debt is closed."

"Money doesn't replace him."

"No. It keeps more people from joining him."

Merle looked at Dale.

Dale looked back.

Neither agreed.

Bo continued.

"If either family retaliates after today, both families lose everything I am about to offer."

Billy removed the brown paper from the map.

THE MAP COVERED DAWBER County from the Gulf to the eastern highway.

Bo marked the Shelton property known as the Neck.

The isolated land extended deep into the swamp, surrounded on three sides by water. Narrow canals connected it to the old smuggling routes.

He marked the Brody orange groves.

The groves reached from the county road toward the interior canal system. Trucks moved through them every day during harvest season.

A red line connected both properties to Battenberg Plantation, the packing house, and the highway.

Dale leaned toward the map.

"What is that?"

"Your future," Bo said.

Merle looked at the Neck.

"You ain't putting Brodys on Shelton land."

"I am not putting anyone anywhere yet."

"Then what's the line?"

"A corridor."

"For what?" Dale asked.

Bo folded his hands.

"The Neck controls the water. The orange groves control the road. Battenberg controls the agricultural traffic. This building provides storage, refrigeration, and access to the fishing fleet."

Merle studied the route.

"What are we moving?"

"Nothing until I know you can follow instructions."

Dale looked toward Buck.

"This legal?"

Bo smiled.

"I stood before Dawber County and promised there would be no more drug smuggling."

"That wasn't my question."

"I meant what I said."

Buck looked at his brother.

The answer was precise enough to be useless.

Bo placed two contracts on the table.

"Merle becomes director of security for the packing house, Dawber Marine, and all properties participating in the operation."

Merle reached for the first contract.

"Dale controls river transportation and fishing crews. Brody trucks provide movement between the groves and the county road."

Dale opened his contract.

"What percentage?"

"Twenty each."

Dale laughed bitterly.

"You offered Battenberg more."

"Forbee supplied capital."

"I'm supplying land."

"Land you're about to lose."

Dale stopped laughing.

Bo turned toward Merle.

"The Neck enters through a long-term lease. You retain ownership."

"Who gets access?"

"People I approve."

"No Brodys."

"People I approve."

Merle stared at him.

Bo continued.

"These properties will make both families more money than you earned during the best years of the smuggling operation."

Dale looked at the map again.

"How?"

"You'll learn when I decide you're capable of knowing."

"You expect us to sign without knowing the business?"

"I expect you to choose between working for me and continuing exactly as you have."

Bo looked around the abandoned building.

"Which has gone very well."

Dale examined the contract.

Merle tapped the page before him.

"What happens if he breaks the peace?"

"Both contracts terminate."

"That punishes me."

"It gives you an incentive to stop him."

Dale looked at Merle.

"And if he breaks it?"

"You lose everything too," Bo said.

"That makes no sense."

"It makes you responsible for one another."

Merle laughed without humor.

"You want us watching each other."

"You've been doing that for free."

Bo placed a pen between them.

"Now you'll be paid."

Neither man reached for it.

Bo looked toward the confiscated weapons.

"Atticus fed enemies to alligators. I intend to put mine on payroll. It's cheaper."

Dale took the pen.

He signed first.

Merle watched him.

Then he signed.

Bo slid the contracts toward Billy.

"Witness."

Billy looked at him.

"You want my name on these?"

"I want you to see what yours can accomplish."

Billy signed.

Bo returned the contracts to his folder.

"Now apologize."

Dale stared.

"For what?"

"Jaspar."

"I paid."

"You haven't paid anything yet."

Dale looked at Merle.

His face twisted with humiliation.

"I'm sorry Jaspar died."

Merle's chair scraped backward.

Bo struck the table with his palm.

Dust fell from the rafters.

"That is not an apology."

Dale looked toward the door.

Buck stood in front of it.

Dale faced Merle again.

"I killed Jaspar without authority. It started a war that killed men on both sides, including my brother."

The words came slowly.

"I was wrong."

Merle's eyes remained cold.

"Accept it," Bo said.

"I accept the blood payment."

"And the apology."

Merle looked at Bo.

Bo waited.

"I accept."

“Shake hands.”

Dale extended his hand.

Merle stared at it.

Bo leaned back.

“Decide which version of me you want running your life. The man offering contracts—or the man Atticus answered to.”

Merle took Dale’s hand.

Neither squeezed.

Neither smiled.

It was not forgiveness.

It was employment.

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THE OVERHEAD LIGHTS came alive.

Motors groaned beneath the floor.

A conveyor belt moved for the first time in eleven years, scattering dust and feathers across the packing house.

Dale released Merle’s hand.

Workers entered through the loading doors carrying tools, electrical cable, and replacement parts.

Forbee Battenberg’s lumber arrived on a flatbed truck behind them.

Merle looked around.

“You already hired people.”

“Forty-three,” Bo said. “Two shifts starting next week.”

Dale stared at the moving conveyor.

“You knew we’d sign.”

“No.”

“What if we hadn’t?”

“The work would have continued without you.”

Bo put on his jacket and walked toward the loading floor.

Merle and Dale followed.

Buck remained beside the table.

Billy studied the red line connecting the Neck, the orange groves, Battenberg Plantation, the packing house, and the county road.

From above, it looked like a single artery running through Dawber County.

Bo stopped beside him.

“What are you building?” Billy asked.

Bo folded the map before he could study it further.

“A reason for everybody to behave.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE FIRST DOCTOR

Dr. Raymond Vale owed the Del Vecchio family three hundred and eighty thousand dollars.

Vinnie told Alex this while driving through Fort Lauderdale in the black Escalade.

“How does a doctor lose that much money?” Alex asked.

“Football.”

“He bet on football?”

“He bets on everything. Football, basketball, horses, whether the bartender remembers his drink.”

“Does he?”

“Usually.”

“Then he wins something.”

Vinnie turned into a fading strip mall between a pawnshop and a store selling discount bedroom furniture.

Half the storefronts were empty.

A sun-bleached sign hung above the final unit.

COASTAL ORTHOPEDIC & REHABILITATION

DR. RAYMOND VALE, M.D.

Several letters had fallen away.

“Your doctor works here?” Alex asked.

“He used to work at a hospital.”

“What happened?”

“Malpractice suit. A nurse. Another malpractice suit involving the nurse.”

“He still has a medical license?”

“For now.”

“That’s all that matters.”

Vinnie looked at him.

"You're seventeen."

"Turning eighteen."

"You keep saying that like a birthday changes the law."

"It changes which court they put me in."

Vinnie smiled.

"I'm beginning to understand why Uncle Kenny worried about you."

Alex looked at the watch around his wrist.

It had belonged to his father.

The band was too large, but Alex refused to have it adjusted.

"Did your father tell Vale we were coming?"

"No."

"Good."

"Why is that good?"

"Because your father thinks we're here to collect his money."

"Aren't we?"

"No," Alex said. "We're here to make sure he gets paid."

• • • •

THE WAITING ROOM CONTAINED six empty chairs, a dead plant, and a fish tank with no fish.

A receptionist sat behind a glass partition reading a magazine.

She looked at Vinnie.

"We're closed."

"The door was open."

"That doesn't mean we're seeing patients."

"We're here for Dr. Vale."

"He's busy."

Vinnie looked around the empty waiting room.

"With who?"

The receptionist lowered the magazine.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"Then you'll need to schedule one."

Vinnie leaned toward the glass.

"Tell Raymond that Vincent Del Vecchio's son is here."

The woman stopped breathing.

She picked up the telephone.

Alex examined the forms on a clipboard.

Pain scale.

Insurance information.

Medical history.

He turned the page.

The clinic accepted cash, checks, and major credit cards.

A door opened.

Dr. Raymond Vale appeared in a white coat.

He was in his early fifties, heavy around the waist, with gray hair curling above his ears. A stethoscope hung around his neck despite the absence of patients.

He looked at Vinnie.

"What are you doing here?"

"Visiting."

"You can't come to my office."

"Why?"

"My staff."

Vinnie looked toward the receptionist.

"She already knows."

Vale's face reddened.

He noticed Alex.

"Who is this?"

"My cousin."

"Why did you bring a child?"

Alex placed the clipboard on the counter.

"I'm the reason we're here."

Vale laughed.
Vinnie did not.
The doctor's smile disappeared.
"Come inside."

• • • •

VALE LED THEM TO HIS office.

Medical journals covered the desk. Framed diplomas hung behind him. One empty space remained on the wall where a hospital credential had been removed.

Vale closed the door.
"I told your father I need more time."
"He gave you time," Vinnie said.
"I made a payment last month."
"You paid interest."
"I'm selling my boat."
"Nobody wants your boat."
Vale sat behind the desk.
"What do you want?"
Vinnie looked at Alex.
Alex remained standing.
"How many patients do you see each day?"
Vale frowned.
"What?"
"Patients."
"That is none of your business."
"How many?"
"Ten. Sometimes fifteen."
"What do they pay?"
"Some have insurance."
"How long before insurance pays you?"
"Thirty days. Sixty. Sometimes longer."

"How much does the insurance company refuse?"

Vale looked toward Vinnie.

"Why is he asking these questions?"

"Answer him."

"A third. Sometimes half."

Alex examined the office.

"You're broke because you let insurance companies decide whether you get paid."

"I'm broke because your father charges twelve percent a month."

Vinnie leaned forward.

"Careful."

Vale looked away.

Alex sat across from him.

"What kind of medicine do you practice?"

"Orthopedics."

"Without hospital privileges?"

Vale's jaw tightened.

"I do consultations and pain management."

"What does pain management mean?"

"It means treating people with chronic injuries."

"Medication?"

"When appropriate."

"Controlled medication?"

Vale leaned back.

"You don't know what you're asking."

"I know exactly what I'm asking."

"You want prescriptions."

"No," Alex said. "I want a business."

Vinnie watched him.

Vale looked between the cousins.

"I will not sell prescriptions."

"We didn't ask you to."

"That's why you're here."

"We're here because you have an active medical license and no profitable way to use it."

"I have a practice."

Alex looked toward the empty waiting room.

"You have rent."

Vale's face hardened.

"You think because your grandfather owns a sugar plantation you understand medicine?"

"Forbee is his grandfather too," Vinnie said.

Vale looked at him.

"Both of you?"

"Unfortunately."

Alex placed a legal pad on the desk.

"Could you operate without insurance?"

"No medical practice can."

"What if every patient paid cash?"

"What patients?"

"People with pain."

"People with pain already have doctors."

"Some doctors won't give them what they want."

Vale became quiet.

Alex continued.

"What does a patient need before you can prescribe pain medication?"

"An examination. Medical history. Evidence supporting treatment."

"Such as?"

"Imaging. Prior records. Documented injury."

"Can those services be provided here?"

"Some."

"What would you need?"

Vale looked at Vinnie again.

"You said you came to discuss my debt."

"We are," Alex said. "Your debt becomes our investment."

Vale laughed.

"You're going to invest in my practice?"

"A new practice."

"Where?"

"Not here."

"Who owns it?"

"You own the medical practice. A separate company manages the office, staff, property, advertising, and finances."

"And who owns that company?"

"We do."

Vale shook his head.

"I'm not putting my license beneath two children."

Vinnie rose.

"I'm twenty-four."

"That does not improve the situation."

Alex remained seated.

"What was your best year at the hospital?"

Vale did not answer.

"Income," Alex said. "Before the lawsuits."

"Four hundred thousand."

"How many hours did you work?"

"Sixty a week."

"What if you made twice that?"

Vale looked at him.

"What if you made it without surgeries, insurance companies, or hospital administrators?"

"Doing what?"

"Seeing patients."

"How many?"

"As many as you can examine properly."

"Properly?"

"We're not asking you to break the law."

Vinnie glanced toward Alex.

Alex ignored him.

Vale stood and moved toward the window.

"This is about oxycodone."

"It's about pain treatment," Alex said.

"Oxycodone is pain treatment."

"Then we understand each other."

Vale turned.

"You think you invented this? Half the doctors in South Florida are adding pain management."

"Then half the doctors in South Florida understand something you don't."

"And what is that?"

"The patient isn't the only customer."

Vale stared at him.

Alex pointed toward the forms from the waiting room.

"Insurance companies make you wait for money and tell you what they won't cover. Cash patients pay before they see you."

"They still require legitimate medical treatment."

"Then treat them."

"What happens when somebody comes in looking for drugs?"

"You refuse them."

Vinnie looked at Alex.

"We do?"

"At first."

Vale caught the words.

"At first?"

Alex smiled.

"Until we understand the business."

• • • •

VALE SHOWED THEM THE examination rooms.

Two had been converted into storage. Dust covered an unused X-ray machine. Sample medication filled locked cabinets along the rear wall.

A genuine patient waited in the final room.

The man wore construction boots and held one hand against his lower back.

Vale stopped outside the door.

"He fell from scaffolding three years ago. Two surgeries. His insurer stopped paying for therapy."

"What does he pay you?" Alex asked.

"Seventy-five dollars."

"For how long?"

"Twenty minutes."

"What does he leave with?"

"A prescription."

"Does he come back?"

"Every month."

Alex looked through the narrow window.

The man inside appeared tired rather than dangerous.

He was not a cartel soldier.

No airplane had carried him across the Caribbean. No armed crew had unloaded anything in the Everglades.

He walked through the front door, paid cash, and left with a doctor's signature.

"What happens if he visits another doctor?" Alex asked.

"I wouldn't know unless he tells me."

"No statewide record?"

"Not one I can search."

"And he could take the prescription anywhere?"

"To a pharmacy."

"What if the medication was dispensed here?"

Vale studied him.

"A registered physician can dispense medication to patients under certain conditions."

"Could you?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you?"

"Inventory. Security. Record keeping. Upfront cost."

Vinnie leaned toward Alex.

"How much upfront?"

Vale looked at him.

"That depends on the medication and supplier."

Alex continued watching the patient.

"Could a management company provide the money, security, and staff?"

"It could provide administrative services."

"And you provide medicine."

Vale closed the examination-room door.

"You make it sound simple."

"Is it?"

"No."

"Is it possible?"

Vale hesitated.

"Yes."

Alex nodded.

"Then complicated is just expensive."

• • • •

THEY FOUND THE STOREFRONT that afternoon.

It stood near the interstate in Broward County, beside a walk-in laboratory and across from a pharmacy. A chiropractor had abandoned it six months earlier.

The examination rooms remained intact.

A reception desk faced a waiting area large enough for thirty people. A rear entrance opened onto a second parking lot hidden from the main road.

Vinnie walked through the office.

"It smells like feet."

"That can be fixed," Alex said.

"With fire."

Vale stood beside the reception desk holding the proposed management agreement Alex had prepared from documents Johnny once showed him.

"You already had this?"

"I had a version."

"You came here expecting me to agree."

"I came expecting you to understand."

Vale turned through the pages.

The new company would pay the rent, hire administrative employees, purchase equipment, and collect management fees.

Vale's professional corporation would employ the medical staff and make all clinical decisions.

On paper.

"What is the clinic called?" Vale asked.

Vinnie looked toward the faded chiropractor sign.

"Del Vecchio Pain."

"No family names," Alex said.

"Why not?"

"Because names attract attention."

"What do you suggest?"

Alex looked through the front windows toward the highway.

"Sunstate Pain and Rehabilitation."

Vinnie grimaced.

"That sounds boring."

"It's supposed to."

Vale placed the agreement on the reception counter.

"I need an attorney."

"Get one," Alex said.

"That could take a week."

"We'll return tomorrow."

Vinnie stepped closer.

"You owe my father three hundred and eighty thousand dollars."

Vale's hand shook.

Alex intervened.

"This is not your father's business."

"It's his money."

"No. It's Vale's debt."

"What's the difference?"

"If your father learns about the clinic now, he'll own it before we open."

Vinnie looked at the doctor.

Vale understood that he had become valuable.

"What happens to my debt?" he asked.

"We buy it," Alex said.

"From Vincent?"

"At a discount."

"He'll never sell."

"He'll sell if he thinks Vinnie is collecting for him."

Vinnie smiled slowly.

"You want me to lie to my father."

"I want you to conduct business."

Vale looked toward the empty waiting room.

"How many patients do you expect?"

"Ten the first day," Alex said.

"And after that?"

"Twenty."

"And after that?"

"As many as you can see without making the examination look false."

Vale removed his glasses.

"You understand that people will abuse the medication."

"People already abuse it."

"That isn't an answer."

Alex thought of the cocaine routes that had destroyed Dawber County. Johnny had financed men who moved poison by the ton and still insisted he had only been an accountant.

Alex had promised himself he would not repeat those mistakes.

No cartels.

No boats in darkness.

No Atticus Shelton.

No men murdered over percentages.

Just doctors, patients, and medicine manufactured by American companies.

"You decide who receives treatment," Alex said. "You're the doctor."

Vale looked at the contract.

Vinnie removed a thick envelope from inside his jacket and placed it on the counter.

Vale opened it.

Cash filled the envelope.

"What is this?"

"Good-faith payment," Vinnie said.

"From where?"

"You don't want that answer."

Vale pushed it back.

"I won't risk my license because two criminals think medicine is easy money."

Vinnie's expression hardened.

Alex picked up the envelope.

"Then don't."

He walked toward the door.

Vinnie stared at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Finding another doctor."

Vale watched them leave.

They reached the sidewalk.

"Alex," he called.

Alex stopped.

Vale stood inside the clinic holding the agreement.

"If I do this, I control every prescription."

"Yes."

"I refuse anyone without evidence of pain."

"Yes."

"I determine dosage and treatment."

"You're the doctor."

"No interference."

Alex looked toward Vinnie.

Vinnie remained silent.

"No interference," Alex said.

Vale read the final page again.

"What percentage?"

"Twenty-five after expenses."

"Forty."

"Thirty."

"Thirty-five."

Alex extended his hand.

"Done."

Vale stared at him.

"You negotiated that quickly."

"I already knew the number."

Vale looked at Vinnie.

"What happens if I say no?"

Vinnie smiled.

Alex answered first.

"Then we find a doctor who wants to become rich."

Vale picked up the pen.

He signed.

Vinnie added his name as the representative of the management company.

Alex signed last.

For the first time, his name appeared on a business agreement without Kenny Gregory above it.

Vale looked at Alex's birth date.

"You really are seventeen."

"For another month."

"I just entered business with a high school student."

"I finished school."

"That isn't comforting."

Alex placed the agreement inside his folder.

"When can we open?"

"Six weeks."

"Three."

"Impossible."

"Expensive?"

Vale looked around the empty clinic.

"Yes."

"Then three weeks."

• • • •

OUTSIDE, VINNIE LEANED against the Escalade.

"We own a pain clinic."

"We manage one."

"Same thing."

“Not on paper.”

“You really think Vale won’t sell prescriptions to anybody with cash?”

“I think he believes that now.”

“And when he stops believing it?”

Alex looked through the window.

Vale stood beneath the empty space where the clinic sign would hang.

“We make sure the records look right.”

Vinnie laughed.

“You have any idea how much trouble we’re about to cause?”

Alex checked his father’s watch.

“No.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Alex looked toward the interstate. Thousands of cars passed every hour, carrying people north and south through Florida.

The old smuggling empire had depended upon hiding.

This business would advertise.

“We don’t sell drugs,” Alex said.

He watched Dr. Vale unlock the medication cabinet inside the clinic.

“He prescribes medicine.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MOGUL

Teddy Henderson spent forty minutes trying to make Bones presentable. The jacket was too tight across his shoulders. The collar scratched his neck. Teddy insisted that the shirt remain tucked inside trousers that cost more than Bones's first car.

Bones examined himself in the mirror.

"I look like somebody died."

"You look like you might be allowed through the front door."

"My clothes were fine."

"You wore jeans with blood on them."

"Wasn't my blood."

"That does not improve them."

Suds emerged from the safe-house bathroom wearing a purple suit Teddy had found in the back of a closet.

The sleeves ended several inches above his wrists.

A white bandage covered the burn on his shoulder.

He spread his arms.

"How I look?"

Teddy stared.

"Like a nightclub bouncer at Easter."

Suds smiled.

"Thank you."

"That was not a compliment."

"It sounded nice."

Bones removed the jacket.

Teddy caught it.

"Put that back on."

"No."

"My father will judge you the second you enter."

"He can judge my shirt."

"My father decides whether we get access to half the wealthy customers in Miami."

Bones took the jacket.

"That's why you're going."

Teddy looked down.

"What does that mean?"

"You're his son."

"That does not carry the influence you think."

Suds adjusted his purple sleeve.

"Your daddy don't like you?"

"My father likes me when I'm useful."

Bones put on the jacket.

"Then today should feel familiar."

• • • •

GORDY SOUND OCCUPIED an entire city block near Biscayne Bay.

The headquarters combined recording studios, executive offices, rehearsal rooms, and a private nightclub hidden behind mirrored glass. Gold and platinum records covered the lobby walls. Photographs showed Phil Henderson beside singers, athletes, politicians, and men whose arrests had occupied the front pages of Miami newspapers.

A fountain shaped like a musical note stood in the center.

Suds looked up at the chandelier.

"This place got its own weather."

Teddy approached the security desk.

The guard saw the healing cut across his throat.

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing."

The guard looked at Bones and Suds.

"They with you?"

"Yes."

"Your father know?"

"He arranged the meeting."

The guard picked up a telephone.

Teddy reached for it.

"He knows."

The guard moved the telephone away.

"Then he won't mind me checking."

A group of young women entered the lobby surrounding a teenage singer Bones recognized from television.

The singer wore sunglasses indoors. An older man followed her carrying shopping bags and a small dog.

Suds smiled.

"I know her."

"You know her music," Teddy said.

"Same thing."

The singer noticed Suds's purple suit.

She smiled back.

Teddy pulled him toward the elevators.

"Do not talk to the artists."

"Why?"

"They belong to my father."

Suds's smile faded.

"People don't belong to people."

"At Gordy Sound they do."

• • • •

THEY HEARD PHIL HENDERSON before they saw him.

"Stop!"

Music died inside Studio A.

An assistant led Teddy, Bones, and Suds into the control room.

Phil stood behind a mixing console surrounded by engineers, producers, musicians, and terrified assistants.

He was in his late fifties, broad-shouldered and immaculate in a cream suit. His hair and beard were trimmed precisely. Diamond rings flashed beneath the studio lights as he pointed through the glass toward a young singer standing alone inside the vocal booth.

"What word are you singing?" Phil demanded through the microphone.

The singer adjusted her headphones.

"Stay."

"No. You are pronouncing stay. I asked you to sing it."

She looked toward the producer.

Phil saw her.

"Don't look at him. He approved the last twelve takes. At this point, he's an accomplice."

The producer shifted uncomfortably.

Phil pressed the microphone button again.

"The man you love is walking out the door. If he leaves, you will never see him again. I need to hear your heart break."

"I'm trying."

"You sound relieved."

The room became silent.

Phil turned toward the engineer.

"Bring her voice forward."

"It's already up three decibels."

"Then why does she sound like she's singing from the trunk of a car?"

The engineer reached for the controls.

Phil slapped his hand away.

"Not that one. Unless you want the drums to sound like garbage cans falling down a staircase."

He adjusted two controls himself.

The vocal rose cleanly above the track.

Phil pointed toward the guitarist.

"The note before the bridge is flat."

The guitarist frowned.

"It's not."

Phil stared at him.

The guitarist checked his instrument.

His face changed.

Phil looked toward the producer.

"You have a flat guitar, a buried singer, and a bridge that lies down and waits for traffic. What exactly have you been producing?"

Nobody answered.

Phil opened the studio door and entered the vocal booth.

He removed the singer's headphones.

"Look at me."

She did.

"You have one of the finest voices I have heard in twenty years. That voice bought your mother a house. It put your brother through school. It employs every frightened person staring through that glass."

The singer's eyes filled.

Phil lowered his voice.

"But none of that matters if you stop feeling the words."

He stepped back.

"Who are you singing to?"

She hesitated.

"My father."

"Where is he?"

"Atlanta."

"No. Where is he when you sing that word?"

Her composure cracked.

"Leaving."

"Good."

Phil placed the headphones over her ears.
“Now stop performing and ask him not to go.”
He returned to the control room.
“From the second verse.”
The music began.
The singer reached the final line.
Her voice broke across the word stay.
Nobody moved.
Phil listened until the note disappeared.
Then he pressed the microphone button.
“There.”
He looked at the producer.
“That is why I spend money.”
The singer wiped her eyes.
Phil turned and saw Teddy.
“Turn the music off. My greatest disappointment has arrived.”
The room went silent again.

• • • •

PHIL STUDIED HIS SON'S face.

His gaze stopped on the thin scar across Teddy's throat.

“What happened?”

“Business.”

“No. Business produces money. You produced swelling.”

Teddy looked toward the studio employees.

“Can we do this somewhere else?”

Phil addressed the room.

“Everybody out except the singer.”

The musicians, engineers, and assistants began gathering their belongings.

Phil pointed toward the producer.

“You stay.”

The producer froze.

"I thought you said everybody out."

"I want you to sit here and contemplate how a seventeen-year-old girl understood the song better after thirty seconds of direction than you did after six weeks of billing me."

The producer sat down.

Phil led Teddy, Bones, and Suds into the hallway.

He stopped in front of Suds.

The purple suit strained across the larger man's chest.

Phil examined him from shoes to collar.

"You look like a nightclub lawsuit wrapped in purple."

Suds smiled.

"That sounds expensive."

Phil's mouth twitched.

Then he looked at Bones.

"You're Johnny Malone's son."

"Bones."

"I know your name."

"You know my father?"

"Your father could smell money through concrete."

Phil leaned closer.

"You smell like gasoline near an open flame."

"Still gets people's attention."

For the first time, Phil smiled.

"Come upstairs."

• • • •

PHIL'S OFFICE OVERLOOKED Biscayne Bay.

Floor-to-ceiling windows filled one wall. The others displayed record awards, magazine covers, and photographs of Phil with every major figure who had passed through Miami during the previous twenty years.

A nervous man waited beside the desk holding an envelope.

Phil entered without acknowledging him.

"Thursday afternoon," Phil said. "The single enters rotation before the weekend."

The man nodded.

"I'll speak to the program director."

"No. The program director has principles. Speak to the man paying his gambling debts."

Phil pointed toward the door.

The man left with the envelope.

Teddy dropped into a chair.

Phil looked at him.

"Stand up."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not finished being angry."

Teddy remained seated.

Phil crossed behind his desk.

"I spent thirty years turning talented idiots into millionaires. Somehow, I raised a millionaire who turned himself into an idiot."

"I've heard this speech."

"No, you've heard shorter versions. I keep hoping repetition will accomplish what parenting did not."

Teddy stood.

"You wanted me to build something."

"I wanted you to learn the business."

"I built my own."

"You sold marijuana to fraternity boys."

"Rich fraternity boys."

"You are not my successor. You are an expense report with hair."

Bones looked away to conceal a smile.

Teddy saw him.

"You think this is funny?"

"A little."

Phil pointed at Bones.

"Don't encourage him. Teddy has mistaken surviving his mistakes for talent since childhood."

Teddy touched the scar on his neck.

"Willis did this."

Phil's expression changed.

The anger did not disappear.

It became colder.

"He cut you?"

"He wanted to scare me."

"Did it work?"

"Yes."

"Good. Fear may succeed where education failed."

"You don't care that he nearly killed me?"

Phil walked around the desk.

He placed two fingers beneath Teddy's chin and examined the scar.

"I care so much that three people had to persuade me not to have Willis Childress killed before breakfast."

Teddy searched his father's face.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because your mother asked me not to begin a gang war while she was planning your funeral."

"I wasn't going to die."

"You arranged a secret meeting with Lucien Baptiste after stealing from both organizations. Death was the first competent appointment on your calendar."

Teddy pulled away.

Phil looked toward Bones.

"You went into the warehouse."

"Yes."

"After Willis ordered you to remain outside."

"Yes."

"You killed Lucien's men."

"Some."

"And saved my son."

"I saved everybody."

"That answer may be the first reason I believe you."

Suds lowered himself carefully into a chair.

Phil noticed his bandaged shoulder.

"You were burned."

"Little bit."

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you smiling?"

"Frowning don't help."

Phil stared at him.

Suds stared back pleasantly.

Phil returned behind his desk.

"What does Willis want?"

"Access," Bones said.

"To what?"

"Your son's customers."

"He already has them."

"Teddy has college students and bored country-club wives. We want the people in your photographs."

Phil laughed.

"You want me to distribute marijuana to recording artists and politicians?"

"No. We want you to stop paying strangers to bring it to them."

Suds unbuttoned the purple jacket and removed a sealed package.

Teddy stared.

"You carried that through my father's security?"

"They searched the wrong arm."

Suds placed the package on Phil's desk.
Phil looked toward the office door.
He pressed a button beneath the desk.
The head of security entered.
Phil pointed toward the package.
"This came through your lobby."
The man looked at Suds.
"I searched him."
"No. You touched his jacket and admired yourself."
Phil pointed toward the door.
"Fire the man operating the front desk."
"He's my brother-in-law."
"Then Thanksgiving will be uncomfortable."
The security chief left.
Suds looked toward Phil.
"You fired a man because I tricked him?"
"I fired a man because you could have been carrying a bomb."
"Fair."
Phil cut open the package and examined the marijuana.
"Quality?"
Suds smiled.
"You holding it."
"Source?"
"Dawber County."
"Volume?"
"Enough to start."
"That means not enough."
"It means Willis don't tell numbers to strangers."
Phil looked at Bones.
"And you?"
"I don't tell my father's business."
"Yet you want mine."

"I want access to the customers your people already supply."

Phil closed the package.

"I don't touch product. I don't transport it. Nothing stays overnight in any building with my name."

"Fine," Bones said.

"My artists never carry it across state lines."

"Fine."

"My employees are not arrested."

"We'll do our best."

Phil's eyes narrowed.

"The correct answer is fine."

Bones smiled.

"You should meet Johnny."

"I intend to."

Teddy looked at his father.

"You haven't agreed to anything."

Phil ignored him.

"What percentage is Willis offering?"

"Fifteen," Bones said.

"Teddy told me twenty."

Bones looked toward Teddy.

Teddy raised his hands.

"He asked."

Phil smiled.

"You boys have been here ten minutes, and my son has already betrayed your negotiating position."

Teddy sat down.

"Now you understand my childhood."

"Twenty-five," Phil said.

"Fifteen."

"You just admitted twenty."

"I admitted Teddy talks too much."

Phil leaned back.

"You want access to recording artists, professional athletes, club owners, hotel suites, yachts, private parties, and people wealthy enough to consider laws an inconvenience."

"Twenty," Bones said.

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty, and Teddy controls the operation."

Teddy looked up.

Phil did too.

"You trust him?" Phil asked.

"No."

"Then why put him in charge?"

"Because he built the market."

Phil looked at his son differently.

Teddy straightened.

Bones continued.

"Suds handles supply. I watch Teddy. Your people open the doors."

Phil looked toward the package.

"What does Johnny Malone contribute?"

"He's in Switzerland."

"That wasn't my question."

"He'll bring money."

"How much?"

"I don't know."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I didn't ask you to."

Phil stood.

The room tightened around him.

"I can end this meeting, close every club to you, and make Willis's marijuana rot in Dawber County."

Bones rose too.

"And then your people keep buying worse product from Lucien at a higher price."

"You think you can stand in my office and tell me how Miami works?"

"No."

Bones stepped closer.

"I think you already know I'm right."

Phil stared at him.

Teddy held his breath.

Suds smiled.

Then Phil extended his hand.

"Twenty."

Bones shook it.

Phil turned toward Teddy.

"You control the operation."

Teddy looked surprised.

"Really?"

"One mistake and I replace you with the giant."

Suds sat straighter.

"I accept."

"You weren't offered anything."

"Still sounded nice."

• • • •

PHIL WALKED THEM THROUGH Gordy Sound.

Recording studios operated behind layers of glass. Producers mixed songs beneath colored lights. Assistants hurried through the corridors carrying contracts, clothes, food, and cash.

Inside the private nightclub, workers prepared for an album-release party.

Phil pointed toward the VIP entrance.

"Product enters there after security changes shifts."

Teddy nodded.

"I know."

"Nothing remains overnight."

"I know."

"Nothing travels on a company tour bus."

"I know."

"Then why did security find six pounds beneath a seat last month?"

"That wasn't mine."

"You were always involved. I simply hadn't determined whether you were useful."

Teddy stopped.

"I built eight clubs, three country clubs, two university campuses, and private customers from here to Palm Beach."

Phil looked at him.

"You did that?"

"Yes."

"Without using my name?"

"Your name opened the first door."

"And after that?"

"My product kept them open."

Phil nodded once.

For Teddy, it was more approval than he had received in years.

They passed the studio where the young singer was listening to the completed track.

Suds waved through the glass.

She waved back.

Phil noticed.

"She likes you."

"I like her."

"She has four albums remaining on her contract."

"I ain't trying to record nothing."

"I meant she is busy."

Suds looked at Bones.

"People really do belong to him."

Phil stopped.

"Everyone in this building belongs to a contract."

"That don't make it right."

"It makes it enforceable."

Suds smiled.

"You funny."

"I wasn't joking."

"I know."

Phil stared at him, unable to decide whether he had been insulted.

Bones laughed.

• • • •

THEY RETURNED TO THE parking garage after dark.

A black sedan waited near the exit.

Bones noticed it first.

"Same kind of car from the warehouse."

Suds's smile disappeared.

Teddy stopped.

"You think it's Lucien?"

Bones handed him the Mercedes keys.

"Get inside."

Suds reached beneath his purple jacket.

The pistol remained.

Two figures stood near Teddy's car.

One placed something beneath the windshield wiper.

"Stay here," Bones said.

He moved between the parked cars.

Suds followed.

"I said stay."

"I don't follow orders from teenagers."

"You follow Willis."

"Sometimes."

The figures returned to the black sedan.

Bones ran.

The sedan accelerated before he reached it.

Suds raised his pistol.

"Too many cars," Bones said.

The sedan disappeared down the ramp.

They approached Teddy's Mercedes.

A photograph rested beneath the windshield wiper.

Teddy stood outside Gordy Sound with Phil.

A red circle had been drawn around his head.

On the back, someone had written:

ONE MILLION.

NEXT TIME WE TAKE THE SON.

Teddy read the message.

His face lost its color.

Phil's voice came from behind them.

"No, they won't."

He stood beside his security chief and four armed guards.

Bones handed him the photograph.

Phil studied it.

His face revealed nothing.

"Sir?" the security chief asked.

Phil returned the photograph to Bones.

"Close every club where Lucien's people conduct business."

"All of them?"

"All."

"That will cost us."

"It will cost them more."

Phil looked toward Teddy.

"Your mother gets two additional guards."

"She'll ask why."

"Tell her I bought her jewelry."

"She'll know you're lying."

"Then buy the jewelry."

Phil turned to the security chief.

"Find every promoter, artist, dealer, and club manager accepting Lucien's money. By morning, they choose between his business and mine."

"You can do that?" Bones asked.

Phil looked offended.

"I made a teenage girl's heartbreak enter radio rotation on Thursday. This is simpler."

Teddy held up the photograph.

"They threatened me."

Phil faced his son.

For an instant, the imperial mask disappeared.

"You are not dying before I decide whether you deserve the company."

Teddy smiled faintly.

"That the closest you can come to saying you love me?"

"Yes."

"Thought so."

Phil looked toward Bones.

"You said Johnny is returning?"

"Soon."

"When he calls the meeting, I'll attend."

"You don't know what the meeting is about."

"It is about money, territory, and men pretending they can become legitimate."

Bones studied him.

"How do you know?"

"Because every criminal eventually wants a conference room."

Phil turned toward Gordy Sound.

Then he stopped.

"One more thing."

Bones waited.

"If Johnny Malone sends his son into another war while he sits behind a desk, I will tell him exactly what I think of him."

"He didn't send me."

"No?"

"I came on my own."

Phil smiled.

"That may be the first interesting thing about you."

He returned inside with his guards.

Suds looked toward Bones.

"I thought he liked you."

"He does."

"How can you tell?"

"He insulted Teddy more."

Teddy opened the passenger door.

"What do we do now?"

"We tell Willis," Bones said.

"And Johnny?"

"When he comes home."

Suds squeezed into the back seat.

Bones started the Mercedes.

Teddy fastened his seat belt.

"You know how to drive this?"

"No."

"This is a hundred-thousand-dollar car."

"I can read the letters."

"What letters?"

Bones shifted into reverse.

"R means race."

The Mercedes shot backward.

Teddy grabbed the dashboard.

Suds laughed.

Bones turned toward the exit.

Behind them, Phil Henderson began closing Miami one door at a time.

Ahead of them, Lucien Baptiste was waiting.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SQUARE GROUPER

At two seventeen in the morning, Bo placed an empty ledger in Billy's hands and told him to get into the truck.

Billy stood barefoot on Rose's porch.

"What is this?"

"Work."

"You said we were going fishing."

"We are."

"Nobody takes a ledger fishing."

Bo walked toward the Lincoln.

Billy looked through the screen door.

Rose stood inside wearing her nightgown. Rufus remained asleep upstairs.

"You know where he's taking me?" Billy asked.

Rose tightened the belt around her robe.

"Your uncle doesn't tell me anything until he needs me to agree with it."

"That doesn't concern you?"

"It has concerned me since before you were born."

Bo sounded the horn.

Rose looked toward the Lincoln.

"Go."

"You want me working for him."

"I want you beside him."

"What's the difference?"

"If you're beside him, he can't forget whose son you are."

Billy looked down at the ledger.

His name had been written inside the cover.

WILLIAM DAWBER.

Beneath it, Bo had added:
PRIVATE ACCOUNTS.
Billy closed the book.
Rose caught his arm before he left.
“You pay attention tonight.”
“To what?”
“Everything he doesn’t explain.”

• • • •

THE MARINA OPERATED without lights.

Dale Brody waited beside an aging commercial fishing boat with one hand resting on his cane. A brace surrounded his injured leg. The boat’s name had faded across the stern.

MISS CAROLINE.

Merle Shelton stood near the fuel dock with a shotgun beneath his arm.

Dale looked toward him.
“I told him not to bring that.”
Merle patted the weapon.
“This ain’t for you.”
“Then quit pointing it at my boat.”
“If I was pointing it, you’d know.”
Bo walked between them.
“Two days.”
“What?” Dale asked.
“You worked together for two days before disappointing me.”
“I didn’t do anything,” Merle said.
“You brought a shotgun after I said no weapons.”
“You said no weapons at the meeting.”
Bo took the shotgun.
“You enjoy testing language?”
“I enjoy being alive.”

"Then stop making me explain things."

Bo handed the weapon to Billy.

Billy looked at it.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Put it in the truck."

"Why does he get to touch it?" Merle asked.

"Because he follows instructions."

Billy looked at Bo.

Nobody laughed.

He carried the shotgun back to the Lincoln.

When he returned, Dale had climbed aboard the Miss Caroline.

Merle remained on the dock.

"You coming?" Dale asked.

"On that?"

"She's seaworthy."

"She's leaking."

"All boats leak."

"Not from the roof."

Bo stepped aboard.

Merle followed reluctantly.

Billy looked toward the dark water.

"Where's the crew?"

"You're looking at it," Dale said.

"That feels insufficient."

Bo extended a hand.

Billy ignored it and jumped aboard.

Dale started the engines.

The Miss Caroline pulled away from the marina.

• • • •

THEY TRAVELED SOUTH through the canal before turning toward open water.

Dale handled the wheel. Bo stood beside him examining an old nautical chart beneath a red cabin light.

Merle remained at the stern, watching the darkness.

Billy sat near a stack of empty fish crates with the ledger across his knees.

No fishing poles were aboard.

No bait.

No nets.

"You planning to tell me what we're catching?" Billy asked.

Bo marked a position on the chart.

"Soon."

"You promised Dawber County you weren't starting another smuggling operation."

"I promised there would be no more drug smuggling."

Billy stared at him.

"That sounds like the same thing."

"Then wait until you understand."

The boat left the shelter of the islands.

Wind struck them from the east. Waves slapped the hull hard enough to send spray across the deck.

Dale adjusted their course.

"Storm moved faster than expected."

"We have time," Bo said.

"You been out twelve years. Weather still don't take orders from you."

"Neither do you. Both problems can be corrected."

Dale looked toward the dark horizon.

A distant light moved across the water.

Merle stepped into the cabin.

"Boat behind us."

Dale checked the mirror.

"How far?"

"Two miles. Maybe three."

"Running lights?"

"White over red."

"Fishing boat."

"Could be Coast Guard."

"Coast Guard runs different lights."

Merle looked at him.

"You sure?"

"My family has been on this water for four generations."

"And still can't afford a boat without holes."

Dale started to rise.

Pain shot through his injured leg.

He gripped the wheel.

Merle saw it.

The insult disappeared from his face.

"I'll check the stern."

He returned outside.

Billy watched him go.

"Peace is going well."

Bo folded the chart.

"They're still alive."

"That your standard?"

"For the first week."

• • • •

THEY REACHED THE COORDINATES shortly before four.

Dale slowed the engines.

Nothing surrounded them except waves and darkness.

Billy looked toward Bo.

"This your fishing spot?"

"Wait."

"For what?"

A low aircraft engine approached from the south.

Billy searched the sky.

The plane passed without lights.

It remained several hundred feet above the water before turning west.

Something fell from its rear.

Then another.

Dark shapes struck the water far ahead.

Billy stood.

"What was that?"

Dale increased speed.

Merle moved to the bow with a handheld spotlight.

The beam found the first object.

A rectangular bale floated beneath layers of black plastic.

Then a second.

A line of packages rose and fell across the waves.

Dale smiled.

"Square grouper."

Billy looked at him.

"What?"

"Florida's only fish with corners."

Bo pointed toward the first bale.

"Bring it aboard."

Dale maneuvered alongside.

Merle hooked the plastic with a boat pole and pulled it toward the hull. Billy helped lift it onto the deck.

The package struck the boards.

A tear opened along one corner.

Compressed marijuana showed beneath the plastic.

Billy stared at it.

"You lied."

Bo looked toward the remaining bales.

"I said no cocaine."

"You said no drug smuggling."

"I said there would be no more drug smuggling like before."

"No, you didn't."

"Then I should have been more precise."

Billy stepped between Bo and the next bale.

"We're going back."

"We return after we collect the shipment."

"I'm not helping."

Bo lowered his voice.

"Move."

"No."

The Miss Caroline rose on a wave.

Billy caught the side rail.

Bo remained balanced.

"You think marijuana destroyed this county?" Bo asked.

"I think smuggling did."

"Cocaine destroyed us. Colombians, guns, airplanes, millions moving too quickly for men who had never possessed anything."

"And this is different?"

"No cartel owns sixty percent. No Mack Donnelly living inside the family. No Johnny Malone lying about the books."

"Just you."

"Just us."

Billy looked toward Dale and Merle.

Dale pretended to watch the instruments.

Merle held the boat pole without moving.

"Weed was moving through these waters before Johnny ever came home from Vietnam," Bo continued. "Fishermen found bales floating offshore and earned more in one night than the shrimp boats paid all year."

"So that makes it right?"

"It makes it ours."

A light swept across the distant water.

Dale looked toward it.

"Boat changed direction."

Merle raised the binoculars.

"Coming this way."

Bo looked at Billy.

"You want to debate morality or get off this water?"

Billy picked up the boat hook.

Together, they pulled the remaining bales aboard.

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THE APPROACHING BOAT passed more than a mile to the east.

Its lights disappeared toward the Gulf.

Nobody spoke until the Miss Caroline entered the protected canal leading toward the Neck.

Merle lowered the binoculars.

"Fishing boat."

Dale smiled.

"Told you."

"You weren't sure."

"I was sure enough."

"You nearly pissed yourself."

"That was seawater."

Bo stood between them.

"Do either of you remember the table?"

They stopped.

The canal narrowed.

Sawgrass pressed toward the boat from both sides. Mangroves covered the entrance behind them, concealing the route from open water.

Billy recognized the red line from Bo's map.

The Neck controlled the water.

The Miss Caroline stopped beside a wooden platform hidden beneath cypress trees.

Shelton men waited with two smaller boats.

They transferred the bales without speaking.

Merle supervised until the final package left the deck.

Billy looked toward Bo.

"Where does it go now?"

"Orange groves."

"Dale's trucks?"

"Yes."

"Then the packing house?"

"Sometimes."

"And Battenberg Plantation?"

"When needed."

The entire corridor came alive inside Billy's mind.

Water to the Neck.

The Neck to the groves.

The groves to the county road.

Agricultural trucks moving through Battenberg and the packing house without attracting attention.

"You planned this in prison," Billy said.

Bo stepped onto the platform.

"I had time."

• • • •

THEY REACHED THE BRODY Orange Groves before dawn.

A refrigerated truck waited inside an equipment barn. Workers hid the bales beneath crates of fruit.

Dale leaned against his cane while Merle counted.

"Twelve," Merle said.

"Thirteen," Billy replied.

Merle looked toward the truck.

"I counted twelve."

"One is beneath the rear pallet."

Merle checked.

The thirteenth bale rested in shadow.

Bo smiled.

"He pays attention."

Billy opened the ledger.

"What am I supposed to write?"

"Weight after processing. Transportation expenses. Shares owed to the fishermen, Sheltons, Brodys, and supplier."

"I don't know any of those numbers."

"You will."

"You want me to be Johnny Malone."

The barn became quiet.

Bo looked toward the workers.

"Outside."

Everyone left except Billy.

Even Merle and Dale obeyed.

Bo closed the barn door.

"I want you to be better than Johnny."

"You think he was the problem?"

"He lied to everybody."

"Because you demanded sixty percent."

"I provided the county."

"You provided fear."

"Same thing when government does it."

Billy closed the ledger.

"I'm not laundering money for you."

"You're keeping honest records."

"Of drug smuggling."

"Marijuana."

"That's a drug."

"It is a plant."

"So is cocaine before people process it."

Bo smiled faintly.

"Bubs teach you that?"

"Common sense did."

Bo walked toward the refrigerated truck.

"One shipment pays twenty fishermen who haven't had steady work in years. Another repairs the packing house. Three more reopen the marine yard."

"And when is it enough?"

"When the legitimate businesses support themselves."

"You believe that?"

"Yes."

Billy searched his face.

Bo meant it.

That frightened him more than a lie.

"What is the prison part?" Billy asked.

Bo stopped.

"What?"

"You learned something in prison. You said you were building more than fishing and trucking."

Bo looked toward the grove through a crack in the barn wall.

"The state spends more money keeping a man in prison than most people in Dawber County earn working."

"So?"

"Dawber County will build a reentry center."

"For prisoners?"

"For men nearing release. They live there, work here, learn trades, and leave with money and employment."

"In your businesses."

"Yes."

"How much does the state pay you?"

Bo smiled.

"Enough."

"And you get cheap labor."

"They get work."

"You get both."

"That is why it's a good business."

Billy looked toward the hidden marijuana.

"You're financing a prison business with drugs."

"I'm financing a second-chance program with marijuana."

"You hear how that sounds?"

"I hear how it works."

"What happens when someone gets arrested carrying your marijuana?"

"They won't."

"And if they do?"

"They made a decision."

"You made it for them."

Bo stepped closer.

"I spent twelve years surrounded by men nobody planned to help. Men came out with forty dollars, no job, and nowhere to live. Then everybody acted surprised when they went back."

Billy had not expected conviction in his voice.

Bo continued.

"I can make money and keep men from returning to prison. I can rebuild this county and give families work. If moving marijuana across water pays for the beginning, I can live with that."

"Can they?"

"Who?"

"The people you use."

Bo's expression hardened.

"You have your father's habit of confusing questions with courage."

"And you have yours of calling greed service."

For a moment, Billy thought Bo might strike him.

Instead, Bo handed him a pencil.

"Write thirteen."

Billy looked at it.

"If you want to know what I'm doing, learn the numbers. If you want to stop me, learn them better."

Billy opened the ledger.

He wrote the date.

Then the number of bales.

Bo watched.

Billy paused.

"What happens when temporary starts making too much money to stop?"

Bo looked toward the rising sun beyond the groves.

He did not answer.

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THEY RETURNED TO ROSE'S house after seven.

Rufus waited beside the pond with his fishing rod.

He saw the Lincoln and waved.

"You went fishing without me!"

Bo climbed out.

"We were working."

"Did you catch anything?"

Billy stepped from the driver's side carrying the ledger.

Rufus looked toward it.

"You caught a book?"

Billy glanced at Bo.

"Something like that."

Rufus ran toward the house to tell Rose.

Bo stopped Billy beside the porch.

"Keep the ledger with you."

"Why?"

"Because Merle can count, Dale can steal, and Buck still believes a badge makes him honest."

"You don't trust your own brother?"

"I don't trust anyone who thinks he's better than me."

Billy looked toward the screen door.

Rose waited inside.

"You trust me?"

Bo placed one hand on his shoulder.

"No."

"Then why give me the books?"

"Because you're the only one I want to."

Bo entered the house.

Billy remained on the porch.

He opened the ledger and looked at the first entry.

Thirteen bales.

One route.

Four families.

A business Bo called temporary.

Billy closed the book.

From the pond, a fish struck the surface and disappeared beneath the dark water.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GHOST COMES HOME

The chartered Gulfstream touched down at Miami International shortly before noon.

Johnny Malone watched Florida rise outside the window—the pale concrete, the distant palms, the flat green horizon beyond them. Twelve years ago, he had fled this state with federal agents, cartel gunmen, and half of Dawber County looking for him.

Now he was returning with more money than any of them knew existed.

Across the aisle, Tommy Scully stared at his hands.

They were a pilot's hands. Scarred knuckles. Thick fingers. A pale line crossing his left palm where a cable had torn through it somewhere over Colombia. He had spent years flying men, weapons, medicine, narcotics, and secrets across borders that existed mostly on maps.

None of that frightened him.

Seeing his daughter did.

Johnny closed the financial statement resting on his lap.

"You've flown into places where people were shooting at you."

"They usually missed."

"You landed a crippled C-123 on a dirt road in Laos."

"Had more road than I had airplane."

"You flew weapons into Nicaragua while half the Soviet Union was looking for you."

Scully glanced toward him.

"Are you trying to help?"

"No."

"Good. Because you're doing a terrible job."

Johnny slipped the statement into a leather portfolio.

Scully looked through the window as the plane taxied toward a private terminal.

"Does she know?"

"No."

"Bubs?"

"No."

"Millie?"

"No one knows except Bones, Tiana, and the people who helped keep you hidden."

Scully nodded slowly.

"That's the part I keep coming back to."

"What part?"

"I'm about to walk into that church and tell my daughter half the people she trusted lied to her."

"They didn't lie. Bubs and Millie believed you were dead."

"But you knew."

"Yes."

"Sanchez knew."

"Yes."

"And she spent twelve years believing I'd been murdered."

Johnny held his gaze.

"You were supposed to be murdered. We changed the ending."

Scully turned back toward the window.

"I should've come home."

"You would've gotten her killed."

"That's what I told myself."

"That's what happened."

"There's a difference."

Johnny had no answer for that.

The aircraft stopped beside a black sedan. Tiana Ross waited near the bottom of the stairs, holding a telephone against one ear and a legal pad against her chest. She ended the call as the cabin door opened.

Johnny descended first.

Tiana took one look at the portfolio beneath his arm.

"How bad is it?"

Johnny stopped on the final step.

"Bad?"

"You've been gone almost a week, you refused to discuss numbers over the telephone, and three Swiss attorneys have contacted my firm demanding confidentiality agreements that make the nuclear launch codes look accessible."

"That sounds encouraging."

"How much did you bring back?"

"Enough."

"Enough for what?"

Johnny looked toward the terminal, where two armored vehicles waited behind the sedan.

"Whatever comes next."

Tiana followed his gaze.

"You hired armored trucks?"

"The bank hired them."

"For documents?"

Johnny smiled.

"Some of the documents are negotiable."

Tiana stared at him.

"How much, Johnny?"

"You'll find out tomorrow night."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only one you're getting on an airport runway."

Scully descended from the aircraft.

Tiana had met him only once at the beach house. Seeing him beneath the Florida sun made his resurrection seem more impossible.

"You still want to do this today?" she asked.

"If I wait another night, I may get back on that airplane."

Johnny handed his portfolio to Tiana.

"Take this directly to the firm. Put it in the main vault. Nobody opens it without me present."

"Not even the senior partners?"

"Especially not the senior partners."

"They have spent the last three days preparing the conference room, revising their partnership structure, and pretending they always respected my judgment."

"Money encourages personal growth."

Tiana looked at the armored vehicles again.

"I'm beginning to understand how much personal growth we're discussing."

Johnny opened the sedan's rear door for Scully.

"Tomorrow night."

Tiana held up the portfolio.

"If this gets me killed, I'm billing your estate."

"Get in line."

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THE ROAD TO GETHSEMANE narrowed until the city disappeared behind them.

Scully sat beside Johnny in the sedan, watching condominiums give way to citrus stands, drainage canals, and open stretches of sawgrass. The closer they came to Dawber County, the quieter he became.

They passed the remains of a gas station Scully remembered from childhood.

The building was gone. Its rusted sign remained.

Farther west, they crossed a bridge where Timmy Dawber had once driven a truck into the canal after drinking all night. Scully and Johnny had pulled him through the passenger window before the cab went under.

Timmy had laughed while they saved him.

He had been laughing less by then.

Scully watched the bridge disappear behind them.

"Does Billy know the truth about Timmy?"

"Not all of it."

"Does he know Bo killed him?"

"We don't know that."

"You believe it."

"I believe Bo was capable of it."

"So did Sanchez."

"We never proved it."

Scully's jaw tightened.

"Rose always blamed me."

"You did talk Timmy into joining the Army."

"I didn't talk him into anything. Timmy saw me in uniform and decided the war couldn't happen without him."

"You could've stopped him."

"Nobody could stop Timmy before Vietnam."

"And after?"

Scully looked out the window.

"After Vietnam, nobody knew how."

They reached the Gethsemane county line in the late afternoon.

The church appeared beyond a stand of cypress trees, its white paint bright beneath the sun. New lumber had been stacked near one wall. A ladder leaned against the roof. Someone had replaced several windows shattered during the recent violence.

Billy Dawber stood on the ladder, driving a nail into a strip of flashing.

Pastor Bubs worked below him, sorting shingles. Millie and Eileen carried folding chairs from the fellowship hall.

Johnny pulled onto the dirt shoulder beneath the trees but did not approach the church.

Scully remained in the car.

Billy looked toward the sedan.

Then Eileen did.

She shielded her eyes against the glare. She could see Johnny behind the wheel but not the man beside him.

Scully's breathing changed.

Johnny waited.

"You coming?" Scully asked.

"This part belongs to you."

Scully reached for the door handle, stopped, and placed his hand back in his lap.

"What if she hates me?"

"She probably will."

Scully stared at him.

"For a little while," Johnny added.

"That's your encouragement?"

"It's the best I have."

Scully opened the door.

He stepped into the road and stood beside the sedan.

Eileen stopped carrying the chairs.

One slipped from her hands and struck the ground.

Millie turned toward her. "Honey?"

Eileen did not answer.

Scully crossed the road slowly.

He had imagined this moment during countless nights in Bogotá, Panama City, Lima, and every nameless airstrip where he waited for men who never used their real names. In some versions, Eileen ran to him. In others, she refused to recognize him.

He had never imagined that she would simply stand there.

Bubs followed her gaze.

The shingles fell from his hands.

"Dear God."

Billy climbed down from the ladder.

Scully stopped at the edge of the churchyard.

Eileen studied the silver in his hair, the scar along his jaw, and the way he leaned slightly on his right leg. Beneath the years, she found the face preserved in the only photograph she owned of him.

Her lips parted.

"Daddy?"

Scully's eyes filled.

"I'm sorry."

Eileen crossed the yard.

For one instant, Scully thought she might strike him.

She collided with him instead.

He wrapped both arms around her and staggered beneath the force. Eileen buried her face against his chest, holding him with the desperate strength of a child who had waited too long.

Scully closed his eyes.

"My baby."

Eileen began to sob.

Scully pressed his face into her hair.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Bubs removed his glasses and wiped his eyes with the back of one hand. Millie covered her mouth. Billy stood beside the ladder, unable to look away.

Eileen finally pulled back.

She touched Scully's face, as if testing whether he was real.

"We buried you."

"I know."

"There wasn't a body."

"No."

"They said there was nothing left to bring home."

"That was the idea."

Confusion replaced wonder.

"The idea?"

Scully looked toward the road.

Johnny remained behind the steering wheel.

Eileen followed his gaze.

Her expression hardened.

"He knew."

"Yes."

"All these years?"

"Yes."

She stepped away from her father.

"Pastor Bubs?"

Bubs shook his head.

"I swear before God, child, I believed your father was dead."

"Millie?"

"We both did," Millie said. "We would never have kept this from you."

Eileen looked back at Scully.

"Then tell me."

Scully glanced at Billy. He saw Timmy in the boy's posture, in the shape of his face, and in the quiet way he absorbed pain before anyone noticed it had reached him.

"Some Del Vecchio men came to Dawber County in 1991," Scully said. "There was a card game. I lost money I didn't have."

Billy came closer.

"My father was there."

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"The men wanted payment. I kept talking when I should've stopped. One of them hit me."

"And my father killed them."

Scully did not soften it.

"Your father saved my life. Then the killing took hold of him, and I couldn't pull him back."

Billy lowered his eyes.

"Afterward, the Del Vecchios sent men to Widow's Walk. Sanchez and I fought them. One tried to take Eileen."

Eileen stared at him.

"I remember Alex."

"He saved you."

"He shot someone."

"Yes."

Her childhood memory returned in fragments: a man's bloody hand, the smell of gasoline, Alex crying while holding a pistol too large for him.

"Johnny and Sanchez knew the Del Vecchios would keep coming," Scully continued. "They made it look as if I had been killed. They got me out of the country."

"And you never came back."

"If they learned I was alive, they would've used you to reach me."

"I was a child."

"That's why I stayed away."

"I grew up."

"I know."

"How?"

Scully could not answer immediately.

Eileen understood.

"You watched me."

"When I could."

"You knew where I was?"

"I knew Bubs and Millie had taken you in. Johnny made sure I received news."

"Photographs?"

"A few."

"Birthdays?"

"All of them."

"But you never called."

"No."

"Never wrote."

"No."

Eileen struck him across the face.

The sound carried across the churchyard.

Billy took a step forward. Bubs stopped him with one hand.

Scully did not move.

Eileen's hand trembled.

"You let me believe you were dead."

"I did."

"I used to pray for one memory of you that belonged to me. Not something Bubs told me. Not an old photograph. Something I could remember for myself."

Scully's cheek reddened where she had hit him.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness."

"No, you don't."

"But I came home to ask for it."

Eileen's anger broke beneath another wave of grief. She grabbed him again.

Scully held her.

This time, neither of them spoke.

Billy looked across the road toward Johnny.

Johnny met his eyes through the windshield.

Billy's expression contained questions about Scully, Timmy, and the uncle who had placed a secret ledger in his hands. Johnny knew the boy would eventually demand answers.

He also knew Bo Dawber would do everything possible to control which answers Billy received.

MACK DONNELLY AWAKENED to someone sitting in his bedroom.

He reached beneath his pillow.

The man in the chair raised Mack's own pistol.

"You should choose a less predictable hiding place."

Mack froze.

Only the bathroom light was on. It cast a narrow yellow line across the floor of his Miami apartment. An empty Jack Daniel's bottle rested on the nightstand beside a half-filled glass.

The man in the chair wore a charcoal suit without a tie. His name was Anton Belov. Mack had met him twice in Reno and once in a casino parking garage outside Las Vegas.

None of those meetings had ended well.

"How did you get in?"

"You gave us a key."

"I changed the locks."

Anton smiled.

"You changed the lock."

Mack sat up carefully.

"What do you want?"

Anton placed three photographs on the bed.

The first showed Mack's daughter walking toward a parked car.

The second showed her seated near a window in a restaurant.

The third showed Barbara embracing her outside a townhouse.

Mack stared at them.

"If you touch either one of them—"

"We have touched no one."

"You followed my daughter."

"We verified that she remains healthy."

Mack lunged from the bed.

Anton pulled back the pistol's hammer.

Mack stopped.

"Sit."

Mack remained standing.

Anton pointed the weapon toward the chair near the window.

Mack sat.

"You told my associates Johnny Malone possesses money in Switzerland," Anton said.

"He does."

"You told them he could provide access."

"He can."

"You told them you could deliver him."

"I'm working on it."

Anton looked around the apartment.

Dirty clothes covered one chair. Case files lay open across the dining table. Newspaper clippings concerning Johnny Malone had been taped to a wall beside maps of South Florida.

"You have been working on Johnny Malone for twelve years."

"I found him."

"You found the ruins of his house."

"He survived."

"Then where is he?"

"Dawber County."

"You are certain?"

"Yes."

"And the money?"

Mack glanced at the photographs.

Anton noticed.

"You made promises in Reno, Agent Donnelly. You borrowed money from men who do not accept disappointment. Then you borrowed more to repay the first debt. This was unwise."

"I know how debt works."

"Do you?"

Anton placed Mack's pistol on the bed and stood.

"We do not want your salary. We do not want your pension. We want Malone and the account information."

"I'll get both."

"When?"

"Soon."

Anton picked up the photograph of Mack's daughter leaving the restaurant.

"Soon is not a date."

Mack's eyes remained fixed on the photograph.

"Give me one week."

"You have three days."

"I can't move that fast."

"Then your daughter may need to."

Mack rose.

Anton drew a second pistol from beneath his jacket and pressed it against Mack's chest.

Mack looked down at it.

"You kill a federal agent in Miami, every agency in the country comes after you."

"We are not threatening a federal agent."

Anton moved the pistol away and slid it back beneath his jacket.

"We are reminding a father of his responsibilities."

He walked toward the bedroom door.

"Three days, Mr. Donnelly. Johnny Malone alive. The Swiss access information verified."

"And if he won't give it to me?"

Anton opened the door.

"You once killed Atticus Shelton."

Mack said nothing.

"I am confident you will think of something."

The apartment door closed.

Mack remained beside the bed.

He picked up the photograph of his daughter. His fingers trembled until the paper rattled.

On the wall across from him, Johnny Malone smiled from a twelve-year-old surveillance photograph.

Mack had once wanted to arrest him.

Then he had wanted to expose him.

Now he needed to sell him.

Mack poured what remained in the bottle into his glass and drank it without sitting down.

• • • •

NIGHT HAD SETTLED OVER Gethsemane by the time Eileen released her father.

Millie insisted Scully eat before leaving. She filled the church kitchen table with fried chicken, collard greens, cornbread, and sweet tea. Scully ate three plates while Eileen sat across from him, asking questions faster than he could answer.

Bubs watched the reunion with cautious gratitude. He had spent years helping Eileen grieve. Now he wondered what damage hope might inflict if Scully disappeared again.

Billy sat at the end of the table.

"Did my father ever talk about coming home?" he asked.

Scully set down his fork.

"Every day."

"Then why did he come back the way he did?"

"Because some wars follow you."

"Is that what happened to him?"

"That's part of it."

"Did Uncle Bo try to help him?"

Scully looked toward Bubs.

The pastor did not rescue him.

"Bo tried to control him," Scully said. "That wasn't the same as helping."

Billy's face tightened.

"What happened the night my father died?"

"Billy," Eileen said softly.

"I want to know."

Scully held the boy's gaze.

"I wasn't there. Johnny and Sanchez had already sent me south. By the time I heard Timmy was dead, everyone had accepted that he killed himself."

"Everyone except you."

"Except me. Johnny. Sanchez."

"Why?"

"Because Timmy survived Vietnam when a lot of better men didn't. He survived the Del Vecchios. He survived himself for a long time."

"That doesn't mean he couldn't have done it."

"No."

"But you don't believe he did."

Scully chose his words carefully.

"I believe your father had become dangerous to people who needed obedience."

Billy looked down at the table.

Beneath his shirt, the key to Bo's private ledger hung from a cord around his neck.

Scully noticed the movement but said nothing.

A car horn sounded outside.

Johnny waited in the sedan.

Scully wiped his mouth and stood.

Eileen stood with him.

"You're leaving."

"For a meeting."

"What meeting?"

"Something Johnny is arranging for tomorrow night. He wants to know who still believes in him."

Eileen's eyes changed.

"Are you leaving again?"

Scully heard everything she could not bring herself to ask.

He reached into his pocket and placed a brass key on the table.

"What is that?" she asked.

"The key to the room Johnny rented for me in town."

"You're staying in Dawber County?"

"I'll be back tonight."

Eileen closed her hand around the key.

"You'd better be."

Scully kissed her forehead.

He shook Bubs's hand, then embraced Millie.

"You raised her better than I ever could have."

Millie held him tightly.

"We raised her because you couldn't. Don't confuse that with not needing you."

"I won't."

Scully stopped beside Billy.

"You look like him."

"Everybody says that."

"I mean before the war."

Billy swallowed.

"No one remembers him that way anymore."

"I do."

Scully went outside.

Billy remained at the table until Johnny's sedan disappeared down the road.

THE TELEPHONE RANG at Rose Dawber's house shortly after nine.

Rose sat in her rocking chair with one swollen foot resting in Rufus's lap. Rufus rubbed it while watching a baseball game with the sound turned low.

Billy answered in the kitchen.

"Hello?"

"Billy, it's Tiana Ross."

He lowered his voice.

"How did you get this number?"

"I'm an attorney. Obtaining telephone numbers is among my less impressive talents."

"What do you want?"

"Johnny is holding a meeting tomorrow night at my firm."

Billy looked toward the living room.

"About what?"

"The future."

"Whose future?"

"Apparently everyone's."

"I don't work for Johnny."

"He knows."

"Then why invite me?"

"Because Alex and Bones asked for you. Johnny agreed."

Billy leaned against the wall.

"Who else is coming?"

"You'll see when you arrive."

"That sounds like something people say before an ambush."

"Eight o'clock. I'll leave your name with security."

"I didn't say I was coming."

"Are you?"

Billy thought of Alex, Bones, his father, and the ledger hidden beneath the loose floorboard in his bedroom.

"Yes."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow."

The line went dead.

Billy returned the receiver to its cradle.

He did not notice the telephone in Bo's study lowering silently onto its base.

Inside the darkened room, Bo remained seated behind his father's old desk.

He had heard every word.

Rose appeared in the doorway carrying her empty glass.

"You listening to that boy's telephone calls now?"

Bo looked up.

"I heard the phone."

"You lifted the extension."

"He's keeping things from me."

"So are you."

Bo leaned back.

"Johnny Malone is holding a meeting tomorrow night."

Rose's expression soured at the name.

"Billy going?"

"Yes."

"You gonna stop him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to know who attends."

Rose studied her husband.

"You weren't invited."

Bo reached for his hat.

"Neither was Johnny when he came back to Dawber County."

Rose smiled despite herself.

"Since when has that stopped either one of you?"

Bo switched off the desk lamp.

“It never has.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The senior partners of Ross, Fowler and Pierce had spent twelve years building one of Miami's most respected law firms.

It took Johnny Malone less than twenty-four hours to take over their largest conference room.

The table was polished mahogany, long enough to seat twenty-four people. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked Biscayne Bay. Oil portraits of the firm's deceased founders hung on one wall, their solemn faces suggesting that none of them would have approved of what was about to happen beneath them.

Tiana Ross stood near the windows, reading the same financial statement for the third time.

The numbers had not changed.

Johnny sat at the head of the table, smoking a cigarette despite the brass sign in the hallway prohibiting it. Tommy Scully occupied the chair to his right. He had traded his flight jacket for a dark suit Tiana had arranged to have waiting at the airport, but he still looked more comfortable in a cockpit than a conference room.

Three senior partners stood near the opposite end of the table, whispering among themselves.

Tiana lowered the statement.

"One hundred twelve million, four hundred seventeen thousand, eight hundred six dollars."

Johnny exhaled smoke toward the ceiling.

"That was the balance this morning."

"This morning?"

"The markets opened."

Tiana looked back at the document.

"You disappeared from Florida with what everyone believed was five million dollars."

"Everyone was wrong."

"How wrong?"

Johnny smiled.

"The five million in the swamp belonged to Dawber County. This belonged to me and Sanchez."

Scully leaned back in his chair.

"Mostly Sanchez."

Johnny glanced at him.

"I did the accounting."

"And Sanchez did the surviving."

"He was good at it until he wasn't."

The humor left Johnny's voice.

Tiana placed the statement on the table.

"How much of this is clean?"

"All of it."

"Johnny."

"It has been sitting in private banks, trusts, holding companies, and investment accounts for twelve years. Taxes were paid wherever taxes were required. The money has been reviewed by attorneys who charge more per hour than this entire firm."

One of the senior partners cleared his throat.

"Mr. Malone, that does not necessarily answer Ms. Ross's question."

Johnny looked down the table.

"And you are?"

"Charles Pierce."

"Your name is on the building?"

"Yes."

"Congratulations."

Pierce adjusted his tie.

"Our firm is prepared to represent you in all legitimate financial, corporate, and estate matters. We cannot knowingly participate in laundering criminal proceeds or financing illegal ventures."

Johnny nodded toward the financial statement.

"Did you read the opinion letters attached to the back?"

"Yes."

"Did the Swiss government release the funds?"

"Yes."

"Did the Internal Revenue Service freeze them?"

"No."

"Did any court place a lien against them?"

"No."

"Then until someone with a badge tells us differently, the money is legitimate."

Pierce looked toward Tiana.

She offered him no assistance.

Johnny crushed his cigarette into a water glass.

"I'm not asking this firm to commit crimes. I'm asking it to protect my investments, establish corporations, purchase property, negotiate contracts, and make certain nobody steals from me."

Scully looked around the room.

"That last part may keep you people busy."

One of the partners forced a laugh. Pierce did not.

Tiana closed the portfolio.

"Charles, we'll take it from here."

"This is still my firm."

"Then you should be pleased that I brought it the largest private client in its history."

Pierce glanced at Johnny, the portfolio, and the financial statement bearing more digits than anything he had previously seen inside the building.

"Of course."

He collected the other partners and led them toward the door.

Johnny called after him.

"Mr. Pierce?"

Pierce stopped.

"I'll need the room through midnight."

"The building closes at ten."

"Not tonight."

Pierce hesitated.

"I'll inform security."

When the doors closed, Tiana turned toward Johnny.

"You have been back in my life for less than two weeks, and I am already giving orders to the man whose name is on my paycheck."

"Your name is on the building too."

"Not first."

"It will be."

Scully smiled.

"I see why you hired her."

"She hired herself."

Tiana sat to Johnny's left.

"Before anyone arrives, we need rules."

Johnny looked at the empty chairs.

"That is why we're here."

"I mean rules for you. No threats. No bribing my partners. No ordering anyone killed. Nobody discusses murders, narcotics shipments, hidden bodies, or federal agents inside this office."

"What can we discuss?"

"Lawful business."

"That should shorten the meeting."

The conference-room doors opened.

Alex Gregory entered first.

He wore the same inexpensive suit he had worn to Kenny's funeral, but something about him had changed. Grief remained in his eyes,

sharpened now by purpose. He carried a leather folder beneath one arm.

Vinnie Del Vecchio followed him in a tailored charcoal suit and an open-collared silk shirt. A gold watch gleamed beneath his cuff.

Scully rose so quickly that his chair rolled backward.

Vinnie stopped.

His eyes moved across Scully's face.

"You're supposed to be dead."

"So were some of your father's friends."

The room went quiet.

Johnny remained seated.

"Tommy."

"I know whose boy he is."

Vinnie looked toward Johnny.

"I didn't kill anybody."

"Neither did your cousin Alex," Johnny said. "That is the generation we are discussing tonight."

Scully continued staring at Vinnie.

"His father sent men after my daughter."

"My father sent men after you," Vinnie said. "One of them panicked and grabbed the girl."

"He put a gun against her head."

"I was eight years old. I didn't approve the operation."

Scully stepped around the table.

Alex moved between them.

"Vinnie helped me when Grandfather told me Dad was dead."

"That makes you even?" Scully asked.

"No. It makes him my cousin."

Scully looked at Alex.

For a moment, he saw the frightened six-year-old boy at Widow's Walk, both hands wrapped around a pistol after saving Eileen's life.

Scully returned to his chair.

"The boy didn't choose his father."

"No," Johnny said. "None of them did."

Vinnie took a seat but kept his attention on Scully.

Alex sat beside him and placed the leather folder on the table.

Johnny nodded toward it.

"What have you got?"

"Sunstate Pain and Rehabilitation."

Tiana closed her eyes.

"Of course you do."

Alex opened the folder and distributed several pages.

"We have a location, a physician, and a management company. Florida doctors can prescribe and dispense medication directly from their offices. The patient pays for the appointment, the examination, and the medication before leaving."

Johnny studied the proposal.

"You're opening a medical clinic?"

"A pain-management clinic."

"Are you in pain?"

"Not personally."

"Then why do I have the feeling I'm about to be?"

Vinnie leaned forward.

"The business is legal."

"So are casinos," Johnny said. "They still destroy people."

Alex pointed to the financial projections.

"The first location could produce three million dollars during its first year. After we prove the model, we expand to Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, and Orlando."

"Where did a seventeen-year-old get these projections?"

"From pharmaceutical distribution reports, public medical-board records, prescription data, and the clinic owner we met in Broward."

Johnny looked at him over the pages.

"You met another clinic owner?"

"I studied the competition."

Scully glanced at Johnny.

"He does sound like you."

Johnny ignored him.

"What happens when the state changes the law?"

"We expand before it does."

"What happens when the federal government notices?"

"We maintain patient records, diagnostic requirements, physician oversight, and separate corporate entities. The doctors make all medical decisions."

"And who makes all the money?"

"We do."

Johnny leaned back.

Tiana studied Alex with growing concern.

"How many pills are you planning to dispense?"

"As many as the doctors lawfully prescribe."

"That answer came too easily."

Alex met her eyes.

"My mother died because she could not afford the treatment she needed. My father died in prison two weeks before he was supposed to come home. I am finished waiting for good things to happen because I followed somebody else's rules."

Johnny looked at him for a long moment.

"Money doesn't fix either one of those things."

"No. But not having it made both worse."

The answer silenced the room.

Johnny closed the folder.

"I'm not approving this tonight."

Alex's expression tightened.

"I didn't ask your permission."

"You asked for my money."

"I asked for an investment."

"They are the same thing until you earn enough to disagree with me."

Vinnie smiled slightly.

Alex did not.

Johnny pushed the folder toward Tiana.

"She reviews the structure. Every corporation. Every contract. Every doctor."

Tiana looked at him.

"You cannot be serious."

"I am not investing until you tell me what can be done legally."

"And if I tell you the entire enterprise is designed to exploit a dangerous gap in Florida law?"

"Then Alex will have to improve his proposal."

Alex sat back, dissatisfied but not defeated.

Johnny noticed.

It was the same expression he had worn when older men told him something could not be done.

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WILLIS CHILDRESS ARRIVED without knocking.

He wore a black suit over a burgundy shirt, with no tie. His right hand was bandaged from the fight in Miami. Two Maroons waited outside the conference room until Tiana pointed toward the lobby.

"No armed escorts."

"They ain't escorts. They're associates."

"They can associate downstairs."

Willis dismissed them with a nod and entered alone.

He saw Scully.

"Damn."

Scully looked up.

"You must be Willis."

"You must be the dead man."

"I've been called worse."

Willis shook his hand.

"My brother talked about you."

"Deon was a good man."

"He was the best of us."

Willis took a chair near the middle of the table.

Johnny looked toward the doors.

"Where is my son?"

"He's coming."

"With whom?"

Willis smiled.

"That's harder to answer."

"I gave Bones one instruction."

"Yeah. He told me."

"And?"

"He didn't follow it."

Johnny looked at Scully.

Scully shrugged.

"He gets that from you."

The doors opened again.

Bones entered laughing with Suds.

They looked badly out of place in the law firm. Bones wore a sports jacket over a black T-shirt. Suds wore a pale blue suit Teddy Henderson had apparently chosen for him, although the sleeves ended above his wrists and the jacket strained across his shoulders.

Teddy came behind them in an expensive linen suit and dark glasses.

Phil Henderson entered last.

Every conversation stopped.

Phil wore a cream-colored suit, a black shirt, and a silk pocket square the color of blood. He surveyed the conference room with the expression of a monarch inspecting a provincial courthouse.

"This is the room?"

Tiana stood.

"It is our largest conference room."

"I've seen vocal booths with more imagination."

"It's a law firm."

"That explains the absence of taste."

Teddy removed his sunglasses.

"Dad."

"Don't 'Dad' me. You said Johnny Malone was assembling the most important business meeting in Florida."

Johnny rose.

"You're Phil Henderson."

"And you're the accountant who destroyed an entire county."

"That description leaves out some details."

"The details are why I came."

Phil shook Johnny's hand, then noticed Scully.

"You fly?"

Scully nodded.

"Anything with wings."

"I have a Gulfstream that keeps developing electrical problems."

"Then you have a mechanic developing financial opportunities."

Phil stared at him.

Scully stared back.

Phil smiled.

"I like him."

Bones spotted Alex.

"There he is."

Alex stood.

The two friends clasped hands and pulled each other into a brief embrace.

Bones looked toward Vinnie.

"This the cousin?"

"Yes."

"The gangster?"

Vinnie frowned.

"You're Johnny Malone's son?"

"That wasn't an answer."

Teddy stepped between them.

"Can everyone try not to start a family war before we sit down?"

Willis pointed toward Teddy.

"That is the smartest thing he said all week."

Phil looked at his son.

"You've spent a week with these people?"

"Working."

"You don't know the meaning of the word."

"I brought you the meeting."

"You brought me two men dressed like nightclub bouncers and a teenager who looks prepared to overturn the table."

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"Who's he talking about?"

"You," Johnny said.

"Oh."

Suds lowered himself carefully into a chair.

The wood creaked beneath him.

Phil chose the seat opposite Willis.

Teddy sat beside his father.

Bones remained standing.

Johnny looked at the bruises visible above his collar.

"What happened in Miami?"

"Nothing."

Willis laughed.

"Your boy walked into a Haitian ambush with two guns and a bad attitude."

Johnny's face hardened.

"You did what?"

"They were hurting Suds."

Suds smiled.

"He saved us."

"I told you to deliver a message and come back."

"I delivered it."

"That was the entire assignment."

"I had time left over."

Johnny placed both hands on the table.

"You could have been killed."

Bones's expression changed.

"I've spent my whole life dealing with what you could've done, should've done, and didn't do. You don't get to come back after twelve years and tell me who I can save."

The room fell silent.

Johnny stared at his son.

Bones did not look away.

Scully watched Johnny struggle with an argument he could not win.

Finally, Johnny nodded toward the empty chair beside him.

"Sit down."

Bones took the chair but dragged it closer to Suds.

Johnny noticed that too.

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BILLY ARRIVED TEN MINUTES late.

He entered quietly, wearing a white shirt, dark trousers, and his father's old watch. The conference room had filled with people he never expected to see together.

Johnny Malone and Tommy Scully occupied the head of the table.

Willis Childress sat across from Phil Henderson.

Vinnie Del Vecchio whispered with Alex.

Bones and Suds were examining the conference room's speakerphone as if considering whether it could survive being dropped from the roof.

Billy stopped inside the doorway.

Bones saw him first.

"Billy!"

Alex stood.

Billy crossed the room. Bones pulled him into a rough embrace before Alex clasped his hand.

For a moment, they were the three boys again—before Johnny's return, Kenny's death, Bo's release, and the money hidden beneath the swamp.

Then Billy saw the documents spread across the table.

"What is this?"

"Our future," Alex said.

Billy glanced at Johnny.

"Whose version?"

"That," Johnny said, "is what we're here to determine."

Billy sat between Alex and Bones.

Johnny studied him.

"Your uncle treating you well?"

"He's given me work."

"What kind?"

"Legitimate work."

Bones laughed.

Billy looked at him.

"What?"

"You said it like you don't believe it."

"I said what it is."

Johnny folded his hands.

"Bo is reopening the Battenberg packing house."

Billy's eyes shifted toward Alex.

"You already knew."

"Forbee told me Bo came to see him."

Johnny continued.

"He put the Sheltons and Brodys back together. Merle controls the Neck. Dale controls the groves and the river access. The packing house connects both properties to Battenberg transportation."

Billy said nothing.

"What is Bo moving?" Johnny asked.

"Produce."

Willis laughed.

Phil Henderson leaned toward Teddy.

"Is everyone in this county a terrible liar?"

"Pretty much."

Billy ignored them.

Johnny watched him carefully.

"Marijuana?"

Billy's jaw tightened.

"I'm not here to inform on my family."

"No one asked you to."

"You just did."

"I asked whether Bo is preparing to compete with us."

"Compete with what? Nobody's told me what this is."

"That's a fair question," Tiana said.

She stood and moved to the front of the room.

"There are no formal partnerships tonight. No investments are being authorized, and this firm is not approving criminal activity. We are here because Mr. Malone requested an opportunity to hear what each of you is building."

Phil glanced around.

"Then why is the door closed?"

"Confidentiality."

"No. It's because everyone here knows the difference between what is legal and what is profitable."

Tiana met his eyes.

"Mr. Henderson, I know your recording company has survived three federal investigations, two congressional inquiries, and an artist who accused you of dangling him from a hotel balcony."

"He was not an artist."

"He was under contract."

"That was his first mistake."

Johnny stood.

The low conversations ended.

"Twelve years ago, Dawber County made more money than most small countries. We had fishing boats, trucks, airstrips, warehouses, pilots, politicians, law enforcement, and routes stretching from Colombia to New Jersey."

Scully watched the faces around the table.

"The operation collapsed because Bo demanded control, the families turned against one another, and too many people started believing they were untouchable," Johnny continued. "Sanchez and I skimmed from Bo because we believed he was taking more than he deserved. Mack Donnelly discovered it. Bo discovered it. Sanchez died, and I burned everything down."

Billy looked at him.

"Along with everyone who trusted you."

"Yes."

Johnny did not attempt to defend himself.

"Kenny went to prison. Bo went to prison. Your parents lost their homes. Businesses closed. Dawber County paid for what I did long after I disappeared."

Willis leaned forward.

"My brother paid for it."

"Yes."

"And now you want to start again?"

"No."

Johnny looked around the table.

"I want to build something that does not depend on one route, one product, one family, or one man."

Alex studied him.

"What does that mean?"

"It means property. Shipping. Entertainment. Agriculture. Private security. Medical investments. Construction. Legal services. Businesses that reinforce one another."

"And marijuana?" Willis asked.

"I don't care what you grow as long as you don't bring federal attention to my door."

"It's already at your door," Tiana said.

Johnny glanced at her.

"That is why I hired you."

"You did not hire me to make the DEA disappear."

"No. I hired you to make sure they knock before entering."

Phil smiled.

"Now he sounds like an accountant."

Johnny opened the leather portfolio.

He removed copies of the financial statement and passed them down the table.

Alex looked at the final number.

His eyes widened.

Vinnie took the statement from him.

"Holy shit."

Willis studied his copy.

"Is this real?"

Tiana answered.

"I have verified it with three institutions, two Swiss firms, and an American forensic accountant."

Teddy counted the digits twice.

Suds leaned closer.

"How much is that?"

Bones looked over his shoulder.

"One hundred twelve million dollars."

Suds whistled.

Billy stared at Johnny.

"You had this the whole time?"

"I had access to part of it. The rest required Scully, Sanchez's records, and several conversations with bankers who believed I was dead."

Willis placed the statement on the table.

"And everybody's been killing each other over five million dollars in a swamp."

Johnny nodded.

"That is the lesson."

"What lesson?"

"Never tell desperate men the true size of the prize."

Phil laughed.

It was the first genuine laugh anyone had heard from him.

Alex continued reading.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to invest a portion in ventures that can survive scrutiny. The rest remains protected."

"How large a portion?"

"That depends on what each of you brings to the table."

Willis pointed toward Bones and Suds.

"We bring Miami distribution and people who ain't afraid to defend it."

Teddy looked at his father.

Phil rested one hand on the financial statement.

"I bring clubs, promoters, athletes, musicians, hotel owners, and people wealthy enough to buy whatever makes them forget who they are."

Teddy cleared his throat.

"And I understand the customers."

"You understand nightclubs," Phil said. "Do not oversell yourself."

Vinnie tapped Alex's clinic proposal.

"We bring a legal product with extraordinary demand."

Tiana looked at him.

"The phrase 'legal product' is doing heroic work in that sentence."

Alex turned toward Johnny.

"I bring the plan."

Johnny studied him.

"Yes, you do."

Billy looked from one face to another.

"And what am I supposed to bring?"

Johnny answered without hesitation.

"Yourself."

"My name, you mean."

"No. I already have enough family names in this room."

"Then why did you ask me here?"

"Because Alex trusts you. Bones trusts you. And whether Bo admits it or not, he trusts you enough to place you beside him."

Billy's hand moved unconsciously toward the key beneath his shirt.

Johnny noticed.

"What did he give you?"

"Work."

"What kind of work?"

Billy hesitated.

"A ledger."

Johnny's expression changed.

Scully saw it.

"His private ledger?" Johnny asked.

Billy said nothing.

"That used to be my job."

"I'm not you."

"I know."

"Uncle Bo says you never understood loyalty."

Johnny walked slowly down the side of the table.

"Your uncle believes loyalty means accepting whatever he decides to take from you."

"He's trying to rebuild the county."

"So am I."

"Maybe Dawber County doesn't need either one of you."

Johnny stopped behind Billy's chair.

"That may be the smartest thing anyone has said tonight."

Billy looked up at him.

"Then why are you both doing it?"

"Because men like Bo and me rarely recognize when we are no longer needed."

Billy considered that answer.

Across the table, Alex closed the clinic folder.

"If this works, we won't need either of you forever."

Johnny smiled.

"That is exactly what I expect you to believe at seventeen."

Bones rested his arms on the table.

"I've got a question."

"Of course you do."

"Who's in charge?"

Several people answered at once.

"Johnny," Scully said.

"Willis," Suds said.

"My father," Teddy said.

"Me," Alex and Vinnie said together.

Phil looked around the table with disgust.

"This organization is doomed."

Tiana raised her voice.

"No one is in charge because no organization exists yet."

Johnny returned to the head of the table.

"She is in charge of telling us why everything we want to do is illegal."

"And I expect that to become a full-time position."

Johnny placed his hands on the back of his chair.

"Tonight, we decide whether we have enough common interests to continue speaking. Tomorrow, Tiana begins constructing the lawful framework. After that, we discuss capital."

Willis frowned.

"That's it? We came all the way here to find out if we can have another meeting?"

"You came because you thought I might distribute one hundred twelve million dollars before dessert."

Willis leaned back.

"Had crossed my mind."

Phil looked at the portraits on the wall.

"Do you have dessert?"

Tiana ignored him.

Johnny looked toward Billy.

"One last question. Does Bo know you're here?"

"No."

"Would he approve?"

"No."

"Then we have at least one thing in common."

The conference-room doors opened.

Charles Pierce stood in the hallway, pale and visibly uncomfortable.

Tiana turned toward him.

"We're still meeting."

"I understand. There is a gentleman here who insists upon seeing Mr. Malone."

"Tell him to make an appointment."

"He said he has been waiting twelve years."

Nobody moved.

Billy looked toward the doorway.

A familiar figure stepped past Pierce.

Bocephus Dawber entered alone.

He wore a dark suit, polished boots, and a white shirt buttoned at the throat. Prison had grayed his hair and deepened the lines in his face, but it had not diminished him. He filled the doorway with the quiet authority of a man accustomed to entering rooms that belonged to someone else.

Billy stood.

"Uncle Bo?"

Bo looked at him but said nothing.

His gaze moved around the table.

Merle Shelton and Dale Brody were absent, but Willis Childress was there.

Phil Henderson sat beside his frightened son.

Vinnie Del Vecchio held Johnny's Swiss financial statement.

Alex Gregory and Bones Malone stood shoulder to shoulder near Billy.

Tiana occupied the chair at Johnny's left.

Then Bo saw the man seated on Johnny's right.

Tommy Scully rose.

For the first time since entering the room, Bo's composure fractured.

Only for an instant.

His eyes narrowed. His left hand closed into a fist. The dead pilot knew too much about Timmy, the Del Vecchios, Sanchez, and the years when Bo's authority had gone unquestioned.

Billy saw the look pass between them.

So did Johnny.

Bo recovered and turned toward the head of the table.

Johnny rose slowly from his chair.

The two men faced each other for the first time since the night Dawber County fell.

Johnny's voice cut through the silence.

"What's he doing here?"

Bo smiled.

"Hello, Johnny."

END OF NOVELLA THREE



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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