Sawgrass Wars: The Complete First Trilogy
Books 1–3
Kurt Weichert

SAWGRASS WARS

THE COMPLETE FIRST TRILOGY

Blood in the Water

Malone's Back

The King Comes Home

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BOOK ONE
Blood in the Water

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

Chapters 1 through 14

CHAPTER ONE
HILL 861

Vietnam, 1968

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

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

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

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

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

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

The explosion flashed white.

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

The Marine fell and did not move again.

Kenny started toward him.

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

"Goddamn it," Kenny whispered.

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

Now most of them were dead.

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

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

The boy looked toward Kenny.

Help me.

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

A North Vietnamese soldier emerged through the bamboo behind him.

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

Kenny tightened his grip on the M16.

The enemy soldier stood over the wounded Marine.

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

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

The wounded Marine found Kenny's eyes again.

Please.

Kenny did not move.

The bayonet plunged into the Marines chest.

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

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

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

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

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

Then he took two hurried bites.

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

Then he stood and turned toward Kenny.

Kenny stopped breathing.

The soldier walked closer.

One step.

Then another.

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

The soldier stopped directly above him.

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

The soldier stared down into the depression.

Kenny was certain their eyes met.

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

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

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

Instead, he remained still.

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

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

Kenny released the breath trapped inside his chest.

Gunfire erupted farther down the hill.

This time it came in disciplined bursts.

American rifles.

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

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

Kenny screamed.

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

Another explosion lifted the ground beneath him.

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

Kenny lay beneath the debris and listened.

English voices carried through the smoke.

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

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

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

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

A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth.

"Found one," the Marine called. "KIA."

Kenny would have recognized that voice anywhere.

Johnny Malone.

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

Johnny studied the body, then surveyed the ruined hillside.

"Kenny Gregory!"

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

Johnny spun toward the sound and raised his rifle.

Kenny coughed again.

Johnny lowered the weapon and ran toward him.

"Kenny?"

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

"You are one sorry sight, Sporty."

Kenny attempted to laugh but coughed instead.

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

"Easy," Johnny said. "I've got you."

Kenny sagged against him.

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

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

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

He handed Kenny his canteen.

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

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

"I knew you'd come."

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

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

A voice cut through the smoke.

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

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

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

"I can see that."

"He needs a corpsman."

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

Kenny stared at him. "Six battalions?"

"That's what intelligence says."

"Two thousand men," Kenny said.

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

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

The Americans began firing toward the tree line again.

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

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

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

"Farther than I want to carry his ass."

"I can walk," Kenny said.

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

Johnny caught him. "That was convincing."

A hand slapped Johnny's shoulder.

He spun with his rifle raised.

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

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

Something moved near Kenny's boot.

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

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

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

"I didn't."

"You just stabbed the ground?"

"Had a feeling."

"You're crazier than Timmy."

"No one is crazier than Timmy."

A rifle clicked in the darkness beyond them.

Johnny's expression changed.

"Down!"

The jungle erupted.

"Contact right!" Sanchez shouted.

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

"They'll hit us from the middle next."

"How do you know?" Kenny asked.

"They think we're as dumb as they are."

Johnny hurled the grenade.

"Frag out!"

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

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

"Defend yourselves, Marines!"

More soldiers came through the bamboo.

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

The soldier drove a fist into Kenny's jaw.

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

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

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

A knife appeared in the soldier's hand.

Kenny caught his wrist.

The blade hovered inches above Kenny's face.

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

The same boy who had urinated on him.

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

A pistol fired.

The soldier went limp and collapsed across Kenny.

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

Kenny shoved the body aside.

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

Kenny stared at him.

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

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

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

"I watched him kill one of mine."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This ain't mine."

"What happened?"

"Ran out of ammunition."

Timmy held up the knife.

For one brief second, Kenny did not recognize the boy he had known since childhood. Timmy had always been the most enthusiastic among them—the first to volunteer, the first to fight, the first to laugh afterward. Something different stared out through his eyes now.

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

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

A distant rotor beat sounded beyond the hill.

Kenny had never heard anything so beautiful.

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

"You boys don't have to carry me," Kenny said.

"Wasn't asking permission," Timmy replied.

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

Rounds snapped through the trees behind them.

Kenny felt Johnny's grip tighten.

"We ain't dying in this soup today, Ken."

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

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

Together.

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

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

Sanchez waved the men forward.

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

CHAPTER TWO
THE SHARK

DAWBER COUNTY, FLORIDA, 2003

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

Alex Gregory hated that saying.

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

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

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

Alex looked down at his reflection in the water.

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

His father would have been embarrassed.

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

Billy Dawber sat at the stern with one hand on the tiller. His blond hair had been bleached nearly white by the Florida sun. He wore a faded green fishing shirt, white shorts, and sneakers that had

not been white in years. A lump of chewing tobacco bulged beneath his lower lip.

Billy scanned the waterfront homes lining the canal ahead.

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

To Billy, the empty homes represented opportunity.

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

"The white place," Billy said.

Alex followed his gaze.

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

"Too big," Alex said.

"Motors ain't too big."

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

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

"That's what you said last time."

"We got away last time."

"We almost got arrested."

"Almost don't count."

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

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

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

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

Royalty had suffered a considerable decline.

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

Billy rarely spoke about him.

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

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

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

One bad play ended his future.

He never complained about it.

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

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

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

The rod had belonged to his father.

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

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

Bones had grown up fighting over those stories.

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

The boy had also said something about Johnny Malone.

No one repeated exactly what.

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

Johnny Malone was the darkest of those places.

Alex glanced at the rod.

"Catch anything?"

Bones continued watching the line. "Not yet."

"You know we're not out here to fish."

"I'm out here to fish."

"We're supposed to be making money."

"You complained about stealing motors the whole way here."

"Because stealing motors is stupid."

Bones looked back. "Then why'd you come?"

"To stop you two from getting caught."

Billy laughed. "You planned the last three jobs."

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

Bones returned his attention to the water. "Then swim home."

Alex watched him for another moment.

Bones knew something.

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

The latest card came from Miami.

Bones claimed they were from an old wrestling coach.

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

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

Alex studied it. "The smaller boat?"

"The Yamaha on the back."

"That motor's bolted through the transom."

"I've got tools."

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

"My plan is to use the tools."

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

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

Bones sat upright. "Got one!"

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

The rod bent toward the water.

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

"This is a big one."

Billy looked over his shoulder. "How big?"

"Marlin big."

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

Bones grinned. "There is now."

The fish pulled again, tilting the skiff.

"Slow us down!" Bones shouted.

Billy eased off the throttle.

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

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

"You're not landing anything."

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

Billy swung the skiff away from the canal.

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

"Helping."

"Why?"

"Because I want to see what he caught."

"He caught seaweed."

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

"A tire, then."

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

Alex watched the expensive homes slide away behind them.

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

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

Alex began to laugh.

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

"This."

"What about it?"

"It's a metaphor."

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

Billy frowned. "A metaphor for what?"

"Our lives."

"I know what a metaphor is."

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

"You spelled it for me last time."

"Because you looked confused."

"I wasn't confused."

"You always look confused," Bones said.

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

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

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

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

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

"That isn't the point."

"It feels like the point."

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

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

"You don't know what you have."

"I know it's big."

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

"Put it on my wall."

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

Bones's grin disappeared.

Alex knew he should stop.

He did not.

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

Billy rose from the stern.

"Alex."

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

"You'd best watch yourself."

The quieter Bones spoke, the more dangerous he became.

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

"This fish is coming into the boat."

"This isn't about the fish."

"It is to me."

"That's the problem."

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

Billy pointed. "There!"

Bones fought the reel. "I told you!"

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

"You jealous?"

"Of what? Whatever garbage you hooked?"

The fish thrashed again.

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

"Hold the line," Bones said.

Billy grabbed it with both hands.

The skiff rocked beneath their weight.

Alex remained seated.

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

"This is how people lose fingers."

"Get up."

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

Bones pulled.

The creature broke the surface.

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

Billy yelled and released the line.

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

Alex shoved Billy backward.

"Cut it!" Billy shouted.

Alex moved toward the gunwale with the pliers.

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

"It almost took Billy's arm."

"We can get it in."

"In what? This boat?"

"We'll have shark steaks."

"It'll have us."

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

Alex reached for the line.

A pistol fired beside his head.

The concussion knocked the breath from him.

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

Billy ducked behind the center bench.

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

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

Smoke curled from the pistol.

Alex looked at the gun, then at Bones.

"You shot at me."

"I shot the shark."

"The bullet passed my hand!"

"I knew where you were."

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

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

"Al—"

The fishing rod slipped from beneath his arm.

Bones grabbed for it too late.

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

The three boys watched until both vanished.

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

Alex's hands began shaking.

"You asshole."

"I'm sorry."

"You almost killed me."

"I wasn't gonna hit you."

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

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

"No thanks to him."

"I said I was sorry," Bones repeated.

Alex shoved him.

Bones barely moved.

"Where's your shark?"

Bones looked toward the water. "Lost it."

"And your father's rod?"

"That, too."

"All that and you lost everything."

Bones's regret hardened into anger.

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

Alex lunged toward him.

Billy forced himself between them.

"Sit down. Both of you."

"Get out of my way," Alex said.

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

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

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

Bones lowered himself at the bow and buried his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, guys."

Billy spat tobacco juice over the side. "Thanks for nothing."

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

Another wasted day.

More gasoline they could not afford.

Another narrow escape with nothing to show for it.

Alex looked at Billy and Bones.

"We can't keep doing this."

Neither answered.

"I'm serious. We're going nowhere."

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

"Yes."

Bones lifted his head.

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

"We find Johnny Malone's money."

Bones's expression went still.

Billy laughed once. "That again?"

"It exists."

"It's a Dawber County story."

"So is Smiley, but that gator ate Bobby Boone."

"That doesn't prove Bobby found any money."

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

Billy glanced back. "What?"

"A map."

Bones stared at Alex.

"What kind of map?"

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

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

"Bobby left it at the boathouse."

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

"I'm telling you now."

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

"Maybe he found the wrong thing first."

"Smiley."

"Exactly."

Billy considered that.

Bones did not.

"Leave my daddy out of it."

"We can't."

"You can."

"Kenny and Johnny made the map."

"You don't know that."

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

Bones turned away.

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

"I never said that."

"You did at Mary Chris's funeral."

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

"That's the same thing."

"No, it ain't."

"What about Ed Dantés?"

Bones looked back sharply.

Billy frowned. "Who's that?"

Alex watched Bones. "Ask him."

Bones rose.

The skiff shifted beneath his weight.

"You went through my room?"

"I saw the postcards."

"You had no right."

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

Billy stared at Bones. "Is that true?"

Bones said nothing.

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

Bones stepped toward him.

"Don't."

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

"I mean it, Alex."

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

"My daddy doesn't owe you anything."

"He owes you."

The words stopped Bones.

For an instant, something wounded appeared behind his eyes.

Alex saw it and continued.

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

Bones's hands curled into fists.

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

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

Billy guided the skiff into the nearest usable slip.

"Help me tie up," he said.

Bones jumped onto the dock with the bowline.

Alex collected the cooler and climbed after him.

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

Bones tied the line around a cleat.

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

Billy covered the skiff with a black tarp.

Bones approached Alex.

For a moment, Alex believed he had won.

Bones punched him in the left eye.

The world flashed white.

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

Bones stood over him.

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

He walked away.

Billy hurried toward Alex and offered his hand.

Alex slapped it aside.

"A lot of help you were."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"He listens to you."

"No, he doesn't."

"You could've tried."

Billy looked down the road where Bones had disappeared.

"You knew what was going to happen."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No. It makes it Bones."

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

Billy picked up the cooler.

"Forget the money, Al."

"I can't."

"It'll get us killed."

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

Billy set the cooler near the boathouse door.

"Go put some ice on your face."

"The ice is all over the dock."

"Then use a beer."

Billy returned to the skiff.

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

The marina settled into silence.

Alex touched his eye and winced.

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

None of it mattered.

The map was real.

Johnny Malone was alive.

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

Kenny Gregory was getting out of prison in three weeks.

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

CHAPTER THREE
THE MAP

REFORM CORRECTIONAL CORPORATION, FLORIDA

Kenny Gregory had survived twelve years in prison by allowing dangerous men to underestimate him.

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

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

The ones who had been there awhile knew better.

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

Prison was not so different from Dawber County.

The walls were higher, but the politics were simpler.

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

"Chaparrito!"

Kenny stopped.

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

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

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

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

"Plenty of time."

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

The prisoner hissed and reached farther through the bars.

Kenny remained just outside his grasp.

"Come closer."

"I would, but people might talk."

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

"Keep moving."

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

Kenny called him Dick.

Not to his face every time.

Only often enough to keep their relationship honest.

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

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

Hot Tamale shouted after him in Spanish.

Kenny answered without turning.

The shouting stopped.

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

"I complimented his mother."

"You think you're funny?"

"I know I am."

Greaves jabbed the baton into Kenny's stomach.

Pain folded him forward.

Hot Tamale cheered from the cell.

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

Kenny struggled to breathe. "Three weeks."

"What?"

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

Greaves raised the baton again.

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

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

"I was hoping we could stay friends afterward."

Greaves shoved him down the corridor.

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

Three weeks.

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

Kenny did not expect forgiveness.

He would settle for the chance to speak.

"Through here," Greaves said.

He opened the door to the visitors' room.

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

Kenny expected to see Deon Childress, his attorney. Deon had promised to check on Kenny's release paperwork and investigate

why the prison had suddenly begun recording disciplinary violations that had never occurred.

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

Kenny stopped.

For one strange moment, the room seemed to tilt.

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

The boy behind the glass was almost a man.

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

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

Greaves nudged him with the baton.

"Move."

Kenny approached the glass and sat.

Alex picked up the telephone.

Kenny lifted the receiver on his side.

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

Now his mind went blank.

His eyes settled on the bruise.

"I hope the other guy looks worse."

Alex's expression hardened.

"Six years, and that's the first thing you say to me?"

Kenny regretted the words immediately.

"Well, I—"

"You always did have a way with words, Kenny."

The use of his name hurt more than Kenny expected.

"What happened to your eye?"

"Nothing."

"That doesn't look like nothing."

"It's handled."

"Who hit you?"

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

Kenny looked at the glass separating them.

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

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

Kenny attempted to recover.

"Where's Bobby?"

"Dead."

The word landed harder than Greaves's baton.

Kenny stared at him. "What?"

"Bobby Boone is dead."

"When?"

"A few weeks ago."

"How?"

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

Alex paused.

"And his right arm."

Kenny's hand tightened around the telephone.

"What happened to the rest of him?"

"Wildlife officers cut open Smiley."

Kenny closed his eyes.

Everyone in Dawber County knew Smiley, the ancient alligator with the scarred snout and crooked teeth. People had been blaming

unexplained disappearances on that animal for decades. Most of the stories were nonsense.

Apparently, Bobby Boone was not.

"Why wasn't I told?"

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

"Bobby was supposed to be looking after you."

"He wasn't very good at it."

"What about your grandparents?"

"Which ones?"

"The Battenbergs."

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

"He's your grandfather."

"He remembers that when it's useful."

"Where are you living?"

"The boathouse."

"With who?"

"By myself."

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

"Almost eighteen."

"That's not an answer."

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

"What about school?"

"What about it?"

"Are you going?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

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

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

He softened his voice.

"Are you eating?"

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

"I didn't mean it that way."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know that."

The answer stopped Alex again.

Kenny placed his free hand on the metal counter.

"I know I wasn't there."

"You went to prison."

"I remember."

"Ma got sick while you were in here."

Kenny looked down.

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

"Alex—"

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

"I know."

"No, you don't."

Kenny looked up.

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

The visitors' room seemed to disappear around them.

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

Kenny had promised to give her a better life.

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

"I loved your mother."

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

Kenny had no defense.

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

"I came because of this."

He pressed it against the glass.

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

The map.

His hand struck the window.

"Put that down."

Greaves looked toward them from across the room.

Alex did not move.

"Where did you get it?" Kenny whispered.

"Bobby's things."

"Put it away."

"You recognize it."

"Alex."

"Who made it?"

Kenny glanced toward Greaves.

The guard had begun walking closer.

"Where did Bobby keep that?"

"At the boathouse."

"Who else has seen it?"

"No one."

"Are you sure?"

"Bones and Billy know it exists. They haven't seen it."

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

Greaves struck the counter with his baton.

"Hands off the window."

Kenny pulled back.

Alex lowered the map but kept it visible.

"I can't read the code."

"Good."

"You and Johnny Malone made it."

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

Every word was being recorded.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

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

"You need to forget you found that."

"Five million dollars is difficult to forget."

Greaves stopped behind Kenny.

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

"That's why I'm here."

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

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

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

Johnny Malone had, too.

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

"Where's the money?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Can't or won't?"

"Both."

"Then tell me how to find Johnny."

Kenny's heart lurched.

He looked toward the camera again.

"Johnny's dead."

"No, he isn't."

"You don't know that."

"Bones does."

"What did Bones say?"

"That he believes Johnny is alive."

Kenny studied his son.

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

Kenny refused to give him the satisfaction.

Instead, he leaned toward the receiver.

"Have you spoken with the pastor?"

"Bubs?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"Your situation."

Alex glanced at the map.

"My financial situation?"

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

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

"I want you to speak to him."

"Why?"

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

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

Kenny forced himself not to react.

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

Alex folded the map and returned it beneath his shirt.

"All right."

"And stay away from Johnny Malone."

"You just said he was dead."

"Then staying away should be easy."

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

"Time."

Kenny turned. "We just started."

"Visit's over."

"That's my son."

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

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

Alex remained seated behind the glass.

Kenny placed his hand against it.

Greaves lifted the baton.

"I said hands off."

Kenny lowered it.

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

"I'm getting out in three weeks."

Alex stood.

"We can start over," Kenny said.

His son stared at him for a long moment.

"I'm not interested in starting over."

He turned toward the exit.

"I love you," Kenny called.

Alex stopped but did not look back.

Then he walked out of the room.

Greaves seized Kenny's shoulder.

Kenny twisted free. "All right, Dick."

The guard smiled.

"What did you call me?"

Kenny immediately understood.

Greaves had been waiting for an excuse.

"I said all right."

"You threatened me."

"I did no such thing."

Greaves shoved him against the counter.

Two additional guards entered through the door.

Kenny raised his hands.

"What is this?"

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

"That's a lie."

"Take him to isolation."

Panic moved through Kenny before either guard touched him.

"No."

Greaves's smile widened.

Kenny backed against the glass.

"My release is in three weeks."

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

"I want my attorney."

"You can want anything you like."

"Get Deon Childress."

The guards grabbed his arms.

Kenny resisted.

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

Greaves drove the baton into Kenny's ribs.

The guards dragged him from the room.

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

Warden Vern Kinder watched the recording for the third time.

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

The appearance had served him well.

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

Kinder paused the recording.

"Magnify that."

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

"The camera resolution ain't good enough."

"Try."

Waylon enlarged the image.

The map dissolved into gray squares.

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

"That boy has it."

"Has what?"

"What do you think?"

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

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

"Smiley ate him."

"Smiley didn't draw that."

Kinder resumed the recording.

Kenny told Alex to speak with Pastor Bubs.

Kinder stopped it again.

"The pastor."

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

"He was close to Malone."

"Everybody was close to Malone until the arrests."

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

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

He also believed Kenny Gregory knew where it was.

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

"Keep Gregory in isolation."

"How long?"

"Until he tells us what the map means."

"His release date is close."

Kinder replaced his glasses.

"Then we don't have much time."

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

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

"What about the kid?"

Kinder watched Alex leave the visitors' room.

"Call Trent."

"He's following the lawyer."

"He can follow two people."

Waylon reached for the telephone.

"And Waylon?"

"Yeah?"

"Find out everything you can about Pastor Bubs."

The isolation cell was smaller than Kenny remembered.

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

The guards threw Kenny inside.

Greaves stood in the doorway.

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

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

"You're a terrible liar."

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

Greaves's smile disappeared.

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

"No, you can't."

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

Kenny looked at the walls.

They seemed to be moving inward already.

Greaves noticed.

"You don't like small places, do you?"

Kenny forced himself to smile. "I've lived in your head for years. Nothing's smaller than that."

Greaves slammed the door.

The lock engaged.

Kenny stood alone beneath the fluorescent light.

His breathing quickened.

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

Kenny pressed both hands against the sides of his head.

"This isn't Vietnam."

His voice sounded distant.

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

"This isn't the hill."

The room continued shrinking.

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

His thoughts returned to Alex.

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

Someone had already hurt his son.

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

Kenny rocked forward and backward on the cot.

He had three weeks to survive the prison.

Alex might not have three weeks outside it.

Kenny opened his eyes and stared at the door.

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

No one answered.

Kenny struck the door with both fists.

"Do you hear me? Get me my damned lawyer!"

His voice echoed through the isolation wing.

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

CHAPTER FOUR
GETHSEMANE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To Bubs, he remained Brother Deon.

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

Bubs nodded. "I appreciate that."

"You shouldn't have waited this long."

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

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

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

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

"Millie has always preferred candlelight."

"Pastor."

"I hear you."

Deon removed his sunglasses.

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

Bubs looked across the property.

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

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

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

The congregation once filled every pew on Sunday mornings.

Now entire rows remained empty.

When the federal agents dismantled the smuggling empire in 1991, they did more than arrest criminals. They removed the industry that had quietly supported nearly every family in the county.

Fishing boats stopped running. Mechanics closed their garages. Restaurants emptied. Those who could leave moved to Fort Myers, Tampa, or farther north.

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

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

"Millie and I will manage," he said.

"You always say that."

"We always do."

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

A hammer struck the church roof.

Both men looked up.

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

"Everything all right down there?"

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

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

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

Billy shook his head and returned to work.

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

"Mama Millie is heating the ribs."

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

"The same kind she made Sunday."

"I might stay for lunch."

Bubs glanced at Deon. "Young love."

Deon smiled. "Does Billy know?"

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

"I think Eileen knows."

"Women usually do."

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

"My wife has me on a diet."

"Mama Millie doesn't recognize diets."

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

Deon put on his sunglasses.

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

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

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

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

Bubs's expression remained calm.

"That shouldn't concern Warden Kinder."

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

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

Deon entered his Mercedes and started the engine.

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

"Go with God, son."

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

Bubs watched until the car disappeared.

Behind him, Eileen called Billy to lunch.

The hammering stopped.

For a moment, Gethsemane became quiet.

Then another engine roared beyond the trees.

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

Bubs stepped into its path and raised both hands.

The car skidded sideways.

Its front bumper stopped several feet from him.

Alex Gregory leaned through the open driver's window.

"You trying to get killed?"

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

"I saw you."

"Then why did you nearly run me over?"

"I thought you'd move."

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

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

Bubs approached the window.

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

"What happened to your face?"

"Fell."

"On what?"

"A fist-shaped rock."

"Whose fist?"

"It doesn't matter."

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

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

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

"Getting into your car."

"I can see that."

"Park beside the church."

"I'm not staying."

"Mama Millie made ribs."

"I didn't come to eat."

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

"I came to talk."

"We can talk inside."

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

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

Alex accelerated toward the gravel lot.

"When did you last sleep?" Bubs asked.

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

"At this rate, that should be Thursday."

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

"I'm not here for a sermon."

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

"I don't believe in organized religion."

"You don't believe in organized anything."

"I'm a Deist."

Bubs looked at him.

"I read about it."

"In what?"

"That John Adams book."

"John Adams was not a Deist."

"Maybe it was Thomas Jefferson."

"Thomas Paine would be a better example."

"That's who I meant."

"You should read the Bible."

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

"Because you clearly need help selecting a religion."

Alex turned off the engine.

Bubs opened the door.

"Hold on."

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

"I saw Kenny."

Bubs slowly closed the door again.

"How was he?"

"In prison."

"That wasn't my question."

"He looks old."

"Twelve years will do that."

"He's getting out in three weeks."

"So I've heard."

"He told me to come here."

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

"What did he say?"

"That you understand difficult financial times."

Bubs glanced toward the church.

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

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

"He wasn't joking."

"No?"

"I showed him something."

"What?"

Alex studied Bubs before answering.

"A map."

Bubs did not move.

"What kind of map?"

"The swamps around Dawber County."

"There are many maps of the swamps."

"Not like this one."

Alex reached beneath his shirt.

Bubs caught his wrist.

"Don't."

Alex smiled.

That smile told Bubs he had already made a mistake.

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

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

"It's paper, Pastor."

"Then leave it where it is."

Alex withdrew his hand.

"Kenny recognized it."

"Kenny recognizes many things he should forget."

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

Bubs looked through the windshield at the church.

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

They appeared ordinary.

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

"Who have you shown?" Bubs asked.

"No one."

"Keep it that way."

"You recognize it, too."

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

"Where is the money?"

Bubs turned toward him.

"What money?"

"Johnny Malone's five million dollars."

The name filled the car.

Alex watched every movement in the pastor's face.

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

The boy still saw something.

"That money is a legend," Bubs said.

"So is the devil."

"The devil has better documentation."

"Kenny sent me to you."

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

"Do you?"

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

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

Bubs frowned. "Explain."

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

Bubs stared at him.

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

"I believe everyone in this county lies."

"Including you?"

"Especially me."

"At least you're self-aware."

Alex leaned closer. "Johnny gave you something."

Bubs looked out the passenger window.

"No."

"That wasn't convincing."

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

"What kind of belongings?"

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

"Johnny's things?"

"I don't remember."

"You remember everything."

"Age changes a man."

"So does five million dollars."

Bubs opened the car door.

Alex grabbed his forearm.

"Pastor."

"Take your hand off me."

Alex released him.

Bubs remained seated.

His voice softened.

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

"It brought money."

"It brought cocaine."

"It brought jobs."

"It brought death."

"People were already dying."

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

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

"For some."

"For everyone."

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

"You sound like Kenny."

"That should trouble both of us."

Alex's expression hardened.

"My mother died broke."

Bubs said nothing.

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

"I know."

"You don't."

"I buried your mother."

Alex looked away.

Bubs continued gently.

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

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

"You were a child."

"I'm not anymore."

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

"I'm trying to get out."

"With blood money."

"With money."

"There is no difference."

"There is when you're hungry."

Bubs looked at the bruise around Alex's eye.

"Did Bones do that?"

Alex did not answer.

"You asked him about Johnny."

"He knows how to find him."

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

"I don't care what Johnny wants."

"You should."

For the first time, Alex's confidence faltered.

Bubs opened the door and stepped out.

Alex followed.

"So he's alive."

"I didn't say that."

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

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

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

Bubs turned toward him.

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

Millie waved from the church.

"Alex! You coming to eat?"

Before he could answer, Bubs called back.

"Give us a moment."

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

Billy and Eileen watched from behind her.

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

"I don't."

"If you know where Johnny is—"

"I don't."

"What did Kenny mean?"

"That you need guidance."

"I need cash."

"You need your father."

"I tried that."

Bubs looked at him sadly.

"Try again."

He walked toward the church.

Alex remained beside the car.

Mama Millie approached carrying the tray of ribs.

Up close, she noticed his eye.

"Oh, baby, what happened?"

"Nothing."

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

She touched his cheek gently.

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

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

Bubs stopped at the church steps.

"Millie."

"What?"

"Leave him be."

"He hasn't eaten."

"He has convinced himself he needs something else."

Millie looked from Bubs to Alex.

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

"What did you two discuss?"

Alex answered before Bubs could.

"Money."

Bubs opened the church door.

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

Millie watched him enter.

"All minds pass through dark places," she said. "That's why the Lord gave us lamps."

Alex looked at her.

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

Then Billy approached.

"Come eat," Billy said.

Alex turned on him. "What are you doing here?"

"Fixing the roof."

"For free?"

"That's generally how volunteering works."

"You don't volunteer."

"I do now."

Alex looked toward Eileen.

She smiled and waved.

"Hey, Alex."

His anger abandoned him without warning.

"Hey."

Eileen glanced at his eye. "Are you all right?"

"Never better."

"What happened?"

"Fishing accident."

Billy coughed to hide a laugh.

Alex ignored him.

"Your hair looks nice."

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

"Then it always looks nice."

An uncomfortable silence followed.

Billy stared at him.

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

Millie called her inside.

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

She returned to the fellowship hall.

Alex watched her go.

Billy folded his arms. "What was that?"

"What?"

"You sounded brain damaged."

"I was being polite."

"You're never polite."

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

"Yes."

"What has he told you?"

"That the roof leaks."

"About Johnny."

Billy's face changed.

"Not this again."

"Kenny sent me here."

"You went to the prison?"

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

"What did your daddy say?"

"He told me Bubs knows something."

Billy looked toward the church.

"What kind of something?"

"The money."

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

"Convenient, isn't it?"

"No. It's terrible."

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

"He's been broke for years."

"Maybe he wants everyone to think that."

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

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

"You need help."

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

Billy glanced at the Caprice.

"Is the map in your car?"

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

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

"I'm getting Johnny Malone."

"Bones said no."

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

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

"No one asks to get punched."

"You practically submitted a written request."

Alex opened the driver's door.

"You coming?"

"To where?"

"To find Bones."

"No. I'm eating ribs."

"With Eileen."

"Yes."

"You like her."

Billy smiled. "I like ribs."

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

"Maybe I'm becoming a better person."

Alex started the car.

"Or maybe you're becoming a liar."

Billy stepped away as the engine roared.

"Slow down on the gravel."

Alex reversed out of the parking space.

He looked once more at the church.

Bubs had lied.

Not well, but repeatedly.

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

Alex drove toward the county road.

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

It had given him something better.

Proof that there was money to find.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE NECK

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

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

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

Even people from Dawber County considered them strange.

Bones Malone felt comfortable there.

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

Bones had proven himself in all three categories.

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

Jasper Shelton leaned over the raised hood.

"How's she look?"

"Like shit."

"That good?"

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

"You think I need a new transmission?"

"I think you need a new truck."

Jasper laughed.

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

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

Bones pushed himself out from beneath the truck.

Jasper handed him a jar of clear liquid.

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

"What's in this?"

"Moonshine."

"What else?"

"Family secret."

Bones took a cautious drink.

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

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

"Like gasoline."

"That's the corn."

"That isn't corn."

"You want more?"

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

Jasper slapped the side of the truck.

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

"You selling it?"

"Maybe."

"How much?"

"More than you've got."

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

Jasper held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"I know what you ain't got."

Bones's hand tightened around the jar.

Jasper noticed.

The grin left his face.

For several seconds, neither moved.

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

"Relax. I'm playin'."

He shook two pills into his hand.

Bones looked at them. "What are those?"

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

"I'm not mad."

"Then you don't need 'em."

Jasper swallowed both pills with moonshine.

Bones handed back the jar.

Beyond the house, an animal screamed.

Bones turned toward the swamp.

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

"Dinner!" Merle announced.

Bones stared at the raccoon.

Merle noticed.

"You got a problem?"

"No."

"Your face says you do."

"My face always looks like this."

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

Merle pointed the rifle at Bones.

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

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

Bones remained still.

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

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

Merle studied him.

Then he lowered the rifle and laughed.

"I see why Jasper likes you."

"I don't," Jasper said.

Merle carried the raccoon toward the rear of the house.

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

"I'm good," Bones called.

Merle stopped.

Bones added, "But I appreciate the invitation."

"That's better."

He disappeared behind the house.

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

"I know."

"Maybe not killed you."

"That's thoughtful."

"He's been tense."

"About what?"

"Money."

Everyone in Dawber County was tense about money.

The Sheltons once served as enforcers for the Dawber family. They collected debts, guarded shipments, frightened witnesses, and made certain people disappear. When the federal raids destroyed

Bo Dawber's empire, the Sheltons lost their primary source of income.

They also lost their father.

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

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

Atticus fed his enemies to the alligators.

Sometimes they were dead first.

Sometimes they were not.

The uncertainty became part of the legend.

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

Two men were exceptions.

Johnny Malone was never impressed by Atticus's legend.

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

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

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

Atticus survived until the federal raids.

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

The official account claimed he died exchanging gunfire with federal agents. Merle insisted his father had been murdered after

the arrests, when the battle was already over. He never identified the man responsible, but he spoke about the killing as though one day the murderer would return and confess.

Bones looked toward the trees beyond the house.

The gator pit remained there.

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

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

Jasper shook the pill bottle. "Plenty."

"With the gators?"

"They know me."

"They're alligators."

"They knew Daddy."

"That didn't make them pets."

Jasper smiled. "You scared?"

"No."

"You should be."

A car engine approached through the Neck.

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

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

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

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

"Where's Merle?"

"Cooking," Jasper said.

Waylon looked at Bones.

The two regarded one another.

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

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

"Helping Jasper."

"With what?"

Bones pointed at the truck.

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

"That's what I told him."

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

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

"Merle!"

Jasper watched him go.

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

"Family."

"He didn't come for coon stew."

"How do you know?"

"No one comes anywhere for coon stew."

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

Bones saw it.

The visit had been planned.

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

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

Jasper noticed.

"You expecting trouble?"

"Always."

"Your daddy's gun?"

Bones removed his hand.

"You ask a lot of questions."

"Just making conversation."

"Make it about something else."

Jasper opened the hood wider.

"You hear from him?"

Bones stared at him.

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

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

"He did."

"No, he didn't."

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

Bones walked toward the front of the property.

"Where you going?"

"Home."

"You ain't got a ride."

"I'll walk."

"Through the Neck?"

"I walked here."

"That was before dark."

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

Bones stopped.

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

"I'll stay until the truck runs."

Jasper smiled. "That's the spirit."

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

Bones moved closer to the corner of the building.

Jasper blocked him.

"Give 'em privacy."

"Why?"

"They're discussing business."

"What kind?"

"The private kind."

Bones looked down at him.

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

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

"I brought you here to fix my truck."

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

"I handed you tools."

"Most of them don't fit."

Jasper's smile weakened.

Bones stepped around him.

Jasper grabbed his arm.

Bones looked at the hand.

"Let go."

"We're friends."

"Then let go."

Jasper released him.

Bones walked around the house.

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

Neither saw Bones.

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

Merle sliced through a joint. "How long?"

"Until he talks."

"He'll talk?"

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

Bones stopped.

Waylon continued.

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

"What kid?"

"Kenny's boy. Alex."

Merle dropped another piece of meat into the pot.

"Bones know about it?"

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

"I told Jasper to work on him."

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

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

"How close?"

"Wrestling close. Drinking close."

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

Merle looked toward the house.

Bones stepped silently backward.

A branch snapped beneath his heel.

The conversation stopped.

"Jasper?" Merle called.

Bones moved around the corner before either man appeared.

Jasper stood beside the truck.

"What were you doing?"

"Taking a leak."

"Outhouse is over there."

Bones looked toward the leaning wooden structure near the sawgrass.

"I forgot."

Jasper studied him.

The sound of another engine reached the property.

This one was deeper.

Multiple vehicles.

Jasper's face changed.

"Who's that?"

"You tell me."

Headlights appeared between the trees.

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

Jasper grabbed the knife in his pocket.

"Get in the outhouse."

Bones did not move. "Why?"

"Go."

The trucks stopped.

Doors opened.

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

His brothers and nephews spread across the yard carrying rifles.

Jasper pushed Bones toward the side of the house.

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

"Why?"

"He ain't here about the truck."

Bones looked toward Merle and Waylon.

Both men had disappeared.

Jasper shoved him again.

"Move!"

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

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

Dale peeled an orange with a hunting knife.

"Evening."

Jasper kept both hands visible. "Dale."

"Where's your brother?"

"Out back."

"Waylon?"

"Don't know."

Dale placed a slice of orange in his mouth and chewed slowly.

His men began searching the property.

One headed toward the gator pit.

Another moved toward the house.

Dale noticed the empty jar of moonshine beside the Chevrolet.

He looked at Jasper.

"Who else is here?"

"No one."

Dale sniffed the air.

Once.

Then again.

Jasper shifted his weight.

Dale smiled.

"You smell that?"

Jasper shook his head.

"Old cheese."

"What?"

"A lie. Lies always smell like old cheese."

Dale walked toward the outhouse.

Bones drew the Colt .45 and held it beside his leg.

Dale stopped halfway across the yard.

He turned back to Jasper.
"I know Johnny Malone's boy was here."
Jasper said nothing.
Dale removed the knife from his belt.
"So why don't you tell me where he went?"

CHAPTER SIX
BLOOD IN THE NECK

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

"So why don't you tell me where Johnny Malone's boy went?"

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

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

He did not move.

Outside, Jasper Shelton faced six armed Brodys.

"I ain't seen Bones," Jasper said.

Dale removed another strip of peel.

"That disappoints me."

"Can't help that."

"I thought we had an understanding."

"About money. Not Bones."

Dale placed an orange slice on his tongue.

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

Dale looked at the jar beside the truck.

"Whose moonshine?"

"Mine."

"There were two cups."

"I get thirsty."

Dale smiled.

"You know what your trouble is, Jasper?"

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

"You're too stupid to lie."

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

Dale saw it.

"Go ahead."

Jasper stopped.

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

"It didn't hurt."

"No. Mack Donnelly did that."

Jasper's face changed.

The name seemed to alter the air.

Dale grinned. "That still bothers you?"

"You weren't there."

"Neither were you."

"My brother knows what happened."

"Merle knows whatever story makes him feel better."

Jasper stepped closer.

Dale lowered the orange.

"Careful."

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

"Your daddy is dead."

The words struck harder than a fist.

Dale continued.

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

Jasper removed his knife.

Bones tightened his grip on the Colt.

The Brodys raised their weapons.

Dale held up one hand.

"Let the boy show us what he inherited."

Jasper lunged.

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

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

Jasper stumbled.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then blood poured down his right leg.

Jasper looked at it with confusion.

Dale stepped away.

"You ever hear of the femoral artery?"

Jasper's knee buckled.

He fell into the mud.

Dale wiped his knife on Jasper's overalls.

"That's a no."

Blood spread beneath the boy.

Bones moved toward the outhouse door.

He stopped himself.

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

Dale crouched.

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

Jasper pressed both hands against the wound.

His face had already begun losing color.

Dale ate another slice of orange.

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

Jasper looked up.

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

"Go to hell."

"You first."

Dale stood.

"Merle!"

His voice carried across the property.

"Your baby brother is bleeding to death!"

No one answered.

Garth returned from the gator pit.

"Found signs someone's been back there."

"Signs?"

"Gate's open."

"Did you look inside?"

Garth stared toward the black water.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Gators."

Dale blinked at him.

"You are holding a fifty-caliber pistol."

"They're big gators."

"That's what the pistol is for."

Garth glanced at the pit again.

"You want me to go in?"

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

Dale pointed toward Clayton.

"Take him. Find Merle and Waylon."

The two men moved toward the pit.

Dale turned to Jessup.

"Get the truck lights on Jasper."

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

"Jessup."

No response.

Dale clapped in front of his face.

Jessup jumped.

"Lights."

Jessup hurried toward the F-350.

Bones watched him approach the outhouse side of the property.

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

Bones eased backward.

His heel struck a metal bucket.

The sound seemed deafening.

Jessup stopped.

Bones raised the Colt.

A scream came from the gator pit.

Jessup turned toward it.

Garth fired three rounds into the water.

The pistol blasts shook the property.

Something large thrashed inside the enclosure.

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

"Could be both!" Garth called back.

Jessup resumed walking toward the truck.

Bones lowered the pistol.

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

An idea came to him.

It was not a good idea.

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

Bones called it the only idea available.

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

Gasoline soaked into the cloth.

He searched his pockets.

No matches.

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

Bones cursed silently.

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

He crawled through the mud and retrieved it.

The ember nearly died between his fingers.

Jessup climbed inside the cab.

Bones touched the cigarette to the gasoline-soaked rag.

Nothing happened.

"Come on."

A thin flame appeared.

Bones moved away.

The flame traveled toward the fuel tank.

He ran for the trees.

Jessup started the truck.

The explosion lifted the F-350 from the ground.

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

Jessup disappeared inside the flames.

Bones hit the mud and covered his head.

Metal fragments cut through the trees.

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

Everyone saw it.

For a terrible second, no one moved.

Dale crawled toward the grenade.

Bones rose and kicked it into the gator pit.

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

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

Merle saw Jasper lying in blood.

"Jasper!"

He ran toward his brother.

Dale tackled him before he arrived.

The two men crashed into the mud.

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

"You burned my brother!"

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

Dale reached for the knife lying nearby.

Merle caught his wrist.

The blade descended toward his neck.

Bones raised the Colt.

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

"Get off him!"

Dale looked toward Bones.

His exposed eye widened.

"There you are."

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

"You killed Jessup."

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

"I came here to talk to you."

"You brought six men and assault rifles."

"That's how Brodys talk."

Dale pressed the knife against Merle's throat.

Bones saw blood gather beneath the blade.

"Put down the gun."

"No."

"I'll open him."

"Then I'll shoot you."

"You might hit Merle."

"I might."

Merle stared at Bones. "Not helping."

Dale laughed.

Bones took a step closer.

Dale dragged the knife across Merle's skin.

Merle gasped.

Bones fired.

The bullet struck Dale below the shoulder blade.

He collapsed beside Merle.

Merle rolled away, holding his neck.

Dale writhed in the mud.

Bones approached with the Colt extended.

Dale looked up.

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

"You little bastard."

"Stay down."

"You think one bullet ends this?"

"No."

Bones aimed at his head.

"This one will."

Dale stopped moving.

Behind them, the gator fence groaned.

Waylon ran toward his Challenger.

Merle grabbed Bones's arm. "Jasper."

The boy lay where he had fallen.

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

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

"Stay with me."

Jasper's eyes fluttered.

"Bones?"

"I'm here."

"Did you get Dale?"

Bones looked toward the wounded man.

"Yeah."

Jasper smiled weakly. "Knew you would."

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

"We need a truck."

Waylon started the Challenger.

Merle shouted at him. "Get over here!"

Waylon looked toward the Brodys regrouping near the gator pit.

Clayton raised the AK-47.

Bullets struck the Challenger.

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

Merle stared after him.

"That coward!"

More gunfire ripped through the yard.

Bones and Merle dragged Jasper behind the Chevrolet.

"We can use this," Bones said.

"It don't run."

"You said it was almost finished."

"Jasper said that. Jasper lies about trucks."

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

No keys.

"Where are they?"

"Sun visor."

Bones pulled it down.

The keys fell into his lap.

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

Bones inserted the key.

The engine clicked.

He tried again.

Nothing.

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

"Start, you piece of shit."

He pumped the accelerator and turned the key.

The engine coughed.

Then it roared to life.

Merle laughed despite himself.

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

Bones shifted into drive.

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

"Come on!"

He restarted it.

The engine caught.

Bones slammed his foot down.

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

Garth stepped into their path with the Desert Eagle.

Bones drove directly at him.

Garth fired twice before diving aside.

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

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

The blast knocked Clayton backward.

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

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

Merle shouted through the sliding rear window.

"Hospital's east!"

"I know."

"You're going west!"

Bones yanked the wheel.

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

Merle looked down at Jasper.

"Keep your eyes open."

Jasper did not answer.

Merle slapped his face.

"Talk to me."

Jasper's head rolled sideways.

Bones watched them through the rearview mirror.

"Is he breathing?"

Merle lowered his ear to Jasper's mouth.

"I don't know."

"Check."

"I am checking!"

"Keep pressure on his leg."

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

Bones pressed the accelerator harder.

The truck shook violently.

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

Bones heard his own breath.

He had shot a man.

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

The act itself did not trouble him.

How little it troubled him did.

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

Bones glanced into the mirror.

Merle was cradling Jasper's head.

His hands no longer pressed the wound.

"Put pressure on his leg."

Merle did not respond.

"Merle."

"He's gone."

Bones looked back at the road.

"No."

"I can't feel him breathing."

"We're almost there."

"He's dead."

"You don't know that."

"I know my brother."

Bones tightened both hands on the steering wheel.

Jasper had lied to Dale for him.

He could have given Bones up and lived.

Instead, he remained silent because they were friends.

Or because he was stubborn.

In the Neck, those qualities were often the same.

Merle bent over his brother's body.

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

Finally, Merle lifted his head.

"That took nerve."

Bones looked into the mirror.

"What?"

"Coming out like you did."

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

"Most people would."

"I ain't most people."

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

Bones felt anger return.

"I'm Bones."

"Your daddy never feared mine."

"Maybe he should have."

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

"You knew my father?"

"I was a kid when he disappeared."

"But you remember him."

"Everyone remembers Johnny Malone."

Bones looked at Jasper's body in the mirror.

"My father left."

"He lived."

"Same thing, where I come from."

Merle rested one hand on Jasper's chest.

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

"I don't."

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

"What do you believe?"

Merle looked into the cab.

"I believe the old war is starting again."

The truck reached the main county road.

Lights from Dawber County appeared beyond the trees.

Bones thought of the card hidden in his bedroom.

SANCHEZ PROPERTIES, LLC.

A Miami address.

COME SEE ME BEFORE YOUR EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY.

Ed Dantés.

Alex had been right.

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

Bones turned toward the hospital.

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

He would find Alex.

And then he would take them both to Miami.

CHAPTER SEVEN
SANCHEZ PROPERTIES

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

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

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

The driver's door opened.

Bones climbed out slowly.

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

Alex lowered the pistol.

"Jesus Christ."

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

"That yours?" Alex asked.

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"Jasper Shelton's."

Alex looked at the blood again.

"Where's Jasper?"

"Hospital."

"Why?"

Bones walked past him into the boathouse.

Alex followed. "Bones."

"I heard you."

"You look like you murdered half the county."

"Only shot one of 'em."

Alex stopped.

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

The usual grin was gone.

"Who did you shoot?" Alex asked.

"Dale Brody."

The name seemed to change the temperature inside the room.

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

"I don't know."

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

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

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

"Start at the beginning."

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

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

"About what?"

"What do you think?"

"The money."

Bones nodded.

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

"Don't start."

"I told you people knew about it."

"I said don't start."

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

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

"What happened?" Alex asked.

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

"What did you tell them?"

"That I didn't know."

"Do you?"

"No."

Alex waited.

Bones glared at him. "I don't."

"All right."

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

Alex thought of Waylon Shelton's pale, patient face. "And you stayed?"

"I was figuring a way out."

"You were waiting to see what happened."

"I was figuring."

"What happened?"

"The Brodys showed up before Waylon did."

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

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

"Since when?"

"Since they decided I could lead them to Johnny's money."

"So the Brodys wanted you too."

"Everybody wants me now."

The bitterness in his voice silenced Alex.

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

Alex looked at Bones's clothes.

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

"What did you do?"

Bones's mouth tightened.

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

"You did what?"

"Truck went up good."

"You blew up their truck?"

"Jessup was standing too close."

Alex leaned back. "How close?"

"Close enough."

"Is he dead?"

"I reckon."

"Then you killed Jessup Brody."

"The truck killed him."

"You set the truck on fire."

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

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

"And Dale?"

"Came after me. I shot him."

"With what?"

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

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

"I didn't shoot you."

"That ain't the point."

Bones placed the pistol on the floor.

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

"You just said you shot him."

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

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know."

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

He looked down at the dried blood on his shirt.

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

Alex's anger receded.

"What happened to Jasper?"

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

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

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

"That doesn't make them your friends."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

Bones raised his head.

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

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

"Did Jasper make it?" Alex asked.

Bones did not answer.

"Bones?"

"He died before they got him upstairs."

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

Alex leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees.

"I'm sorry."

"Jasper was an asshole."

"He was."

"He was gonna hand me to Waylon."

"Probably."

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

"You kept him from dying alone."

"Didn't do much good."

"It mattered."

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

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

"You need to wash that off."

"Ain't mine."

"I know."

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

Alex glanced at him.

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

"Bubs knows something too."

"What did he tell you?"

"That blood money always brings death."

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

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

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

Now men were bleeding for it.

One was already dead.

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

"Yeah."

"You really went to see him?"

"Somebody had to tell me the truth."

"And did he?"

"He sent me to Bubs."

"Who told you to stay away from the money."

"He didn't say there wasn't any."

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

Alex folded the map. "The money's real."

"Even if it is, we don't know where it is."

"No. But Johnny does."

Bones became still.

Alex noticed the change immediately.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You do that every time somebody mentions your daddy."

"Do what?"

"Look like you're about to run."

"I ain't runnin'."

"You came all the way here."

"Had nowhere else to go."

"You could've gone home."

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

Alex let the words hang between them.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

Bones reached inside his shorts and removed a creased envelope.

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

Bones handed it over.

Alex read the name twice.

"Who's Ed Dantés?"

"Nobody."

"Then why's he sending you mail?"

"Open it."

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

SANCHEZ PROPERTIES, LLC

An address in Miami appeared beneath the name.

Someone had written across the back in red ink:

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

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

"Few weeks ago."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I wasn't gonna go."

"Who sent it?"

Bones stared at the business card.

"Johnny."

Alex felt his heartbeat quicken.

"How do you know?"

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

Alex turned the envelope over again.

"Ed Dantés," he said.

"Yeah."

"Edmond Dantès."

Bones shrugged.

"The Count of Monte Cristo."

"The what?"

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

Bones frowned at the envelope. "Sounds cheerful."

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

"Maybe he liked the movie."

"Maybe he's telling you something."

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

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

"I can read."

"Your eighteenth birthday."

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

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

"You have pictures."

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

Alex said nothing.

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

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

"Maybe he couldn't come back."

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

"He might have been protecting you."

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

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

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

Bones looked up.

"Go for yourself. Ask him why."

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

"Yes."

"At least you're honest."

A knock struck the door.

Both boys reached for a gun.

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

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

He took one look at Bones.

"What the hell happened to you?"

Bones sighed. "I shot Dale Brody."

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

"What's that supposed to mean?"

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

"It ain't breakfast."

"It's two in the morning."

Alex handed Billy the Miami card.

Billy read it, then looked from Alex to Bones.

"This Johnny?"

Bones nodded.

"You sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

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

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

"That ain't possible," Billy said.

"Maybe Sanchez was worse."

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

Alex folded the map and tucked it into his jacket.

"We leave before sunrise."

Billy studied him. "We?"

"Bones isn't going alone."

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

"Yes, you have."

"When?"

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

Bones looked at the envelope in his hand.

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

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

"And the sheriff?"

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

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

"We take my Caprice."

"That thing make it across the Alley?"

"It'll make it."

"It overheats going to the Piggly Wiggly."

"Only when it's hot."

"We live in Florida."

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

Billy caught his arm before he could pass.

"You all right?"

Bones glanced at the hand, then at Billy.

"No."

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

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

"Why?"

"Because I work for a living."

Bones disappeared into the small bathroom.

Water groaned through the pipes.

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

"He'll tell Bones."

"That isn't what I asked."

Alex looked at the closed bathroom door.

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

"What?"

"Leverage."

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

Alex placed the Sanchez Properties card beside the map.

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

"Then we find out who took it."

"And if Bubs was right?"

"About what?"

"That it gets us killed."

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

"The killing already started."

Billy followed his gaze.

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

Alex smiled faintly. "Knew you were coming."

"I didn't say that."

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

"Because you said it was an emergency."

"It is."

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

"What's it for?"

Billy looked toward the black water beyond the marina.

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

He glanced back at Alex.

"I want the truth."

He went outside.

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

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

Alex wondered whether Johnny Malone had done the same.

Behind him, the shower ran red into the drain.

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

Bones had Johnny's address.

Billy wanted the truth about their fathers.

Alex wanted enough money to free Kenny and save Gethsemane.

Three boys. Three reasons for crossing Alligator Alley.

By sunrise, they would be on their way to Miami.

CHAPTER EIGHT
ACROSS THE ALLEY

The Chevrolet Caprice left Dawber County twenty minutes before sunrise.

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

He had fallen asleep before they reached the county line.

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

Alex noticed.

"You tired?"

"No."

"You keep doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Trying to kill us."

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

"It didn't pull right yesterday."

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

From the back seat came a wet snore.

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

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

"He looks dead," Alex said.

"He nearly was."

"You believe everything he told us?"

"I believe somebody's blood covered him."

"He could've exaggerated the rest."

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

Alex faced forward again.

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

Behind the Caprice, Dawber County disappeared into the swamp.

Alex kept checking the side mirror.

Billy noticed. "You expecting somebody?"

"The Brodys."

"In what? Bones blew up their truck."

"They own more than one."

"The Sheltons?"

"Maybe."

"Waylon?"

"Probably."

Billy adjusted the mirror. "Anybody else?"

"Sheriff Buck."

"Good thing we're traveling inconspicuously."

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

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

"We ain't in Miami."

A green highway sign emerged through the mist.

MIAMI — 114 MILES

Bones woke when the Caprice hit a pothole.

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

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

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

"Across the county line."

"You see anybody following?"

"Not yet."

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

"What happened to you?" Alex asked.

"Merle hit me."

"You left that part out."

"Didn't seem important."

"Why'd he hit you?"

"Thought I was driving too slow."

"You were trying to save his brother."

"He was upset."

Billy shook his head.

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

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

"It'll hold," Alex replied.

The temperature gauge crept slightly above the halfway mark.

Billy tapped it.

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

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

The highway cut across the wilderness in a straight gray line. Water and sawgrass stretched to both horizons, interrupted by stands of cypress and dark islands of hardwood hammock. White birds rose from the marsh as the Caprice passed. An alligator rested beside a canal with its mouth open toward the warming sky.

There was nowhere to hide on the Alley.

Alex checked the mirror again.

A dark sedan had appeared behind them.

It stayed several car lengths back.

"You see that?" Alex asked.

Billy looked in the rearview mirror. "Yeah."

Bones twisted around.

"Quit looking," Alex said.

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

"By not letting them know we noticed."

Bones continued staring through the back window.

"Very subtle," Billy said.

The sedan maintained its distance.

Billy moved into the right lane. The sedan followed.

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

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

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

"I'm not."

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

"Buck don't know we left."

"Buck knows everything ten minutes after it happens."

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

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

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

"With one good arm?" Alex asked.

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

"You said you did."

"I was busy."

The sedan moved closer.

Billy accelerated.

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

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

"You want distance or coolant?"

"Both."

"You bought the wrong car."

The sedan pulled into the left lane.

Alex drew the Colt and held it below the window.

Billy gripped the wheel. "Keep it down."

Bones reached under the seat for his own pistol.

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

"You'd rather they shoot us?"

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

The sedan came alongside them.

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

Bones lowered his pistol.

Billy exhaled. "Terrifying."

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

"Her youngest looked especially dangerous."

Alex returned the Colt beneath the seat.

None of them laughed for long.

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

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

"We find Johnny," Alex replied.

"And then?"

"Bones introduces us."

"What if he won't?"

Alex looked back.

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

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

"He invited me."

"He invited you. Not us."

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

"He'll see us," he said.

"You sound sure."

"I ain't."

They drove in silence.

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

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

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

Johnny Malone had vanished.

Everybody else had paid for what he built.

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

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

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

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

"Woman felt sorry for me."

"Why?"

"Told her my daddy abandoned me."

Alex stared at him.

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

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

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

Bones licked sugar from his thumb. "Yep."

"What?"

"Hello."

"And after that?"

"See how hello goes."

Billy poured the last of the water into the radiator.

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

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

"Why not?"

"Because I'm asking the questions first."

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

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

Alex folded the map slowly.

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

Bones looked at him. "What?"

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

"You didn't tell us that."

"I'm telling you now."

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

Alex considered it.

"Bubs and Millie are losing Gethsemane."

"We know that," Billy said.

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

Bones stopped chewing.

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

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

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

Bones looked at the business card.

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

"What are we going for?" Billy asked.

"To find out why Johnny wants it back."

Miami rose from the horizon in pieces.

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

Bones sat upright, watching everything.

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

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

Billy held the business card against the steering wheel.

"You sure this is the street?"

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

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

"Turn on the heater," Alex said.

"It's ninety-three degrees."

"Pulls heat from the engine."

Billy switched on the heater.

Hot air blasted into the car.

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

"Open a window."

"The window don't work."

"Then sweat."

They left the main road and entered Little Havana.

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

Billy slowed.

"Address should be ahead."

Alex spotted the house first.

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

A black sign on the gate warned:

BEWARE OF DOG

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

Bones stared.

"This is it?"

Alex checked the number. "This is it."

"My daddy lives here?"

"Maybe Sanchez owns it."

"Looks condemned," Billy said.

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

It did not belong in the neighborhood.

Billy drove past the house without stopping.

"What are you doing?" Bones asked.

"Checking the street."

"You think that Mercedes followed us?"

"No. It got here first."

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

Nobody spoke.

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

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

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

"How do you know?" Billy asked.

"Saw his picture at Bubs's house."

"The football player?" Bones asked.

"Lawyer now."

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

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

"Finding Johnny," Alex replied.

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

The gate opened.

Deon entered.

Bones reached for the door handle.

Alex stopped him. "Wait."

"That's my daddy in there."

"Maybe."

"You heard him."

"I heard a man."

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

"He could have guards."

"He's an accountant."

"He was Pablo Escobar's accountant."

"That story's bullshit."

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

Bones hesitated.

Billy killed the engine. The heater went silent.

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

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

"I'm starting to regret coming."

They waited.

Twenty minutes passed.

The Caprice grew hotter.

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

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

Neither Alex nor Billy answered immediately.

"He sent the card," Billy finally said.

"What if somebody else sent it?"

"Then we find out who."

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

"Sounds possible," Alex said.

"She stopped saying it when I got older."

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

Bones nodded.

The side gate opened.

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

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

A shirtless man appeared behind him.

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

The man wore an old gold watch.

A faded military tattoo marked his left wrist.

Bones stopped breathing.

Johnny Malone looked older than the photographs pinned inside Bones's trailer. His hair had thinned and gone gray at the temples. His body had softened, and Florida sunlight had carved deep

lines around his eyes. Yet something about him remained unmistakable.

The crooked smile.

Bones had the same one.

"Stay safe, brother," Johnny called.

Deon pushed through the gate.

Alex opened his door.

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

"Going with you."

"I didn't ask."

"You didn't have to."

Billy climbed out on the driver's side.

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

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

The three boys walked toward the house.

Deon noticed them first.

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

"Bones?"

Bones stopped.

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

"I didn't do anything."

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

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

Behind Deon, Johnny stepped closer to the gate.

"Who is it?" he called.

Deon looked back at him.

Then he moved aside.

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

Now he stood less than twenty feet away.

The birthday card trembled in Bones's hand.

Johnny's cigarette dropped slightly between his lips.

The color left his face.

For one fleeting instant, the old man looked frightened.

Then the crooked Malone smile returned.

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

"Hey, boys."

Nobody moved.

Johnny's gaze settled on Bones.

The smile faltered.

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

Hello had seemed like enough.

Now it was not nearly enough.

CHAPTER NINE
THE GHOST

Johnny Malone continued holding his arms open.

Bones continued staring at him.

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

"You boys come alone?"

"Depends who's asking," Alex said.

"I am."

"Then yes."

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

"Deon's leaving."

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

His gaze settled on the three boys.

"You followed me?"

"We were here first," Alex said.

Deon looked at Billy. "Billy Dawber?"

Billy nodded cautiously.

"You look like Timmy."

"People say that."

"They're right."

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

"What happened to your face?"

"Merle Shelton."

"Why did Merle Shelton hit you?"

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

"Does that story involve Dale Brody being shot?"

Nobody answered.

Deon removed his sunglasses.

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

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

"The other Chevrolet."

"Oh."

"Did you shoot Dale?"

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

Johnny's casual smile vanished.

"Dale Brody tried to kill my son?"

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

"What for?"

"The money."

Johnny's eyes shifted to Alex.

"What money?"

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

Johnny lit his cigarette.

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

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

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

Deon placed a hand against the open gate.

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

"Then they especially shouldn't leave."

"You're not listening."

"I heard every word."

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

Alex stepped forward. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know yet."

"Is he alive?"

"He was when the prison called."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"No. You're staying here."

"That's my father."

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

"We're not fugitives," Billy said.

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

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

"I intend to find out."

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

"Hold off until I talk to him."

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

Deon looked at the boys again.

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

Bones frowned. "You got my number?"

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

Johnny inhaled sharply.

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

Deon said nothing.

"Have you?"

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

"For him?"

Deon's silence answered.

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

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

Deon pushed past them.

"You are one smooth son of a bitch."

"So I've been told."

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

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

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

"Welcome to Miami."

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

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

A revolver rested on the table.

Another pistol lay beneath a folded newspaper.

Billy noticed both.

Johnny noticed him noticing.

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

Alex looked around. "This is it?"

Johnny removed his cigarette. "This is what?"

"You."

"That is a difficult philosophical question for this early in the day."

"Everybody in Dawber thinks you escaped with millions."

"Everybody in Dawber spends too much time discussing my affairs."

"You live in a dump."

Johnny looked toward the house. "I don't come to your boathouse and criticize the mildew."

"How do you know about my boathouse?"

Johnny smiled.

Alex glanced at Bones.

Bones had not taken his eyes off his father.

Johnny's smile weakened beneath the scrutiny.

"How've you been, son?"

Bones looked around the yard. "You really asking me that?"

"Yes."

"Not good."

Johnny nodded slowly. "How's your mother?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I can't."

"You know where she lives."

"Knowing where somebody lives and being free to knock on the door are different things."

"You invited me here."

"You're turning eighteen."

"Tomorrow."

"I know."

Bones stepped closer. He was several inches taller than Johnny and nearly twice as broad.

"You know my birthday."

"Of course I know."

"You know where I live. You know who I run around with. You even know we steal boat motors."

Billy glanced at Alex. "He knows about that?"

Johnny pointed his cigarette at them.

"Stealing outboard motors is an amateur enterprise with an unacceptable risk-to-profit ratio."

Alex stared at him. "That's your objection?"

"It's my professional assessment."

Bones's face reddened.

"You knew everything," he said. "All this time, you knew everything."

"Not everything."

"You knew enough to send somebody to watch us."

"To protect you."

"You sent Deon?"

"Deon provided occasional information."

"Occasional?"

"Birthdays. School trouble. Your mother's health. The people around you."

Bones's hands curled into fists.

"But you couldn't come yourself."

"No."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?"

Johnny looked toward the pool.

"The Colombians wanted me dead. The Haitians wanted me dead. Some Italians in Tampa wanted me dead for reasons I never completely understood. The federal government wanted me in prison. Mack Donnelly wanted me in the ground."

"Mack's gone," Bones said.

"Men like Mack are never gone. They leave apprentices."

"What about Atticus?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "What about him?"

"People say Mack killed him looking for you."

"That's what happened."

"You let everybody else pay."

The accusation struck harder than a fist.

Johnny took a drag from his cigarette, but his hand was no longer steady.

"I left because staying would've killed more people."

"Leaving killed people too."

Johnny looked at his son.

For once, he had no clever answer.

Alex stepped between them.

"Where's the money?"

Billy sighed. "Alex."

"What? That's why we came."

"That's why you came," Bones said.

"It's why Dale Brody tried to take you. It's why Jasper Shelton is dead. It's why Kinder put Kenny in isolation. Everybody thinks we can find Johnny's money."

Johnny studied Alex with renewed interest.

"Kenny showed you something?"

"I showed him a map."

"What map?"

Alex drew the coded paper from inside his jacket.

Johnny reached for it.

Alex pulled it back.

"You first."

Johnny laughed softly. "Kenny's boy, all right."

"You know what it is?"

"I might."

"Can you read it?"

"I might."

"Where is the five million dollars?"

Johnny's humor disappeared.

"Who told you the amount?"

"Dale Brody."

"Before or after Bones shot him?"

"Before."

Johnny looked at Bones. "You really shot Dale?"

"He had a knife."

"Did you kill him?"

"Don't know."

Johnny nodded as if Bones had passed a test neither of them knew was being given.

"Come inside," he said.

"I'm not giving you the map," Alex replied.

"I was going to feed you."

Bones's stomach growled.

Johnny smiled. "At least one Malone is willing to negotiate."

The inside of the house looked older than the outside.

Small white tiles covered the floor. Dark wood paneling lined the walls. A brown sofa faced a television with rabbit-ear antennas. Stacks of newspapers, financial magazines, and property records occupied every flat surface.

The air smelled of mildew, coffee, stale cigarette smoke, and something cooking too long in the oven.

Johnny led them into the kitchen.

"Make yourselves at home."

A young woman entered wearing denim shorts and a red brassiere. She had dark hair, an angry expression, and a wooden spoon in one hand.

"You left the tamales in the oven."

Johnny glanced at the stove. "I was handling a security situation."

She looked at the three boys.

"Who are they?"

Johnny placed a hand on Bones's shoulder.

Bones stiffened.

"This is my son."

The woman's anger gave way to surprise. "Your son?"

"Bones, meet Carmen."

Bones shook her hand.

Carmen stared at Johnny. "You said you had no family."

"I said my family lived far away."

"You told me your son was a baby."

"He was when I left."

"That was seventeen years ago!"

"Time passes quickly."

She struck him in the chest with the wooden spoon.

Johnny stepped back. "We have guests."

"Now you care?"

"Carmen."

"You could not meet my parents because you were hiding. You could not come to my cousin's wedding because you were hiding. But three children from the swamp can walk through the gate?"

"We ain't children," Bones said.

Carmen looked him up and down. "Not that one."

Johnny opened the oven. Smoke rolled into the room.

"The tamales appear to have suffered."

Carmen shoved the pan onto the counter. Red sauce splashed against the wall.

Billy moved out of range.

"You are an impossible man," she said.

"I have survived because I am difficult to predict."

"You survive because God wants to punish the rest of us."

She grabbed Johnny's hair with one hand.

Johnny shouted and bent at the waist.

Bones lunged forward. "Get off him!"

Carmen pulled.

A thick piece of Johnny's hair came away in her hand.

Everyone froze.

Johnny covered the top of his head.

Carmen held an expensive brown wig.

Bones stared at his father's short gray hair.

Alex began laughing.

Billy tried not to, which made it worse.

Carmen threw the wig into the sink.

"I hate this thing."

She stormed through the kitchen and slammed the screen door behind her. Her voice faded down the side of the house in a rapid stream of Spanish.

Johnny straightened.

"Well," he said, "she took that better than expected."

Bones pointed at the wig. "What the hell is that?"

"A disguise."

"You wear a wig?"

"The Colombians, Haitians, Italians, and federal government all possess photographs of me."

Johnny peeled a false mustache from beneath his nose and dropped it beside the wig.

Billy looked at Alex. "We crossed the state for this man."

Alex wiped tears from his eyes. "Apparently."

Johnny opened a cabinet and removed a bottle of rum.

"Neither of you is funny."

Bones did not laugh.

"You can live here like this," he said, "but you couldn't come check on Mama?"

Johnny put the bottle down.

"I told you. Returning would have endangered you."

"You endangered us by leaving."

"How?"

"We were broke."

Johnny frowned. "I made arrangements."

"Your arrangements didn't pay the light bill."

"I sent money."

"When?"

"Regularly."

"Then somebody stole it."

Johnny's face changed.

"Your mother never received anything?"

"Postcards."

"I sent cash through intermediaries."

"Who?"

Johnny did not answer.

Bones stepped closer.

"Who?"

"I'll look into it."

"You've had seventeen years to look into it."

Johnny pressed both hands against the counter.

"I cannot get those years back."

"No."

"I can't give you an explanation that makes them hurt less."

"No."

"But I did not forget you."

Bones looked away.

Johnny left the kitchen without another word.

Alex moved toward the doorway.

Billy stopped him. "Give them a minute."

"We don't have a minute. Deon said something happened to Kenny."

"And Johnny just learned somebody may have stolen money meant for his family."

"That isn't our problem."

Billy stared at him.

Alex's shoulders lowered. "Fine."

Johnny returned carrying a black duffel bag.

He placed it on the kitchen table.

"You remember why I sent the card?" he asked Bones.

"Early birthday present."

Johnny unzipped the bag.

Bundles of cash filled it from end to end.

Alex moved closer.

Billy whispered, "Good Lord."

Bones stared without touching it.

"How much?" Alex asked.

"Eighty thousand dollars."

Johnny turned the bag toward Bones.

"It's yours."

Bones looked at his father. "Why?"

"Because you're my son."

"That didn't matter yesterday."

"It mattered every day."

"You think this fixes it?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"A start."

Johnny took out one bundle and placed it in Bones's hands.

"Use it as a down payment. Buy a piece of property. Something with road access and room to grow. Land is the only thing they aren't making more of."

"What am I supposed to grow?"

"Value."

Bones frowned.

Johnny looked at Alex. "Help him."

"We didn't drive here to become real-estate agents."

"What is this 'we'?"

"We're partners."

"In boat-motor theft?"

"In whatever comes next."

Johnny's gaze hardened. "My son is finished stealing motors."

"My son," Bones repeated bitterly.

Johnny ignored the tone.

"You buy land," he said. "You hold it. You borrow against it when the value increases. Then you buy more."

"What about the rest of the money?" Alex asked.

Johnny lit another cigarette. "What rest?"

"The five million."

"Different money."

"You know where it is."

"Yes."

The answer came so easily that all three boys fell silent.

Alex unfolded the coded map and placed it on the table.

Johnny looked down.

Recognition passed across his face.

"You can read it," Alex said.

"I can."

"Then take us to it."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I can't return to Dawber County."

"You can. You don't want to."

"Those are not the same thing."

"Everyone back home is drowning because of what you started."

"I saved Dawber County."

"You saved it for a few years. Then you left Kenny, Timmy, Bo Dawber, and everybody else to go to prison while you hid in Miami wearing a wig."

Johnny's eyes flashed.

"You know nothing about what happened."

"I know my father served twelve years. Bones grew up without one. Bubs is losing his church. Billy's family lives under a name everybody hates. And you're sitting beside a swimming pool giving investment advice."

Billy moved between them before either could take another step.

"Every story I ever heard about Vietnam said you ran toward the shooting," Billy told Johnny. "Nobody ever called you a coward back then."

Johnny looked at him.

"My daddy left Dawber County as somebody everybody admired," Billy said. "He came home from Vietnam a different man. Then he died before I ever got the chance to know him."

Johnny's expression darkened.

"Timmy deserved better."

Then tell me what happened to him.

Johnny's anger faded.

He looked at the sons of the men with whom he had gone to war, first in Vietnam and later in Dawber County. They had arrived carrying their fathers' faces, their fathers' grievances, and a map that should never have left the swamp.

"The five million was a reserve," Johnny said. "If the organization collapsed, it was supposed to help the families of every man arrested."

"It didn't," Alex said.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because the arrests happened faster than expected. I was allowed to walk, but once I left the county, Mack Donnelly came hunting. Then Atticus crossed his path."

"And Mack killed him," Bones said.

"Yes. After that, there was no safe way back."

"You could've told somebody where the money was," Alex said.

"I did."

"Who?"

Johnny pointed at the map.

"Your father helped hide it."

Alex shook his head. "Kenny says he doesn't know."

"Kenny knows more than he remembers."

"Who else?"

Johnny hesitated.

"Bubs?" Alex asked.

Johnny's silence confirmed it.

"And the third person?" Billy said.

Johnny crushed his cigarette into an ashtray.

"The third person is dead."

"Atticus?" Bones asked.

"No."

"Who?"

Johnny zipped the duffel bag shut and pushed it toward his son.

"That is a story for another day."

"We came for answers," Alex said.

"And you have one. The money exists."

"Then come home and get it."

Johnny laughed once, but there was no humor in it.

"I return to Dawber County, people die."

"People are already dying," Bones said.

Johnny looked at the bloodless bruise on his son's face.

Bones lifted the duffel bag and set it back down.

"I don't want your eighty thousand dollars."

"Don't be foolish."

"I wanted a father."

The words struck the room silent.

Johnny stared at him.

Bones pushed the bag across the table.

"If the money belongs to all those families, then bring it back to them yourself."

"I told you why I can't."

"No. You told me why you're scared."

Johnny Malone had faced artillery on Hill 861. He had stood against cartels, federal agents, rival smugglers, and men who fed their enemies to alligators.

He could not look his son in the eye.

Alex picked up the coded map.

"Deon gave you until five tomorrow," he said. "Whatever Bubs is about to do, you're afraid of it."

Johnny remained silent.

"So you have a choice. Stay here and let Bubs hand your secret to the federal government—or cross the Alley with us and take control of what you left behind."

Johnny looked toward the doorway through which Carmen had vanished. Beyond it lay his pool, his disguises, his false name, and the small life he had constructed inside exile.

Then he looked at Bones.

"When are you boys leaving?"

"As soon as the Caprice cools down," Billy said.

Johnny glanced through the window at the battered car.

"That thing brought you across the state?"

"Barely."

Johnny reached for the duffel bag.

Alex smiled. "You coming?"

Johnny lifted it from the table.

"No."

Bones turned away.

"But you boys aren't driving back to Dawber County without me."

CHAPTER TEN
THE HIT

Johnny Malone opened the duffel bag again.

"You'll need this."

Bones stared at the money he had just refused.

"I told you I don't want it."

"You don't have to want money for it to be useful."

"What's it gonna buy us?"

"A better car, for starters."

Billy looked through the kitchen window at the Caprice. "He has a point."

Alex folded the coded map and slipped it inside his jacket.

"If you're coming with us, we leave now."

"I did not say I was coming with you."

"You said we weren't driving back without you."

"That is not the same thing."

"It sounds exactly the same."

Johnny took a bottle of rum from the cabinet and wrapped it inside a shirt. He placed it in the duffel bag beside the cash.

"I'm accompanying you as far as Homestead."

"Homestead is south," Billy said. "Dawber County is west."

"Thank you, Magellan. I know where Homestead is."

"Then what happens there?"

"I make arrangements."

Alex planted both hands on the table. "You go to Homestead, we go back to Dawber, and nothing changes."

"I'll contact Bubs."

"He won't listen to you on the telephone."

"He used to."

"That was before his son died from the poison you brought into Dawber County."

Johnny stopped packing.

Bones looked between them. "Bubs's son?"

Johnny reached for his cigarettes.

"Not now."

"When?"

"When we're somewhere safer."

Alex laughed. "Safer than the home you've been hiding in for twelve years?"

Johnny pointed toward the windows.

"This property has reinforced interior walls, three escape routes, an independent water supply, and enough weapons to hold off a small army."

The first burst of gunfire shattered every window facing the street.

Glass exploded across the kitchen.

Billy tackled Bones.

Alex dropped behind the counter as bullets tore through the cabinets above him. Plates burst apart. Cans spun from the shelves. Red tamale sauce sprayed across the wall beside the stain Carmen had already left.

Johnny fell to one knee with the .38 in his hand.

He did not look surprised.

"Small army?" Alex shouted.

"A figure of speech."

Another volley raked the front room.

The television imploded. Wood paneling splintered into the hallway. A round struck the bottle of rum inside the open duffel, filling the kitchen with alcohol and broken glass.

Johnny stared at the ruined bottle.

"Now I'm angry."

He crawled toward the doorway.

Bones raised his head.

Johnny pushed it down. "Stay low."

"Who is it?"

"I haven't asked."

Bullets continued chewing through the house.

Billy dragged Bones behind the refrigerator. Alex crawled after them, slicing his palm on broken glass.

A car idled outside. Men shouted to one another in Haitian Creole.

Johnny recognized the voices.

He closed his eyes briefly.

"The Haitians."

Bones looked through the gap beside the refrigerator. "You said there was a funny story."

"The humor developed poorly."

"What did you do to them?" Alex asked.

"Technically, nothing."

A bullet struck the refrigerator with a metallic crack.

Billy jerked away. "What does technically mean?"

"It means Etienne Baptiste stole money from them and blamed me."

"Did you have the money?"

"For a short time."

"How short?"

"Six years."

Alex stared at him. "You stole their money."

"I recovered misallocated funds."

Another burst punched through the wall.

Bones drew the Colt .45.

Johnny looked at the pistol and then at his son.

"Where did you get that?"

"Ma gave it to me."

"That's mine."

"She said you left it."

"I was coming back for it."

"When?"

Johnny had no answer.

A man outside shouted, "Malone! We come for the money!"

Johnny leaned around the doorway.

"I gave it to Etienne!"

"We don't work for Etienne!"

Johnny looked back at the boys. "That is new information."

The gunfire stopped.

Silence descended so abruptly that Alex heard shell casings rolling across the front porch.

Billy whispered, "They're reloading."

Johnny nodded.

"And moving closer."

He crossed the hallway on his stomach and opened a narrow closet. Coils of black wire, ammunition boxes, and military equipment crowded its shelves.

Alex saw two green blocks inside a wooden crate.

"Are those mines?"

"Defensive improvements."

"You have land mines in your closet?"

"It isn't illegal if they aren't armed."

Johnny took out a spool of wire.

"Are they armed?" Billy asked.

Johnny crawled toward the front door. "They're about to be."

Outside, shoes moved through the grass.

Bones started after his father.

Alex caught his leg. "Where are you going?"

"To help him."

"He knows what he's doing."

"How do you know?"

"Look at him."

Johnny worked beneath the front window while bullets continued passing through the wall above him. His movements remained calm and exact. He attached the wire to two hidden contacts, stretched it across the entrance, and secured it near the broken remains of the door.

For an instant, Alex saw the young soldier Kenny had described on Hill 861.

The fearlessness had never left Johnny Malone.

It had merely learned to wear a wig.

Johnny crawled back.

"When they come through the door, stay down."

"What happens?" Bones asked.

"They regret their choices."

A shadow crossed the front window.

The muzzle of an Uzi appeared through the broken glass.

Johnny fired once.

The weapon disappeared.

A man screamed outside.

Gunfire erupted again.

Billy covered his head. Bones pressed both hands over his ears, the Colt trapped against his cheek. His entire body shook.

Johnny saw him.

"Bones!"

Bones did not respond.

"Look at me!"

A bullet tore through the refrigerator door and sent milk spraying across the floor.

Bones squeezed his eyes shut.

Johnny crawled to him and grabbed his shirt.

"You hear me, son?"

Bones opened his eyes.

"When they stop firing, you shoot through that window. Three rounds. No more."

"I can't see 'em."

"You don't have to hit anybody. We need their heads down."

Bones tried to nod.

"Three rounds," Johnny repeated. "Then follow Alex and Billy into the back bedroom."

"What about you?"

"I'll be behind you."

The shooting stopped.

Johnny slapped the floor. "Now!"

Bones rose to one knee.

He let out a roar and fired.

The first round struck the front wall.

The second passed through the shattered window.

A man outside cried out.

Bones continued pulling the trigger.

Johnny seized the weapon after the fifth shot and forced the barrel upward.

"I said three!"

"I hit one!"

"You nearly hit the neighbors!"

"They're shooting at us!"

"And Mrs. Alvarez next door isn't!"

Footsteps thundered onto the porch.

A man hit the tripwire.

The explosion lifted the front door from its frame.

Heat and pressure swept through the house. The kitchen ceiling cracked. A wall of dust, smoke, and broken plaster rolled down the hallway.

Johnny pushed the boys toward the back bedroom.

"Move!"

The bedroom door barely closed before gunfire resumed.

Johnny locked it.

A second later, bullets punched through the wood.

Billy and Bones shoved an oak dresser across the floor. It struck the door as someone hit it from the other side.

Alex searched the room.

One window faced the backyard, but iron security bars covered it.

"We're trapped."

Johnny opened the closet.

"We're prepared."

Behind a row of tropical shirts, an attic ladder hung from the ceiling. Johnny pulled a cord. Wooden steps unfolded into the closet.

Billy stared at him. "You planned this?"

"I plan everything."

The bedroom door shook.

Bones climbed first. The ladder groaned beneath him.

"Your mother feeding you concrete?" Johnny asked.

Bones disappeared into the attic.

Billy followed.

Alex placed one foot on the ladder, then looked back.

"What about the eighty thousand?"

Johnny threw him the duffel bag.

Alex caught it against his chest. "You're trusting me with this?"

"No. Bones is directly above you."

The dresser slid several inches from the door.

Johnny climbed behind Alex and pulled the ladder upward.

Darkness swallowed them.

The attic was hot enough to burn their lungs. Insulation clung to their clothes. Narrow planks ran above the ceiling joists toward a small window at the side of the house.

Johnny flicked open his military lighter.

In the weak flame, Alex saw wires running in every direction.

Some disappeared through drilled holes in the beams. Others led to small wrapped packages attached to the roof supports.

Alex stopped.

"You wired the whole house."

"I told you I plan ahead."

"You're gonna blow it up?"

"It no longer seems like a sound real-estate investment."

Bones peered through the attic window.

"The street looks clear."

"They're entering through the front," Johnny said. "They think the explosion was the only surprise."

A crash sounded beneath them.

Men shouted from inside the house.

Johnny opened a small metal box attached to one rafter. Inside were blasting caps, a timer, and a white fuse.

Billy stared at it. "How much explosive is in here?"

"Enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Move."

Bones forced open the attic window.

The neighboring yard lay several feet below. A row of Eureka palms concealed most of the side passage from the street.

"Go feet first," Johnny said.

Bones squeezed through the opening. His shirt caught on a nail and tore across the back before he dropped into the shrubbery.

Billy followed.

Alex pushed the duffel through before climbing onto the sill.

Johnny caught his arm.

"Where are the car keys?"

Alex reached into his pocket and produced them.

"Keep the engine running," Johnny said. "Do not wait if the Haitians come around the side."

"What about you?"

"I'll be there."

"You just said not to wait."

"If I'm not there, I won't care."

The bedroom door crashed open below them.

Johnny touched the lighter flame to the fuse.

It sparked.

Alex watched the fire begin its slow journey along the white line.

"You're crazy."

"Your father used to say that."

Johnny shoved him through the window.

Alex landed badly, rolled across the dirt, and struck the fence with his shoulder.

Bones pulled him upright.

"Where's Pa?"

"Coming."

Billy had already reached the sidewalk. He waved frantically.

"Car!"

They ran.

Men shouted inside the house.

Alex expected bullets to follow, but the Haitians were still searching the rooms. Smoke billowed through the broken front windows. A body lay motionless near the porch.

The Caprice seemed impossibly far away.

Billy reached it first.

"Keys!"

Alex threw them.

Billy unlocked the driver's door, slid across the bench seat, and started the engine. The starter ground twice before the motor caught.

Bones climbed into the front passenger seat.

Alex threw the duffel onto the floor and dove into the back.

Johnny was still inside the yard.

"Go!" he shouted.

Billy shifted into drive.

Alex grabbed his shoulder. "Wait!"

A Haitian gunman appeared around the side of the house.

Bones leaned through the passenger window and fired.

The man dropped behind a parked car.

Johnny cleared the fence and sprinted toward them with surprising speed for a man his age. The false mustache still clung to one side of his face.

Billy began moving.

Johnny reached the Caprice and pulled open the rear door. One foot slipped on the pavement. Alex grabbed his wrist and hauled him inside as Billy accelerated.

Gunfire followed them.

The rear window shattered.

Johnny grunted and fell across the seat.

Alex saw blood.

"You're hit."

"Not again."

"Where?"

Johnny reached behind himself. His fingers came away red.

Bones looked back. "They shot you in the ass?"

"Drive faster."

"You got shot in the ass in Vietnam too," Bones said.

Johnny pressed a magazine against the wound. "Your mother had no discretion."

Billy turned hard at the intersection. Tires screamed against the pavement.

The house disappeared behind them.

Bones aimed through the empty rear window and fired again.

Johnny slapped the pistol downward.

"Stop shooting!"

"They're behind us!"

"You're firing at an entire neighborhood!"

The sky turned orange.

A deep explosion struck the Caprice like a wave.

The back of Johnny's house rose in fire. Windows burst outward. A section of roof lifted, folded, and collapsed into the flames. Black smoke rolled above the palm trees.

The pursuing car swerved to avoid debris.

Billy drove through another intersection without slowing.

Sirens began somewhere in the distance.

Alex stared through the shattered window.

"You blew up your house."

Johnny removed the remaining strip of false mustache.

"It was time to move."

"What about Carmen?" Billy asked.

"She left before the shooting."

"All your things?"

Johnny nodded toward the duffel bag. "Everything important is in there."

Bones looked at the bag. "The eighty thousand?"

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

"Passports. Account numbers. Property records. Names of people who owe me favors."

"Guns?" Alex asked.

"No guns."

A metallic object shifted inside the bag.

Johnny sighed. "One gun."

Billy glanced at the rearview mirror.

"Where are we going?"

"Hospital," Alex said.

"No hospitals," Johnny replied.

"You've been shot."

"It passed through."

"Through your ass," Bones said.

"Yes, thank you."

"What if you bleed to death?"

"Then I'll die facedown, which seems appropriate."

Billy made another turn and merged into traffic.

Police cars raced toward Little Havana in the opposite lanes.

Johnny lowered himself against the seat. Color had drained from his face, but his voice remained steady.

"Take Flagler west. There's a warehouse near the airport."

"What's Sanchez Properties?" Alex asked.

Johnny's face darkened.

"A company that belonged to the finest man I ever knew."

"Who was Sanchez?" Billy asked.

"One of us. He fought beside your fathers in Vietnam."

"What happened to him?"

"Atticus Shelton killed him in 1991."

Bones shifted in his seat. "People say Atticus was the most feared man in Dawber County."

"He was," Johnny said. "But Sanchez was the only man Atticus never frightened."

"Why did Atticus kill him?"

Johnny looked at Billy through the rearview mirror.

"Because Bo Dawber ordered him to."

Billy stiffened. "That's a lie."

"Bo made Sanchez's murder look like the cartel did it. Everybody believed him."

"But you didn't," Alex said.

"No. I knew Bo was responsible."

"So you went to the federal government."

Johnny stared through the shattered rear window at the smoke rising over Miami.

"I gave the feds what they needed to destroy Bo's empire. I wanted revenge against Bo. I never intended to send my friends to prison."

"But they went anyway," Bones said.

Johnny's voice fell quiet.

"They were collateral damage in a war I thought I could control."

"Drive," Johnny said. "It's time I went home."

CHAPTER ELEVEN
ALLIGATOR ALLEY

Sanchez Properties occupied a windowless warehouse behind Miami International Airport.

There was no company sign, mailbox, or indication that anyone conducted business there. A twelve-foot fence enclosed the property. Security cameras watched the steel gate from three directions.

Billy stopped the bullet-riddled Caprice beside a keypad.

Johnny leaned forward from the back seat and entered six numbers.

Nothing happened.

He entered them again.

A red light turned green. The gate rolled sideways.

"You forget the code?" Bones asked.

"I've been shot. Allow for typographical errors."

"You can't make a typo with numbers."

"Drive inside, Billy."

Billy guided the Caprice through the gate. It closed automatically behind them.

The warehouse appeared abandoned. Dust covered the loading dock, and weeds grew through cracks in the pavement. Every exterior window had been sealed with concrete blocks.

Billy stopped beside a steel door.

"Somebody expecting us?" he asked.

"No."

"Then who opened the gate?"

"I did."

Johnny struggled with the rear door.

Alex helped him stand. Blood had soaked through the magazine Johnny held against his wound.

Bones removed the duffel bag from the floor.

"Does Sanchez own this place?"

Johnny looked at the faded lettering above the loading dock.

"He did."

"Where is he?"

"Dead."

The answer silenced everyone.

Johnny entered another code beside the steel door. A lock disengaged with a heavy metallic clunk.

Overhead lights illuminated the warehouse one row at a time.

A black Cadillac sat near the center. A white cargo van and an old military Jeep occupied the spaces beside it. Steel cabinets lined one wall. Maps of Florida, the Caribbean, Colombia, and Central America covered another.

A medical table stood beneath bright lights.

"This is yours?" Alex asked.

"It belongs to the company."

"Which belongs to who?"

"Complicated men don't ask simple questions about ownership."

"You own it."

"I have access to it."

Johnny removed his bloodstained shirt and lowered himself facedown onto the medical table.

He pointed toward a cabinet.

"Top drawer."

Alex found antiseptic, bandages, gauze, tape, and several bottles of medication.

"You planned on getting shot?"

"I planned on eventually needing medical care without explaining myself to a hospital."

"You've done this before."

"More times than I recommend."

Alex cut away the fabric around the wound.

Bones stared.

"You really got shot in the ass."

"Thank you for confirming it."

"Same place as Vietnam?"

"Approximately."

"You have two scars?"

"Symmetry is important."

Alex poured antiseptic onto a cloth.

"This will hurt."

"I've survived worse."

Alex pressed the cloth against the wound.

Johnny's hands clamped around the table.

"Gentler."

"You survived Vietnam."

"The Vietnamese were gentler."

Billy walked around the Cadillac. The windows were darkly tinted, and the tires appeared new. He found the keys in a locked drawer beneath the workbench.

The drawer also contained bundles of cash, passports bearing different names, property records, and two pistols.

"What is this place?" Billy asked.

"A contingency."

"For what?"

Johnny looked toward the damaged Caprice.

"The day my past found me."

Bones placed the duffel bag beside the medical table.

"Looks like it found you."

A framed photograph hung between the maps.

Five young servicemen stood together in Vietnam. Their uniforms were covered in mud, and exhaustion had hollowed their faces.

Johnny Malone.

Kenny Gregory.

Timmy Dawber.

Thomas "Tommy" Scully.

Rodrigo Sanchez.

Bones approached the photograph.

"Which one is Sanchez?"

Johnny pointed toward the man standing at his right shoulder.

"He was your friend?"

"My brother."

"Not really."

"Blood isn't the only thing that makes brothers."

Billy studied the picture of Timmy.

His father had left Dawber County as a popular leader, baseball star, and one of the most admired young men ever to graduate from Dawber High School. The man in the photograph was thinner and harder, but something remained in his eyes that later photographs had lost.

"He looks normal," Billy said.

"He wasn't," Johnny replied. "None of us were by then."

"But he wasn't crazy."

"Your father came home wounded in a place nobody knew how to treat. People called him crazy because that was easier than admitting what the war had done to him."

"Bo tried to help him."

"So did all of us."

"Bo said nothing worked."

Johnny looked at Billy but did not answer.

Bones pointed to Sanchez.

"What happened to him?"

"Atticus Shelton killed him in 1991."

"Atticus?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Johnny's expression darkened.

"Because Bo Dawber ordered him to."

Billy turned away from the photograph. "That's a lie."

"No."

"Bo said the cartel killed Sanchez."

"That's what he wanted everyone to believe."

"You don't know what Bo wanted."

"I know exactly what happened."

"Were you there?"

"No."

"Then you don't know."

Johnny sat up carefully while Alex taped clean gauze over the wound.

"Sanchez and I established the smuggling operation. We knew we couldn't move anything through Dawber County without Bo's permission."

"It was his county," Billy said.

"No county belongs to one man."

"He protected it."

"He demanded sixty percent of everything we earned."

"That was the deal."

"It was extortion."

"You agreed to it."

"We agreed because refusing Bo wasn't an option."

Alex finished the bandage. "So you lied to him."

Johnny looked at him.

"If the operation earned ten million dollars, we might report four million. The rest went through private accounts, shell companies, property investments, and cash reserves."

"Sanchez Properties," Alex said.

"Yes."

"How long did you skim from Bo?" Billy asked.

"Years."

Billy's face reddened.

"Then you stole from him."

"Bo received more money than he could spend in ten lifetimes."

"That doesn't mean the rest belonged to you."

"Johnny and Sanchez built the network," Alex said.

Billy turned on him. "This ain't your family."

"It became my family when Kenny went to prison."

Johnny raised one hand.

"Enough."

He looked back at the photograph.

"Bo brought Mack Donnelly into the organization to launder his share. Mack examined the books and discovered the real revenue."

"He told Bo," Alex said.

"Yes."

"And Bo had Sanchez killed."

"Yes."

"Why not kill you too?"

"I was the accountant. I knew where the money went, which officials had been paid, and how every part of the operation worked. Killing me would have endangered the entire organization."

"But Sanchez was expendable," Bones said.

Johnny's jaw tightened.

"Not to me."

"What proof did you have?" Billy asked.

"Atticus took Sanchez's watch."

"Did you find it?"

"No."

"Then it wasn't proof."

"Cartel executions were messages. They wanted credit. Sanchez's death was staged to resemble one of their hits, but the details were wrong."

"That gave you enough reason to blame Bo?"

"It gave me enough reason to destroy him."

Billy stared at Johnny.

"You were the informant."

"I gave the FBI the records they needed to dismantle Bo's empire."

"You sent my uncle to prison."

"I wanted revenge against Bo. I never intended for Kenny, Bubs, and the others to pay for it."

"But they did."

Johnny looked toward Alex.

"Yes."

Billy threw the Cadillac keys onto the workbench.

"Drive yourself."

He walked toward the loading dock.

Alex picked up the keys.

"He'll come back."

"You sound sure."

"He wants answers more than he wants to leave."

Johnny removed the framed photograph from the wall and placed it inside the duffel bag.

Billy returned several minutes later.

He held out his hand.

Alex gave him the keys.

"I'm driving," Billy said.

Nobody argued. Tiana Ross was forty miles west of Miami when Deon Childress called for the third time.

She guided her white BMW through the afternoon traffic with one hand while pressing the telephone against her ear with the other.

"I'm already on Alligator Alley," she said.

"Where exactly?"

"I passed the service plaza about ten minutes ago."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

Deon was silent.

"Why do you keep asking me that?"

"I need you to listen carefully. Kenny Gregory was removed from isolation after an alleged suicide attempt."

"Alleged?"

"Kenny didn't try to kill himself."

"How do you know?"

"Because Kenny Gregory would kill everybody else in the building first."

"If anything happens to me, call my brother." "Willis?" "Don't sound so surprised."

"You told me never to involve him in your legal work." "This isn't legal work anymore."

Tiana heard voices behind Deon. A metal door slammed.

"Where are you?"

"Still at the prison."

"I thought you were meeting me outside."

"Plans changed."

Something in his voice frightened her.

"Deon, what is happening?"

"I need you to bring the emergency petition, Kenny's representation agreement, and every note from our investigation."

"They're in my briefcase."

"Do not show them to anyone."

"I know how attorney-client privilege works."

"This is not about privilege. There are people inside this prison who cannot know what we've discovered."

"What people?"

The connection crackled.

"Deon?"

"Turn around."

"What?"

"Go back to Miami."

"You just told me to come."

"I'm telling you not to now."

"Why?"

The connection became silent.

Tiana looked at the screen.

The call had ended.

She tried Deon again.

The call went directly to voicemail.

Rain began striking the windshield.

Behind her, a black Ford Crown Victoria maintained a steady distance. Trent Dietrich watched Tiana's brake lights through the rain.

He had been following her since she left Miami.

For several weeks, Tiana believed he was her boyfriend. In reality, Trent was a corrections intelligence officer working directly for Warden Kinder. Their chance meeting at a Miami Beach bar had been arranged. Their dates had been surveillance sessions disguised by alcohol, expensive meals, and carefully rationed affection.

Tiana had told him everything she knew about Deon.

She had not known she was being interrogated.

Trent's telephone rang.

"Where is she?" Kinder demanded.

"Thirty miles from the prison."

"Deon made a call."

"I saw her answer."

"What did he tell her?"

"I don't know."

"Is she still heading west?"

"Yes."

"Then stop her."

Trent tightened his grip on the telephone. "How?"

"I don't care."

"There are cameras at the prison. If she arrives and disappears—"

"She cannot arrive."

"What do you want me to do?"

Kinder's voice lowered.

"Make it look like an accident."

The call ended.

Trent watched Tiana's BMW.

Visibility continued deteriorating. Rain turned the road into a white blur. Canals and swamps stretched beyond the guardrails on both sides.

Alligator Alley offered few places to stop.

It offered many places to disappear.

Trent accelerated. Billy drove the Cadillac west beneath the approaching storm.

Johnny lay across the rear seat with his head against the door. Bones sat beside him, guarding the duffel bag. Alex occupied the front passenger seat with Kenny's coded map inside his jacket.

The Miami skyline had disappeared.

Concrete gave way to canals, sawgrass, and the long straight road through the Everglades.

Johnny reached for a cigarette.

Bones took the pack from him.

"What?"

"You've been shot."

"In an unrelated location."

"You ain't smoking."

Johnny started to object, then saw his son's expression.

He lowered his hand.

Billy noticed in the mirror.

"He listens to you."

"First time," Bones said.

"Don't become accustomed to it," Johnny replied.

Alex unfolded the map.

"You'll help us find the five million?"

Johnny watched the dark islands passing beyond the glass.

"If it's still there."

"You said you knew where it was."

"I know where we buried it. That was twelve years ago."

"Who could've moved it?"

"Bubs."

Bones frowned. "You left five million dollars with a preacher?"

"I left him access to it. The money was supposed to provide for the families after the arrests—mortgages, legal expenses, medical bills, whatever our people needed."

"Then why is everybody still poor?" Alex asked.

"Because Bubs decided the money was poisoned."

"Blood money," Alex said.

"That's what he calls it."

"He never touched it?"

"According to Deon, not one dollar."

"Then it's still in the swamp."

"Unless somebody else found it."

Alex leaned closer. "What about the rest of your money?"

Johnny looked at him.

"What rest?"

"The millions everybody says you hid overseas."

"You ask expensive questions."

"Swiss accounts?"

Johnny turned toward the window.

"Accounts I haven't touched since 1991."

"Why not?"

"Because the DEA never stopped watching me. I made an agreement with the FBI, not the DEA. As far as the DEA is concerned, I escaped with a fortune they couldn't recover."

"And Mack Donnelly," Billy said.

Johnny's jaw tightened.

"Mack doesn't care about the law anymore. He cares about proving I beat him."

"So the money just sits there?" Bones asked.

"Until I settle matters in Dawber County and know you're safe."

Alex shook his head. "I don't just want the five million."

Johnny looked at him.

"I want you to teach us."

"Teach you what?"

"How to rebuild the operation without making the mistakes you and our fathers made."

Johnny studied the three boys.

"You think our mistakes were accounting errors?"

"I think you built the most profitable smuggling network in Florida."

"And then I destroyed it."

"That means you know how to do both."

Rain struck the windshield.

Billy switched on the wipers. They dragged across the glass without clearing it.

"Storm's getting bad."

Johnny looked past him.

Several hundred yards ahead, a white BMW had reduced its speed.

A black Crown Victoria followed closely behind it.

"Back off," Johnny said.

Billy eased off the accelerator.

The Crown Victoria moved into the passing lane.

Instead of overtaking the BMW, it remained beside it.

"What's he doing?" Alex asked.

Johnny sat upright.

"Nothing good." Tiana could no longer see the road behind her.

The black Crown Victoria appeared beside her through the rain. Its tinted passenger window lowered.

She recognized the driver.

"Trent?"

She lowered her own window several inches.

Rain blew into the BMW.

Trent pointed toward the shoulder and motioned for her to pull over.

Tiana raised the telephone.

He shook his head and pointed again.

She called him.

He answered.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I've been following you."

"Why?"

"Deon called me. He said you shouldn't go to the prison."

"He told me the same thing."

"Pull over."

"Why?"

"There's something wrong with your rear tire."

Tiana glanced toward the dashboard.

No warning light appeared.

"The car feels fine."

"It's wobbling. Pull over before you lose control."

There was nowhere safe to stop. A narrow shoulder separated the highway from a high chain-link barrier. Beyond it lay a canal filled with black water.

"I'll stop at the next service area."

"Pull over now."

His voice had changed.

The attentive man she knew had disappeared. What remained was cold and commanding.

"Who told you I was going to the prison?"

Trent did not answer.

"Deon didn't call you."

"Tiana, pull over."

"You've been following me since Miami."

"Do what I said."

She accelerated.

Trent matched her speed.

Then he steered toward her lane.

The Crown Victoria struck the BMW's left side.

Tiana screamed.

Her car swerved toward the barrier. She corrected and regained control.

"Are you insane?" she shouted into the telephone.

Trent hit her again.

The BMW fishtailed across the wet pavement.

Tiana dropped the phone and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

In the mirror, headlights approached rapidly from behind.

Billy saw the Crown Victoria strike the BMW

"He's running her off the road."

Johnny grabbed the back of the front seat. "Slow down."

"If we slow down, he'll push her through the fence."

"Then pass them."

"There's no room."

The BMW swerved into their lane.

Billy hit the brakes.

The Cadillac began sliding.

"Don't fight it!" Johnny shouted. "Steer into the skid!"

Billy turned the wheel.

The rear of the Cadillac swung sideways. Alex braced himself against the dashboard. Bones pulled the duffel bag over his head.

The Crown Victoria stopped abruptly across the roadway.

Billy had nowhere to go.

The Cadillac's front corner smashed into the rear of Trent's car.

Metal folded.

The impact drove the Crown Victoria forward.

It struck the BMW near its rear passenger wheel.

Tiana's car spun across the shoulder.

The BMW crashed through the chain-link barrier and disappeared over the embankment.

A tremendous splash rose from the canal.

The Cadillac rotated once and stopped against the guardrail.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Steam escaped from beneath the crumpled hood.

Johnny raised his head.

"Everybody alive?"

"My nose hurts," Bones said.

"You're alive."

Billy's hands remained locked around the steering wheel.

"I hit them."

"The black car stopped in front of you," Johnny said.

"The woman went into the water."

Alex opened his door.

Johnny grabbed him. "Wait."

"We have to help her."

"The man in the Crown Victoria did that deliberately."

"How do you know?"

"Because accidents don't usually require three attempts."

Trent's door opened.

He climbed out holding a pistol.

"Down!" Johnny shouted.

A bullet struck the Cadillac's windshield.

Billy ducked beneath the steering wheel.

Bones drew the Colt.

Johnny caught his wrist. "Not through the glass."

Alex crawled across the front seat and exited through the driver's door, keeping the Cadillac between himself and Trent.

Bones followed.

The BMW was already sinking.

Only its roof remained above the black water.

Tiana appeared through the broken driver's window. She gasped, grabbed the roof, and tried to pull herself free.

Something moved in the canal behind her.

An alligator's head broke the surface.

"Bones!" Alex shouted.

Bones looked toward Trent.

Another shot struck the Cadillac.

Then he looked at Tiana.

He ran toward the embankment.

"Cover him!" Johnny ordered.

Billy reached beneath the seat for the second pistol from the warehouse. He fired twice toward the Crown Victoria.

Trent disappeared behind his car.

Bones slid down the muddy bank.

Tiana clung to the sinking BMW. Water had reached her shoulders. Her clothes and hair dragged against her as she attempted to climb onto the roof.

"Help me!"

"I'm comin'!"

Bones waded into the canal.

The mud swallowed his legs to the knees.

Alex reached the fence opening and saw the alligator approaching from behind Tiana.

"Bones, hurry!"

"I am!"

The BMW shifted.

Tiana lost her grip and disappeared beneath the surface.

Bones lunged forward and caught her arm as she resurfaced. She seized his shirt with both hands.

"Don't pull me under!"

"There's something behind me!"

"I know."

The alligator moved closer.

Bones raised the Colt.

The animal submerged.

"Where did it go?" Tiana screamed.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"It went underwater!"

Bones wrapped one arm around her and dragged her toward the embankment.

The mud fought every step.

Tiana looked back.

The BMW disappeared beneath the water.

Bubbles rose where it had been.

Alex climbed partway down the slope and reached for her.

A shot struck the fence near his head.

Trent had left the cover of the Crown Victoria.

He walked toward the embankment with his pistol aimed at Tiana.

Johnny fired from beside the Cadillac.

His round struck the pavement near Trent's foot.

Trent turned and fired back.

Johnny collapsed behind the engine block.

"Pa!" Bones shouted.

Trent continued toward the canal.

Tiana recognized him.

"Trent?"

He aimed at her.

The truth arrived before the bullet.

Their meeting had not been accidental. Their dates had not been romance. Every question about Deon, Kenny, and the prison had been part of an assignment.

"Why?" she asked.

Trent hesitated.

That moment saved her.

Bones pushed Tiana into Alex's reach, turned, and fired the Colt.

The round struck Trent in the chest.

He staggered.

Bones fired again.

Trent fell near the broken fence.

His pistol slid across the wet pavement and disappeared into the canal.

The alligator surfaced.

It was less than ten feet from Bones.

Tiana screamed.

Bones shoved her up the embankment and scrambled after her. Alex caught Tiana beneath both arms and pulled. Billy reached through the fence and helped drag her onto the shoulder.

Bones climbed last.

The alligator lunged from the canal.

Its jaws closed on the heel of his boot.

Bones kicked free, leaving the boot behind.

The animal rolled backward into the black water.

Bones collapsed beside Tiana.

She coughed canal water onto the pavement.

"You all right?" he asked.

She stared at him.

"You shot Trent."

"He was gonna kill you."

"That was my boyfriend."

Bones looked toward the body.

"You need better taste in men."

Johnny searched Trent's pockets while Alex checked the highway for approaching traffic.

They had only minutes before another vehicle arrived.

Johnny found Department of Corrections identification, an unmarked badge, two telephones, and a small photograph of Tiana entering Deon's law office.

He handed the photograph to her.

Tiana stared at it.

"This was taken weeks ago."

"He was watching you," Johnny said.

"Who are you?"

"Somebody who knows what surveillance looks like."

She looked at the blood on his trousers, the revolver in his hand, and the three young men surrounding him.

Then she recognized Alex.

"You're Kenny Gregory's son."

Alex frowned. "How do you know me?"

"I work for Deon Childress."

Johnny stepped closer. "Why were you going to the prison?"

"Deon called. He said something happened to Kenny."

"What?"

"They claimed he attempted suicide. Deon said it was a lie."

Alex's face hardened.

"Where's Deon now?"

"At the prison."

Johnny looked at Trent's identification.

"Not for long."

Tiana tried standing. Her knees failed.

Bones caught her.

"Easy."

She looked at him. "What's your name?"

"Bones."

"Of course it is."

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Billy looked east. "Police."

"Not necessarily," Johnny said.

"What do we do?" Alex asked.

Johnny surveyed the wreckage.

The Cadillac could still move, but steam poured from the damaged radiator. The Crown Victoria's rear had collapsed. Tiana's BMW was gone.

"We take the Cadillac."

"It won't make Dawber," Billy said.

"It only needs to get us off the highway."

"What about Trent?"

Johnny looked toward the canal.

Johnny looked toward Trent's body.

"Bones, help me move him."

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

"Keeping you from spending the night explaining why your boyfriend followed you onto Alligator Alley and tried to murder you."

"We need to call the police."

Johnny held up Trent's Department of Corrections identification.

"He was the police—or close enough that the distinction won't save you."

"Moving his body makes us criminals."

Johnny looked at the ruined cars, the broken fence, and the dark canal below.

"That decision was made when he fired the first shot."

Bones took Trent beneath the arms. Johnny grabbed his legs, wincing as the movement pulled against his wound.

Together, they carried him through the opening in the fence.

Tiana followed. "Stop! You can't do this!"

Johnny searched Trent's pockets, removing his telephones, identification, keys, and the photograph of Tiana outside Deon's office.

Then he and Bones rolled the body down the muddy embankment.

Trent struck the water facedown.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

A dark shape moved beneath the surface.

Then another.

Trent's body jerked sideways.

Tiana covered her mouth.

An alligator seized his shoulder and pulled him into deeper water. A second animal struck from the opposite direction. The canal erupted in mud, blood, and white foam.

When the surface became still again, Trent was gone.

Johnny looked at Bones.

"That man came here to kill an innocent woman. Don't waste your conscience mourning him."

Bones stared into the canal.

"I wasn't."

Johnny turned toward the Cadillac.

"Good. Because the gators weren't either."

The sirens grew closer.

Bones helped Tiana into the back seat.

Johnny climbed beside her. Alex and Bones crowded into the remaining space while Billy returned to the wheel.

The Cadillac started.

Steam rose over the hood.

Billy drove through the broken fence opening, crossed the shoulder, and returned to the highway.

Tiana watched Trent's body disappear through the shattered rear window.

Everything she believed that morning had vanished into the canal with her BMW.

Her relationship.

Her career.

Her safety.

Possibly Deon.

She looked at Johnny.

"You still haven't told me who you are."

Johnny pressed a hand against his wounded side.

"Johnny Malone."

Tiana went pale.

Deon had spoken that name only a few times, always carefully, as though saying it too loudly might summon something from Dawber County's past.

"You're supposed to be gone."

"So is Scully," Johnny said. "People are often mistaken."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Dawber County."

"I need to get to Deon."

"So do we."

Billy looked at the temperature gauge.

"We need another vehicle first."

Johnny looked toward the western horizon.

The storm was passing. A thin strip of red sunlight appeared beneath the clouds.

Behind them, police vehicles approached the collision.

Ahead waited the prison, Kenny, Deon, Warden Kinder, and the county Johnny had destroyed twelve years earlier.

Bones sat barefoot beside Tiana, his empty boot filling with canal water on the floor.

"You saved my life," she said.

Bones shrugged.

"You would've done the same."

"No," Tiana replied honestly. "I don't think I would have."

Bones smiled.

The Cadillac continued west, leaking coolant and carrying five people who had not intended to become allies.

They had not yet crossed into Dawber County.

The war had already reached them.

CHAPTER TWELVE
THE COUNTY LINE

The Cadillac began overheating twenty miles from Dawber County.

Billy watched the temperature needle climb toward the red.

"We're losing coolant."

Johnny looked through the cracked windshield at the steam rising from the hood.

"Keep moving."

"If the engine seizes, we'll stop permanently."

"If the police find that wreck before we leave Alligator Alley, the engine will be the least of our problems."

Tiana sat between Johnny and Bones in the back seat. Her wet clothes clung to her skin. Mud covered her legs, and the cut above her left eye had swollen.

She held Trent's two telephones and Department of Corrections identification inside a plastic sandwich bag.

Her briefcase had gone into the canal with the BMW.

Every document Deon instructed her to bring was underwater.

"What did you do with Trent's body?" she asked.

Nobody answered.

She looked at Bones.

"You know."

Bones stared at his one remaining boot.

"I helped Pa move him."

"Where?"

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"He went into the canal," Johnny said.

"You fed him to the alligators."

"I removed an immediate problem."

"He was already dead."

"That condition prevented him from objecting."

Tiana stared at him.

Johnny's face showed no remorse.

"You destroyed evidence."

"I preserved the evidence that matters."

He nodded toward the plastic bag.

"His identification, telephones, keys, and the photograph proving he had been following you. A dead corrections officer on the highway would have brought every law-enforcement agency in Florida down on us before we reached Dawber County."

"You made me part of a cover-up."

"Trent made you part of a murder attempt."

"That doesn't give us the right to dispose of his body."

"No. It gives us the need."

Tiana turned toward Bones.

"And you went along with it?"

"He tried to kill you."

"You could've said no."

Bones glanced at his father.

"No one says no to him."

Johnny's expression tightened.

"Plenty of people have."

"Where are they?" Tiana asked.

Johnny looked through the window at the black canal running beside them.

"That depends which people you mean."

The temperature needle touched the red.

Billy pulled onto the shoulder.

The Cadillac rolled to a stop beneath a highway sign warning motorists not to approach or feed alligators.

Bones looked back toward the canal.

"Little late for that."

Steam erupted when Billy lifted the hood.

Johnny removed his clean shirt and tied it around his waist before examining the radiator. The collision had bent the front frame inward. A narrow split leaked coolant in a steady stream.

"We need water," Billy said.

"We're surrounded by it," Bones replied.

Billy looked toward the canal. "You first."

Alex searched the trunk and found a tool kit, two gallons of drinking water, and a container of radiator sealant.

"Sanchez planned for everything," he said.

Johnny took the container.

"Sanchez believed preparation was the difference between an escape and a funeral."

Tiana stood beside the car, attempting to call Deon.

His telephone went directly to voicemail.

She tried his private number.

No answer.

Then she called the main office at the law firm.

"This is Tiana Ross. Has Mr. Childress called?"

She listened.

"When did he leave?"

Another pause.

"Did he say where he was going?"

Tiana closed her eyes.

"Yes, I know he went to the prison. I'm asking whether he returned."

The receptionist answered.

"No. Don't call the police yet. If he contacts the office, tell him to call me immediately."

She hung up.

Johnny watched her.

"He never left the prison."

"You don't know that."

"His Mercedes is still there."

"How do you know?"

"The firm tracks company vehicles."

Johnny looked west toward Dawber County.

"You said he called you."

"He told me to bring Kenny's representation agreement, the emergency petition, and every note from our investigation. Then he called again and ordered me to turn around."

"Something changed while he was inside."

"He sounded frightened."

"Was Deon easily frightened?"

"No."

"Then assume the threat was real."

Tiana looked at Deon's number on her telephone.

"Before the call ended, he told me something else."

"What?"

"If anything happened to him, I should call his brother."

Johnny stopped pouring the sealant.

"Willis."

"You know him?"

"I knew him when he was a boy."

"He isn't a boy now."

"No."

"He runs the Maroon Gang."

"I know."

"Deon told me never to involve Willis in legal matters."

"This stopped being a legal matter when Kinder sent Trent to kill you."

Tiana looked down at the plastic bag.

"Deon and Willis barely spoke."

"That doesn't mean they didn't love each other."

"How do you know?"

Johnny returned his attention to the radiator.

"Deon escaped Dawber County. Willis learned how to rule the part everybody else abandoned. Brothers don't need to understand each other to remain brothers."

Bones studied his father.

"You speaking from experience?"

Johnny ignored him.

Tiana removed Trent's first telephone from the bag.

"It's locked."

"Both?"

"Yes."

Johnny extended his hand.

She hesitated before giving him one.

He removed the battery.

A strip of paper had been taped beneath it. Six handwritten numbers appeared on the paper.

Tiana stared.

"His passcode."

"Men who lead secret lives prepare for the inconvenience of forgetting which life they're living."

She entered the numbers.

The telephone unlocked.

The recent-call list contained repeated calls to the same unlisted number.

Johnny used his own telephone to dial it.

The call connected.

"Who is this?" Warden Kinder demanded.

Johnny said nothing.

"Trent?"

Johnny ended the call.

Tiana stared at the telephone.

"That was Kinder."

"Yes."

"That proves Trent was working for him."

"It proves Trent called him."

"Repeatedly."

"A prosecutor will want more."

"I'm a lawyer. I know what a prosecutor wants."

"Then you know we need Kinder to believe Trent is still alive."

Johnny replaced the battery and returned the telephone.

"When Kinder calls, answer."

"And say what?"

"Nothing. Let him hear the highway."

"That won't fool him for long."

"It only needs to fool him until we reach Widow's Walk."

Billy poured the first gallon of water into the radiator.

"What happens when we get there?"

"We hide the Cadillac," Alex said.

"And her?" Billy nodded toward Tiana.

"She stays with us."

Tiana folded her arms. "Nobody asked me."

"You can leave whenever you want," Johnny said. "The Everglades is that direction."

He pointed toward the sawgrass.

Bones stepped between them.

"She ain't going anywhere alone."

Tiana looked up at him.

"You always this protective?"

"No."

Johnny gave his son a sideways glance.

Bones ignored it.

Billy poured the remaining water into the radiator and closed the hood.

"We might get another thirty miles."

"County line is twenty," Alex said.

"And Widow's Walk?"

"Twenty-seven."

Billy returned to the driver's seat.

"Then we walk the last seven."

They crossed into Dawber County after sunset.

The damaged engine clicked and groaned. Steam escaped from beneath the hood, but the temperature needle remained below the red.

A weather-beaten sign appeared beside the road.

WELCOME TO DAWBER COUNTY

WHERE FLORIDA BEGINS

Three bullet holes pierced the word WELCOME.

Johnny sat upright.

The smell entered through the cracked windows: sawgrass, salt water, mud, rotting vegetation, and distant wood smoke.

Home.

He had imagined returning for twelve years.

In some versions, federal agents brought him back in chains. In others, he arrived with enough money to purchase every acre Bo controlled. Sometimes he returned to kill Bo. Sometimes he came back only to stand beside Sanchez's grave.

He had never imagined arriving wounded, nearly broke, and surrounded by the children of men his revenge had sent to prison.

Bones watched him.

"You all right?"

"No."

It was the first answer Johnny had given him that required no interpretation.

Billy drove past the sign.

Tiana studied Johnny.

"You destroyed the smuggling operation here."

"Yes."

"Deon said you saved this county first."

"Both things can be true."

"Why come back?"

Johnny looked toward Bones.

"I was invited."

Alex laughed. "That isn't how I remember it."

The Cadillac left the paved road and entered the shell road leading toward Widow's Walk.

The engine died fifty yards from the marina.

Billy turned the key.

The starter clicked but did not engage.

"That's it."

Bones looked toward the boathouse. "We can push it."

"You can push it," Alex said.

They climbed out.

Bones and Billy took the rear bumper. Alex pushed from the driver's side while steering through the open window. Johnny attempted to help until his wound reopened.

Tiana caught his arm.

"You're bleeding again."

"I've been informed."

"Sit down."

"We need the car hidden."

"Bones can push it by himself."

Bones strained against the bumper.

"She ain't wrong."

Johnny stepped aside.

They rolled the Cadillac behind the abandoned bait shop and covered it with a weathered boat tarp. From the road, it resembled another forgotten piece of Widow's Walk.

Alex led them along the dock.

Tiana stopped several feet from the boathouse.

"You live here?"

"Temporarily."

The structure sagged over black water. Mosquitoes covered the screens. One section of roof had been patched with an old campaign banner stolen from Sheriff Buck Dawber.

Tiana looked at the banner.

"Does the sheriff know you have that?"

"He didn't win that election because of signs."

Bones unlocked the door.

The lamp remained burning inside.

Nothing appeared disturbed.

Alex checked the rear room and loft before lowering his pistol.

"Clear."

Tiana stepped inside.

The place smelled of mildew, fish, gasoline, and old books. A sagging sofa occupied one wall. Kenny's coded map lay beneath a cushion. Tools, boat parts, and fishing equipment covered every available surface.

She looked at Johnny.

"I nearly died for this?"

"You nearly died because your boyfriend worked for a prison warden," Alex said.

"Former boyfriend."

"Very former," Bones added.

Johnny lowered himself into the recliner.

Bones carried the duffel bag inside and placed it beside him.

Billy closed the curtains.

"No lights near the windows. Nobody goes outside unless we have to."

Alex looked at him. "You giving orders now?"

"Somebody should."

Johnny raised one hand.

"Billy's right. Kinder knows Tiana survived, and traffic cameras caught the Cadillac entering the county."

"We lost the rear plate in the crash," Alex said.

"That will delay identification, not prevent it."

Tiana placed Trent's telephones on the table.

"We need to contact law enforcement."

"No," Johnny said.

"You cannot keep saying no every time the law becomes inconvenient."

"The law is not inconvenient. It is compromised."

"Trent worked for Kinder. That doesn't mean every officer in Florida does."

"Kinder operates the prison. Bo controls people inside it. Sheriff Buck controls the county outside it. Which one do you trust?"

"Deon."

"Then find him."

Tiana called again.

Voicemail.

She left a message.

"Deon, it's Tiana. I was attacked on Alligator Alley. Trent was working for Kinder. I have his phone and identification. I'm safe, but I need you to call me immediately."

She almost ended the message.

Then she remembered Deon's final instruction.

"You told me to call Willis if something happened. I haven't done that yet. Please don't make me."

She disconnected.

Bones found a clean towel and handed it to her.

"You can use the shower."

"There's a shower?"

"Sort of."

"What does sort of mean?"

"You stand in it and water comes out."

"Then why sort of?"

"It ain't always the same color."

Tiana stared at him.

Bones smiled.

Despite everything that had happened, she almost smiled back.

Billy found dry clothes inside an old storage trunk. Alex spread the coded map across the table.

Johnny watched him.

"Put that away."

"We came here for the money."

"We came here because men tried to kill us."

"Same reason."

"Not tonight."

"Kenny is inside that prison because of this map."

"And rushing into Kinder's facility will put all of us beside him."

"Tiana can get us inside."

Tiana removed her wet jacket.

"I cannot get anybody inside. Deon had the authorization."

"Then we use his name."

"I will not impersonate my employer."

"You don't have to impersonate him. Just act like a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer."

"Then it should be easy."

Tiana stepped toward Alex.

"You think being intelligent excuses being obnoxious."

"No. Being right excuses it."

Johnny reached across the table and folded the map.

"Enough."

Alex looked at him.

"My father may be dying."

"I know."

"You don't care."

"I crossed the state because your father may be dying."

"You crossed because Bubs might give away your money."

Johnny placed the folded map inside his shirt.

"You want me to teach you how to rebuild the operation?"

Alex's anger paused.

"Yes."

"Then learn the first rule."

"What?"

"Never let desperation choose your next move."

Johnny leaned back in the recliner.

"Tonight, we gather information. Tomorrow, we act."

Trent's telephone rang.

Everyone looked at it.

The display showed the same unlisted number.

Kinder.

Tiana answered and activated the speaker.

She said nothing.

For several seconds, only silence passed between them.

Then Kinder spoke.

"Trent, if you can hear me, the situation has changed."

Johnny motioned for everyone to remain quiet.

"Deon Childress is still inside the prison. His associate never arrived. Kenny Gregory has been moved."

Tiana covered her mouth.

Kinder continued.

"If the woman survived, finish the assignment and call me. If you fail again, don't come back."

The connection ended.

Nobody moved.

Tiana stared at the telephone.

"He admitted Deon is there."

"He admitted nothing a court could use," Johnny said.

"I don't care about court."

"That makes two of us."

She reached for her shoes.

Bones stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"To the prison."

"You won't get through the gate."

"I have to try."

Johnny stood carefully.

"No."

Tiana turned on him.

"I am not one of your soldiers."

"No. You're Deon's responsibility, and he sent you away because he wanted you alive."

"He needs help."

"He needs us to understand why Kinder is holding him."

"The money."

"Yes."

"What can Deon tell him?"

"Nothing."

"Then Kinder will kill him."

The truth silenced the room.

Johnny looked toward the distant glow above Reform Correctional.

He knew men like Kinder. They did not release witnesses. They removed them.

"What do we do?" Billy asked.

Johnny looked down at Trent's telephone.

"We give Kinder a reason to keep Deon alive."

"What reason?"

"We make him believe Deon is the only person who can lead him to the five million."

Alex understood first.

"And while Kinder interrogates him?"

"We find Bubs."

Tiana shook her head. "You're gambling with Deon's life."

"Yes."

"You don't get to do that."

Johnny met her eyes.

"Kinder already did."

Outside, a boat engine moved through the dark channel beyond Widow's Walk.

Its lights were off.

Everyone became still.

The engine slowed near the marina.

Then stopped.

Johnny reached for his revolver.

Alex extinguished the lamp.

Bones moved beside Tiana.

In the darkness, Johnny listened to water striking the pilings.

Someone had followed them home.

At Reform Correctional, Deon Childress waited alone while a guard with a shotgun came to escort him downstairs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
THE MORTUARY

Deon Childress knew something was wrong the moment the prison gate closed behind him.

The guards were too quiet.

On earlier visits, they had joked among themselves, complained about overtime, and made crude remarks intended to remind visiting attorneys who controlled the building. That afternoon, nobody spoke unless required.

The officer at the first checkpoint examined Deon's identification three times.

The officer at the second ordered him to surrender his telephone, briefcase, belt, keys, and watch.

"My briefcase contains privileged legal documents."

"You'll get it back when you leave."

"It does not leave my possession."

The guard rested one hand on his baton.

"Warden's orders."

"I am here to see my client."

"Then you'd better cooperate."

Deon looked through the reinforced window behind the guard. Two additional officers waited in the corridor.

This was not a security procedure.

It was a warning.

Deon placed the briefcase on the counter but retained his grip on its handle.

"I want a written inventory of everything you take."

"You'll get a receipt."

"I want the inventory before I surrender it."

The guard rolled his eyes and began listing each item on a property form.

Deon watched him open the briefcase.

The emergency petition was gone.

So were Kenny's representation agreement and Deon's notes about the prison.

Tiana had them.

Deon concealed his relief.

He had telephoned her before entering and instructed her to bring the documents. Later, when he realized the prison had no intention of allowing him to leave freely, he called again and ordered her to turn around.

His last words had been the most difficult.

If anything happens to me, call my brother.

Deon had spent his adult life protecting Willis from consequences.

Now he was trusting Willis to become one.

The guard finished the inventory.

"Sign."

Deon signed.

The guard placed the briefcase beneath the counter and pushed a visitor's badge across the desk.

A portly officer with a gray-streaked beard waited near the metal detector. His nameplate read DALY.

He carried a shotgun.

"Attorney Childress?"

"Yes."

"Follow me."

"Where is Warden Kinder?"

"Busy."

"Where is Kenny Gregory?"

"I'll take you to him."

Daly turned without waiting.

Deon followed. They passed the visitation room.

Deon stopped.

"Kenny usually meets me here."

"Not today."

"Why?"

Daly continued walking.

The corridor narrowed as they entered an older section of the prison. The concrete walls showed water stains. Fluorescent lights flickered behind wire cages.

No inmates occupied the area.

No guards followed them.

Deon noticed a camera near the ceiling.

Its indicator light was dark.

"Where are we going?"

Daly pointed ahead with the shotgun.

A wall sign displayed two arrows:

INFIRMARY — LEFT

MORGUE — DOWNSTAIRS

Daly turned toward the stairs.

Deon did not move.

"Officer?"

Daly looked back.

"Come on."

"Why are we going to the morgue?"

The guard shifted the shotgun.

"Because your client hanged himself."

Deon stared at him.

"No."

"Afraid so."

"When?"

"Couple hours ago."

"I spoke to this facility less than an hour ago. I was told Kenny was receiving medical treatment."

"Things changed."

"Who pronounced him dead?"

"Doctor."

"What doctor?"

"The prison doctor."

"Name."

Daly's expression hardened.

"You want to see your client or stand here asking questions?"

"I want Warden Kinder."

"He'll talk to you afterward."

"I am not entering that morgue without him."

Daly looked beyond Deon toward the empty corridor.

"You drove all this way."

Deon glanced at the dead camera.

Every instinct told him to return to the gate.

Then he thought of Kenny.

If the body below truly belonged to him, Deon had an obligation to identify it, preserve evidence, and prevent the prison from destroying whatever proved how he died.

If it was not Kenny, Deon needed to know why they were lying.

"You go first," he said.

Daly shrugged.

"Suit yourself."

He descended the stairs.

Deon followed several steps behind.

The door at the bottom was painted black.

White letters identified the room:

MORTUARY — AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

Daly unlocked it.

Cold air escaped into the stairwell.

He waved Deon inside.

The mortuary contained six stainless-steel drawers, an examination table, and a deep utility sink. Bleach could not completely disguise the odor of death.

A body lay beneath a white sheet.

Only one hand remained exposed.

An identification band encircled the wrist.

GREGORY, KENNETH.

Deon remained near the door.

"What happened?"

"Used his bedsheet."

"Kenny was in isolation."

"That's right."

"Isolation cells use tear-resistant bedding."

Daly stared at him.

"Guess he found a way."

"Where is the ligature?"

"Evidence."

"Where are the photographs?"

"Being processed."

"Why is his face covered?"

Daly nodded toward the body.

"You wanted to identify him."

Deon approached slowly.

The exposed hand bothered him.

Kenny Gregory had broken two fingers during the 1991 arrests. The bones healed crooked, leaving the smallest finger angled toward the palm.

The dead man's fingers were straight.

"That isn't Kenny."

Daly's grip tightened around the shotgun.

Deon stepped away from the table.

A shadow moved behind him.

He turned.

A wiry inmate with wild eyes emerged from the corner holding a sharpened piece of metal.

Deon raised his arm.

The shiv cut through his sleeve and opened the flesh beneath it.

The inmate lunged again.

Deon caught his wrist.

They crashed against the examination table. The covered body rolled sideways beneath the sheet.

"Help me!" Deon shouted.

Daly closed the mortuary door.

Deon understood.

The inmate drove his forehead into Deon's face.

Pain burst behind Deon's eyes.

The shiv came free.

Deon seized the attacker's shirt and slammed him against the steel drawers. One opened behind him, revealing the empty tray inside.

The inmate grinned.

"You fight good for a lawyer."

"You picked the wrong one."

Deon struck him in the throat.

The inmate staggered but did not fall.

Deon moved toward Daly.

The guard raised the shotgun.

"Stay where you are."

"You brought me here to be killed."

"I said stay back."

The inmate attacked again.

Deon turned too late.

The blade carved deeply across his neck.

Heat became cold.

Blood struck the white sheet, the floor, and the front of Daly's uniform.

Deon pressed both hands against the wound.

He tried to speak.

Only air escaped.

His legs failed.

Daly caught him before his head struck the concrete and gently lowered him onto a sheet of plastic spread beneath the examination table.

They had known exactly where he would fall.

The inmate stood above him, breathing hard.

"You said this clears what I owe."

Daly raised the shotgun.

"Inmate Fester, Warden Kinder thanks you for your service."

Fester's grin vanished.

The shotgun blast struck him in the chest.

His body flew backward and crashed against the mortuary drawers. Blood and buckshot marked the steel.

Daly pumped the shotgun and waited.

Fester slid to the floor.

Deon continued breathing.

Barely.

Daly looked down at him.

"Damn."

He placed the shotgun on the table and pressed one gloved hand against Deon's wound.

Not to save him.

To make certain the bleeding continued.

Deon could no longer feel his body.

Sounds became distant.

Daly called for the cleanup team. Guards entered with a rolling bin, fresh plastic, and cleaning chemicals.

Nobody appeared surprised.

One guard pulled the false identification band from the dead inmate's wrist. Another removed the body beneath the white sheet.

The corpse was not Kenny.

Deon had been right.

Kenny remained alive somewhere inside the prison.

That knowledge gave Deon a final moment of peace.

He saw Pastor Bubs waiting outside the county courthouse after Deon's father was sentenced for murdering his mother.

Deon had been ten years old.

Bubs knelt in front of him and said, You can come home with us.

Millie stood beside him holding a paper bag containing a sandwich, an apple, and a clean shirt.

Willis remained across the street.

Their father's friends had already begun teaching him that tears made boys weak. Willis had refused to cross the road.

Deon went with Bubs.

Willis stayed behind.

They had chosen different sides of Dawber County before either was old enough to understand what the choice meant.

Years later, Willis watched from across another street when Deon left for college.

He pretended he had not come to say goodbye.

Deon pretended he had not seen him.

His younger brother had always been there, just beyond the road Deon crossed.

The guards lifted Fester.

Daly dragged the body across the plastic and placed it over Deon.

An inmate who murdered a visiting attorney.

A guard who heroically stopped him.

A tragedy nobody could have anticipated.

Daly leaned close.

"Should've stayed in Miami."

Deon thought of Tiana.

He hoped she had listened.

He hoped she had turned around.

Most of all, he hoped she would make the call he had avoided making for years.

Find Willis.

Fester's dead eyes stared down at him.

Deon Childress stopped breathing beneath the body of the man hired to kill him. Warden Kinder watched the mortuary cleanup on a small monitor inside his office.

The supposedly disabled camera had been transmitting to one location.

Kinder sat behind his desk sipping Scotch.

Bo Dawber occupied a leather chair near the window. His orange Department of Corrections uniform had been professionally tailored. A gold watch rested on his wrist.

An uncuffed prisoner sitting in the warden's office and drinking eighteen-year-old Scotch was an unusual sight.

At Reform Correctional, unusual privileges had prices.

Bo watched Daly position Fester's body.

"You're enjoying this," he said.

Kinder smiled.

"I think I am."

"Didn't know you had it in you."

"You should have seen my unit in Vietnam."

"Someday you'll have to tell me about it."

Bo took another drink.

"Malone never shut up about his time over there."

"You really hate Johnny Malone."

"Does it show?"

Kinder laughed.

"That's why I like you, Bo. Ice water in your veins."

Bo looked at the monitor.

"You killed Pastor Bubs's boy."

"Deon Childress was not his son."

"Blood isn't the only way people become family."

"Sentimental."

"Practical. His death creates problems."

"Deon knew too much."

"He knew nothing about the location."

"He knew Kenny."

"Half the county knows Kenny."

"He threatened federal action."

"Lawyers threaten things. That's how they bill clients."

Kinder reclined in his chair.

"You would have let him leave?"

"I would have let him believe he was leaving."

Kinder studied Bo.

Neither man smiled.

Their partnership had always depended upon each believing he would betray the other first.

Bo planned to use Kinder's guards and prison access to find the five million before his release the following month. Once free, he would have Kinder killed and reclaim control of Dawber County.

Kinder planned to locate the money, kill Bo before his release, and blame the death on another inmate.

Both plans required Kenny Gregory.

Neither required the other man afterward.

Kinder turned back to the monitor.

"Daly did well."

"Daly talks when he drinks."

"Then he'll stop drinking."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know."

Bo set down his glass.

"You're sure Bubs can lead us to the money?" Kinder asked.

"He's the only man alive who can interpret the complete route."

"Kenny drew the map."

"Kenny remembers pieces. Bubs knows how those pieces fit together."

"Five million dollars buried in a Baptist preacher's swamp. That's one hell of an offering."

"The money isn't Bubs's. Johnny gave him access so he could help the families after the arrests."

"And he never touched it?"

"He sees it as blood money."

"What man leaves five million dollars buried for twelve years?"

Bo leaned closer.

"A better man than either of us."

Kinder stiffened.

Bo saw it and smiled faintly.

"And if he refuses when my guards question him?" Kinder asked.

"You don't touch Bubs."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's the last friendly warning you'll receive."

For several seconds, the only sound came from the monitor as guards washed Deon's blood into the mortuary drain.

Kinder forced a hollow laugh.

"Just let the guards know when you're ready to return to your cell."

Bo finished his Scotch and stood.
"No cameras tonight?"
"Maintenance issue."
"No entry in the visitor log?"
"Deon never arrived."
"What about his Mercedes?"
"We'll move it."
"Tiana knows he came here."
"Trent was supposed to handle Tiana."
"Supposed to?"
Kinder reached for his telephone.
Trent had not reported.
Bo noticed.
"You lost your man."
"I haven't lost anyone."
"Then call him."
Kinder dialed.
The call rang.
Someone answered.
Kinder heard no voice. Only a car engine and wind.
"Trent?"
The connection ended.
Kinder looked at the telephone.
Bo smiled.
"Sounds like you've lost two men today."
Kinder placed the receiver down.
"Trent will complete his assignment."
"And if he doesn't?"
"Then Tiana will lead us to whoever saved her."
"Johnny."
"You think Malone is back?"
"I think he never stopped watching Dawber County."

Kinder looked toward the dark window.

"If he returns, we'll be ready."

Bo walked toward the office door.

"No," he said. "You won't."

Kinder's eyes narrowed.

"What makes Johnny Malone so dangerous?"

Bo stopped.

"He will let you believe you've won."

"And then?"

"He'll burn down everything—including his own empire—just to make sure you lose."

Bo opened the door.

Kinder called after him.

"You still haven't explained why he did it."

Bo looked back.

"He blamed me for Sanchez."

"Did you kill Sanchez?"

Bo smiled.

"Everybody knows the cartel killed him."

He left the office.

Kinder watched the closed door.

Bo had not answered.

AT WIDOW'S WALK, THE BOAT ENGINE MOVED CLOSER

Johnny stood beside the darkened window with his revolver ready. Alex guarded the rear door. Billy and Bones waited on opposite sides of Tiana.

The unseen boat drifted past the marina.

Nobody aboard spoke.

Its engine restarted farther down the channel and disappeared into the swamp.

Everyone remained still.

Then Tiana's telephone rang.

Deon's name appeared on the screen.

Relief swept across her face.

She answered.

"Deon?"

A man spoke from the other end.

"Is this Tiana Ross?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Deputy Warden Marsh at Reform Correctional."

Johnny lowered his revolver.

He recognized the rehearsed tone.

"What happened?" Tiana asked.

"There was an incident involving Mr. Childress."

"What kind of incident?"

"An inmate attacked him inside a secure area. One of our officers responded immediately."

"Let me speak to Deon."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible."

Tiana gripped the telephone.

"Is he alive?"

The pause told her first.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Ross."

Her knees weakened.

Bones caught her before she reached the floor.

The deputy warden continued speaking, but Tiana no longer heard the words.

She lowered the telephone.

Johnny already knew.

"Deon's dead," she whispered.

Nobody moved.

Tiana pressed both hands against her face.

Bones held her upright.

Billy removed his hat.

Johnny Malone stood in the darkness with the sons of the men his revenge had once sacrificed.

He had returned believing the old war was waiting for him.

Warden Kinder had just made it new.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
BLOOD IN THE WATER

Dawber County Swamps, 1991.

Johnny Malone reduced the boat's engine to an idle as Gethsemane Baptist Church disappeared behind the cypress trees.

Kenny Gregory sat near the bow with three black duffel bags between his boots. Each bag had been wrapped in waterproof canvas, sealed inside heavy plastic, and bound with enough duct tape to survive a hurricane.

Five million dollars occupied surprisingly little space.

The money had arrived in Dawber County over several months, separated from the revenue Johnny and Sanchez reported to Bo. By then, the smuggling operation had grown beyond anything they had imagined. What began as a way to save unemployed fishermen had become one of Florida's most profitable cocaine routes.

Bo still believed he received sixty percent.

Johnny and Sanchez made certain he never learned the full amount.

A ten-million-dollar shipment became four million in the books Mack Donnelly reviewed. The rest moved quietly into property, foreign accounts, and cash reserves.

Johnny watched the tree line.

"Check the ridge."

Kenny lifted a pair of binoculars and examined the strip of high ground beyond the mangroves.

"All clear."

"You sure?"

"You want to check?"

"I trust you."

"That's a first."

Johnny smiled around the cigarette hanging from his lips.

The boat entered a narrow channel surrounded by sawgrass. Cypress knees rose from the dark water like old bones. Insects swarmed above the surface. Nothing identified the place as different from a thousand other hidden corners of the Everglades.

That was why Johnny selected it.

Kenny checked the bags again.

"We good?"

"Relax. This ain't Vietnam."

"Last time you told me that, somebody shot at us."

"People shoot at us everywhere."

"Comforting."

Johnny offered him a cigarette.

Kenny shook his head.

"Not now."

"Suit yourself."

Johnny lifted the first duffel bag.

"Separate but close. If somebody finds one, we don't want him finding the rest."

"You really think Bo knows?"

"Not yet."

"Mack?"

Johnny looked toward the ridge.

"Mack knows the reported numbers don't match the volume moving through the county."

"Then stop skimming."

"If we stop now, Bo asks why."

"What does Sanchez say?"

"That we move the reserve before Mack completes his audit."

"And after that?"

"We prepare for the day Bo discovers the truth."

Kenny stared at him.

"You're talking about war."

"I'm talking about insurance."

Johnny steadied himself and threw the first bag overboard.

It struck the water and floated briefly. Air escaped from beneath the plastic in a trail of bubbles. Then the weight pulled it below the surface.

Kenny opened a small notebook.

"Bearing?"

Johnny checked his compass.

Kenny recorded the number beside a drawing of the channel.

"Depth?"

"Twelve feet."

"Current?"

"Almost nothing."

"Landmark?"

Johnny pointed toward a cypress with two trunks twisted around each other.

"The Widow."

Kenny sketched it.

Johnny handed him the second duffel.

"Farther east."

Kenny strained beneath the weight.

"You put bricks in this one?"

"Hundred-dollar bills get heavy."

He swung the bag and released it.

A massive alligator erupted from the water.

Its jaws closed around the canvas strap.

Kenny fell backward and drew the Uzi from beneath his seat.

"Don't shoot!"

The weapon fired.

Rounds struck the water beside the animal. One grazed the armored ridge above its eye.

The alligator twisted.

Water crashed over the boat.

Its tail struck the hull hard enough to send Johnny into the console.

The animal disappeared with the duffel bag still caught in its jaws.

Johnny seized the Uzi and forced the barrel upward.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"It had the money!"

"That was Smiley."

Kenny stared at the boiling water.

"That was Smiley?"

"Yes."

"How am I supposed to recognize an alligator?"

"He's missing two teeth on the left side."

"I was looking at the rest of them."

Johnny searched the surface.

The torn strap appeared twenty feet away.

"He let it go."

"You sure?"

"Smiley doesn't eat luggage."

"You know him personally?"

"We have an understanding."

The duffel surfaced briefly near a stand of cypress knees before sinking into deeper water.

Johnny checked the compass.

"Mark it."

"You want to leave it there?"

"It's separated but close."

"You planned that?"

"Of course."

Kenny stared at him.

Johnny retrieved another cigarette.

"Insurance requires flexibility."

Kenny recorded the bearing.

The third duffel went overboard without incident.

When they finished, Kenny reviewed the notebook. It contained bearings, depths, distances, water channels, and crude drawings of natural landmarks.

Johnny looked over his shoulder.

"Make a second copy."

"Why?"

"If something happens to one of us."

"What happens to the copies?"

"You keep the coded map. I'll leave recovery instructions with Bubs."

"Bubs doesn't want anything to do with the money."

"He won't spend it on himself."

"He might burn it."

"Bubs won't burn five million dollars."

"He burned a liquor store once."

"That was different."

"He called it a temple of wickedness."

"It was also uninsured."

Kenny closed the notebook.

"What do you want Bubs to do with the money?"

"If the organization collapses, he uses it for the families. Mortgages, lawyers, medical bills—whatever people need."

"You think it's coming apart?"

Johnny looked toward the water where the bags had disappeared.

"Mack knows something. Bo suspects everybody. Sanchez thinks we're being watched."

"You trust Sanchez?"

"With my life."

"Bo doesn't."

"Bo doesn't trust his own shadow unless it pays him."

Kenny returned the notebook to his shirt pocket.

"What about Timmy?"

Johnny's humor disappeared.

"Timmy doesn't learn the location."

"He's our brother."

"He's also unstable."

"He came home from Vietnam that way."

"I know."

"You think Bo had something to do with his death."

"So does Sanchez."

"You have proof?"

"No."

"Then what do we have?"

Johnny started the engine.

"A dead brother, five million dollars in the swamp, and too many men lying to one another."

The boat moved out of the hidden channel.

Behind them, Smiley surfaced.

One dark eye watched them leave.

WIDOW'S WALK MARINA, LATER THAT NIGHT

Johnny opened two beers and handed one to Kenny.

They crossed the dock toward a battered Ford Bronco parked near the old bait shop. Kenny's shirt had dried stiff with sweat and swamp water.

"Pop the back."

Johnny unlocked the Bronco.

Kenny placed the empty cooler inside and threw his beer bottle toward a trash barrel.

It missed and broke on the road.

Headlights swept across the marina.

A patrol car entered sideways and stopped behind the Bronco, blocking the road.

Sheriff Buck Dawber stepped out.

His son climbed from the passenger side.

Little Bucky was already in his twenties but remained little only in comparison with his father. He wore a reserve deputy's uniform, a pistol too large for his belt, and the expression of a man forever waiting for permission to prove himself.

Buck approached slowly.

"What're you boys up to?"

Johnny drank from his beer.

"Taking care of business."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't told about any shipments tonight."

"Wasn't a shipment," Kenny said. "Just a check-in."

Buck looked toward the dark water.

"You fishing now?"

"Jones McNeely called in a lost package," Johnny said. "We followed up."

"Jonesey's been in Georgia all week."

"Just got around to it."

Buck closed the distance between them.

"You're full of shit."

Johnny smiled.

Buck did not.

"What did you dump out there?"

"Nothing."

Little Bucky pointed toward Johnny.

"You know he's running side action, Pa."

Kenny laughed. "What's it to you?"

Little Bucky stepped forward.

"What'd you say?"

"You heard me."

Buck placed one hand against his son's chest.

"Not while you're wearing the uniform. Internal Affairs has been sniffing around."

"But he's always riding me."

Buck shoved him toward the patrol car.

"How do you get a donkey's attention?"

Little Bucky glared at Kenny.

Buck answered his own question.

"You beat it with a stick."

Kenny laughed again.

"Listen to your daddy."

Buck turned.

His fist struck Kenny before Johnny saw it move.

Kenny slammed against the Bronco.

Buck drew his nightstick and struck him across the ribs.

Kenny fell.

The nightstick rose and fell.

Johnny took one step forward.

Little Bucky drew his pistol.

"Don't."

Buck struck Kenny across the back.

Kenny tried to stand.

Another blow dropped him.

"Get him, Pa!"

Johnny stared at the pistol aimed at his chest.

"Buck!"

The nightstick stopped.

Buck stood above Kenny, breathing heavily.

"You got something to say?"

"You're going to kill him."

Buck looked down.

Blood ran from Kenny's mouth onto the dirt.

"Nah. I won't kill him."

He tapped the nightstick against his leg.

"Maybe put him in a coma."

Johnny's hands curled into fists.

Buck saw it.

For one dangerous moment, both men considered what would happen if Johnny moved.

Then Buck smiled.

"Tell Bo what you dumped."

"We didn't dump anything."

Buck struck Kenny one final time.

"Then next time I won't stop."

He returned to the patrol car.

Little Bucky kept the pistol on Johnny until he climbed inside.

The patrol car backed away.

Johnny knelt beside Kenny.

"You conscious?"

"Unfortunately."

"Anything broken?"

"Pride."

"That was cracked already."

Kenny laughed, then groaned.

Johnny helped him sit against the Bronco.

"You should've let me shoot him."

"With what?"

Kenny pulled a pistol from beneath his shirt.

Johnny stared.

"You had that the entire time?"

"Little Bucky had the angle."

"You would've killed the sheriff and his son."

"They were beating me."

"And Bo would've killed everyone we know."

Kenny returned the pistol to his waistband.

"You think Buck tells him?"

"Yes."

"Then Bo will search the swamp."

"He won't find anything."

"He'll search Gethsemane."

"Bubs won't tell him."

"Bubs doesn't know yet."

Johnny looked toward the distant church steeple.

"He will tomorrow."

Kenny wiped blood from his mouth.

"You sure about trusting him?"

"No."

"You sure about anything?"

Johnny helped him into the Bronco.

"I'm sure Smiley has terrible timing."

Kenny laughed despite the pain.

Johnny closed the door and looked back toward the swamp.

Five million dollars rested beneath its black water. The reserve was intended to save families if Bo's empire collapsed.

Johnny did not yet know that he would be the man who brought it down.

WIDOW'S WALK MARINA, PRESENT DAY

Tiana remained in Bones's arms after the call ended.

Nobody told him to release her.

Nobody knew what to say.

She had spent years preparing for legal emergencies. She knew how to request injunctions, preserve evidence, challenge unlawful detention, and force institutions to answer questions they preferred to bury.

None of that knowledge told her how to exist in a world without Deon Childress.

"He told me to turn around," she whispered.

Bones held her more tightly.

"I should've kept going."

"They tried to kill you."

"If I'd reached the prison—"

"You'd be dead too."

"I could've helped him."

"No," Johnny said. "You couldn't."

Tiana lifted her head.

"You don't know that."

"I know Kinder sent Trent to stop you. Your survival depended upon not reaching that prison."

"I abandoned Deon."

"You followed his final instruction."

"And he died."

Johnny accepted her anger.

"He died protecting you and Kenny."

"How do you know?"

"Because Deon entered that prison knowing something was wrong. He sent you away anyway."

Tiana looked at Trent's telephone.

"I have to call the police."

"You have to call Willis."

The name made her hesitate.

"Deon told you what to do if something happened."

"He didn't know he was going to be murdered."

"He knew enough to give you the instruction."

"I can't tell Willis over the telephone."

"No."

"You know what he'll do."

"Yes."

"He'll start a war."

"Kinder already started it."

Tiana wiped her face.

"I want proof before I tell Deon's brother."

"You have Trent's telephone."

"That connects Kinder to Trent. It doesn't prove Kinder ordered Deon's murder."

"Then we find proof."

"How?"

"By finishing Deon's work."

"I don't work for you."

Johnny turned toward her.

"Do you still want to practice law?"

"What?"

"Do you want to be a lawyer or not?"

"Deon was murdered tonight."

"Which means somebody has to finish what he started."

"I am not becoming your lawyer."

"You're Ivy League educated, you survived an assassination attempt, and you're already hiding in a boathouse with five criminals."

"I'm not a criminal."

Johnny looked around the room.

"Then we desperately need your diversity."

"You cannot hire me without my consent."

"You're hired."

"I just said—"

"Argue with me later. That'll be your first billable hour."

Tiana stared at him.

"I don't even know whether I still have a job."

"You do now."

"I don't want it."

"Honey, I'm all you've got."

"Honey? I am an Ivy League-educated attorney with a whole hell of a lot of qualifications."

Johnny nodded.

"Exactly why you're hired."

A pause settled over the room.

Tiana almost laughed.

The sound caught in her throat and became another sob.

Bones guided her toward the sofa.

She sat and pressed both hands against her face.

Johnny looked at the three boys.

"What are you going to do with the eighty thousand?"

Bones glanced at the duffel bag.

"Spend it."

"On what?"

"Stuff."

"Excellent financial plan."

Alex unfolded Kenny's coded map across the table.

"We buy land."

"Real estate." Johnny nodded approvingly. "At least one of you listened."

Bones looked offended.

"I listened."

"What did I say?"

"Buy stuff."

Johnny turned back to Alex.

"What kind of land?"

"Near the old Battenberg sugar plantation."

"I'd think waterfront property would be a better investment."

"It is near the water."

"It's near the swamp."

"Exactly."

Johnny studied him.

Alex pointed toward a section of the map outside the sugar property.

"I need a large tract of secluded land that can be reached through the swamp."

Bones looked over his shoulder.

"That describes all of Dawber County."

"It also needs road access."

"For what?" Johnny asked.

"Trucks."

Johnny's approval vanished.

"What trucks?"

"To move product inland."

"What product?"

Alex smiled.

"You know. Yayo."

Bones's face lit up.

"Yes! Like *Scarface*. Get the yayo!"

Johnny placed both hands over his face.

"Oh, for the love of God."

"It's genius," Bones said.

"You're not doing that."

Alex looked genuinely offended.

"Why not?"

"If I give you money, it will be an investment. You'll use it to purchase legitimate property and make the value grow."

"That's exactly what we'd be doing."

"No. You'd be peddling drugs."

"That's what you did."

"I was a financier."

"You ran cocaine for Pablo Escobar."

"The Dawbers, Sheltons, Del Vecchios, and fishermen moved the product. I managed the money."

"You financed and organized an international drug network."

"I'm an accountant."

"Since when did you become such a bullshitter?"

Johnny lowered his hands.

"I have always been a professional bullshitter. That's how I became rich."

Bones stopped smiling.

"Your bullshit had consequences, Dad."

Johnny looked at him.

"For me. For Ma. For everybody in Dawber County."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"Because I do."

"Knowing ain't the same as fixing it."

"No."

Johnny looked at the duffel bag.

"I'll give you the eighty thousand now. When I settle matters here and can safely access the Swiss accounts, I'll give you a million dollars on the condition that you leave Dawber County."

Bones considered it.

"I can live with that."

"No," Alex said.

Bones turned. "Why not?"

"I don't want his handout."

"A million dollars ain't a handout."

"It's an exit payment. He wants us to disappear so he doesn't have to deal with us."

Johnny looked at Alex.

"You really do understand me."

"A million dollars is nothing compared with what we can make."

"It's considerably more than you currently possess."

"We could control this county."

Bones nodded enthusiastically.

"And not just Dawber. The whole state."

Billy stood near the curtained window.

"Both of you have lost your damn minds."

Alex looked at him.

"You want to stay poor?"

"I want to stay out of prison."

"That's why Johnny teaches us."

Billy looked at Malone.

"Because that worked so well for our fathers."

The room became quiet.

Johnny accepted the blow.

Alex refused to let the argument die.

"We won't repeat their mistakes."

"You already are," Billy said.

"How?"

"You think being smarter makes you untouchable."

"It helps."

"So did Bo."

"I'm smarter than Bo."

"That sounds exactly like something a Dawber would say."

"I'm not a Dawber."

"No. You just want to become one with better bookkeeping."

Alex stepped toward him.

Bones moved between them.

"Not now."

Billy looked at his large friend.

"Two days ago, you wanted nothing to do with Johnny's money."

"I met him."

"And that fixed everything?"

"No."

Bones looked at his father.

"But it gave me something I didn't have."

"What?"

"A chance."

Billy shook his head.

"It's a trap."

"Then help us avoid it."

"I'm not moving cocaine."

"Nobody asked you to," Alex said.

"You'll ask."

"And you'll say yes."

"Don't count on it."

Johnny studied the three young men.

Bones had inherited his fearlessness but none of his patience.

Alex possessed Johnny's mind without sharing his blood.

Billy carried the Dawber name while fighting not to become a Dawber.

Together, they contained everything that built the old empire—and everything that might destroy the next one.

"You boys have no boats," Johnny said.

"Widow's Walk," Alex replied.

"No pilots."

"We find one."

"No suppliers."

"You still know people."

"Most want me dead."

"Then start with the ones who don't."

"No protection."

Bones straightened.

"You have me."

Johnny looked at his son.

"I shot Dale Brody," Bones continued. "Killed Trent. Pulled Tiana out of a gator canal."

"That doesn't make you protection."

"What does?"

"Discipline."

"Teach me."

The request struck Johnny harder than any accusation.

"You want me to teach you how to rebuild the operation?"

Alex nodded.

"Yes."

"You follow my instructions exactly."

"Yes."

"You don't improvise."

Alex hesitated.

"Exactly," Johnny repeated.

"Yes."

"You don't lie to me."

"Fine."

"You already lied."

"I said yes."

Johnny turned toward Bones.

"You learn discipline."

"I will."

"You stop pointing guns at people unless you intend to fire."

Bones placed the Colt on the table.

"Yes, sir."

"You control your temper."

Bones hesitated longer than Alex had.

"I'll try."

"Trying keeps you out of trouble for an afternoon. Control keeps you alive."

Bones looked down.

"Yes, sir."

Johnny faced Billy.

"You don't have to participate."

"But?"

"When this begins, people will use you to reach us."

"Bo?"

"Especially Bo."

Billy absorbed that.

"My uncle raised me."

"I know."

"He isn't everything you say."

"I hope you're right."

"You don't."

"No," Johnny admitted. "I don't."

Alex leaned against the table.

"So we're doing this?"

Johnny looked through the window toward the dark swamp.

He had spent twelve years avoiding his accounts, his money, and the county whose empire he destroyed. He understood every reason to refuse.

The boys would proceed without him.

Alex would create the plan. Bones would enforce it. Billy would be pulled between friendship and blood until one side forced him to choose.

Without Johnny, they would be dead or imprisoned within a year.

With him, they might survive long enough to become something worse.

"Yes," Johnny said.

Alex and Bones exchanged a look.

Then they slapped hands.

Johnny pointed at them.

"That is the last celebration until we have something worth celebrating."

"We're back in business," Bones said.

"We are not back in anything."

"You just said yes."

"I agreed to teach you."

"Teach us what?"

Johnny looked at Kenny's coded map.

"How to build an organization nobody can burn down."

Alex smiled.

"Where do we start?"

"Kenny."

"We break him out?"

"We keep him alive first."

"Kinder wants the map."

"We give him one."

Alex's eyes narrowed.

"A false map."

"Now you're learning."

"What about the real money?"

Johnny touched the faded markings.

"Kenny and I hid it. We are the only living men who stood in that boat and watched it sink."

"But Bubs knows."

"He knows that the money exists. I left him a sealed envelope containing the recovery instructions and authorized him to use the reserve for the families."

"Did he?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Because Deon said Bubs considered it blood money."

"What if he opened the envelope?"

"Then Bubs knows how to combine the instructions with Kenny's map."

"And if he didn't?"

"Then it remains sealed inside his Bible."

Alex started toward the door.

"Let's go get it."

Johnny caught his arm.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because Kinder and Bo are watching Gethsemane. We approach Bubs now, we confirm he is the key."

"What do we do?"

"We leave him out of this until we can protect him."

"So the five million stays buried."

"For now."

"What finances the operation?"

"The eighty thousand."

Bones pulled the duffel bag closer.

"Our money."

"Operating capital," Johnny corrected.

"Can I buy a truck?"

"No."

"A boat?"

"No."

"A gun?"

"You have one."

"What can I buy?"

"Breakfast."

Bones considered it.

"Good start."

Tiana lowered her hands.

"What about Willis?"

Johnny turned toward her.

"At sunrise, you go to him."

"Alone?"

"He won't speak honestly if I'm present."

"What do I tell him?"

"The truth. Deon was murdered inside Kinder's prison. Trent was sent to kill you. Kenny is still alive, and the same people are coming for him."

"And Johnny Malone wants his help?"

Johnny nodded.

"Willis hates you."

"Everybody hates me."

"That doesn't trouble you?"

"It saves time when meeting new people."

"Willis may kill me for bringing your name into his neighborhood."

"No. You were important to Deon."

"How does Willis know that?"

"He'll see it on your face."

Tiana picked up Trent's telephone.

"If Willis joins us, he'll want revenge."

"We'll give him a plan."

"And if he refuses?"

"Then we find somebody else."

"You don't believe that."

"No."

"Why Willis?"

"Because Deon spent his life protecting his brother from the law."

Johnny looked toward the distant prison.

"Now Willis can return the favor.

At Reform Correctional, Bo sat alone at a table playing solitaire.

The private wing had gone quiet.

Warden Kinder entered carrying a surveillance photograph.

Bo placed a red queen beneath a black king.

"What?"

"A vehicle connected to Sanchez Properties crossed into Dawber County tonight."

Bo's hand stopped.

"Sanchez is dead."

"His company isn't."

"Who was in the vehicle?"

"Traffic cameras photographed five occupants."

"Names."

"Tiana Ross."

Bo looked up.

"Trent failed."

"Apparently."

"Who else?"

"Alex Gregory. Billy Dawber. Bones Malone."

Kinder placed the photograph on the table.

The image was grainy, but the wounded man sitting beside Bones was unmistakable.

Johnny Malone.

Bo stared at it.

For twelve years, he had imagined this moment.

Sometimes Johnny returned begging forgiveness. Sometimes federal agents brought him back wearing chains. Most often, Atticus dragged him from the swamp and placed him at Bo's feet.

But Atticus was gone.

Sanchez was gone.

Timmy was gone.

Only Bo and Johnny remained from the men who had destroyed one another in 1991.

Kinder poured himself a drink.

"You were right."

Bo gathered the playing cards into a single pile.

"About what?"

Kinder smiled.

"Malone's back."

Outside the private wing, locks engaged one after another with the sound of distant gunfire.

Bo looked toward the narrow window.

Beyond the prison walls, darkness covered the swamp.

Somewhere inside it, Johnny was rebuilding the machinery that once made Dawber County rich—and then destroyed everyone who touched it.

Bo placed the deck on the table.

"No," he said. "Johnny Malone never came back from Vietnam."

He looked again at the photograph.

"But whatever's wearing his face just started another war."

The End.

BOOK TWO

Malone's Back

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

Chapters 1 through 12

CHAPTER ONE
SORRY CHARLIE

The black Firebird came around the corner too fast.

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

Mack Donnelly killed the engine.

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

Mack's telephone vibrated against his hip.

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

Area code 775.

Nevada.

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

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

He put it away unopened.

The cigarette he lit instead tasted stale.

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

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

That ability had made him a legend in Dawber County.

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

Mack stepped from the Firebird and approached the barricade.

A uniformed Miami police officer hurried toward him.

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

Mack continued walking.

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

"Sorry, Agent."

"Who found the bodies?"

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

"Identification?"

"Nothing official."

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

Mack ducked beneath the tape.

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

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

Mack stopped where the front entrance had once stood.

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

Someone had wanted to destroy more than the house.

They had wanted to destroy whatever evidence remained inside it.

"I'm surprised you came."

Mack recognized the voice before he turned.

Barbara Roland stood beside a black Suburban with an open laptop resting on its hood. She wore a dark pantsuit cut well enough to conceal a shoulder holster without hiding it completely. Her hair was shorter than Mack remembered, and the years had sharpened rather than softened her.

She had been beautiful when they were married.

Now she looked powerful.

Mack took a drag from his cigarette.

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

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

"And what? Homeland Security stops bombs now?"

Barbara closed the laptop halfway.

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

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

Her expression hardened.

"Says the career DEA agent."

"Exactly."

She looked at the cigarette.

"You're contaminating my crime scene."

"Your crime scene?"

"My people arrived before yours."

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

"That doesn't surprise me."

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

"We're still determining that."

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

"I didn't bring you anywhere."

"You knew I'd come."

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

Mack glanced toward the house.

Johnny Malone had spent twelve years living quietly behind those walls. He paid his taxes, avoided Dawber County, and pretended to be a retired accountant with no interest in the fortune he had helped move through the United States.

Mack had never believed the performance.

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

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

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

The third was barely recognizable as human.

Barbara watched Mack's face.

"Recognize any of them?"

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

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

"Barb—"

"Director Roland."

Mack smiled. "How's Tucker?"

The question landed exactly where he intended.

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

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

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

"That wasn't what I asked."

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

"That you know of."

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

"High-profile litigator. Young interns following him everywhere. Private jets. Foreign conferences. Rich clients with interest-

ing appetites." Mack flicked ash onto the pavement. "You sure he's not worse than me?"

"He isn't a degenerate."

"You used to like that about me."

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

Mack studied her.

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

Some things survived a divorce.

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

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

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

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

Mack stopped smiling.

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

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

He knew that lighter.

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

"Malone's," Mack said.

"According to your old reports."

"Where did you find it?"

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

"Which one?"

Barbara selected another photograph.

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

Mack studied the photograph.

"That isn't him."

"You determined that from a picture?"

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

"Who else would carry Malone's lighter?"

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

"You know who they were?"

"No."

"Then how do you know they came to kill him?"

"Because Johnny blew up the house."

Barbara stared at him.

Mack pointed toward the ruins. "Look at the debris. Whoever set the charge knew exactly where to put it. Johnny spent twelve years waiting for somebody to come through that door. He wouldn't let himself get trapped inside his own house."

"People get old."

"Not him."

"People get careless."

"Not him."

"People die, Mack."

"Johnny Malone makes other people die."

Barbara took the evidence bag from him.

"You sound almost impressed."

"I know what he is."

"Do you?"

"Better than anybody."

"You said that in Reno too."

"This isn't Reno."

"No. In Reno, you were only destroying yourself."

Mack's telephone vibrated again.

He ignored it.

Barbara glanced toward his belt. "Aren't you going to answer?"

"No."

"Who keeps calling?"

"Someone who doesn't understand the word no."

"That narrows it down to everyone you've ever met."

The telephone stopped.

Barbara closed the laptop.

"Dental comparisons are being run. Until we get the results, that body is presumed to be the owner of this house."

"Then your presumption is wrong."

"You always were at your most confident when you had the least evidence."

"I had enough evidence to destroy the Dawber organization."

"You had evidence because you lived with those people for years."

"I did what I had to do."

"You always say that."

Mack looked toward the ruins.

There were entire nights in Dawber County that had never appeared in his reports. Men who disappeared without being entered on a witness list. Orders Mack had followed because refusing them would have exposed him.

The official history called the operation legendary.

Official histories were written from whatever survived the fire.

Barbara stepped closer.

"How long have you continued investigating Malone?"

"I haven't."

"Don't lie to me."

"You haven't been my wife for a long time. You don't get to decide when I'm lying."

"I knew when you were lying before I was your wife."

Mack dropped his cigarette and crushed it beneath his boot.

"I kept my files."

"That wasn't my question."

"I reviewed them occasionally."

"How occasionally?"

"Whenever I had trouble sleeping."

"So every night."

Mack did not answer.

Barbara shook her head. "Oscar knows?"

"He knows I never liked the way the case ended."

"That isn't the same thing."

"No."

"You used agency resources?"

"Nothing anyone was using."

"That means yes."

"I talked to informants."

"DEA informants?"

"People talk to me because they trust me."

"People talk to you because they're frightened of you, indebted to you, sleeping with you, or hoping you'll eventually disappear."

"Still counts."

Barbara gathered the photographs and returned them to the folder.

"I want every Malone file you have."

"Why?"

"Because DHS is opening a domestic-threat investigation."

"Based on one exploded house?"

"Four bodies, military-grade demolition work, and a former federal informant connected to one of the largest narcotics organizations in Florida history."

"He wasn't a federal informant."

"What was he?"

Mack looked at her.

"Protected."

Barbara caught the distinction.

"By whom?"

"Ask the FBI."

"I'm asking you."

"The Bureau made a separate arrangement with Johnny before the Dawber County raid. They kept him off our arrest list and refused to tell us where they put him."

"And you've been angry about it ever since."

"I'm angry because they protected the man who designed the operation."

"Bo Dawber ran it."

"Bo owned the county. Johnny built the machine."

Barbara opened the driver's door of the Suburban.

"Get in."

"Where are we going?"

"To see Oscar."

"He'll be thrilled."

"I'm not asking him to be thrilled."

"You're asking him to surrender jurisdiction."

"I'm giving him concurrent jurisdiction."

Mack smiled. "You always did know how to make theft sound constitutional."

Barbara climbed behind the wheel.

Mack looked back at the smoking house.

Somewhere beyond the barricades, beyond the burned bodies and the lighter planted in the rubble, Johnny Malone was moving.

Mack could feel it.

The feeling was not evidence. It was older and more reliable than evidence.

He walked toward the Suburban.

#

Oscar Fuentes slammed the manila folder onto his desk hard enough to rattle the nameplate.

"This is some real bullshit."

The Special Agent in Charge of the DEA's Miami field office was in his fifties, Cuban-American, wiry, and seemingly incapable of sitting still when angry. He glared at the folder as if it had personally insulted his mother.

Mack sat across from him with his arms folded.

Barbara remained standing beside the window.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" she asked.

Oscar looked at her. "What?"

"For a year, you've been demanding more resources. Congratulations."

"How is Homeland Security going to get me more resources when your shiny new department is vacuuming up every nickel in Washington?"

"Work with us."

Oscar threw his hands into the air.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means DHS supplies forensic personnel and federal funding. DEA supplies its institutional knowledge of the Dawber organization."

Oscar turned toward Mack. "Did she always talk in riddles when you two were married?"

"Barbara has always taken pride in being a professional ballbuster."

"Excuse me?" Barbara said.

Oscar pointed at her. "She talks like a government fortune cookie."

"DEA and DHS have concurrent jurisdiction."

"That's bureaucratic horse shit and you know it."

Oscar dropped into his chair and rubbed his temples.

"The War on Terror is consuming everything. I've got six cartel killings on Calle Ocho and a witness in Hialeah too frightened to testify. My agents are chasing murderers with broken radios, but Homeland Security finds money because some retired accountant blew up his kitchen."

"That retired accountant helped finance one of the largest narcotics pipelines in the southeastern United States," Barbara said.

Oscar looked at Mack. "You told her."

"I didn't tell her anything she couldn't find in the records."

"Those records were sealed."

"Apparently not well enough."

Barbara placed both hands on Oscar's desk.

"A house exploded in broad daylight in Miami. Four unidentified bodies were recovered. The homeowner has documented connections to cartels, organized crime, corrupt law enforcement, and federal intelligence agencies. Post-September eleventh, that qualifies as a potential domestic threat."

"And you conveniently dump it on me when you've got a flight to Washington in two hours."

"Help us close this and I'll be your best advocate in Washington."

"Bullshit. You don't want the explosion blowing back on DHS."

Mack leaned forward.

"We didn't finish it the first time, Oz. Malone is still out there."

Oscar closed his eyes.

"Dios mío. Not this ghost story again."

"We found Malone's lighter," Barbara said. "He was at the house."

Oscar opened the folder and examined the evidence photograph.

"A lighter? You want me to redirect federal agents because of a goddamn Zippo?"

"It's custom," Mack said. "He carried it in Vietnam. Skull and crossbones etched into the casing."

Oscar lowered the photograph.

"You're not helping yourself. You're making it sound like you've continued investigating him."

Mack said nothing.

Oscar stared at him.

Barbara stared at him.

Mack finally shrugged. "On my own time."

Oscar pushed himself slowly out of his chair.

"How much of your own time?"

"Some."

"How much agency time?"

"Depends how you define agency time."

"I define it as any moment when I'm paying you."

"Then very little."

Oscar laughed without humor.

"You disobeyed a direct order."

"I kept up with old sources."

"You used DEA informants?"

"They were already registered."

"Vehicles?"

"Occasionally."

"Databases?"

"Only when necessary."

Oscar looked toward the ceiling.

"Jesus Christ."

"I was right," Mack said. "He's alive."

"You don't know that."

"I know Johnny Malone."

Oscar stabbed a finger toward him.

"No, you knew him. Twelve years ago. Before Dawber County ate whatever good judgment you had left."

"Johnny tipped the FBI."

"We don't know that."

"You knew the night of the raid that he had a deal."

"I knew someone above me had ordered his name removed from our target list."

"And you never asked why?"

"Of course I asked. Then I followed the order because that is what federal agents do."

"That's what bureaucrats do."

Oscar leaned across the desk.

"No one wanted you after Reno. No one. I brought you into this office because we started together and because I believed there was still an agent underneath all that whiskey and self-pity."

"I don't drink whiskey at work."

"You drink before work. Apparently that satisfies your code of ethics."

Barbara glanced at her watch.

"Are you accepting the joint investigation?"

Oscar looked at her. "You planned this."

"I responded to an explosion."

"You used Mack's obsession to create a task force."

"I used the agent most familiar with Johnny Malone."

"That isn't the same thing?"

"No."

Mack smiled faintly.

Oscar saw it.

"And you. Wipe that look off your face. You went around me."

"I didn't go to Barbara."

"The end result is the same."

Barbara picked up her briefcase.

"I need an answer."

Oscar sank into his chair.

"Fine. I'll babysit your bag of shit. But remember something while everyone in Washington is waving flags and chasing terrorists—drugs are killing more Americans than al-Qaeda ever did."

Barbara extended her hand.

Oscar stared at it before reluctantly shaking.

"My office prepares the operational agreement," Barbara said. "DHS retains authority over the explosion. DEA handles the narcotics and organized-crime components."

"And if Malone is alive?" Mack asked.

Barbara looked at him.

"Then we find him."

"We arrest him."

"If the evidence supports it."

"The evidence has supported it since 1991."

"You don't get to retry your old case because you dislike the outcome."

Mack leaned back. "Say hello to Tucker for me."

Barbara paused at the door.

"Still jealous?"

"Concerned. Those Hamptons winters can destroy a man's character."

"He'll be touched."

She left without looking back.

Oscar watched the door close.

"She's something."

"She always was."

"That woman could castrate a bull with a look."

"Tucker probably considers it foreplay."

Oscar laughed despite himself, then caught Mack looking through the glass wall beside his office.

A young agent walked past carrying three case files. She was in her late twenties, Latina, sharply dressed, and moved with the confidence of someone who had already decided where she was going.

"Who's that?" Mack asked.

Oscar followed his gaze.

Then he raised his voice.

"Reyes."

The agent stopped and turned.

"Yeah, Chief?"

"Get in here. Welcome to the circus."

Special Agent Aisha Reyes entered the office and closed the door behind her. A badge and pistol rested on her hip.

"What's up?"

Oscar gestured toward Mack.

Reyes examined him without enthusiasm.

Mack stood and offered his hand.

"Mack Donnelly."

"I know."

"Have we met?"

"You gave a lecture at the academy."

"I've given a lot of lectures."

"You tried to take me back to your hotel afterward."

Mack's hand remained extended between them.

"I think I'd remember that."

"You were drinking heavily."

Oscar covered his mouth to hide a smile.

Reyes looked at Mack's hand until he lowered it.

"You don't remember me," she said. "That's the part I remember."

Oscar sat down.

"Mack, Agent Reyes is your new partner."

Mack turned toward him. "No."

"I wasn't asking."

"I don't work with partners."

"Your last partner is now flying to Washington after taking jurisdiction over my office."

"Barbara was my wife."

"That explains the anger. It doesn't explain the paperwork."

Reyes looked between them. "What investigation?"

Oscar tapped the folder.

"Explosion at the residence of Johnny Malone."

Her expression changed.

"The Johnny Malone?"

Mack looked at her. "You know the name?"

"Everyone at the academy knows the name. Dawber County was required reading."

Mack nodded toward Oscar. "Then she knows who brought it down."

"She also knows who escaped," Reyes said.

Mack studied her more carefully.

Oscar smiled.

"Not only is Reyes your partner, she is the ranking agent on the investigation."

Reyes's smile appeared immediately.

"Thanks, Chief."

Mack looked at Oscar. "You can't be serious."

"I have never been more serious."

"She was in high school when we took down Dawber County."

"Middle school," Reyes said.

Oscar pointed toward her. "She follows orders. She writes complete reports. She hasn't assaulted a prisoner in federal custody, compromised an undercover operation in Reno, or spent twelve

years using government resources to chase a man she was ordered to leave alone."

"You left out my commendations."

"I ran out of breath."

Oscar handed the folder to Reyes.

"Read everything. The explosion is now a joint DEA-DHS investigation. You report directly to me. Mack reports to you."

Mack's jaw tightened.

Reyes accepted the folder.

"What's our first move?"

"We locate everyone from the old organization who might know where Malone went."

"Bo Dawber," Mack said.

"He's still at Reform Prison," Reyes said.

"So is Kenny Gregory."

Oscar nodded. "Start there."

Mack stood.

Oscar raised one finger.

"I don't want this becoming a Mack Donnelly shit show."

Mack shrugged.

"Don't give me that look. I saved your ass after Reno, and you've been repaying me by breaking every rule I put in front of you."

"We're friends."

"Then try not to get us indicted. We may be friends, but I'll fire you myself."

Mack headed for the door.

"Reyes, get a car."

She did not move.

Mack looked back.

Reyes held up the folder. "You report to me."

"For administrative purposes."

"For every purpose."

Oscar leaned back in his chair, enjoying himself now.

Reyes tossed Mack a set of government keys.

"You drive. I read."

Mack caught them.

His telephone vibrated again.

The same Nevada number appeared on the screen.

Reyes noticed.

"You answering that?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"Not unless my luck has gotten considerably worse."

He silenced the call and followed Reyes from the office.

The telephone vibrated a final time as they approached the elevator.

This time, the caller left a message.

Mack waited until Reyes stepped inside. He remained in the hallway and raised the telephone to his ear.

A man spoke for less than ten seconds.

"Mister Donnelly, time has not improved your position. We are finished waiting."

The message ended.

Mack deleted it.

The elevator doors began to close.

Reyes stopped them with her hand.

"You coming?"

Mack looked at the blank telephone screen.

Reno had followed him to Miami.

He slipped the telephone onto his belt and entered the elevator.

"Let's go find Johnny Malone."

CHAPTER TWO
THE NIGHT DAWBER FELL

Reform Prison rose from the flat South Florida landscape like a concrete ship run aground.

Razor wire surrounded the outer walls in shining coils. Guard towers stood at each corner, their dark windows reflecting the morning sun. Beyond the perimeter stretched drainage canals, scrub pine, and enough empty land to discourage anyone foolish enough to climb the fence.

Mack parked the government sedan beneath a sign marked FEDERAL AND STATE VISITORS.

Aisha Reyes closed the Johnny Malone file she had been reading since Miami.

"You drove ninety miles an hour."

"We got here, didn't we?"

"That isn't how federal travel regulations work."

"You going to put it in your report?"

"I'm deciding whether it deserves its own section."

Mack climbed from the car.

His telephone had remained silent since they left Miami. That should have relieved him. Instead, he found himself checking it every few minutes to make certain the battery had not died.

Reyes noticed.

"Expecting a call?"

"No."

"You've checked that telephone fourteen times."

"You counted?"

"I investigate things."

"That's adorable."

She locked the car. "Keep talking. Oscar gave me authority to send you home."

"Oscar gave you a folder and an inflated sense of importance."

"He also gave me ranking authority."

"Those words mean less every time you say them."

They crossed the parking lot toward the administration building.

Inside, a corrections officer inspected their badges and directed them through a metal detector. Mack removed his pistol, spare magazine, pocketknife, lighter, flask, and the keys to the Firebird he was not driving.

The officer looked at the collection.

"You carry all that every day?"

"I left the shotgun at home."

Reyes placed her pistol in a lockbox.

"Please don't encourage him."

The officer returned their badges and issued two visitor passes.

A second guard escorted them through a series of steel doors. Each opened only after the previous one slammed shut behind them. The deeper they traveled into the prison, the cooler air of the administration building gave way to heat, disinfectant, and the human odor of too many men confined in too little space.

Inmates watched through reinforced windows as Mack and Reyes passed.

Some recognized the badges.

Others recognized Mack.

He could tell by the way their expressions changed.

His name had once traveled through federal prisons ahead of him. Dawber County had made him famous among agents and infamous among the men they arrested. Reno had added a different kind of reputation.

At the end of the corridor, Warden Vernon Kinder waited beneath a security camera.

Kinder wore a charcoal suit and a broad smile. He had thick silver hair, pink cheeks, and the soft appearance of a man whose meals were prepared by people he could punish.

Sweat glistened along his upper lip despite the air-conditioning.

"Mack Donnelly," Kinder said. "As I live and breathe."

He extended his hand.

Mack shook it.

"How've you been, Vern?"

"Better than the men in my custody."

Kinder laughed at his own joke and turned toward Reyes.

"And who might you be?"

"Special Agent Aisha Reyes," Mack said.

Kinder's smile widened.

"Oh, my. What an exotic name."

Reyes withdrew her hand before Kinder could take it.

"It's a name."

She looked at Mack.

"What is it with you old-timers?"

Mack frowned. "Who are you calling old?"

Kinder dabbed his forehead with a folded handkerchief.

"Well, Agent Reyes, welcome to Reform. How can we assist the Drug Enforcement Administration?"

"We're here to speak with two prisoners," Reyes said. "Bocephus Dawber and Kenny Gregory."

Kinder's smile remained in place, but something behind it shifted.

"I can help you with one."

Mack watched him fold the handkerchief and return it to his pocket.

"What does that mean?"

"Kenny Gregory hanged himself two days ago."

For a moment, the corridor seemed to grow quieter.

Mack looked at Reyes.

She was already opening her notebook.

"Where?" she asked.

"In his cell."

"What time?"

"Shortly before dawn."

"Who found him?"

"Officer Daly."

"Was Gregory in general population?"

"He had recently been moved to administrative segregation."

"Why?"

"Disciplinary reasons."

"What disciplinary reasons?"

Kinder's smile thinned.

"I don't have the complete report in front of me."

"Get it."

The warden studied her.

Mack almost smiled.

Reyes continued.

"Gregory was due for release in less than a month. Why would a man who served nearly twelve years kill himself days before going home?"

"For that, you'd need a séance."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is the only answer Mr. Gregory left us."

"Why wasn't a death notice or coroner's report sent to the DEA?"

"This facility filed all required reports with the Department of Corrections."

"Gregory was convicted in a federal narcotics prosecution."

"He was serving his sentence in a state-managed facility under an interstate placement agreement."

"That doesn't remove federal notification requirements."

Kinder's eyes moved toward Mack.

"Is she always like this?"

"We've been partners for two hours."

"And he's already tired of me," Reyes said. "Imagine how you'll feel by lunchtime."

Kinder's handkerchief returned.

Mack watched him blot his upper lip.

"Where's the body?" Mack asked.

"Transferred for examination."

"To whom?"

"The state medical examiner."

"Which office?"

"I'd have to check."

"Check."

Kinder slipped the handkerchief into his pocket again.

"I was under the impression you came to discuss Johnny Malone."

Neither Mack nor Reyes had mentioned Johnny.

Reyes closed her notebook.

"What makes you think that?"

Kinder hesitated for only a fraction of a second.

"You requested two inmates from the Dawber County organization. Malone was associated with them."

"So were fifty other people."

"Malone's house exploded yesterday. It has been on the news."

"The owner of the house hasn't been identified publicly."

Kinder's smile finally disappeared.

Mack stepped closer.

"You expecting Johnny, Vern?"

"Why would Johnny Malone come here?"

"To see Bo. To see Kenny. To find out which one of them talked."

"No one talked."

"You seem certain."

"I run a secure institution."

"Kenny Gregory died inside that secure institution."

Kinder's jaw tightened.

"We take every death seriously."

"Then you won't mind giving Agent Reyes the housing logs, surveillance recordings, disciplinary reports, visitor records, medical records, and names of every officer working Gregory's unit during the forty-eight hours before his death."

"I will need a formal request."

Reyes produced a folded document from the file.

"Here."

Kinder did not take it.

"This authorizes access to information connected with a joint DEA and Homeland Security investigation," she said. "If you obstruct that investigation, I'll telephone Director Barbara Roland from your office. She can explain the consequences personally."

Kinder looked at the document, then at Mack.

"Homeland Security?"

"A house exploded in Miami," Mack said. "Patriot Act-type thing."

"I admit I don't understand all the particulars of the Patriot Act."

Reyes smiled.

"It means we can make your day considerably worse."

Kinder studied them both.

"How ominous."

"And Bo?" Mack asked. "Are you bringing him out?"

"I can't permit an interrogation without notifying his attorney."

"We're not questioning him about his conviction," Reyes said. "We're investigating a current national-security matter."

"That phrase seems to open an impressive number of doors."

"You're learning."

Kinder removed a walkie-talkie from his belt.

"Looks like I don't have much choice."

"You have choices," Mack said. "You're just running out of good ones."

Kinder pressed the transmission button.

"Bring Bocephus Dawber to Interview Room Three. Federal agents are waiting."

A voice acknowledged the order.

Kinder returned the radio to his belt.

"This way."

As they followed him, Reyes leaned closer to Mack.

"He knew why we came."

"Yep."

"He's lying about Gregory."

"Probably."

"Does everyone you know lie?"

"Everyone worth knowing."

#

Bocephus Dawber sat with his hands cuffed to a steel ring bolted into the interrogation table.

Prison had taken weight from him without making him smaller. His hair had gone silver at the temples, and the lines around his mouth had deepened, but he remained broad-shouldered and imposing.

He sat upright in his orange uniform as if the prison belonged to him.

Mack stopped inside the doorway.

For twelve years, he had imagined seeing Bo again.

In some versions, Bo looked defeated. In others, he begged. Mack should have known better than to expect either.

Bo smiled.

"Well, well. If it ain't Captain Ahab and his babysitter."

Kinder held the door open behind Mack and Reyes.

"You play nice, Bo."

"Always do, Vern."

The familiarity between them was subtle, but Mack heard it.

Kinder gave Bo an oily smile and stepped into the corridor.

The door closed.

Bo looked at Reyes.

"Who's the pretty young thing? She looks a hell of a lot better than Oscar."

Mack sat across from him.

"She could kick your ass in ways Oscar only dreams about."

Reyes remained standing.

"Special Agent Aisha Reyes."

"Another exotic name."

"It's still just a name."

Bo chuckled.

"You two rehearsing that?"

"We're here to discuss Johnny Malone," she said.

The humor vanished from Bo's eyes, but not from his mouth.

"Twelve years, Mack. Twelve years you leave me sitting in here, and now you show up when I'm less than a month from freedom."

"You make it sound like I forgot about you."

"You forgot to visit."

"I sent a Christmas card."

"Must've gotten lost."

"How tragic."

Bo leaned back as far as the cuffs allowed.

"I don't have to talk without my lawyer."

"You can call him," Reyes said.

"That right?"

"Yes. While you wait, we can request a federal hold based on an active narco-terrorism investigation. Your attorney can spend the next month arguing about whether your release date still applies."

Bo's gaze sharpened.

"Narco-terrorism?"

"A Miami house exploded in broad daylight," Reyes said. "Four bodies were recovered. The dead appear connected to a Haitian criminal organization."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Maybe nothing," Mack said. "Maybe everything."

He placed a clear evidence bag on the table.

Johnny Malone's lighter rested inside.

The skull and crossbones remained visible beneath the scorch marks. On the reverse, the old engraving could still be read.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

Bo stopped moving.

Mack watched his eyes.

"Recognize it?"

Bo looked at the lighter for several seconds before raising his gaze.

"Johnny's."

"We found it inside the house."

"Then maybe the Haitians finally got him."

"You and I both know Johnny has nine lives. He's not even halfway through them."

Bo pushed the evidence bag back with one finger.

"Congratulations. You found your white whale."

"Johnny's alive."

"You sound happy about it."

"I'm going to finish what I started."

Bo gave a low laugh.

"That's what you said in 1991."

Mack felt Reyes watching him.

He ignored her.

"Word is, if you hadn't killed Sanchez, you and Johnny would still be making money."

"I didn't kill Sanchez."

"You gave the order."

"The cartel killed him."

"That story wasn't believable twelve years ago."

"It convinced everyone but Johnny."

"And me."

Bo's smile returned.

"You believed a lot of things back then."

"I believed you were a drug trafficker."

"You were right."

"I believed you were a murderer."

"Couldn't prove it."

"I believed Johnny Malone was the brains of your organization."

Bo looked down at the lighter.

"That one still bothers you, doesn't it? All those medals, all those newspaper stories, and the accountant walked away."

"He turned on you."

"He turned on everybody."

"He tipped the FBI."

"Maybe."

"He traded the organization for protection."

Bo raised his cuffed hands.

"And yet here you sit, asking me where he went. Doesn't sound like the Bureau protected him very well."

Mack leaned forward.

"Johnny didn't leave that lighter accidentally. He put it beside a body so we'd think he died in the explosion. That means he needs time."

"For what?"

"To get back to Dawber County."

Bo's expression remained controlled.

"He hated Dawber County."

"He left something behind."

"Bad memories."

"Five million dollars."

The silence lasted one beat too long.

Reyes noticed.

Mack did too.

"You know where he hid it," Mack said.

"If I knew where five million dollars was buried, do you think I'd still be eating state-issued meat loaf?"

"You couldn't reach it from prison."

"I've got friends."

"You've got Kinder."

Bo's eyes flicked briefly toward the dark glass dome in the ceiling.

Mack followed the glance.

A red light glowed beside the camera lens.

Someone was watching.

Someone was listening.

Bo looked back at him.

"You always did see more than was healthy."

"And you always lied when the truth was cheaper."

"Truth never came cheap in Dawber County."

Reyes opened the file.

"Johnny and Kenny Gregory controlled the emergency cash reserve. Gregory is dead. Johnny's house was destroyed, and Johnny has disappeared. If he's coming back for that money, who does he contact?"

Bo looked at her with renewed interest.

"You're smarter than you look."

"And you're less charming than you think."

Mack almost smiled.

Bo shifted in his chair.

"Johnny and Kenny hid the money in the swamp. Kenny remembered pieces of the route. Markers. Turns. Islands that disappear when the water rises."

"Who knew the complete route?" Reyes asked.

"Pastor Bubs."

"Bubs has the money?" Mack asked.

Bo did not answer immediately.

"Bubs has the way to it."

"That isn't the same thing."

"It's close enough."

"How did a Baptist preacher get involved in drug money?"

"Johnny trusted him."

"Why?"

"Because Bubs was the one man in Dawber County nobody owned."

Mack thought about the preacher he remembered from 1991. A large man with a larger voice, standing in front of grieving families and telling them salvation remained possible even after the federal vans carried their fathers away.

"Johnny gave Bubs access to the money after the arrests," Bo continued. "Told him to use it for the families."

"Did he?" Reyes asked.

"Bubs considered it blood money."

"So he left five million dollars in the swamp for twelve years?"

"A better man than you or me might."

Mack looked at the camera again.

Bo had given the answer loudly and clearly.

Too clearly.

"You want us to go to Bubs," Mack said.

"I want you to find Johnny."

"Why?"

"So I can thank him for the memories."

"You're planning something."

"I'm planning to walk out of this prison next month."

"And Kinder?"

"What about him?"

"You tell me."

Bo's face revealed nothing.

Mack moved the evidence bag closer.

"Johnny blew up his house because someone came for him. If he returns to Dawber County, the people who want that money will follow."

"Then you better find him first."

"You expecting trouble?"

"In Dawber County?" Bo smiled. "Always."

Reyes closed the file.

"We'll need a complete statement concerning Bubs and the route."

"No."

"You were happy to talk a moment ago."

"I gave you a hunch. I'm not signing anything."

"You understand we can interfere with your release."

"You understand my lawyer will have you reassigned to counting aspirin at the Veterans Administration."

Reyes placed both hands on the table.

"You don't frighten me."

"I'm not trying to."

Bo looked at Mack.

"You frighten easily enough for both of you."

Mack held his gaze.

Bo's smile became smaller.

"Atticus knew that."

The room seemed to tighten around them.

Reyes looked from Bo to Mack.

"What does Atticus Shelton have to do with this?"

"Nothing," Mack said.

Bo leaned toward her.

"Your partner ever tell you what he did to prove himself to us?"

Mack's chair scraped against the floor as he stood.

"We're done."

Reyes did not move.

Bo's eyes remained fixed on Mack.

"Did you put all of it in those legendary reports?"

Mack gathered the lighter.

"Enjoy your remaining weeks."

"You should visit more often."

Mack walked toward the door.

Behind him, Bo spoke again.

"Bubs knows the way. But if Johnny's really back, that money is the least dangerous thing he came home for."

Mack opened the door.

Kinder stood several feet down the corridor, pretending to examine paperwork.

Mack looked up at the camera, then at the warden.

Kinder smiled.

"Productive conversation?"

"Turn off the recording," Mack said.

"I'm afraid security recordings are automatic."

"Preserve every second."

"Of course."

"If any part disappears, I'll come back with a warrant and enough agents to take this prison apart one brick at a time."

Kinder's smile weakened.

Reyes stepped into the hallway and closed the interrogation-room door behind her.

"We also want Gregory's complete file."

"I'll have my staff assemble it."

"Now."

"That could take several hours."

"We'll wait."

Kinder wiped his upper lip again.

"I was told you had an urgent investigation."

"We do," Reyes said. "A suspicious prison death just became part of it."

Kinder glanced at Mack.

Mack offered no help.

The warden motioned toward a waiting area.

"I'll see what can be done."

He walked away.

Reyes waited until he disappeared through a steel door.

"Bo was telling the truth about Bubs," she said.

"Part of it."

"He wanted us to hear it."

"He wanted Kinder to hear it."

"You think the warden is looking for the money?"

"I think everyone is looking for the money."

"And Atticus?"

Mack started down the corridor.

"Dead."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"It's the only answer you're getting."

Reyes caught up with him.

"What did you leave out of your reports?"

"Nothing that matters now."

"That usually means it matters more than anything."

Mack stopped beside the first security door.

Through its narrow reinforced window, he could see prisoners moving along the opposite corridor.

One of them paused and stared at him.

Mack remembered another corridor, another year, and Atticus Shelton standing between him and the only exit.

The memory arrived with the force of a fist.

Mack pushed it down.

"Kinder is lying about Kenny," he said.

"I know."

"We get the file, then we visit Pastor Bubs."

"And after that?"

"We find Johnny before everyone else does."

The steel door opened.

Mack stepped through. Behind them, beyond concrete and reinforced glass, Bocephus Dawber remained seated beneath the camera with Johnny Malone's return spreading through the prison like the first tremor of an approaching war.

CHAPTER THREE
THE NIGHT THE MUSIC ENDED

DAWBER COUNTY — 1991

The music outside was loud enough to rattle the walls of the backstage trailer.

Mack Donnelly barely heard it.

Bo Dawber stood three feet from Johnny Malone, his face tight with rage. Kenny Gregory remained between them, one hand raised toward each man as if he could hold back a war that had been building for years.

Johnny was drunk. Not stumbling drunk. Not yet. He was worse than that—angry enough to believe the liquor had made him fearless.

Mack knew better.

Johnny Malone had never needed liquor for that.

"What is he still doing here?" Bo demanded.

"Johnny was just leaving," Mack said.

"Like hell I am."

"You're drunk, Johnny," Bo said.

"And you're a damn murderer."

Johnny lunged.

Mack caught one arm while Kenny grabbed the other. Johnny twisted violently between them, trying to reach Bo. His heel struck a cable on the floor, and he crashed onto his back.

The plywood walls shook.

Outside, hundreds of people applauded the band performing on the main stage.

Bo glanced toward the curtain separating the backstage area from the crowd.

"You watch your mouth, Malone."

Kenny extended a hand.

Johnny slapped it away and climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"I know it was you who murdered Sanchez."

The accusation landed harder than the music vibrating through the walls.

Bo's expression barely changed.

Mack felt something tighten beneath his ribs.

Sanchez had been dead for six days.

His body had been discovered beside a burning automobile south of Miami. His hands had been removed. Three bullets had been fired into his chest, and another into his head. A Colombian symbol had been carved into the skin above his heart.

It looked like a cartel execution.

It was supposed to.

"Your buddies in the cartel did that, Johnny," Bo said. "Sent a message. To you."

"Bullshit."

"I warned you what would happen."

Kenny moved closer to Johnny.

"Johnny, I've been with Bo all week. He ain't said a word about Sanchez."

Johnny stared at his oldest friend.

"He didn't need to say anything. He's got the Sheltons. He's got the Brodys. Bo knows how to get things done without saying a word."

"I don't know about this one," Kenny said.

Bo's mouth curled into a satisfied smile.

Mack looked away.

He had found the discrepancy three months earlier while examining the operation's ledgers. The numbers were too clean. Johnny and Sanchez claimed that a shipment had earned four million when the payment had been closer to ten.

Once Mack found the first lie, the others followed.

Different books. False invoices. Phantom expenses. Money routed through shell companies before disappearing overseas.

Johnny and Sanchez had been skimming from Bo for years.

Bo demanded sixty percent for allowing them to move narcotics through Dawber County. Johnny and Sanchez had agreed to his terms, then lied about how much the operation made.

Mack had given Bo the numbers because that was what a trusted lieutenant would have done.

It was what an undercover agent had to do to protect his identity.

He had expected threats. Maybe a beating. Bo forcing Sanchez and Johnny to repay what they had taken.

He had not expected Atticus Shelton to appear at Bo's house that night.

Two days later, Sanchez was dead.

Mack had spent six days telling himself that he had not ordered the murder.

Standing backstage now, he no longer believed the distinction mattered.

"You stole from me," Bo told Johnny. "You breached our agreement. You've been skimming from our business."

"Our business?" Johnny laughed bitterly. "You sat in this county and collected sixty percent while Sanchez and I took all the risks."

"It was my county."

"You didn't own it."

"I owned enough of it to keep you alive."

Bo stepped closer.

"I told you the cartel would find out about your double-dipping. I told you they would make you pay. And I told you that if

you wanted my protection, you'd have to give me every dollar you owed me."

"I want nothing from you."

"Them cartel boys are still out there, Johnny. All I have to do is tell them you went renegade and ran off with their money."

Johnny's smile vanished.

Bo saw it and pressed harder.

"Then they'll come back for your lovely wife and that little boy of yours."

Johnny's hands closed into fists.

Mack leaned near him.

"This isn't worth it, friend. Sleep it off."

Johnny turned toward him.

For one terrible instant, Mack wondered if Johnny knew everything.

"You think you could've stood in my foxhole?" Johnny asked. "Any of you? Or Sanchez's? You boys ain't got nothing on us."

"No," Bo said. "But we also ain't got a target on our backs like you do."

"Is that right?"

"Empty threats and loose talk. That's all you are these days." Bo pointed a thick finger at Johnny's chest. "Get us our money. You didn't just rob me. You robbed all of us. Otherwise, I call the Colombians and let them finish what they started."

Kenny placed a hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"Mack's right. Go home and sleep it off. I'll check on you tomorrow."

Johnny looked at Kenny with an expression Mack could not understand.

It was anger, certainly.

There was grief in it too.

But beneath both was something else.

A farewell.

"Nah, Ken. We've been asleep for a decade." Johnny looked past him toward the stage. "Not anymore. You'll see, buddy."

Bo spat tobacco juice into an empty beer bottle.

The song outside entered its final chorus.

"Get him the hell out of here."

Mack took Johnny by the arm and guided him toward the rear exit.

Johnny allowed it.

That worried Mack more than another fight would have.

Behind them, Bo called out.

"You get me my cut by the end of the week. Then you get your ass out of my county. Do that and your family stays safe. Don't, and the Colombians will do what they do best."

Johnny stopped at the door.

"Kenny and his boys work for me now," Bo continued. "God knows they can't rely on you."

Johnny glanced back at Kenny.

Kenny appeared wounded by the entire exchange, but he still stood beside Bo.

The band struck its final chord.

Bo smiled.

"Sounds like the music's coming to an end."

Johnny opened the door.

"That's one way of putting it."

Kenny followed him for several steps.

"Johnny, let me take you home."

"I'm out, Ken. You won't see me for a while."

"Don't be like that. We've got to stick together."

"Let him go," Bo said. "Your buddy's lost it."

Johnny looked at Mack one final time.

There was no drunkenness in his eyes now.

Only calculation.

Then he stepped outside and disappeared into the darkness.

Mack watched the door close behind him.

Something was wrong.

Johnny had been furious about Sanchez, but he had been too controlled beneath the rage. His accusations had been specific. His goodbyes had sounded final.

Mack started toward the door.

Bo caught his shoulder.

"Let him go."

"I should make sure he doesn't do something stupid."

"He's already done something stupid. He stole from me."

Before Mack could answer, Merle Shelton burst through the curtain.

Merle was Atticus Shelton's son, a nervous young man whose wiry frame seemed incapable of containing his panic. His ripped jeans were wet to the knees, and mud covered his boots.

"Bo!"

Bo had already walked through the opposite curtain toward the stage.

Mack blocked Merle's path.

"What is it?"

"I've got to talk to Bo."

"He just walked onstage," Kenny said.

"Dammit. I've got news."

"About what?"

Merle looked between them.

"My daddy called from the marina. The Coast Guard ordered every Dawber County–registered fishing boat back to port half an hour ago."

Kenny laughed.

"You been drinking Shelton moonshine?"

"I ain't playing. The Feds blocked the county road. Nobody's getting in or out."

The last notes of the song faded.

The crowd went quiet.

Sirens rose in the distance.

Not one siren.

Dozens.

Merle's eyes widened.

"There's a goddamn army out there. Looks like the Panama invasion. They're looking for Bo—and the rest of us."

Kenny's smile disappeared.

He ran toward the stage.

Mack followed.

#

Bo stood at center stage beneath white floodlights, facing what had been a cheering crowd moments earlier.

Now people were running in every direction.

Federal agents poured through the festival grounds in raid jackets. DEA. FBI. Customs. Coast Guard personnel closed off the marina while helicopters swept spotlights across the surrounding fields.

Oscar Fuentes stood at the foot of the stage with his service pistol trained on Bo.

"Interlock your fingers behind your head!"

Bo stared down at him.

His left eye twitched.

Slowly, he raised his hands. His right hand went behind his head, but his left drifted toward the pistol tucked beneath his shirt.

Kenny emerged from backstage.

Oscar swung the weapon toward him.

"Freeze!"

Kenny raised his hands.

"Easy, pal. I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"Don't move another muscle, Mr. Gregory."

Kenny looked at Bo's hand creeping toward the pistol.

"Bo, don't."

Mack climbed the rear steps and crossed the stage behind him.

Bo's fingers touched the grip.

Mack drew his pistol and pressed it against the back of Bo's head.

"Don't even try it."

Bo went still.

His eyes moved toward Mack.

"What?"

"DEA, prick. You and all your boys are under arrest."

For the first time since Mack had met him, Bocephus Dawber looked completely surprised.

Oscar climbed onto the stage.

"You did real good here, Mack."

"Thanks, Oz."

Agents rushed past them, ordering musicians and stagehands onto the ground. Across the festival grounds, men who had believed they owned Dawber County were being dragged from tents, trucks, boats, and beer stands.

Mack searched the confusion for Johnny.

He was gone.

"Johnny Malone was here," Mack said. "He just slipped out the back."

Oscar lowered his voice.

"Yeah."

"He's the brains behind the whole operation."

Bo laughed.

Oscar ignored him.

"Malone is no longer your concern. Let's get you back to Miami for debriefing."

Mack stared at his oldest friend.

"What do you mean he's no longer my concern?"

"I mean exactly that."

"We have to find him before he disappears."

"I've got hundreds of suspects here. Bo Dawber is the target."

"Johnny Malone built the financial network. He negotiated with the Colombians. He moved the money."

"Mack."

"He's not an accountant. He's the whole goddamn machine."

Oscar took a pair of handcuffs from his belt and pushed them into Mack's hand.

"Cuff Mr. Gregory."

Mack looked at the steel cuffs.

Then at Kenny.

Kenny had stopped smiling.

"You?" Kenny asked.

Mack stepped toward him.

"Give me your hands."

"You're a Fed?"

"Turn around, Ken."

Kenny did not move.

"All those years," he said. "All those nights at Widow's Walk. You sat at my table."

"I know."

"My boys trusted you."

"I know."

"Did Johnny know?"

Mack hesitated.

"I don't know."

That was the truth, but it sounded like another lie.

Kenny slowly turned and placed his hands behind his back.

Mack closed the cuffs around his wrists.

Kenny looked over his shoulder.

"I thought you were my friend."

Mack tightened the cuffs one notch.

"I was."

Agents led Kenny away.

Mack faced Oscar.

"Did Johnny call this in?"

"No."

"Then why isn't he on the arrest list?"

Oscar glanced toward the FBI command vehicle near the edge of the field.

"Someone tipped the Bureau earlier this week. They started building their own operation. We moved tonight before they could shut us out and claim the entire case."

"Someone?"

"The order came from above. Johnny Malone is not ours."

Mack understood.

Johnny had not stumbled out of the backstage trailer defeated.

He had already made his deal.

"You let him walk."

"I didn't let anybody do anything. I'm following orders."

"He traded all of them for protection."

Oscar looked toward the agents loading prisoners into vans.

"Tonight we ended one of the largest smuggling networks in Florida history. Try remembering that."

Bo was still kneeling on the stage, surrounded by agents. He watched Mack with dark amusement.

Mack approached him.

"You think this is funny?"

"I think you spent years crawling around in the mud with us, and the one man you wanted walked right past you."

"Shut up."

"You never understood Johnny."

"I understood him better than you did."

"No. If you had, you'd know he was always going to leave you holding an empty bag."

Oscar motioned for two agents to take Bo away.

Bo allowed them to raise him.

As they reached the edge of the stage, he looked back.

"Just remember one thing, Mack. You'll never find that money without me."

Mack struck him in the stomach.

Bo doubled over.

Oscar grabbed Mack by the collar and hauled him backward.

"Don't you dare! His lawyer will eat us alive."

"He threatened a federal agent."

"He was handcuffed."

Oscar shoved Mack away and pointed toward another agent.

"Get Dawber and Gregory in the wagon."

The rear doors of a prisoner transport slammed shut behind them.

Oscar stepped close enough that Mack could smell coffee on his breath.

"You better get your head straight. Don't ruin this for all of us."

"Johnny has the money."

"Then another team will handle Johnny."

"You know that isn't what's happening."

"What I know is that your assignment is over. You're going back to Miami. You're going to shower, see a doctor, and sit through a debrief."

Mack stared toward the dark road where Johnny had vanished.

"Yeah," he said. "Fine."

#

Mack did not return to Miami.

He drove past the federal convoy and turned onto a shell road leading deeper into Dawber County.

Johnny maintained three safe houses. Mack knew about all of them.

The first was an abandoned bait shop near the county line.

Empty.

The second was a hunting cabin hidden behind a stand of cypress trees.

Empty.

Mack reached the third shortly before dawn.

It was an old fish camp beside a drainage canal, half concealed by sawgrass. A rusted pickup truck sat in the yard. One light burned inside the house.

Mack parked well short of the property and approached on foot.

His pistol remained in his hand.

He climbed the porch steps and tried the door.

Unlocked.

Inside, he found an open bottle of whiskey, two glasses, and blood on the floor.

Not much.

Enough to tell him someone had been hurt.

"Mack."

The voice came from behind him.

He turned.

The knife flashed before he could raise his pistol.

The blade sliced through his shirtsleeve and opened his upper arm. Mack stumbled sideways, striking the doorframe.

Atticus Shelton came at him again.

Atticus was older than Mack by nearly twenty years, but age had done nothing to diminish him. He was built like a man who had spent his life lifting engines, hauling nets, and hurting people with his bare hands.

Stories about him circulated throughout southern Florida.

Men said Atticus kept alligators in a private pit and fed his enemies to them.

Mack had never learned whether that was true.

He had never wanted to ask.

Atticus slashed again.

Mack caught his wrist with both hands. The knife stopped inches from his throat.

"You goddamn traitor," Atticus whispered.

Mack drove a knee into his stomach.

Atticus grunted but did not release the blade. He slammed his forehead into Mack's face.

Light burst behind Mack's eyes.

Atticus threw him through the screen door.

They crashed across the porch and into the yard. The railing splintered beneath Mack's weight. His pistol flew from his hand and landed somewhere in the darkness.

Atticus followed him down.

Mack tried to rise.

A boot struck his ribs and rolled him onto his back.

Atticus stood above him, the knife red with Mack's blood.

"First time Bo brought you around, I told him no outsiders."

Mack kicked at Atticus's knee.

The old man staggered.

Mack scrambled toward the truck. Atticus caught him by the back of his shirt and slammed him facedown across the hood.

The knife rose.

Mack grabbed the whiskey bottle from the truck bed and swung it backward.

Glass shattered across Atticus's face.

Atticus roared and released him.

Mack turned and drove the jagged neck of the bottle toward his throat. Atticus blocked it, grabbed Mack's injured arm, and twisted.

Pain dropped Mack to one knee.

Atticus struck him across the jaw.

Mack fell against an old fence. Rotten boards snapped beneath them as Atticus tackled him through it.

They rolled in splintered wood and mud.

Mack clawed for anything he could reach.

His fingers closed around a rock.

Atticus drew a revolver from beneath his jacket and cocked the hammer.

Mack threw the rock.

It struck Atticus above the eye.

The revolver fired.

The bullet passed close enough for Mack to feel it against his cheek.

He lunged.

They tumbled into the drainage ditch beside the road. Brown water swallowed them. Atticus forced Mack's head beneath the surface.

Mack struck blindly at his face.

Atticus held him down.

The pressure inside Mack's chest became unbearable. His injured arm had begun to fail. His strength was disappearing.

Then his hand struck metal beneath the mud.

His pistol.

Mack closed his fingers around the grip.

He drove the barrel into Atticus's abdomen and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot sounded dull beneath the water.

Atticus released him.

Both men rolled apart.

Mack crawled onto the gravel shoulder, coughing canal water. Blood ran down his arm and dripped from his fingertips.

Atticus made it several feet before collapsing beside the road.

For a long moment, neither man moved.

Dawn began to lighten the eastern sky.

Mack forced himself upright.

His pistol shook in his hand as he walked toward Atticus.

The bullet had entered low in the abdomen. Dark blood spread across the old man's shirt, but he was still conscious.

Atticus looked up at him.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted."

Mack stopped several feet away.

"That's all true."

"DEA rat bastard."

"That too."

Atticus coughed and wiped blood from his mouth.

"Do your bosses know about the men you brought me?"

Mack said nothing.

"Do they know about the two men Bo made you kill yourself?"

"I left that part out of my reports."

Atticus smiled through bloodied teeth.

"Figured."

"I had to make Bo believe me."

"No. You wanted him to believe you. There's a difference."

Mack tightened his grip on the pistol.

Atticus had made him kill the first man to prove he was committed to Bo's operation. The second had been Mack's own idea because refusing twice would have exposed him.

He had told himself both men were killers.

He had told himself their deaths protected the investigation.

He had left their names out of every report.

Atticus shifted painfully on the gravel.

"You came out here looking for Malone."

"Yes."

"He ain't here."

"I can see that."

"He beat you again."

Mack moved closer.

"Where did he go?"

Atticus laughed until the pain stopped him.

"You still don't understand him. Johnny don't run from men. He makes men run after him."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

Mack pointed the pistol at his chest.

Atticus studied the trembling barrel.

"You scared?"

Mack considered lying.

There had already been enough lies that night.

"Truth is, you scared the shit out of me, Atticus. From the first day I met you."

Atticus nodded approvingly.

"Only a fool wasn't afraid of me."

"Johnny wasn't."

"Johnny Malone's a different kind of fool."

"Sanchez wasn't afraid of you either."

The humor left Atticus's face.

"No. He wasn't."

"You killed him."

Atticus looked toward the brightening sky.

"Bo wanted him dead."

"And you did whatever Bo wanted."

"For a long time."

"You made it look like the cartel."

"Did a good job too."

"Johnny knew."

"Johnny always knew too much."

Atticus tried to push himself upright, but the wound stopped him. He fell back, breathing hard.

"You better kill me now, boy."

Mack did not lower the gun.

"If you take me in, I'll tell them everything. Every man you handed over. Every crime you helped us commit. Those two bodies you put in the ground yourself."

"I know."

"And if I get out, I'll find you."

"I know."

"I'll find your family too."

Mack's finger settled against the trigger.

The shot in the ditch had been self-defense.

Whatever happened next would not be.

Atticus recognized the decision in his eyes.

"Go on, then."

Mack raised the pistol.

Atticus spat blood onto the gravel.

"You got lucky once."

"I did."

"You won't get lucky twice."

"That's why I can't take you in."

Atticus smiled.

It was the same smile men in Dawber County had seen before disappearing into the swamp.

Mack pulled the trigger.

The first bullet struck Atticus in the chest.

Mack fired again.

And again.

He continued until the pistol clicked empty.

The gunshots rolled across the sawgrass and disappeared into the coming morning.

Mack stood over the body, covered in mud, blood, and broken glass.

By sunset, his report would say that Atticus Shelton had ambushed him while he pursued a fleeing suspect. It would say Atticus attacked with a knife and fired a revolver. It would say Mack Donnelly discharged his weapon in self-defense.

It would not mention the men Mack had delivered to Atticus.

It would not mention the two men he had killed for Bo.

It would not mention Sanchez.

And it would not mention that Atticus had been wounded and helpless when Mack emptied the rest of the magazine into him.

Mack had survived the most feared man in Dawber County.

It did not feel like winning.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE OTHER BROTHER

The ancient ceiling fan rotated above Willis Childress's head with a tired metallic groan.

It had been turning when he entered the gym that morning. It would probably still be turning after the building collapsed around it.

Willis understood that kind of stubbornness.

Sweat ran from his shaved head and soaked through the waistband of his camouflage trousers. His bare fists struck the heavy bag in a relentless rhythm.

Left.

Right.

Left hook.

The bag jerked violently with every blow.

Suds planted his enormous hands against the opposite side and struggled to hold it steady. He was nearly six and a half feet tall, built like an overturned refrigerator, and wore the same pleasant expression whether he was repairing an engine or breaking a man's legs.

"What's wrong, bro?" Suds asked.

"Hold him steady."

"I'm trying."

Willis drove another fist into the center of the bag.

A muffled scream came from inside.

Suds looked down at the canvas.

"He's still breathing."

"That ain't what I asked."

Suds tightened his grip.

The Maroons had converted the abandoned produce warehouse into something between a clubhouse, a repair shop, and a fortress. Men worked on boat engines in the loading bay. Others guarded the entrances with rifles across their laps. A card game continued in the adjoining room despite the cries coming from the gym.

Everyone inside knew the rules.

Business belonged to Willis.

Loyalty belonged to the Maroons.

Betrayal belonged to the bag.

Willis struck it again.

Pain traveled through his swollen right hand and into the old injury in his forearm. For an instant, he was back inside a burning armored vehicle, choking on smoke while metal screamed around him.

He pushed the memory down and hit harder.

The bag swung sideways.

"Suds."

"I got him."

"You don't got him."

The trapped man groaned.

Willis stepped back, breathing heavily. He took a bottle of water from a nearby bench, swallowed twice, and poured the rest over his head.

Then he removed a large combat knife from the sheath at his back.

Suds smiled.

"This my favorite part."

Willis plunged the blade into the bottom of the bag and cut through the canvas.

TED "TEDDY" HENDERSON fell onto the concrete floor.

The University of Miami student landed in a heap, his expensive shirt torn and soaked with blood. One eye had swollen shut. His lip was split, and his wrists remained bound behind his back.

Teddy gasped for air.

Willis crouched beside him.

"You understand why you're here?"

Teddy tried to speak.

Only a dry rasp came out.

Willis grabbed his hair and lifted his head.

"I asked you a question."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I understand."

The Maroons gathered at the gym entrance.

Teddy had been selling their marijuana to wealthy students at the University of Miami, then moving it through country clubs and private parties from Coral Gables to Palm Beach. His family name opened doors that Willis's men could not approach without attracting police attention.

For six months, the partnership had made everyone money.

Then Teddy decided the Haitians could give him a better price.

He had not merely changed suppliers. He had given the Haitian crew names, delivery routes, and the location of two Maroon storage houses to prove his value.

One of those houses belonged to a man with three children.

Willis pulled Teddy closer.

"I thought we were partners."

"We were."

"Then you sold us out."

"I didn't."

Willis drove his fist into Teddy's stomach.

Teddy folded around the blow and vomited onto the floor.

Suds looked down at the mess.

"I just cleaned in here."

"You ain't never cleaned nothing in your life," Willis said.

"I supervised."

Despite himself, Willis nearly smiled.

He turned back to Teddy.

"You thought because you went to some rich-boy university, you were smarter than us. You thought you could make money off our work and hand our people to the Haitians when you found a better deal."

Teddy shook his head.

"That's not what happened."

"What happened, then?"

"I owed them money."

"That supposed to make me feel better?"

"They threatened me."

"And you gave them my people instead."

"I didn't know what else to do."

"You could've come to me."

Teddy began crying.

"My father will pay you."

Willis tilted his head.

"Oh, he's going to pay."

He placed the knife against Teddy's throat.

The young man stopped breathing.

"Please."

Willis pressed the edge hard enough to draw a thin line of blood.

"Teddy, I need you to listen carefully, because I don't like repeating myself."

Teddy stared up at him.

"You're going back to Miami. You're going to tell your daddy that you made a bad business decision. Then he's going to pay every dollar you owe us, plus interest."

"He will."

"You're also going to tell him that the Maroons expect access to the same clubs, parties, and rich customers you promised us."

"Yes."

"You work for us. You don't work for the Haitians. You don't work for yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Willis removed the blade.

Teddy released a sobbing breath.

"If you cross us again, Suds is going to cut you into enough pieces that your daddy will need a map to put you back together."

Suds nodded pleasantly.

"I'm good with puzzles."

Teddy stared at him in horror.

Willis stood.

"Take him home."

Four Maroons lifted Teddy from the floor.

Willis caught one of them by the arm.

"Put him in the back seat. Don't throw him in the truck bed."

The man appeared confused.

"Why not?"

"Because he ain't dead. And don't let him die on the way. His father's no use to us if his son arrives in a coffin."

They carried Teddy out.

Suds watched them go.

"You really would've let me cut him up?"

"No."

Suds looked disappointed.

"Then why'd you say it?"

"Because Teddy believed me."

A voice crackled from the radio clipped to Willis's belt.

"Boss?"

Willis pressed the button.

"What?"

It was Bigz, one of the men guarding the front gate.

"Got a woman out here asking for you."

"I know a lot of women."

"Says her name is Tiana Ross."

Willis wiped his face with an old handkerchief.

"What does she want?"

"She won't tell me."

"Then send her away."

"She says it's about Deon."

Willis stopped wiping his face.

Suds noticed.

"What about him?" Willis asked.

"She said she needs to tell you herself."

Willis clipped the radio back onto his belt.

"Get the floor cleaned."

"That sounds like a job for somebody else."

"Find somebody else, then."

Willis walked toward the front of the warehouse.

His right fist had begun to throb.

He flexed it as he passed through the loading bay. The men working there stopped what they were doing and watched him. Willis gave them nothing.

Deon had probably sent Tiana to lecture him.

That was how his brother handled disagreements now. Lawyers, appointments, and conversations filled with words like liability and consequences.

Deon had used some of those words the last time he represented Willis.

The weapons charge had been serious enough to send Willis away for years. Deon had dismantled the prosecution's case, discredited two deputies, and gotten the charges dismissed.

Afterward, instead of accepting thanks, Deon had told Willis that it was the last time.

It had not been the last time.

With Deon, it never was.

Willis stepped outside.

A battered pickup truck stood beyond the open gate. One of the doors was a different color from the rest, and dried swamp mud covered the tires. Willis recognized it as an old Shelton vehicle.

Tiana Ross stood beside it.

Her clothes were wrinkled and stained. A cut crossed her forehead. Despite that, she held herself with the same confidence she had displayed when Willis first met her in Deon's Miami office.

Bigz stood several feet away with a rifle.

"She wouldn't let me search her," he said.

Tiana looked at him.

"You tried to put your hands under my blouse."

"That's where people hide guns."

"That's where you were going to lose your fingers."

Willis raised a hand.

"Go inside, Bigz."

Bigz hesitated.

"Boss—"

"Go."

Bigz walked away muttering.

Willis stopped in front of Tiana.

"What are you doing in a Shelton truck?"

"It was the only transportation available."

"That don't answer my question."

"It's a long story."

"Then start talking."

Tiana glanced toward the warehouse. Two Maroons loaded Teddy into the rear seat of a waiting sedan.

"What happened to him?"

"My business."

"He looks like he needs a hospital."

"He needs better judgment."

The sedan drove away.

Tiana turned back to Willis.

"Did you receive a call from the prison?"

The question struck him with enough force to make him forget about Teddy.

"What call?"

"From Deon."

"No."

"From anyone?"

"What happened?"

"I need you to come with me."

"You drove all the way out here in a stolen Shelton truck to tell me that?"

"Yes."

"Where is Deon?"

Tiana's composure faltered.

It lasted less than a second, but Willis saw it.

A coldness entered his stomach.

"Where is my brother?"

"He went to Reform Prison to see Kenny Gregory."

Willis stared at her.

"Why the hell was Deon talking to Kenny Gregory?"

"Our firm represented him."

"Why?"

"Because Kenny was our client."

"That ain't an answer."

"It's the only answer that matters. Deon was an attorney. Kenny was scheduled for release and believed the guards were threatening him."

"Kenny Gregory helped destroy this county."

"He still had constitutional rights."

"Those white boys poisoned this place and got rich doing it. Then Johnny Malone burned everything down and left the rest of us to starve. Why would Deon help any of them?"

"Because that was his job."

"That was always Deon's problem. He cared more about doing his job than remembering where he came from."

Tiana's eyes hardened.

"That isn't true, and you know it."

"You come onto my property and tell me what I know?"

"He spent half his career keeping you out of prison."

Willis stepped toward her.

Bigz and the guards at the gate watched carefully.

Tiana did not retreat.

"Be very careful," Willis said.

"I'm not here to fight with you."

"Then tell me where my brother is."

Tiana reached into her jacket.

Every rifle at the gate rose.

"Easy," she said.

She removed a small cellular phone.

"This came in before he went inside the prison."

She pressed a button and held the phone between them.

Static came through the speaker.

Then Deon's voice.

"Tiana, something isn't right. They changed the meeting room, and nobody will tell me why. If I don't call you in ten minutes, call my brother."

The message ended.

Willis stared at the phone.

"Play it again."

Tiana did.

"If I don't call you in ten minutes, call my brother."

The recording stopped.

Willis looked toward the dirt beneath his boots.

"When did he leave that?"

"Yesterday."

"And you're just coming now?"

"I spent most of yesterday trying not to get killed."

"What does that mean?"

"I drove toward the prison after receiving the message. A corrections vehicle followed me onto the old Alligator Alley."

Willis listened without moving.

"They forced my car off the road. It went into the water. They shot at me when I tried to get out."

"Who?"

"Prison guards. Or men dressed like them."

"How'd you get away?"

"Johnny Malone."

Willis laughed once.

It was an empty, humorless sound.

"Johnny Malone is dead."

"No, he isn't."

"Then I'm talking to a crazy woman."

"I've been with him."

"Malone's been gone twelve years."

"He came back."

Willis studied her face, searching for some sign that this was a trick.

Tiana looked exhausted.

She did not look dishonest.

"Where's Deon?"

Her eyes filled, but she held his gaze.

"I think the warden had him murdered."

The world seemed to narrow around Willis.

The guards at the gate disappeared.

The warehouse disappeared.

Even the heat disappeared.

There was only Tiana and the sentence she had just spoken.

Willis shook his head.

"No."

"Kenny Gregory is dead too."

"No."

"The prison says Kenny hanged himself."

"Then he hanged himself."

"He was scheduled to be released."

"Men do stupid things."

"Deon entered that prison to meet with him. He never came out."

"Maybe they detained him."

"The prison claims he was never there."

"Then you went to the wrong prison."

"His car is still in their visitors' parking lot."

Willis walked away from her.

He reached the edge of the road before stopping.

His brother could not be dead.

Deon was the one who survived by avoiding every bad decision Willis made. Deon had studied while Willis fought. Deon had gone to church with Pastor Bubs and Millie while Willis disap-

peared into juvenile detention. Deon had graduated from college, then law school, then opened an office in Miami with his name printed across the glass.

Willis still carried one of Deon's business cards in his wallet.

He had never told anyone.

On the front, beneath the embossed name, Deon had written a private telephone number and the words:

Anytime. No questions.

Willis had called it more times than he would ever admit.

Tiana approached slowly.

"Willis."

He turned on her.

"No. Guys like me die."

She said nothing.

"Guys like Deon don't die. They become senators. Maybe president. They get their picture on television and come back here wearing some expensive suit, telling everybody how they escaped Dawber County."

His voice broke on the final words.

Willis looked away.

He would not let his men see him cry.

"I'm sorry," Tiana said.

"You don't know he's dead."

"I know."

"You saw his body?"

"No."

"Then you don't know anything."

"I know someone tried to kill me after Deon went inside that prison. I know Kenny Gregory died before he could tell Deon where Johnny Malone hid five million dollars. And I know Deon's last message told me to call you."

"The five million is a ghost story."

"It's real."

"Says who?"

"Johnny."

Willis faced her again.

"Malone was a con man. He destroyed his partners and disappeared with their money."

"He says the money is still here."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because Johnny believes the people who killed Deon are coming to Dawber County to find it."

"Let them come."

"They're working with surviving members of the Brody and Shelton families."

"Those two families spent the last two days killing each other."

"Some of them survived."

"They always do."

"They'll kill anyone between them and that money."

Willis looked toward the warehouse.

"Then they picked the wrong county."

"Johnny has a plan."

"Johnny Malone always has a plan. Everybody else ends up in prison while he walks away."

"He wants to speak with you."

"I don't want to speak with him."

"Then speak to him for Deon."

Willis's jaw tightened.

"Don't use my brother to move me around."

"I'm not. Deon spent his entire life getting you out of trouble. Now I'm asking you to help me find out who killed him."

Willis stepped close enough that their faces were inches apart.

"If you are lying to me, there will not be any law firm, federal agency, or police department capable of protecting you."

"I'm not lying."

"If this is some trick Malone put together to get his hands on my people—"

"It isn't."

"If I don't like what I hear, you won't wake up tomorrow."

"Then you can kill me tomorrow. Today, you're coming with me."

For the first time since she arrived, Willis saw something in Tiana that reminded him of Deon.

Not her education.

Not the expensive language or the belief that the law meant anything in Dawber County.

It was her refusal to back down when common sense told her to run.

Deon had possessed the same infuriating quality.

Willis turned toward the warehouse.

"Suds!"

The large man appeared in the doorway, still smiling.

"Yeah?"

"Bring my car."

Suds looked at Tiana, then at the Shelton truck.

"Where we going?"

"To hear a dead man tell us where my brother is."

Tiana frowned.

"Johnny isn't dead."

"We'll see."

Willis pointed toward the loading bay.

"Bigz and the others follow us in the truck. Rifles, shotguns, everything."

Tiana watched the Maroons move.

"If we arrive with an army, Johnny may think you're attacking him."

"I want him to think about it."

Suds disappeared inside.

Willis took out his wallet and removed Deon's business card.

The edges had softened from years of being carried. The ink on the back had faded, but the words remained visible.

Anytime. No questions.

Tiana saw it.

"He loved you," she said.

Willis returned the card to his wallet.

"We didn't understand each other."

"That isn't the same thing."

"No."

The warehouse doors opened.

A black sedan rolled into the yard, followed by two pickup trucks filled with armed Maroons. Suds parked in front of Willis and climbed out.

"Tank's full."

Willis opened the driver's door.

Tiana walked toward the passenger side.

"You aren't driving," he said.

"Why?"

"Because you put your last car in the Everglades."

"Someone forced me off the road."

"That's what everybody says after an accident."

Under any other circumstances, Deon would have laughed at that.

The thought hurt more than Willis expected.

He climbed behind the wheel.

Tiana sat beside him. Suds and Bigz joined the vehicles behind them.

Willis started the engine but did not put the car in gear.

"If Deon is alive, I'm bringing him home."

Tiana looked ahead.

"And if he isn't?"

Willis stared through the windshield at the road leading deeper into Dawber County.

"Then Johnny Malone is going to give me the names of every person involved."

"And after that?"

Willis shifted into drive.

"After that, I'm going to kill every last one of them."

The gates opened.

Willis drove out first.

The Maroons followed him toward Johnny Malone.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

The Maroon convoy stopped fifty yards from Alex Gregory's boathouse.

Willis Childress counted four vehicles already parked near the marina: a battered Caprice with bullet holes through its body, Alex's pickup, an unfamiliar sedan, and a county utility truck that appeared to have been abandoned beside the road.

Beyond them, the boathouse rested on pilings above the dark water.

Willis killed the engine.

"That where he is?" he asked.

Tiana nodded.

"Johnny, Bones, Alex, and Billy Dawber are inside."

Willis turned toward her.

"A Dawber?"

"Billy helped save my life."

"That don't make him less of a Dawber."

"He isn't his uncle."

"Ain't decided that yet."

Willis climbed from the car.

The Maroons emerged from the vehicles behind him. Suds carried a shotgun across his chest. Bigz and the others spread out instinctively, watching the windows, dock, and surrounding sawgrass.

"Stay out here," Willis ordered.

Suds frowned.

"All of us?"

"If I start shooting, come inside."

"What if somebody else starts shooting?"

"Then come inside faster."

Willis looked at Tiana.

"Lead the way."

They crossed the marina together.

The air smelled of gasoline, fish scales, and the storm gathering beyond the western horizon. A television played somewhere inside the boathouse. Willis heard a reporter describing another American advance into Baghdad.

He stepped through the door.

Johnny Malone sat on a worn couch facing the television.

He looked smaller than the legend Willis remembered.

His hair had gone gray around the temples. Bandages showed beneath the leg of his borrowed trousers. A pistol rested on the table beside him, close enough to reach but far enough away to appear polite.

Alex Gregory stood over a chart spread across a workbench. Billy Dawber watched from the kitchenette.

Bones Malone leaned against the wall.

Bones moved first.

He pushed away from the wall and placed himself between Willis and his father.

Willis stopped.

Bones had been a small child when Johnny disappeared. Back then, older boys had waited for him after school and punished him for what they believed his father had done to their families.

Bones never ran.

He walked toward them and took his beating.

Then he grew.

By seventeen, he had become a state champion wrestler with shoulders broad enough to fill a doorway. Every boy who had once beaten him eventually received a visit. Afterward, people stopped using Johnny Malone's name when Bones was near.

Willis understood violence.

He recognized it in the young man's eyes.

"You've got a lot of nerve coming back here," Willis told Johnny.

Bones stepped closer.

"I wouldn't come any nearer to my father."

Willis looked him over.

"Why are you protecting him? He hurt you and your mother as much as he hurt everybody else in this county."

"That's between him and me."

"Then move."

"No."

Johnny rose carefully from the couch.

"Bones."

His son did not look back.

"Sit down, Dad."

"I can handle this."

"You've been shot."

"I noticed."

Willis looked at the bandage.

"Somebody beat me to it?"

"Several people tried."

"Maybe they had the right idea."

Bones crossed the remaining distance between them.

Willis held his ground.

The boy was larger, but Willis had fought larger men in the Army, on the streets, and inside rooms where no one followed rules. He also knew that Bones wanted him to make the first move.

"You touch him," Bones said, "and I'm putting you through that wall."

Willis glanced at the thin wooden paneling.

"That ain't much of a threat. A hard sneeze could put me through that wall."

Billy tried to hide a smile.

Bones heard him.

His attention shifted for half a second.

Willis used it to step around him.

Bones caught Willis by the shoulder.

Willis turned sharply.

Johnny moved between them.

"That's enough."

Bones stared at his father's hand on his chest.

"Get out of my way."

"Not until you calm down."

"I am calm."

"You're breathing like a bull."

Willis smiled.

Johnny pointed toward the kitchen.

"Go get everyone something to drink."

Bones stared at him in disbelief.

"What?"

"We've got business to discuss."

"You want me to serve drinks?"

"I want you to give yourself thirty seconds before you do something stupid."

Willis sat in the large recliner facing the television.

"I'll take a beer."

Bones's face reddened.

"Get it yourself."

"You ain't much of a host."

Bones turned and punched the wall.

The impact sounded like a shotgun blast.

His fist went completely through the paneling.

Silence descended over the boathouse.

Bones withdrew his hand. Splinters clung to his bleeding knuckles.

"That could've been your face," he told Willis.

Willis looked at the hole.

Then at Johnny.

Johnny sighed.

"He takes after his mother."

"I was about to say."

Tiana closed the door before the Maroons outside could rush in.

"Everyone stop measuring themselves," she said. "Deon is dead."

The humor disappeared.

Willis stared at Johnny.

"I want the truth."

Johnny picked up the remote and turned off the television.

"So do I."

"Did Warden Kinder kill my brother?"

"I believe he ordered it."

"Believing ain't knowing."

"Kenny Gregory was murdered shortly before Deon arrived. The prison staged Kenny's death as a suicide. Deon went inside asking questions, and now the prison claims he was never there."

Tiana placed the cellular phone on the table.

"They tried to kill me before I could reach him."

Willis continued watching Johnny.

"Who did it?"

"Vernon Kinder has guards working for him. Daly is one of them. There will be others."

"Give me their names."

"I will when I have them."

"You expect me to wait?"

"I expect you to kill the right men."

Willis rose.

"You don't get to tell me how to handle my brother's murder."

"No. I'm telling you that killing the first prison guard you find will warn everyone else."

"I want them warned."

"Then you'll never learn who gave the order."

"You just said Kinder gave it."

"I said I believe he did."

Willis stepped closer.

"You used to be more certain of yourself."

"I used to mistake certainty for intelligence."

"That supposed to impress me?"

"No."

Johnny looked toward the armed men visible through the boathouse windows.

"I'm impressed you brought an army."

"You said men were coming."

"They are."

"Then why are you sitting around watching television?"

"Because frightened men move too quickly. I'm trying not to be one of them."

Willis looked at the bullet holes in the Caprice outside.

"How's that working out?"

"Still evaluating."

Alex folded the map on the workbench.

"Warden Kinder isn't acting alone."

Willis turned toward him.

"You Kenny Gregory's boy?"

"Alex."

"I know who you are."

"Then you know my father died in that prison too."

"Your father helped Bo Dawber flood this county with cocaine."

"He also helped build half the businesses that disappeared after the arrests."

"Drug money built them."

"Money built them. Drugs destroyed them."

Willis studied him.

Alex carried himself differently from the other young men. He possessed his mother's Battenberg manners, but his eyes belonged to someone raised around docks, card games, and men who lied for a living.

Johnny's kind of eyes.

"You trying to teach me about Dawber County?" Willis asked.

"No. I'm trying to tell you we have the same enemy."

"You ain't got the same enemies I do."

"Warden Kinder killed your brother because he thought Deon knew where my father hid Johnny's money. That makes this the same fight."

Willis glanced at Johnny.

"The boy always talk for you?"

"Usually before I want him to."

"Maybe because he's smarter than you."

Johnny smiled faintly.

"He might be."

Bones heard that.

His wounded knuckles tightened.

Billy emerged from the kitchenette carrying several beers. He gave one to Willis.

Willis accepted it without thanking him.

"You Timmy Dawber's boy?"

Billy nodded.

"Your uncle involved in this?"

"I don't know."

"That ain't a no."

"Bo has been in prison for twelve years."

"And he's run half the county from his cell."

Billy looked toward Johnny.

"He gets released in a few weeks."

"That's exactly why this is happening," Johnny said.

Willis opened the beer.

"Explain."

"Kinder has been giving Bo special privileges for years. Private meetings, alcohol, access to telephones, anything that made Bo useful."

"And what did Bo give him?"

"Names. Favors. Connections. The promise of five million dollars."

Billy shook his head.

"My uncle doesn't share."

"No," Johnny said. "He doesn't."

"Then why work with the warden?"

"Because each man believes he can kill the other after they find the money."

Willis took a drink.

"Maybe I save them both the trouble."

"That would satisfy you for an afternoon. I'm trying to accomplish something larger."

"Here we go."

Willis sat again.

"Johnny Malone's got himself another grand plan."

Johnny lowered himself onto the couch.

"How much money do you need?"

Willis laughed.

"For what?"

"To rebuild the Maroons."

"We don't need rebuilding."

"You're stuffing college students into punching bags because you need access to their fathers' customers."

Willis stopped smiling.

"How do you know about Teddy?"

"I pay attention."

"You been back in Dawber County one day."

"And I already know your distribution network is trapped between county roads watched by the Dawbers and coastal routes controlled by the Haitians. You've got manpower, but no political protection, no legitimate transportation company, and not enough money to expand."

"You wearing a wire?"

Johnny stood and lifted his shirt.

His chest was covered in gray and black hair. Bandages circled his waist and upper thigh.

Willis recoiled.

"Good Lord. Put that down."

"You asked."

"You look like something Jane Goodall ought to be studying."

"I'm part Italian. What do you expect?"

"I expect grown men to own razors."

Johnny lowered his shirt and sat.

"Are you satisfied?"

"About the wire. Not the hair."

Tiana folded her arms.

"Can we return to the murder conspiracy?"

Willis pointed at Johnny.

"How much?"

"Two million dollars."

No one spoke.

Even the Maroons visible outside seemed to become still.

Willis searched Johnny's face for the trick.

"You offering me two million dollars?"

"I'm offering it to the Maroons."

"For what?"

"Help me stop Kinder and his guards from taking the five million hidden in the swamp."

"So the money is real."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Close enough."

"That ain't an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting until we have an agreement."

Willis leaned back.

"I heard you hid five million. Why do I only get two?"

"Because it's my money."

"According to who?"

"The man who hid it."

"You hid drug money on Maroon land?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Alex looked at Johnny.

Willis caught it.

"The boy knows."

"Alex knows enough to be dangerous," Johnny said.

"I know the routes," Alex replied. "Not the exact location."

Willis turned toward him.

"What routes?"

Alex unfolded the map again.

"Three canals lead toward Gethsemane. Only one stays deep enough this time of year for a loaded skiff. Kinder's men will need

trucks to move the cash once they reach dry land. That limits where they can come ashore."

He pointed to a narrow strip of land.

"If they approach from the prison, they'll use the eastern service road. If they're working with the Brodys, they may come through the old hunting lease."

Willis stepped over to the table.

"What about the north canal?"

"Too shallow."

"For a normal boat."

Alex looked at him.

"You have airboats."

"Six."

Johnny joined them.

"That's why I need the Maroons."

Willis studied the map.

"If you know where they're coming, why not call the police?"

Billy laughed.

Everyone looked at him.

"Sorry," he said. "That was funny."

"The sheriff's department still belongs to the Dawbers," Johnny said. "The state police would ask too many questions. The FBI might protect us long enough to seize the money. The DEA would take the money and spend the next ten years trying to prove I touched it."

"And you haven't?" Tiana asked.

"Not since 1991."

Willis looked up.

"You've got more somewhere."

Johnny folded the map.

"We're discussing the five million."

"You didn't live twelve years on nothing."

"I'm an accountant."

"You're a thief with a calculator."

"Those professions overlap more than you'd think."

"How much do you have?"

"Enough."

"Where?"

"Not here."

"Swiss accounts?"

Johnny said nothing.

Willis smiled.

"I knew it."

"The two million is more than enough for your assistance."

"Assistance?"

"You provide men and equipment. We keep Kinder away from the money, identify everyone involved in Deon's murder, and make sure the truth reaches the right authorities."

Willis stared at him.

"You want to arrest them?"

"I want them exposed."

"I want them dead."

"I assumed."

"You got a problem with that?"

"I have a problem with leaving bodies all over Dawber County before we restart the most lucrative enterprise this place ever had."

Billy slowly lowered his beer.

Tiana closed her eyes.

"Johnny."

Alex smiled.

Willis noticed.

"What enterprise?" he asked.

Johnny glared at Alex.

"The boys have an idea."

"It's more than an idea," Alex said.

Bones returned from the kitchen with ice wrapped around his hand.

"We're rebuilding the operation."

Tiana looked at Johnny.

"You agreed to this?"

"I agreed to discuss a tightly controlled investment."

Alex laughed.

"You agreed we could make more than five million."

"That is not the same thing."

"We want to move product through the old routes," Bones said. "Bo, Kinder, the Sheltons, and the Brodys are already fighting each other. When it's over, nobody controls the county."

"We will," Alex said.

Billy remained quiet.

Willis looked at him.

"What does the Dawber think?"

Billy's expression hardened.

"My name is Billy."

"That wasn't my question."

Billy glanced at the map.

"My uncle Bo believes this county belongs to him. My uncle Buck has spent his life enforcing that belief."

"And you?"

"I haven't decided what I believe."

Willis nodded.

"That makes you the most honest Dawber I ever met."

Johnny tapped the map.

"The old operation became too large, too careless, and too violent. Everyone confused fear with loyalty. We would not repeat that."

"You already used the word we," Willis said.

Johnny looked irritated.

"So?"

"Sounds like you made your decision."

"I haven't."

Bones sat across from his father.

"Yeah, you have."

Johnny looked between the young men.

Bones possessed the muscle. Alex possessed the strategy. Billy carried the name that could either unite Dawber County or divide it again.

None of them understood how quickly ambition turned men into corpses.

Johnny did.

That was why they needed him.

It was also why he should have walked away.

Willis extended his hand.

"Two million."

"After the money is recovered."

"And the men who killed Deon?"

"You'll get every name I find."

"No warnings."

"No."

"No police protection."

"I can't control what the government does."

"But you can control what you tell them."

Johnny looked at Willis's outstretched hand.

"I've played that game before."

"You started that game."

Johnny finally accepted the hand.

Willis tightened his grip.

"If you betray me, I won't put you in a bag."

"That's reassuring."

"I'll feed you to the gators myself."

Johnny met his eyes.

"Atticus used to say things like that."

"I ain't Atticus."

"No. He would've tried to kill me before hearing the offer."

"Maybe I'm getting soft."

"You brought twelve armed men."

"Eleven. Suds counts as two."

Outside, Suds smiled through the window as if he had heard them.

Johnny released Willis's hand.

"Tiana, I need you to find out everything you can about Kenny and Deon's deaths. Autopsy reports, guard schedules, surveillance records, prison logs."

"Kinder will bury all of it."

"Then find someone who dislikes him."

"That won't be difficult."

"Billy, you need to learn what your father knows about Bo's arrangement with the warden."

Billy's face changed.

"You want me to spy on my unce?"

"I want you to decide which side you're on."

Billy placed his unopened beer on the table.

"He's still my uncle."

"I know."

Johnny turned to Alex.

"Find every route into Gethsemane that can carry a truck."

"Already working on it."

"Bones, you're with me."

"Where are we going?"

Johnny reached for the pistol on the table.

Willis looked toward the black water beneath the dock.

"You going after the money?"

"I'm going to see whether it's still where I left it."

"You want my men with you?"

"Not yet."

"That smart?"

"Probably not."

Johnny checked the pistol and pushed it into his waistband.

Bones picked up a shotgun.

Alex reached for the map.

Johnny stopped him.

"You stay here."

"If you're going into the swamp, you need me."

"I need someone capable of thinking more than thirty seconds ahead to coordinate with Willis."

Bones frowned.

"You saying I can't think?"

"I'm saying you punched a wall five minutes ago."

"The wall started it."

Willis laughed.

Bones glared at him.

Johnny opened the boathouse door.

Storm clouds gathered over the sawgrass, turning the afternoon sky nearly black. Somewhere beyond the marina waited five million dollars, a corrupt warden, a newly released Bo Dawber, and a DEA agent who had spent twelve years refusing to let Johnny Malone disappear.

Willis followed him onto the dock.

"One more thing."

Johnny stopped.

"If you're wrong about Deon—if he's still alive—you pay the two million anyway."

"Agreed."

"And if you're right?"

Johnny looked back at him.

"Then we make sure his killers regret it."

Willis nodded.

That was the first thing Johnny had said all afternoon that sounded like a promise.

Johnny climbed into the skiff. Bones untied the line and stepped in behind him.

The engine turned over.

"Where exactly are you going?" Tiana called.

Johnny pushed the skiff away from the dock.

"Fishing."

The boat accelerated into the canal.

Willis watched father and son disappear into the approaching storm.

For twelve years, Dawber County had lived with the damage Johnny Malone left behind.

Now Malone was back.

And this time, Willis Childress intended to make certain the destruction fell on the right people.

CHAPTER SIX
THE OUTLAW LIFE

The skiff struck another wave and launched Johnny Malone several inches above the wooden bench.

He came down hard.

Pain shot from the bullet wound high on the back of his thigh and traveled directly into his spine.

Johnny grabbed the sides of the boat and glared at his son.

"Slow down."

Bones stood at the rear of the skiff with one hand on the motor control. Wind pushed his dark hair away from his face. He looked completely at home guiding the boat through the narrow channel.

"I know how to drive."

"You know how to go fast. That ain't the same thing."

Bones increased the throttle.

The skiff slammed across another line of choppy water.

Johnny winced.

"B."

Bones laughed.

"We're not in a race."

"Somebody might be following us."

"Then we shoot them."

"That is not the answer to every problem."

"It's worked pretty good so far."

Dark clouds gathered over the Everglades, swallowing what remained of the afternoon sun. Lightning flickered beyond the trees. The storm was still miles away, but Johnny could smell rain approaching across the sawgrass.

Bones eased the skiff into a channel surrounded by mangroves.

The water became calmer.

Johnny shifted carefully on the bench.

"You're enjoying this."

Bones looked ahead.

"I've got to thank you, Malone."

"You mean Dad."

"Sure."

"I am your father."

"According to Ma."

Johnny ignored the remark.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"For giving me a purpose."

Johnny watched the back of his son's head.

"What purpose?"

Bones turned and smiled.

"I'm an outlaw, Malone."

The words delighted him.

That frightened Johnny.

For years, Johnny had imagined the person his son might become. In those private fantasies, Bones possessed his father's intelligence, his mother's strength, and none of their mistakes.

Maybe he would attend college.

Maybe he would become an attorney, build legitimate businesses, or enter politics. Johnny had accumulated enough money to give his son choices no Malone had ever possessed.

But Bones had grown up without him.

Other people had taught him what the Malone name meant.

"Like you," Bones added.

"I'm a fucking accountant."

"You keep saying that like anybody believes you."

"Because it's true."

"Accountants don't blow up their houses."

"Some do."

"Accountants don't disappear for twelve years."

"I had reasons."

"Accountants don't hide five million dollars in a swamp."

"That was an unusual tax strategy."

Bones laughed.

For a moment, Johnny heard the child he remembered.

Then it disappeared.

"You get us that money," Bones said, "and I might start calling you Dad."

"You called me Dad twenty minutes ago."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Must've been the excitement."

"Maybe you could call me Dad because I'm your father."

"Maybe you could act like one."

Johnny looked toward the water.

That wound hurt more than the bullet.

Bones pulled the throttle back as the channel narrowed.

"What do you expect to get from this?" Johnny asked.

"A shitload of money."

"For what?"

"You heard Alex. This is the down payment on our future."

"Crime isn't a future."

"Not this again."

"I mean it."

"So do I. You can forget about sending me to college or buying me some little house where I can mow the grass every Saturday. School's over."

"You're seventeen."

"I'll be eighteen soon."

"That doesn't make you wise."

"No, growing up in Dawber County did that."

Bones glanced at him.

"What did you think was going to happen? You and Bo and Kenny ran cocaine through here for years. Then you handed everybody to the Feds and disappeared. Half the kids in town blamed you because their fathers went to prison."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

Bones faced forward again.

"The older boys used to wait for me after school. Sometimes five or six of them."

Johnny felt his stomach tighten.

"Your mother never told me."

"She probably figured you were too busy being an accountant."

"What happened?"

"I walked toward them."

"Why?"

"Because they were going to catch me anyway."

Johnny imagined his son as a small boy walking toward a group of older children, knowing what they intended to do.

"Alex and Billy stopped them when they were around," Bones continued. "But they weren't always around."

"Who were they?"

"What?"

"The boys who hurt you."

Bones smiled faintly.

"Doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

"I handled them."

"When?"

"When I got big enough."

The satisfaction in his voice answered everything else.

Johnny looked at his son's shoulders. At the bruised knuckles from the boathouse wall. At the shotgun resting within reach.

Johnny had always believed Bones would become like him.

Instead, Bones had become what surviving Johnny Malone required.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said.

Bones did not respond.

"I mean it."

"Then get us the money."

"You think money fixes everything?"

"No. But I'd like to find out for myself."

Johnny almost smiled.

"You're not dumb, son."

"I know."

"You just don't think through your actions."

"That sounds like something dumb people do."

"It's a skill you can learn."

"Can you teach me?"

"I can try."

Bones looked back at him.

"That might be the first fatherly thing you've said."

The channel divided ahead.

One route curved east into an open stretch of sawgrass. Another narrowed between mangroves whose branches formed a tunnel above the water.

Johnny pointed.

"Take the tunnel."

Bones reduced the throttle.

"You sure?"

"My father took me through here before I could walk. He knew every channel between Gethsemane and the Gulf."

"I thought you grew up in Miami."

"I was born in Dawber County. My father moved us after he got tired of working for the Dawbers."

"Smart man."

"He had his moments."

Bones guided the skiff beneath the mangrove canopy.

The sky disappeared above them. Branches scraped the sides of the boat. Insects moved across the surface of black water.

"How much farther?" Bones asked.

"Slow down."

"I am going slow."

"Slower."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Everything I didn't see coming the first time."

Bones pulled the throttle back until they were barely moving.

Johnny studied the mangrove roots.

The landscape had changed over twelve years. Storms had destroyed some trees and deposited others across the channel. But beneath the growth, he recognized the route.

A split trunk shaped like an open hand.

A limestone ridge rising several inches above the water.

An old iron survey marker nearly consumed by vines.

"There."

Bones followed his finger.

"I don't see anything."

"You're not supposed to."

Johnny motioned toward the center of the tunnel.

"Cut the engine."

Bones switched it off.

The sudden silence felt unnatural.

Water dripped from the mangrove branches. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Johnny stood slowly and removed a long boat hook from beneath the center bench.

"Kenny and I put five containers down here in 1991."

"One million in each?"

"Approximately."

"What does approximately mean?"

"It means we were in a hurry."

"You ever count your own money?"

"That's most of what I did."

Johnny pointed toward five locations surrounding the skiff.

"We sealed the cash inside waterproof bags, placed them in marine containers, and attached each one to a weighted net. The weights kept them underwater. The netting gave us something to catch."

Bones looked doubtful.

"You left five million dollars tied to rocks?"

"Large rocks."

"That was your brilliant plan?"

"No one found it."

"Maybe it floated to Cuba."

"It didn't float."

"How do you know?"

"Because I used the word tethered when I explained it to Kenny."

Bones stared at him.

"What does that mean?"

"Tied."

"Then say tied."

"Tethered is more accurate."

"You always use words like you're charging people by the syllable."

Johnny handed him the hook.

"The first one should be off the bow."

Bones moved to the front of the skiff and lowered the hook into the water.

It struck mud.

He tried again.

Nothing.

"You sure this is the spot?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Because twelve years is a long time."

"I know where I hid five million dollars."

"You forgot you had a son."

Johnny said nothing.

Bones glanced back.

The expression on his father's face made him look away.

He dragged the hook across the bottom.

It caught.

"Got something."

"Don't pull too hard. Find the net."

Bones adjusted the angle and pulled steadily. Muddy bubbles rose around the hook. A length of dark netting appeared beneath the surface.

Bones grabbed it with both hands.

The muscles in his back tightened as he lifted.

A black marine case broke through the surface.

Bones hauled it over the side and dropped it onto the floor of the skiff.

The boat rocked dangerously.

"Easy," Johnny said.

Bones fell to his knees and attacked the latches.

"Wait."

"For what?"

"We make sure the seal held."

"How?"

"By looking before you tear it apart."

Bones ignored him and forced the case open.

Inside rested a thick rubberized bag.

He ripped the bag open.

Bundles of hundred-dollar bills spilled across the floor.

Bones froze.

Johnny watched the anger leave his son's face.

For the first time since returning to Dawber County, Bones looked purely happy.

He picked up two bundles and held them beneath his nose.

"Money doesn't have a smell when it's wrapped in plastic," Johnny said.

"Smells rich to me."

"Keep your voice down."

Bones laughed and raised the bundles above his head.

"We did it."

"That's one million. There are four more."

"One million more than I had this morning."

Bones pressed the money against his chest.

Johnny felt something unexpected.

Relief.

This was a moment they could share. Father and son, alone in the place where Johnny's past had been waiting for both of them.

Then Johnny realized the money had produced the happiness his return could not.

"Put it back," he said.

Bones looked offended.

"We just found it."

"And we'll lose it if you tip the boat. Seal the bag."

Bones reluctantly returned the bundles to the case.

Johnny moved toward the port side and lowered the hook.

The wound in his thigh throbbed as he worked the line across the bottom. When the hook caught the second net, he pulled.

The container felt heavier than he remembered.

Bones watched him struggle.

"You need help, Old Man?"

"I have it."

"You're turning purple."

"I'm fine."

"You look like you're giving birth."

Johnny pulled harder.

Bones laughed until Johnny shot him a look.

Then he grabbed the net and helped lift the container into the skiff.

They checked the seal together.

The second million was intact.

The third container came up more easily. Its outer case had accumulated algae, but the rubberized bag inside remained dry.

Bones counted the three cases.

"Three million dollars."

"Keep your voice down."

"There ain't anybody out here."

"There is always somebody out here."

Bones reached for the hook.

"Where's the fourth?"

Johnny pointed beyond the stern.

Bones lowered the hook and swept it across the bottom.

He caught the net on his third attempt.

As he began pulling, Johnny heard something move beneath the water.

Not a splash.

A displacement.

Something large had changed direction below them.

"Stop."

Bones continued hauling the net.

"What?"

"Let it go."

"I've got the money."

"Bones, let go."

The surface erupted.

A massive alligator surged from beneath the skiff.

Its jaws closed around the rising container.

Bones fell backward as the boat tilted violently. The hook tore from his hands. Johnny caught the gunwale before he went overboard.

The animal rolled.

Its armored back broke the surface. One side of its face carried a deep white scar across the eye.

Johnny recognized it.

"Smiley."

The alligator twisted with the container trapped in its jaws. One tooth punctured the rubberized bag inside.

The seam split.

Bundles of cash burst into the water.

Bones stared in disbelief.

"No."

Smiley released the ruined container.

Hundred-dollar bills floated around the skiff.

"No!"

Bones lunged over the side and began grabbing money.

Johnny seized the back of his shirt.

"Get away from the water."

"That's a million dollars!"

"And that's a fifteen-foot alligator."

"Help me!"

Bones scooped several soaked bundles into the boat.

The water exploded again.

Smiley's jaws snapped inches from his arm.

Johnny pulled Bones backward.

Both men crashed onto the cases.

Bones fought free and reached for the shotgun.

"Don't."

"That thing took our money."

"It almost took your arm."

Bones chambered a shell.

Smiley's scarred head appeared beyond the stern.

Bones fired.

The blast tore through the mangrove tunnel.

Water erupted beside the alligator.

Smiley disappeared.

Bones fired again at the dark shape moving beneath the surface.

"Stop shooting!"

"I'm killing it."

"You can't see it."

"I can see enough."

Johnny knocked the barrel upward before Bones fired a third time.

The shot ripped through the branches above them.

Birds scattered from the mangroves.

Bones shoved his father away.

"Get off me."

"You're going to put a hole through the boat."

"It stole a million dollars."

"It's an alligator. It didn't steal anything."

"Then what do you call that?"

They looked at the water.

Loose bills drifted between the mangrove roots. The punctured container sank slowly beneath them.

Smiley was nowhere in sight.

Johnny took the shotgun from Bones.

"You almost got yourself killed over money."

"Our money."

"Money can be replaced."

"You would say that."

"What does that mean?"

"You've got millions somewhere else."

Johnny did not answer.

Bones looked at him.

"The Swiss accounts are real."

"We have another container to recover."

"How much do you have?"

"Find the fifth net."

"Ten million? Twenty?"

"Bones."

"A hundred?"

Johnny pushed the hook into his hands.

"Find the net."

Bones glared at him before lowering the hook into the water.

He kept the shotgun beside his foot.

They searched for several minutes.

The approaching storm darkened the tunnel until the water became almost impossible to read.

The hook finally caught.

Together, they lifted the fifth container.

The damage became apparent before they opened it.

Several deep scratches crossed the outer shell. One corner had been crushed inward. Water spilled through the broken seal.

Bones stared at it.

"Open it."

"There's no point."

"Open it."

Johnny released the latches.

The rubberized bag inside had collapsed. Gray water filled the space around it.

Bones tore through the material.

The money had fused into a wet, milky mass. Ink stained the water green and black.

Bones lifted what had once been a bundle of hundred-dollar bills.

It disintegrated between his fingers.

He dropped it.

"How much can we save?"

"None."

"Some of it has to be good."

"It's been underwater for years."

Bones ripped open another bundle.

The paper came apart in his hands.

He kicked the ruined case.

The skiff rocked.

"Careful."

"Three million."

"That's what survived."

"Three million isn't five."

"It will have to be."

"I promised Willis two."

"You didn't promise him anything. I did."

"That leaves one million for us."

"One million dollars is still money."

"Not for what Alex wants to build."

Johnny began securing the three intact cases.

"Alex has no idea what he wants to build."

"He understands more than you think."

"He understands numbers and routes. He doesn't understand prison."

"Neither did you. You got everybody else sent there."

Johnny stopped.

Bones stood over the ruined money, breathing heavily.

For several seconds, only the approaching thunder moved between them.

"What happened to Sanchez?" Bones asked.

Johnny looked up.

"What?"

"Everybody says his death is why you turned on Bo."

"It was."

"So you destroyed the entire operation for one man?"

"He wasn't one man."

"What was he?"

"My brother."

Bones absorbed the answer.

"You burned everything down for him."

"Yes."

"But not for me."

Johnny looked away.

"I left to keep you alive."

"That's what you tell yourself."

"Bo threatened you and your mother. The cartel believed I had stolen from them. Mack Donnelly was hunting me. If I stayed, every one of them would have used you to reach me."

"You still could've called."

"I watched when I could."

"That ain't being a father."

"No."

Bones appeared surprised by the admission.

Johnny closed the final case.

"I thought staying away protected you. Maybe I was wrong."

"You were."

"I know that now."

The first drops of rain penetrated the mangrove canopy.

Bones looked toward the money floating outside the skiff.

"Bubs knew this was here?"

"Yes."

"You told him?"

"I told him where we put it and how to reach it. I gave him permission to use it."

"For what?"

"Anything Dawber County needed. Food. Medicine. Keeping families from losing their homes after the arrests."

"And he left it underwater."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he considered it blood money."

Bones laughed bitterly.

"Blood money could've helped Ma."

"Bubs believed the smuggling had already poisoned too many people in his congregation. He wouldn't use more poison to heal them."

"That sounds like something people say when they ain't hungry."

"You don't know what Bubs survived."

"I know he watched us struggle while five million dollars sat in his backyard."

"He believed touching it would bring Bo, the cartel, and the government down on everyone he tried to help."

"Maybe he should have asked us."

"You were a child."

"Ma wasn't."

Johnny had no answer for that.

Bones looked toward the direction of Gethsemane.

"I want to talk to him."

"Later."

"Now."

"We have three million dollars sitting in an open boat."

"Willis can protect it."

"We don't know who's watching the church."

"Bubs owes me an explanation."

"Pastor Bubs spent six years in a North Vietnamese prison camp. They starved him, beat him, and broke bones that never healed properly. He never gave them what they wanted."

Bones stared at his father.

"Why are you telling me that?"

"Because if you plan to frighten him, don't waste your time."

"I don't want to frighten him."

"What do you want?"

"The truth."

"You may not like it."

"I'm getting used to that."

An engine growled somewhere beyond the mangroves.

Both men went still.

The sound faded beneath the thunder.

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"That Willis?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Willis said he has six airboats. We would hear all of them."

The engine grew louder.

One boat.

Moving slowly.

Searching.

Johnny returned the shotgun to Bones.

"Load it."

Bones chambered a fresh shell.

Johnny removed the pistol from his waistband and checked the magazine.

The first flash of a searchlight moved across the mangrove branches behind them.

Johnny killed the skiff's small running light.

Darkness closed around the boat.

"Get the cases beneath the benches," he whispered.

Bones moved the three million dollars out of sight.

The approaching engine slowed.

A man's voice carried through the tunnel.

Johnny could not make out the words.

Then a second voice answered.

Bones crouched beside the motor.

"What do we do?"

Johnny watched the beam move across the black water.

For the first time that afternoon, his son was waiting for him to decide.

Johnny raised the pistol.

"Now you learn to think before you shoot."

The searchlight swept closer.

Someone had followed them into the swamp.

CHAPTER SEVEN
CAPTAIN AHAB

Pastor Bubs opened the doors of Gethsemane Baptist Church before Mack Donnelly reached the steps.

He stood beneath the entrance light with one hand resting on a wooden cane. Age had bent his shoulders, but it had not diminished him. His white shirt was buttoned at the throat, and his dark trousers appeared freshly pressed.

The scars on his wrists remained visible.

Mack had heard the stories. Six years in a North Vietnamese prison camp. Starvation, beatings, broken bones, and interrogations that ended only when Bubs's captors became too tired to continue.

No one had broken him.

Mack doubted twelve years in Dawber County had accomplished what the North Vietnamese could not.

Aisha Reyes followed Mack up the church steps.

"Agent Donnelly," Bubs said.

"Pastor."

Bubs looked at Reyes.

"And you are?"

"Special Agent Aisha Reyes."

"DEA?"

"Yes."

Bubs stepped aside.

"I suppose you should come in before the storm arrives."

Mack entered.

Gethsemane was smaller than he remembered. Wooden pews faced a plain pulpit. The walls held photographs of church picnics,

baptism ceremonies, and families who had lived in Dawber County for generations.

One photograph showed Deon Childress graduating from law school.

Pastor Bubs and Millie stood beside him.

Mack stopped in front of it.

"You raised Deon."

"We helped."

"He went to Reform Prison to see Kenny Gregory."

Bubs's expression did not change.

"So I heard."

"He hasn't been seen since."

"Then perhaps the Drug Enforcement Administration should find him."

"We're working on it."

"Are you?"

Reyes looked at Mack.

Bubs continued toward the pulpit.

"You didn't drive from Miami to discuss Deon."

"No," Mack said. "We came to discuss Johnny Malone."

Bubs stopped.

"Johnny has been gone for twelve years."

"He's back."

"What makes you think that?"

Mack removed a plastic evidence bag from inside his jacket.

The scorched Vietnam lighter rested inside. Its metal case had cracked in the explosion, but the engraved words remained visible.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

Bubs studied it.

"Where did you find that?"

"Inside what was left of Johnny's house."

"Then perhaps he died there."

"He didn't."

"You sound certain."

"I know Johnny."

Bubs looked toward the lighter again.

"I once believed that too."

Mack returned it to his jacket.

"Bo Dawber says you know where Johnny hid five million dollars."

Bubs walked behind the pulpit and rested both hands upon it.

"Bo Dawber has spent his life saying things."

"He was very specific."

"Prison gives a man time to develop his imagination."

"Did Johnny leave the money with you?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

Bubs stared at him.

Reyes moved closer.

"Pastor, two men may already be dead because of that money. Someone tried to murder an attorney on Alligator Alley. If Johnny returns for it, more people will die."

"People were dying long before Johnny Malone returned."

"Help us prevent another killing."

Bubs looked at her for a long moment.

"I have never touched Johnny's money."

"That isn't what she asked," Mack said.

"It is the answer I'm prepared to give."

"Five million dollars could have kept this church open for generations."

"This church was not built with cocaine."

"It could've fed your congregation."

"The same congregation Johnny's business helped poison?"

"You let it sit in a swamp?"

Bubs's gaze hardened.

"There are some things a man cannot use without becoming part of how they were earned."

"That sounds noble."

"It isn't nobility. It's fear."

Mack had not expected that.

"Fear of what?"

"What money makes men willing to do."

Thunder rattled the stained-glass windows.

Mack looked toward the rear of the church.

"Where's the water access?"

Bubs said nothing.

Mack walked down the side aisle.

Reyes followed.

Behind the sanctuary, they found a small kitchen, two classrooms, and an office. A rear door opened onto a covered walkway leading toward the swamp.

Beyond it stood a wooden dock.

One slip was empty.

Reyes pointed toward the water.

"Something left recently."

A trail of disturbed algae ran from the dock into the channel.

Bubs stepped onto the walkway behind them.

"The church keeps boats for floods and emergencies."

"How many?" Mack asked.

"Two."

"Where's the other one?"

"Being used."

"By whom?"

"Someone who needed it."

A gunshot rolled across the swamp.

Bubs turned toward the mangroves.

A second shot followed.

Then a third.

Reyes removed her pistol.

"That sounded like a shotgun."

Mack was already moving toward the dock.

A flat-bottomed airboat occupied the second slip. A large propeller rested inside a metal cage behind the elevated driver's platform.

Bubs blocked the walkway.

"That boat belongs to the church."

"I'll bring it back."

"You do not have my permission."

"Exigent circumstances," Reyes said.

Bubs looked disappointed in her.

"That phrase has excused a great deal of sin."

"People may be in danger."

"People are always in danger when Mack Donnelly follows Johnny Malone."

Mack stepped into the boat.

Reyes opened a storage compartment and found two sets of protective earmuffs. She handed one to Mack.

"Where do the channels divide?" Mack asked Bubs.

"About half a mile west."

"Which one leads toward the mangroves?"

"Both."

Mack put on the hearing protection.

Bubs remained on the dock.

"If Johnny is back," he said, "he didn't return for the money."

"What did he return for?"

"His son."

Mack started the engine.

The propeller roared to life, ending any possibility of conversation.

Bubs raised one hand.

His lips moved, but Mack could not hear him.

He did not need to.

The warning in the pastor's expression said enough.

Mack pushed away from the dock.

#

The airboat thundered through the channel.

Reyes sat beside Mack wearing the protective earmuffs, her pistol secured in its holster. The church searchlight swept over mangrove roots and walls of sawgrass.

Conversation was impossible.

Mack communicated with gestures.

When they reached the divide, he raised a fist and pulled back the throttle. He switched off the engine.

The roar stopped, but the propeller continued turning behind them.

They waited until it spun down completely before removing their hearing protection.

"You believe Dawber?" Reyes asked.

"About the money?"

"About Bubs."

"Bo lies when the truth won't serve him. This time, it does."

"Bubs said he never touched it."

"I believe him."

"Then why are we out here?"

"Because not touching money isn't the same as not knowing where it is."

Reyes studied the two channels.

"Which way?"

Mack examined the surface.

The channel to the left carried broken leaves and a thin film of fuel. Something had passed through recently.

"Left."

"You sure?"

"No."

"That's comforting."

They replaced the earmuffs.

Mack restarted the engine and guided the airboat beneath the mangrove canopy.

The searchlight found something floating on the water.

Money.

Mack immediately reduced the throttle and shut down the engine again.

The airboat glided forward on its remaining momentum. The propeller slowed behind them.

When it stopped, Mack and Reyes removed their hearing protection.

A hundred-dollar bill floated faceup beside the hull.

Then another.

Dozens drifted between the mangrove roots.

Reyes leaned over the side and retrieved one.

The bill was soaked but real.

"Well," she said. "I guess Bo's imagination is healthier than we thought."

Mack used a push pole stored along the deck to move them quietly through the floating currency.

A ruined black container rested against a mangrove root. Its side had been punctured and torn.

Something large moved beneath the surface nearby.

Reyes pulled her arm back into the boat.

"What did that?"

"Something that lives here."

Mack pushed them around the bend.

A small skiff rested in the center of the tunnel.

Bones Malone crouched near the motor with a shotgun.

Johnny stood at the bow, holding a pistol.

Three black marine cases had been pushed beneath the benches.

Mack saw them anyway.

For twelve years, he had imagined this moment.

Johnny in a Colombian villa.

Johnny stepping from a Swiss bank.

Johnny standing behind Mack in a dark parking garage with a gun against his spine.

Never this.

Johnny Malone looked older, injured, and exhausted.

But he was alive.

Mack forgot about Reyes.

He forgot about the explosion, Oscar's orders, and every official procedure he had promised to follow.

"Johnny."

The name came out quieter than he intended.

Johnny's pistol rose.

Bones aimed the shotgun.

Mack used the pole to bring the airboat closer.

Reyes raised her badge.

"Federal agents! Lower your weapons."

Bones looked at his father.

"Can I shoot them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because shooting federal agents complicates things."

"They followed us."

"Still complicated."
Mack pushed the airboat alongside the skiff.
The two hulls bumped gently.
"Twelve years, Johnny."
Johnny's expression barely changed.
"You look terrible, Mack."
"I was about to say the same thing."
"I've been shot. What's your excuse?"
Reyes kept her weapon trained on Bones.
"Put the shotgun down."
Bones smiled.
"You first."
"Bones," Johnny said.
"What?"
"We're thinking before we shoot."
"I thought about it."
"Think longer."
Mack stared at the cases beneath the bench.
"You found it."
"Found what?" Johnny asked.
"Don't."
"You're going to have to be more specific."
"The money."
Johnny looked at the floating bills.
"Somebody appears to have littered."
"Three cases," Mack said. "One million each?"
"You were always good with numbers."
"I learned from you."
"No, you learned enough to get dangerous."
Mack reached for the skiff.
Johnny aimed the pistol at his hand.
Reyes stepped forward.

"Mr. Malone, lower the weapon."

"Am I under arrest?"

"You are being detained for questioning."

"About?"

"A residential explosion that killed several people."

"Haitians tried to murder me."

"Then come with us and make a statement."

"Do I look healthy enough for an interview?"

"You look healthy enough to recover three million dollars."

Bones's finger tightened against the shotgun trigger.

Mack noticed.

"Easy, kid."

"Don't call me kid."

"So you're Bones."

"You've heard of me?"

"I arrested half the men who used to bounce you on their knees."

"You're Mack Donnelly."

Mack smiled.

"My reputation precedes me."

"My dad says you're an asshole."

Johnny looked at his son.

"I don't remember saying that."

"You didn't have to."

A distant roar entered the mangrove tunnel.

Everyone stopped talking.

Another airboat.

Its engine grew steadily louder, announcing its approach long before the vessel appeared.

Mack turned toward the bend.

Reyes raised her pistol.

Johnny looked at Bones and made a cutting motion toward the skiff's ignition. Bones nodded but did not start the engine.

The second airboat emerged through the mangroves.

A uniformed corrections officer stood behind the controls. His khaki shirt was dark with sweat, and the name above his pocket read WIGGINS.

Waylon Wiggins.

Two armed men rode in front of him. One carried an assault rifle. The other held a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Wiggins saw the DEA badges.

He reduced the throttle.

The boat's momentum carried it into the wider section of the tunnel while the propeller slowed. Wiggins switched off the ignition and waited for the blades to stop turning.

The sudden quiet made the confrontation feel even more dangerous.

Reyes held up her badge.

"DEA. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Wiggins drew his pistol.

"Step away from the money."

Mack moved between Wiggins and Johnny's skiff.

"Corrections Officer Wiggins, lower your weapon."

Wiggins looked at the badge on Mack's belt.

"Warden says nobody takes that money."

Johnny glanced at Wiggins's uniform.

"You boys come straight from work?"

"Shut your mouth, Malone."

"That Bo's order or Kinder's?"

Wiggins leveled the pistol.

"Does it matter?"

The rifleman opened fire.

Bullets tore through the mangroves.

Mack shoved Reyes down as rounds struck the airboat's metal cage. The searchlight exploded above them.

Wiggins restarted his engine.

The propeller's roar swallowed every other sound.

Johnny threw himself behind the bow and shouted directly toward Bones.

"Start it!"

Bones turned the key.

The skiff's outboard coughed but failed to catch.

Bones fired the shotgun toward Wiggins's airboat.

The blast shattered part of its windshield.

The rifleman fired again.

Bullets punched through the side of Johnny's skiff. One of the marine cases slid into view.

Its lid broke open.

Bundles of hundred-dollar bills spilled across the floor.

Wiggins saw the money.

He pointed toward the case and drove his airboat forward.

Reyes fired twice.

The rifleman spun sideways and fell against the gunwale. His weapon dropped into the water.

Wiggins's airboat struck the rear of Mack's.

The impact threw Mack against the steering platform. His pistol fell onto the deck.

Wiggins's remaining passenger attempted to jump onto Johnny's skiff.

Bones met him with the shotgun stock.

The blow broke the man's nose and sent him into the water.

He surfaced between the boats, screaming.

Something moved beneath him.

A long armored back broke the surface.

The man disappeared.

Bones stared into the water.

"Smiley ain't dead!"

Johnny seized the front of Bones's shirt and shouted into his face.

"Motor!"

Bones turned back to the controls.

Wiggins swung his airboat toward Johnny's skiff.

Mack retrieved his pistol and climbed onto the front deck.

He fired.

One round shattered Wiggins's instrument panel. Another struck the propeller cage.

Reyes joined him, firing at the engine housing.

The airboat coughed and lost power.

Wiggins used what remained of his momentum to reach a wider pocket in the mangroves. He worked the rudders and hit the throttle in short bursts.

The damaged propeller screamed.

The boat began a slow, violent turn.

Mack jumped from the church airboat onto Johnny's skiff.

The hull dropped beneath his weight.

Johnny drove the pistol into Mack's ribs.

Mack caught his wrist.

For an instant, they stood face-to-face.

Twelve years disappeared.

Mack smelled cigarettes, swamp water, and blood. Johnny's eyes held the same contempt Mack remembered from the night of the raid.

"You should've stayed dead," Mack said.

"You should've stayed undercover."

Mack twisted Johnny's wrist.

Johnny struck him with his free hand.

Mack staggered into one of the money cases.

Bones turned from the motor.

"Get off my father!"

He swung the shotgun.

Mack ducked.

The stock passed over his head and struck a mangrove branch.

Johnny drove his shoulder into Mack's chest.

Both men crashed against the gunwale.

The skiff tilted.

Mack grabbed Johnny's shirt.

Johnny's hand found the plastic evidence bag inside Mack's jacket.

For one second, his fingers closed around the scorched lighter.

His eyes changed.

Mack tore the bag away and shoved it back beneath his jacket before Johnny could see the inscription.

Not yet.

Reyes fired toward Wiggins's airboat.

A shotgun blast struck Johnny's skiff.

Johnny pushed Mack away and pointed toward the motor.

Bones tried the ignition again.

The outboard caught.

The skiff surged forward.

Mack grabbed the rear bench to keep from falling.

Johnny kicked his hand.

Mack lost his grip and crashed backward into the church airboat.

Johnny and Bones accelerated through the gap in the mangroves.

Wiggins completed his turn.

His damaged airboat headed back the way it had entered. The propeller rattled violently inside the cage, but it produced enough thrust to carry him away.

Mack raised his pistol.

Reyes grabbed his arm and pointed toward the deck.

Gasoline poured from a bullet hole in the church airboat's fuel line.

One muzzle flash could ignite everything around them.

Mack lowered the weapon.

Wiggins disappeared into the mangroves.

The roar of his engine gradually faded.

Johnny's smaller outboard vanished in the opposite direction.

Silence returned.

Reyes ejected her empty magazine and replaced it.

"You recognize him?"

"Wiggins. Corrections officer."

"He just tried to murder two federal agents."

"He tried to take the money."

"On whose orders?"

"You heard him."

"Warden Kinder."

"And Bo Dawber."

Reyes looked toward the channel where Johnny had escaped.

"You were right."

Mack continued staring into the darkness.

"About which part?"

"Malone's alive."

"I told you."

"And the money is real."

Mack noticed something beside his boot.

A bundle of hundred-dollar bills had fallen from Johnny's open case during the collision.

He picked it up.

A faded bank strap encircled the soaked currency. The date printed across it was twelve years old.

1991.

Reyes looked at the bundle.

"How much do you think they recovered?"

"Three million."

"You sound sure."

"I counted the cases."

"We need to call Oscar."

Mack slipped the bundle inside his jacket.

Reyes noticed.

"That's evidence."

"I know."

"It goes in a bag."

"I don't have one."

"You have one holding Malone's lighter."

Mack touched the evidence bag through his jacket.

"That stays separate."

Reyes studied him.

Before she could respond, Mack's cellular phone vibrated against his belt.

He checked the screen.

A Nevada area code.

775.

He turned away from Reyes before answering.

"What?"

A man spoke softly.

"You have forty-eight hours."

Mack looked toward the mangrove tunnel.

"I'm working on it."

"You said Malone was dead."

"He isn't."

"Then your situation has improved."

"I need more time."

"You had time."

The man paused.

"If we don't hear from you, we visit your daughter."

Mack's grip tightened around the phone.

"You stay away from her."

"Forty-eight hours."

The call ended.

Mack continued holding the telephone to his ear.

Reyes watched him.

"Who was that?"

"Wrong number."

"You told a wrong number you were working on something?"

Mack put the phone away.

"Reno telemarketers are aggressive."

"Mack."

"We need to get back to Gethsemane."

"What about Malone?"

"He has to return to dry land eventually."

"And Wiggins?"

"He'll report to Kinder."

"Then Kinder knows Johnny recovered the money."

"So does Bo."

Reyes looked at the disabled engine.

"And we're stranded in the swamp."

"Temporary setback."

"You've been saying that about your career for ten years."

Mack removed the wet bundle of cash from his jacket.

Three million dollars had just disappeared into the mangroves with Johnny Malone.

The money could make the Russians go away.

Johnny's Swiss accounts could make sure they never returned.

Mack looked at the lighter inside the evidence bag.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

For twelve years, justice had been enough.

Now his daughter's life had a deadline.

Johnny was alive. The money was real.

And Mack no longer had the luxury of deciding which one he wanted more.

CHAPTER EIGHT
BLOOD MONEY

Johnny guided the skiff toward the rear dock of Gethsemane Baptist Church. The outboard motor made conversation impossible, but none was needed.

Bones sat at the bow with the shotgun across his knees. Three black marine cases rested beneath the center bench.

He had not looked at his father since they escaped the mangrove tunnel.

Johnny reduced the throttle as they entered the narrow canal behind the church. He switched off the engine and allowed the skiff to glide toward the dock.

Pastor Bubs stood waiting beneath the covered walkway.

He watched Johnny approach without surprise.

Johnny had hoped for surprise.

After twelve years, he would have settled for anything that looked like happiness.

The skiff bumped against the pilings.

Bubs looked at Johnny's gray hair, bloodstained clothes, and bandaged leg.

"You look terrible."

Johnny secured the bow line.

"Everyone keeps saying that."

"Perhaps you should listen."

Bones stepped onto the dock carrying the shotgun.

Bubs studied him.

"Hello Bones."

"Pastor."

"You probably don't remember coming here when you were a little kid."

"I remember enough."

Johnny lifted the first marine case.

Pain from his wounded thigh nearly caused him to drop it.

Bones took the case from him.

"I've got it."

"I can carry my own money."

"Not without making that face."

"What face?"

"The one that looks like you're trying to pass a kidney stone."

Bubs almost smiled.

Johnny noticed.

"Don't encourage him."

"I haven't said anything."

"You were thinking it."

Bones carried the case onto the dock.

Bubs's attention moved to the other two containers.

"You found it."

"Most of it," Johnny said.

"How much survived?"

"Three million."

"And the rest?"

"Smiley."

Bubs looked toward the swamp.

"He's still alive? I thought the trappers killed Smiley for eating Bobby Boone last month"

"Unfortunately, they euthanized the wrong gator" Bones said.

"You went into his water."

"He went after our money."

"It was his water before it was your money."

Bones returned for the second case.

Johnny helped him lift it onto the dock.

Bubs placed his cane across the walkway.

"That money does not enter the church."

Johnny stopped.

"Bubs."

"Not one dollar."

"It won't stay here."

"Then it can remain in the boat until it leaves."

"A corrections officer just tried to kill us."

"Then perhaps bringing the money here was unwise."

"We needed somewhere close."

"You needed somewhere sacred enough that your enemies might hesitate."

Johnny looked at the church.

"Will they?"

"No."

Bones set the case down.

"You knew it was out there."

Bubs faced him.

"Yes."

"All five million."

"I knew where your father and Kenny placed it."

"You could've taken it whenever you wanted."

"Yes."

"But you didn't."

"No."

Bones looked toward Johnny.

"He told you to use it?"

"He gave me permission."

"For what?"

"For the county. For families who lost their income after the arrests. Food, medicine, housing—whatever I believed would help."

Bones stepped closer.

"My mother needed help."

Johnny felt the accusation without Bones looking at him.

Bubs held the young man's gaze.

"I know."

"We had weeks when the electricity got turned off. Ma worked two jobs. People in this county treated us like garbage because of him."

Bones pointed at Johnny.

"You had five million dollars sitting in the swamp."

"It wasn't mine."

"My father said you could use it."

"Permission did not make it clean."

"Clean?"

"The money came from cocaine."

"So did half the money in Dawber County."

"That did not make it right."

"It could've kept our lights on."

"It also could have brought Bo Dawber, the cartels, and the federal government to your front door."

"They came anyway."

Bubs lowered his eyes.

"Yes."

"My mother shouldn't have had to ask."

"No, she shouldn't."

The admission momentarily silenced Bones.

Bubs continued.

"Your mother never asked me for Johnny's money. She wanted nothing from the business that took her husband away."

"She wanted him."

Bones pointed toward Johnny again.

"But he wasn't available."

Johnny absorbed the blow.

Bubs moved nearer to Bones.

"I helped your mother whenever she allowed me. So did Millie. We used food purchased with church donations and money earned by people who worked for it. We did not use money that came from destroying other families."

"You decided that for everyone."

"Yes."

"You didn't have the right."

"Perhaps not."

Bones had expected resistance.

Bubs's willingness to accept the accusation left him with nowhere to direct his anger.

"You watched people suffer," Bones said.

"I watched the drug trade destroy people I baptized. I buried children whose parents became addicted. I counseled women beaten by men who owed money to Bo Dawber. I watched families celebrate shipments because the money paid their bills, then curse those same shipments when their sons became customers."

Bubs looked at the cases.

"I could not heal that wound with the knife that made it."

"It's money," Bones said. "It ain't poison."

"Then why has everyone who touched it ended up dead, imprisoned, or hunted?"

Bones looked toward Johnny.

Johnny had no answer that would help either of them.

Bubs turned to him.

"You should have destroyed it."

"Five million dollars?"

"Yes."

"I'm an accountant, not a saint."

"No one has ever confused you with one."

Johnny looked at the empty airboat slip.

"Where's your other boat?"

"A church member took it upriver this morning."

"And the other church boat?"

"Agent Donnelly took it."

"Mack was here?"

"With Agent Reyes."

"How long ago?"

"Not long before the shooting began."

Bones lifted the shotgun.

"They followed us."

"Yes," Johnny said.

Bubs looked between them.

"You left two federal agents in the swamp?"

"Their fuel line was hit."

"By whom?"

"Merle Shelton's cousin, Waylon Wiggins."

"The corrections officer?"

"He brought armed men. He told Mack the warden wanted the money."

Bubs closed his eyes.

"Deon."

Johnny nodded.

"It confirms Kinder is involved."

"Confirms?" Bubs asked. "You believe Deon is dead?"

"I believe anyone who could have exposed the warden was marked for death."

Bubs leaned more heavily upon his cane.

Johnny had seen men receive news of death in jungles, hospitals, and prison yards. Some collapsed. Others cried or shouted.

Pastor Bubs did none of those things.

He became very still.

"Does Willis know?" he asked.

"Tiana told him."

"Where is he?"

"At Alex's boathouse."

"Then why isn't he here?"

"He will be."

Johnny walked toward the church telephone.

#

Alex answered on the second ring.

"Gethsemane," Johnny said. "Bring everyone."

"Did you find it?"

"Three million survived."

"What happened to the other two?"

"Nature collected a fee."

"Are you and Bones all right?"

"We ran into Mack."

"Donnelly?"

"And Kinder's people. Waylon Wiggins was wearing his corrections uniform when he tried to kill us."

"I'll tell Willis."

"Tell him to bring the Maroons."

"How many?"

"All of them."

Johnny hung up.

When he turned, Bubs stood in the office doorway.

"You intend to bring an army onto church property."

"I intend to prevent one from killing us."

"Violence will not enter my sanctuary."

"Violence doesn't ask permission."

"This is still God's house."

"Kinder doesn't believe that."

"Do you?"

Johnny looked through the window toward Bones and the three cases on the dock.

"I stopped believing anyone owned anything in Dawber County."

"That is not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

#

Waylon Wiggins entered Warden Kinder's office with blood on his uniform and a piece of glass embedded in his cheek.

Bo Dawber sat on the leather couch drinking Scotch from a heavy glass.

Kinder stood behind his desk.

Neither man offered Waylon a chair.

"Well?" Kinder asked.

"Malone found it."

Bo leaned forward.

"How much?"

"Three cases. Looked like a million in each."

"There should be five."

"Two were lost in the swamp."

Kinder's expression darkened.

"How do you lose two million dollars?"

"One case was floating open. Money everywhere. Something got to it."

"Something?"

Wiggins removed the glass from his cheek and examined it.

"Gator, probably."

Bo smiled faintly.

"Smiley."

Kinder looked at him.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Where are the other three cases?"

"Malone and his boy escaped with them."

"You let an injured accountant and a teenager get away?"

"Mack Donnelly was there."

Bo's smile disappeared.

"With Reyes?"

"Yes."

Kinder moved around the desk.

"You fired on federal agents?"

"Your order was to stop anyone who found the money."

"My order was not to start a war with the DEA."

"It was already a war."

Bo watched Wiggins carefully.

"Did Mack see the cases?"

"Yes."

"Then he knows Johnny has the money."

"He knows everything," Kinder said.

"He doesn't know where Johnny took it."

Bo looked toward Waylon.

"Gethsemane."

Wiggins nodded.

"That would be my guess."

Kinder walked to the window overlooking the prison yard.

"We go tonight."

Bo stood.

"No."

Kinder turned.

"The money is exposed. Donnelly will call Miami, and this county will be crawling with agents by morning."

"You don't touch Bubs."

"Bubs put himself in the middle."

"He stayed out of our business for twenty years."

"He knew where the money was."

"And never spent a dollar."

"That makes him a fool, not innocent."

Bo placed his glass on Kinder's desk.

The room became quiet.

Waylon looked between them.

Bo spoke slowly.

"Take the money from Johnny. Kill Johnny if you have to. But no one harms Pastor Bubs or anyone inside that church."

Kinder smiled.

"You're giving orders in my prison?"

"I'm reminding you of our agreement."

"Our agreement concerns the money."

"Our agreement concerns whatever I say it concerns."

Kinder's smile vanished.

For several seconds, the two men stared at each other.

Bo had spent years allowing the warden to believe the prison belonged to him. Kinder provided liquor, private meals, unrestricted telephone calls, and access to rooms where Bo could conduct business.

In exchange, Bo promised him a fortune.

Both men understood the partnership would end when Bo walked out of prison.

Neither expected the other to survive long afterward.

Kinder looked toward Waylon.

"Officer Wiggins, would you excuse us?"

Waylon did not move.

Bo looked at him.

"Go clean yourself up."

"Yes, sir."

Waylon turned toward the door.

Kinder stopped him.

"Waylon."

He waited.

"Report to the vehicle bay in thirty minutes."

Waylon glanced back at Bo.

"What for?"

"We're recovering state property."

"That money doesn't belong to the state."

"Tonight it does."

Waylon looked toward Bo again.

Bo spoke without raising his voice.

"No one touches Bubs."

Waylon nodded.

"Yes, sir."

He left.

Kinder waited until the door closed.

"Your people seem confused about who runs this prison."

"They know exactly who runs it."

"Then perhaps you should remember."

Bo stepped close enough that Kinder had to raise his chin.

"Two weeks from now, I walk out of here."

"If nothing interferes with your release."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's an observation."

Bo smiled.

"You've enjoyed having me here, Vernon. The Scotch. The conversations. Pretending men obey you because they're frightened."

"They are frightened."

"Of the uniform."

Kinder looked toward the door.

"And Waylon?"

"Waylon is loyal."

"To whom?"

Bo picked up his glass.

"That's the question, isn't it?"

#

The Maroons arrived at Gethsemane shortly after sunset.

Pickup trucks and battered sedans filled the dirt parking lot. Willis stepped from the lead vehicle with Suds beside him. Bigz and the others opened trunks filled with rifles, shotguns, and ammunition.

Tiana arrived with Alex and Billy.

Pastor Bubs waited on the church steps.

Willis approached him alone.

For the first time that evening, Willis did not look angry.

He looked lost.

Bubs descended one step.

"Willis."

"Pastor."

"Where is Deon?"

Willis looked toward Tiana.

She came forward.

"We don't have his body."

Bubs's hand tightened around the cane.

"But you believe he's dead."

"Yes."

"Tell me."

Tiana described the final message.

She told him about Kenny's death, Deon entering Reform Prison, and the institution's claim that he had never arrived. She explained the attempt on her life and Waylon Wiggins's attack in the swamp.

Bubs listened without interruption.

When she finished, he looked toward the church photograph visible through the open doors.

"Deon believed the law could protect people," Willis said.

"No," Bubs replied. "He believed people were worth protecting."

"And it got him killed."

"It may have."

"You raised him to trust the system."

"I raised him to do what was right when the system failed."

Willis looked away.

"He was better than me."

"He chose a different road."

"He got out."

"He always intended to come back."

Willis faced him.

"For what?"

"For you."

Willis laughed bitterly.

"He spent half his time keeping me out of prison."

"He believed you could become more than what Dawber County expected."

"He was wrong."

"Deon rarely believed that."

Willis's eyes filled.

He wiped them before the Maroons could see.

"When I find Kinder—"

"I know."

"No, you don't."

Bubs descended the final step and placed one hand against Willis's shoulder.

"I know what rage feels like when it convinces you it is love."

Willis looked at the hand.

"It's revenge"

Johnny approached from the rear of the church.

"We need to prepare."

Bubs turned toward him.

"You will not turn Gethsemane into a battlefield."

"Kinder is already coming."

"You don't know that."

"Waylon saw the money. He'll report to the warden. Kinder has one chance before the DEA fills this county with agents."

Willis looked at the skiff tied behind the church.

"The three million still aboard?"

"Yes."

"You want to move it?"

"No."

Alex joined them.

"You're using it as bait."

Johnny nodded.

"Kinder believes we'll hide it or move it before morning. We let him see exactly what he expects."

Bubs looked at the armed Maroons spreading around the church grounds.

"People worship here."

"That's why we keep the fighting away from the sanctuary," Johnny said.

"No fighting belongs anywhere on this land."

Willis pointed toward the road.

"Tell that to the men who killed Deon."

Bubs looked at Tiana.

"You should leave."

"I'm staying."

"Deon would want you safe."

"Deon wanted this exposed."

Billy stood near the church doors.

"What about Mack and Reyes?"

Johnny looked toward the swamp.

"They're stranded."

"Should we get them?"

Willis laughed.

"They're federal agents hunting the same money."

"They were also attacked by Kinder's men," Alex said. "That makes them witnesses."

Johnny considered it.

Mack wanted him in handcuffs. Reyes wanted answers. Neither could be trusted with the money.

But if Waylon had killed them, Kinder could control the story.

Johnny looked toward Suds.

"Take one boat and two men. Follow the western channel until you find the church boat."

Willis frowned.

"We're rescuing the DEA now?"

"We're rescuing Agent Reyes."

"What about Donnelly?"

"If Mack happens to be standing beside her, try not to run him over."

Suds smiled.

"No promises."

"Bring them back here."

Tiana looked at Johnny.

"You want federal agents at the church while we're sitting on three million dollars?"

"I want Kinder to see them."

Alex understood first.

"He can attack us or withdraw. If he attacks while DEA agents are present, he exposes the entire operation."

Willis shook his head.

"Kinder's men already shot at them once."

"Yes," Johnny said. "Which means he may believe he has nothing left to lose."

Bubs looked toward the darkening road.

"That is the kind of man you brought to my church."

"No," Johnny said. "Bo brought him. I'm trying to make sure he doesn't leave."

Suds and two Maroons headed toward the boats.

The remaining men took positions beyond the churchyard.

Johnny opened one marine case and removed several bundles of cash.

He placed them inside an empty canvas bag.

Willis watched.

"What's that?"

"Something Kinder can see."

"You're leaving the rest in the skiff?"

"For now."

"Risky."

"That's why it will look real."

Bones came from behind the church carrying his shotgun.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stay inside with Bubs."

Bones stared at his father.

"No."

"You're injured."

"My hand's injured."

"You nearly shot two federal agents."

"I didn't."

"Because I stopped you."

"Then stop me again."

Johnny lowered his voice.

"I need you to protect Bubs."

Bones looked toward the pastor.

"He doesn't want protection."

"That never stopped anybody in Dawber County."

Bubs approached them.

"You are not putting your son between me and gunfire."

Johnny looked at him.

"My son has spent his entire life paying for my decisions. I'm trying to give one of those decisions a purpose."

Bones absorbed the words.

"I'll stay near the church," he said. "Not inside."

Johnny nodded.

It was the best agreement he was going to receive.

Lightning crossed the sky.

The storm finally reached Gethsemane.

Rain struck the church roof and poured through the oak trees. The armed men outside disappeared into the darkness.

Johnny stood beneath the covered walkway and watched the road.

Three million dollars rested in the skiff behind him.

Willis and the Maroons waited in the swamp.

Suds was bringing Mack Donnelly and Aisha Reyes directly into the trap.

Pastor Bubs entered the sanctuary and began ringing the church bell.

Each heavy toll traveled across the water and through the sawgrass.

Johnny turned toward him.

"What are you doing?"

"Warning anyone close enough to hear."

"About the storm?"

Bubs pulled the rope again.

"No."

The bell rang over Gethsemane.

"I'm warning them that there are still people inside God's house."

Far down the county road, headlights appeared through the rain.

Not one vehicle.

A convoy.

Johnny raised his pistol.

Warden Kinder was coming for the blood money.

CHAPTER NINE
NO SANCTUARY

The call reached Oscar Fuentes twenty-three minutes before Warden Kinder's convoy arrived at Gethsemane.

Aisha Reyes's voice broke through static.

"Shots fired. Two federal agents attacked."

Oscar pressed the telephone closer to his ear.

"Where are you?"

"West of Gethsemane. Church airboat disabled."

"Who attacked you?"

"Corrections Officer Waylon Wiggins and at least two armed accomplices."

Oscar stood.

"Where's Mack?"

"Here."

"Is anyone hurt?"

"Not yet."

"What were corrections officers doing in the swamp?"

A burst of static swallowed her answer.

Then Oscar heard three words clearly.

"Malone is alive."

Oscar closed his office door.

"Repeat that."

"Johnny Malone is alive. We saw him with approximately three million dollars."

Oscar looked through the glass wall toward the overworked Miami field office.

Most of his agents were already assigned to cartel murders, surveillance operations, or post-September 11 task forces. He had two people available without pulling them from active investigations.

"Stay where you are," Oscar said. "I'm bringing support."

"We need someone at Gethsemane. Wiggins will report to Kinder."

"I'll contact the sheriff."

"Mack says Buck Dawber belongs to Bo."

"Mack thinks everybody belongs to Bo."

The connection began to fail.

"Oscar, listen to me. This is bigger than—"

The call dropped.

Oscar tried reconnecting.

Nothing.

He grabbed his coat and stepped into the main office.

"Carson. Lewis. You're with me."

Two agents looked up from their desks.

"Where are we going?" Carson asked.

"Dawber County."

The older agent glanced at the storm outside.

"What happened?"

Oscar picked up the telephone and dialed the Dawber County Sheriff's Department.

"A temporary setback became a Mack Donnelly shit show."

#

Sheriff Buck Dawber listened without interrupting.

Oscar explained that two DEA agents had been fired upon by armed corrections officers near Gethsemane Baptist Church. He requested that Buck secure the property, locate Mack and Reyes, and detain Waylon Wiggins.

Then Oscar mentioned Johnny Malone.

Buck rose slowly from behind his desk.

"You're certain?"

"Reyes saw him."

"And the money?"

"Three million, possibly more."

Buck looked through the blinds toward the rain sweeping across the parking lot.

"Where is my brother?"

"Still at Reform Prison."

"You spoke to Bo?"

"Mack did."

Buck understood.

Bo had sent them toward Gethsemane.

"Sheriff?"

"I'm here."

"Can you secure the church?"

"How many corrections officers?"

"At least three. Possibly more."

"Warden Kinder involved?"

"We believe so."

Buck took his hat from the corner of the desk.

"I'll handle it."

"Buck, this is a federal investigation."

"Then you better drive fast."

He hung up.

Four deputies waited in the outer office. Buck selected the three he trusted most.

Then he called Billy.

The telephone rang until voicemail answered.

Buck disconnected and tried again.

Nothing.

"Sheriff," one deputy said, "dispatch has something."

Buck picked up the radio.

A woman's voice reported multiple vehicles traveling south from Reform Prison. One was registered to the Department of

Corrections. Another belonged to a company controlled by the Brody family.

Their last known direction was Gethsemane.

"Any units near the church?" Buck asked.

"Negative."

"Billy Dawber's truck been spotted?"

A pause followed.

"It was seen heading toward Gethsemane earlier."

Buck closed his eyes.

"Get the cars."

#

Alex Gregory turned the church office into a command post.

A Dawber County road map covered one wall. Marine charts lay across the desk. A police scanner hissed beside a radio connected to the Maroons stationed around Gethsemane.

Tiana sat at the telephone recording names, times, and everything they knew about Kinder's operation.

Billy watched the front parking lot through the blinds.

Pastor Bubs hung up the second telephone.

"Millie is safe," he said.

"Where?" Tiana asked.

"She drove three elderly congregants to the county storm shelter before sunset. I told her not to return."

"Did you tell her about Deon?"

"I told her enough to keep her away."

Bubs's voice tightened.

"I will tell her the rest face-to-face. That is if we survive the tonight."

The church bell rang above them.

Alex marked the positions of Willis's men on the map.

"South road?" he asked into the radio.

A Maroon answered.

"Four vehicles. Maybe five."

"Canal?"

"Two boats near the eastern crossing. Engines off."

"Do not fire unless they cross the fence."

Alex placed the radio down.

Johnny stood in the doorway watching him.

"You've done this before?"

"No."

"You look comfortable."

"I make plans."

"Plans change when people start shooting."

"Then I'll change the plan."

Johnny smiled faintly.

Kenny's son had inherited his father's confidence and his mother's intelligence. But beneath both, Johnny recognized something that belonged to neither of them.

Alex thought like an accountant.

He identified resources, anticipated loss, and moved people where they produced the greatest advantage.

Bones entered behind Johnny.

"What do you want me doing?"

Alex pointed toward the sanctuary.

"Stay with Bubs."

Bones looked at Johnny.

"You told him to say that?"

"No."

"He doesn't give me orders."

Alex looked up from the map.

"Then stand wherever you want and get shot."

Bones stepped toward him.

Johnny placed himself between them.

"Not now."

"When?"

"After the men trying to kill us leave."

Bones glared at Alex before returning to the sanctuary.

Alex watched him go.

"He's going to be a problem."

"He's my son."

"That doesn't contradict what I said."

Headlights appeared through the rain.

Billy moved away from the window.

"They're here."

Alex picked up the radio.

"All positions. Hold."

Outside, the church bell continued ringing.

#

The convoy entered the Gethsemane parking lot with its headlights on high beam.

A Department of Corrections van stopped near the gate. Two unmarked trucks moved behind it. A fourth vehicle blocked the county road.

Warden Kinder emerged from the van wearing a raincoat over civilian clothes.

Waylon Wiggins stepped out beside him. He had changed into a clean corrections uniform, but a strip of tape covered the cut across his cheek.

Ten armed men spread across the parking lot.

Some were corrections officers.

Others belonged to the Brodys.

Kinder raised a loudspeaker.

"Johnny Malone."

His voice traveled across the church grounds.

"We know you have the money. Send it out and no one gets hurt."

Johnny stood beneath the front overhang, protected by darkness.

"You already killed Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress."

Kinder looked toward the sound.

"Those men died inside a correctional institution."

"That's one way of saying it."

"Kenny committed suicide."

"And Deon?"

Kinder did not answer.

Tiana stepped onto the walkway beside Johnny.

"You tried to kill me too."

Kinder lowered the loudspeaker.

"You should've stayed in Miami."

"Thank you," Tiana said. "That sounded almost like a confession."

Kinder motioned toward one of his men.

The man opened the electrical box beside the gate and cut the church's power.

Gethsemane went dark.

The bell continued ringing.

Battery lanterns appeared inside the sanctuary.

Johnny lifted a canvas bag and placed it where Kinder could see.

"This what you came for?"

Kinder raised the loudspeaker again.

"Bring it into the parking lot."

"You come get it."

"I'm not negotiating."

"That's unfortunate. You're surrounded."

Kinder looked toward the trees.

"I don't see anyone."
"That's the point."
"You're bluffing Johnny."
Wiggins leaned toward him.
"Bo said not to touch Bubs."
Kinder covered the loudspeaker.
"Bo isn't here."
"I am."
Pastor Bubs stepped through the church doors.
Bones followed with the shotgun.
Kinder looked at the old pastor.
"This does not concern you."
"You brought armed men onto church property."
"You are harboring fugitives and stolen drug money."
"The only criminals I see are wearing state uniforms."
Several Maroons laughed from the darkness.
Kinder's face hardened.
"Step inside, Pastor."
"No."
Bones positioned himself slightly in front of Bubs.
Wiggins noticed.
"That Malone's boy?" he asked.
Kinder nodded.
"Take them both."
Wiggins did not move.
One of the Brody gunmen crossed the fence line.
Alex's voice came through the Maroons' radios.
"Wait."
The gunman advanced toward the canvas bag.
A second followed.
Johnny remained beneath the overhang.
The first man reached the bag and lifted it.

Inside were several bundles of cash resting atop stacks of cut newspaper.

He looked toward Kinder.

"It's a decoy."

A rifle cracked from the darkness.

The tire beside him exploded.

Then another.

The front of the corrections van dropped as both tires went flat.

Kinder's men opened fire.

Windows shattered across the church.

Johnny pulled Tiana to the floor.

Bones pushed Bubs through the sanctuary doors as bullets tore through the wooden entrance.

The Maroons returned fire from the tree line.

Muzzle flashes surrounded the parking lot.

Kinder dove behind the van.

Wiggins remained beside him.

"You said nobody would be inside!"

"I said get the money."

The church telephone went dead.

Inside the office, Tiana dropped the receiver.

"They cut the line."

Willis spoke into the radio.

"Bigz, move toward the road. Nu Nu, stay hidden. Do not let them reach the dock."

Billy picked up a rifle.

"What about me?"

Alex spoke into the radio.

"Side entrance. Watch Bones."

"Bones doesn't need watching."

"He needs witnesses."

Billy ran from the office.

Alex adjusted the positions on the map as reports came through the radio.

He could no longer see the battle.

He could hear all of it.

#

The Maroon boat reached Gethsemane from the western channel.

Suds shut down the engine before reaching the dock and allowed the vessel to glide into the slip.

Mack and Reyes have arrived.

Gunfire erupted beyond the church.

Suds looked toward the sanctuary.

"We might've missed the quiet part."

Reyes drew her pistol.

"How many men do you have here?"

"Enough."

"That isn't an answer."

"It usually is."

The boat touched the dock.

Reyes stepped off first.

Mack followed.

"Stay behind me," he said.

"I outrank you."

"This isn't paperwork."

They moved toward the rear entrance.

A man appeared from behind the church carrying a rifle.

Mack fired twice.

The man fell beside the walkway.

Reyes checked him.

"Corrections uniform."

"Welcome to Dawber County."

They entered through the fellowship hall.

Tiana was crouched beside the office door.

Reyes grabbed her arm.

"Where's Malone?"

"Outside."

"The money?"

"On the skiff."

Mack looked toward the rear dock.

Tiana saw the direction of his attention.

"Don't even think about it."

"About what?"

"You know exactly what."

A shotgun blast struck the fellowship hall windows.

Glass covered the floor.

Guard Daly entered through the side door with blood across his forehead and a pistol in his hand.

Tiana recognized the portly, bearded officer from Reform Prison.

"That's Daly."

He aimed at her.

Reyes pushed Tiana aside.

The pistol fired.

The bullet struck Reyes beneath the shoulder and spun her into the wall.

Mack shot Daly once in the chest.

Daly's body armor absorbed most of the round, but the impact knocked him backward.

Bones appeared from the sanctuary.

He fired the shotgun into Daly's thigh.

The guard collapsed screaming.

Mack knelt beside Reyes.

Blood spread across her blouse.

"Stay with me."

She pressed one hand against the wound.

"I'm not dying."

"You don't know that."

"It went through."

Tiana pulled Reyes's jacket away and examined the wound.

"She's right. There's an exit."

Bubs entered carrying the church medical kit.

Mack looked toward Daly.

The guard attempted to crawl toward his pistol.

Bones kicked it away.

"Move again," Bones said, "and the next one goes through your head."

Daly looked up at him.

"You're Malone's boy."

Bones chambered another shell.

"That sounded like moving."

"Bones," Johnny said from the doorway.

His son stopped.

Johnny looked at Reyes.

"How bad?"

"She needs a hospital," Tiana said.

Reyes grabbed Mack's sleeve.

"Stay on Kinder."

Mack looked through the broken windows.

Kinder's men were retreating toward the road. The Maroons had closed around them.

Then Mack saw Johnny glance toward the rear dock.

Toward the three million dollars.

Reyes followed his eyes.

"Mack."

"I'm securing the evidence."

"You stay here."

"I'll be back."

"Mack!"

He was already moving.

Johnny watched him disappear through the fellowship hall.

For a moment, neither man acknowledged the other.

Then Johnny followed.

#

Sheriff Buck Dawber heard the gunfire before he saw Gethsemane.

He accelerated.

Three patrol cars followed him through the storm.

The church appeared beyond the trees, dark except for muzzle flashes and vehicle headlights.

Buck's radio filled with confused reports.

Armed corrections officers.

Brody gunmen.

Maroons in the woods.

Federal agents somewhere inside.

Buck drove through the gate and positioned his patrol car across the parking lot.

The siren continued screaming.

He stepped out with a shotgun.

"Dawber County Sheriff's Department! Put down your weapons!"

No one listened.

A corrections officer turned toward him.

"Sheriff, they've got us pinned."

"Lower your weapon."

"We're under Warden Kinder's authority."

"You're in my county."

The man hesitated.

A figure moved near the side of the church.

Billy.

Buck saw his nephew carrying a rifle.

"Billy!"

Billy turned.

A Brody gunman raised his weapon toward him.

Buck fired.

The blast struck the gunman in the chest and threw him against the prison van.

Billy stared at his uncle.

Buck ran toward him.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Trying not to get killed."

"Put down the rifle."

"Kinder's men murdered Kenny and Deon."

"I said put it down."

Billy lowered the weapon.

Buck looked toward the church entrance.

Pastor Bubs knelt beside an injured woman. Tiana pressed towels against the wound.

"Who's hit?"

"DEA," Billy said. "Agent Reyes."

Buck turned toward Kinder.

The warden emerged from behind the van.

"You shot one of my men."

"I shot an armed man aiming at my nephew."

"Your nephew is assisting drug traffickers."

"My nephew is standing in a church you brought ten gunmen to."

Kinder pointed toward the rear.

"Johnny Malone has three million dollars in narcotics proceeds. I am recovering it under state authority."

"You run a prison, Vernon. You don't seize drug money."

"He's harboring fugitives."

"Johnny isn't a fugitive."

Kinder's expression tightened.

Buck looked toward Waylon.

"Put it down."

Wiggins continued holding his pistol.

"Sheriff—"

"Bo told you no one touches Bubs."

Wiggins glanced toward Kinder.

Buck stepped closer.

"Didn't he?"

"Yes."

Kinder looked at Wiggins.

"You answer to me."

Wiggins slowly lowered his weapon.

"Not about this."

Kinder raised his pistol toward him.

Buck aimed the shotgun at Kinder.

"Your night is over, Vernon."

A voice came from behind the warden.

"Not yet."

Willis Childress stepped from the darkness and pressed a knife against Kinder's throat.

Blood covered Willis's hands.

His eyes held no humor.

"First," Willis said, "the warden is going to tell me what he did to my brother."

CHAPTER TEN
BROTHER'S KEEPER

Willis Childress pressed the knife more firmly against Warden Kinder's throat.

A narrow line of blood appeared beneath the blade.

Kinder stood rigid in the rain.

Sheriff Buck Dawber kept the shotgun aimed at the warden's chest.

"Put down the knife, Willis."

"Not until he tells me about Deon."

"You kill him, he can't tell you anything."

"I ain't planning to kill him quickly."

Kinder tried to smile.

"You hear that, Sheriff? He's threatening a state official."

Buck looked around the churchyard.

Bodies rested between shattered vehicles. Corrections officers and Brody gunmen lay facedown beneath the weapons of Maroon gang members. A DEA agent bled inside the church.

"You stopped being a state official when your men opened fire on Gethsemane."

"I was recovering narcotics proceeds."

"With ten armed men?"

"Malone's people attacked us."

"You cut the church's power and telephone."

Kinder looked toward Waylon Wiggins.

"Officer Wiggins, arrest this man."

Waylon's pistol remained lowered.

"Did you hear me?"

Waylon glanced toward Pastor Bubs.

Then toward Billy Dawber.

Timmy's son stood beside the church entrance holding a rifle. Rain ran through his hair and across a face that looked increasingly like his father's.

For one terrible instant, Buck saw Billy's father Timmy standing there.

The same narrow eyes.

The same stubborn jaw.

The brother Buck had failed to protect.

Then the image became Billy again.

Buck tightened his grip upon the shotgun.

"Waylon," he said, "put your weapon on the ground."

Wiggins obeyed.

Kinder stared at him.

"You work for me."

"I work for the Dawbers."

"I am your commanding officer."

Wiggins looked toward Buck.

"Sheriff Dawber outranks you out here."

Willis smiled.

"Looks like you're running out of friends, Warden."

Tiana appeared in the doorway.

"Daly is alive."

Willis turned toward her.

"The guard?"

"He's wounded. Reyes and Bubs are keeping him from bleeding out."

"Why?"

"Because he knows what happened to Deon."

Willis removed the knife from Kinder's throat.

"Bring him out."

"No," Tiana said. "Bring Kinder inside."

Buck stepped forward.

"You don't give orders at my crime scene."

"It became my crime scene when Daly shot a federal agent and confessed that the warden ordered Deon into the prison mortuary."

Willis looked at Kinder.

The warden's confidence faltered.

Only slightly.

It was enough.

Buck motioned toward one of his deputies.

"Cuff him."

The deputy approached.

Kinder held out his hands.

"Sheriff, before you do something that destroys your career, you should call your brother."

"This has nothing to do with Bo."

Kinder smiled.

"It has everything to do with Bo."

Buck pushed him toward the church.

"Then he can explain it after I finish with you."

#

Guard Daly lay on the fellowship hall floor with a belt tightened around his wounded thigh.

Aisha Reyes sat against the wall nearby. Bubs had cut away part of her blood-soaked blouse and packed the gunshot wound beneath her shoulder. The bullet had passed through without striking bone.

She was pale but conscious.

Bones stood over Daly with the shotgun.

Tiana placed a small recorder on the floor between them and pressed the red button.

Daly watched the reels turn behind the plastic window.

"I want a lawyer."

"You tried to murder me," Tiana said.
"You're a lawyer."
"Not yours."
Willis entered with Buck, Kinder, Billy, and two deputies.
The sight of Kinder gave Daly momentary relief.
It vanished when he saw the handcuffs.
Willis knelt beside him.
"Tell me what happened to my brother."
Daly looked toward Kinder.
The warden said nothing.
"I don't know anything."
Bones drove the shotgun stock against Daly's injured leg.
Daly screamed.
Buck grabbed the weapon.
"Enough."
"He's lying," Bones said.
"He can lie without you killing him."
Willis leaned closer to Daly.
"You know who I am?"
Daly nodded.
"Say it."
"Willis Childress."
"Then you know what happens if you lie again."
Daly's breathing became shallow.
Tiana checked the recorder.
"Start with Kenny Gregory."
Daly closed his eyes.
"He was supposed to tell us where the money was."
"Who ordered you to question him?"
Daly looked toward Kinder.
"The warden."
Kinder laughed.

"This is coerced testimony from a wounded man surrounded by armed gang members."

Reyes raised her head.

"And two federal agents."

Kinder saw her.

"Mack is not here."

"I'm here," Reyes said. "Keep talking, Daly."

Daly swallowed.

"Kenny wouldn't tell us. Said the money belonged to Malone."

"What happened to him?" Tiana asked.

"He fought."

"So you killed him."

"I didn't put the rope around his neck."

"Who did?"

Daly hesitated.

Willis placed the knife against the floor beside his face.

"Another guard," Daly said. "Warden wanted it to look like suicide."

Kinder turned toward Buck.

"You believe this?"

Buck watched Daly.

"What happened when Deon arrived?"

Daly's eyes filled.

Not with remorse.

With fear.

"We took him downstairs."

"To the mortuary?" Tiana asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Kenny's body was there."

"And?"

"Inmate Fester was waiting."

Willis's hand closed around the knife.

"What did Fester do?"

"He cut Deon's throat."

Bubs lowered his head.

Billy looked toward Willis.

Willis remained completely still.

"Did Deon know?" he asked.

"What?"

"Did he know what was happening?"

"He knew something was wrong."

"Did he say anything?"

Daly looked at the recorder.

"He said somebody needed to call his brother."

Willis's face changed.

The rage remained, but something beneath it broke.

Tiana's recording of Deon's final message had said the same thing.

Call my brother.

"Then what?" Reyes asked.

"Fester stabbed him. I caught Deon before he hit the floor."

"You helped murder him."

"I didn't have the knife."

"You knew what was coming."

Daly began crying.

"The warden said Fester would get a transfer and protection."

"What happened to Fester?"

Daly looked toward the blood on his uniform.

"I shot him."

"Why?"

"He was the only witness."

Kinder stepped forward.

Buck's deputy held him back.

"This is absurd."

Daly looked directly at the warden.

"You watched it from your office."

Kinder's face lost its remaining color.

"You watched through the security camera," Daly continued. "You were drinking with Bo."

Buck turned sharply.

"Bo was there?"

"No," Daly said. "Bo was in the warden's office earlier. He left before Deon arrived."

"What did my brother know about this?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing about killing Deon."

Kinder spoke quickly.

"Nothing. Bo had nothing to do with the attorney. Neither did I."

Willis stood.

"You did."

Kinder looked at him.

"Your brother made an unfortunate decision."

"He went to see a client."

"He went looking for money."

"He went looking for the truth."

"And now he's dead."

Willis crossed the room.

Buck moved between them.

"Back away."

"He killed Deon."

"And Daly's confession will put him away."

"I don't want him put away. I want him put down."

Bubs rose from beside Reyes.

"Willis."

"You stay out of this."

"I cannot."

"You raised Deon. You should want him dead too."

"I want justice."

"This is Dawber County. We don't have justice."

"Then someone must be the first to practice it."

Willis pointed toward Kinder.

"That man slit Deon's throat and watched him bleed."

"And if you murder him here, Deon's last act becomes the reason you throw away the rest of your life."

"My life ain't worth what his was."

Bubs moved closer.

"Deon would disagree."

"He ain't here to say it."

"No. That is why you must remember who he was."

Willis's eyes filled again.

Kinder watched him and smiled.

It was a small expression.

A private victory.

Willis saw it.

So did Buck.

"Search him," Buck ordered.

The deputy reached toward Kinder.

The warden drove his shoulder into the man's chest.

As the deputy fell, Kinder lifted his cuffed hands and pulled a small pistol from an ankle holster.

He fired into the ceiling.

Everyone ducked.

Kinder grabbed Bubs by the shirt and pressed the pistol beneath his jaw.

Bones raised the shotgun.

"No!" Buck shouted.

Kinder dragged Bubs toward the rear door.

"Put everything down."
Willis did not move.
Kinder pushed the barrel harder against the pastor's throat.
"Knife."
Willis dropped it.
"Shotgun," Kinder told Bones.
Bones lowered it to the floor.
Kinder backed through the doorway, pulling Bubs with him.
Waylon Wiggins stood outside.
"Move the vehicle," Kinder ordered.
Waylon stared at Bubs.
"Bo said not to touch him."
"Bo isn't your warden."
"And you ain't getting a car."
Kinder fired at him.
Waylon threw himself behind the walkway.
The bullet missed.
Bubs drove the end of his cane into Kinder's injured throat.
The warden released him.
Willis charged.
Kinder fired again.
The bullet passed through Willis's coat.
Willis struck him across the face.
The pistol fell into the mud.
Kinder ran.
"Stay with Bubs!" Buck shouted.
Willis pursued the warden into the darkness.
Buck followed.

#

Kinder crossed the cemetery behind Gethsemane.

Rain turned the ground between the graves into mud. His cuffed hands destroyed his balance, but fear kept him moving.

Willis gained with every step.

Kinder reached the edge of the swamp and tried to turn north.

Willis tackled him.

They rolled down the bank and stopped beside the black water.

Kinder kicked free.

Willis struck him in the mouth.

Kinder fell against a cypress root.

"You want the money?" Willis asked. "You should've taken it."

Kinder spat blood.

"That's what this county understands."

"You killed Deon for it."

"Your brother was in the way."

"He had a family."

"He had you. That was probably punishment enough."

Willis struck him again.

Kinder laughed through broken teeth.

"He thought the law would save him."

"No."

"What?"

"He thought people were worth saving."

Willis lifted him by the front of his shirt.

Kinder drove his head into Willis's face.

Willis fell backward.

The warden crawled toward his pistol.

It rested several feet away in the mud.

Willis drew his own weapon.

Kinder reached for the fallen gun.

Willis shot him in the leg.

The warden collapsed.

Kinder looked toward the pistol.

It remained beyond his fingertips.

"You can't kill me," he said. "Not with the sheriff here."

Willis looked back toward the cemetery.

No one had reached them yet.

"Where is my brother's body?"

Kinder gripped his wounded leg.

"He was transferred."

"Where?"

"A crematory we use outside the county."

"You burned him?"

"We removed a problem."

Willis raised the pistol.

Kinder saw the decision.

"Bo knew."

Willis stopped.

"What?"

"Bo knew we were questioning Kenny. He knew Deon was coming."

"Did he order the murder?"

Kinder smiled.

"You'll have to ask him."

"Did Bo order you to kill Deon?"

Footsteps approached through the cemetery.

Kinder reached desperately for the gun in the mud.

Willis fired.

The bullet struck Kinder in the chest.

He fell back against the roots.

Willis fired again.

The warden's body slipped into the shallow water.

Buck reached the edge of the cemetery with his shotgun raised.

He saw Kinder's pistol in the mud.

He saw the distance between it and the body.

He looked at Willis.

"He was reaching," Willis said.

Buck stared at him.

"So you said."

Sirens sounded far down the county road.

Oscar was approaching.

Buck looked toward Kinder's body.

Then toward Timmy's grave in the church cemetery.

For years, Buck had wondered whether Bo was capable of killing their younger brother.

Now another brother had been murdered by men connected to Bo.

Buck lowered the shotgun.

"Go back to the church."

"You arresting me?"

"I haven't decided."

Willis walked past him.

Buck remained beside the water.

The warden's blood moved slowly through the rain.

#

Johnny followed Mack through the dark fellowship hall.

Gunfire had stopped outside. The church bell no longer rang.

Only the distant sirens and the rain remained. As Johnny passed the office, Alex stepped into the doorway.

"Mack went toward the dock."

"I know."

"He's after the money."

"He's after me."

Alex looked toward the sanctuary.

"Federal agents are coming."

"How long?"

"Minutes."

"Keep Bones inside."

"That won't be easy."

"Nothing involving my son is easy."

Johnny continued toward the rear of the church. The side door stood open.

Beyond it, the covered walkway led toward the dock and the skiff holding three million dollars.

Johnny stepped outside. Mack was nowhere in sight.

"Mack?"

No answer.

Johnny moved down the walkway.

The skiff remained tied to the dock. All three cases were still aboard.

Johnny stopped. If Mack wanted only the money, he would already have taken it.

He turned. Mack stood in the church doorway. A lunatic's grin spread across his face.

He held the scorched Vietnam lighter inside its plastic evidence bag. The words remained visible through the cracked metal.

"Sorry, Charlie."

Johnny's rage disappeared.

Mack seized him by the collar and slammed him against the wall. The impact drove the air from Johnny's lungs.

Mack twisted Johnny's wrists behind his back and snapped on the handcuffs. Hard.

"Where's the money, Johnny?"

Johnny looked toward the three cases in the skiff. Then back at Mack.

"You're standing right beside it."

Mack drove him toward the dock.

"No," he said. "I'm standing beside the down payment."

CHAPTER ELEVEN
SORRY, CHARLIE

Mack forced Johnny down the covered walkway toward the dock.

Rain blew beneath the roof and struck them sideways. The handcuffs cut into Johnny's wrists every time Mack shoved him forward.

"You can stop pushing."

"Keep walking."

"I've been shot."

"I noticed."

"You also kicked me in the exact place I was shot."

"That was intentional."

"Good. For a moment I thought federal training standards had declined."

Mack shoved him again.

Johnny stumbled against the railing.

The three marine cases remained aboard the skiff. Rainwater collected on their black surfaces.

Mack stared at them.

Three million dollars.

Johnny saw the hunger in his face.

"This isn't an arrest."

"Get in the boat."

"What happened to justice?"

"Justice doesn't pay Russians."

Johnny stopped.

Mack drove the pistol beneath his ribs.

"Move."

Johnny stepped into the skiff. The boat shifted beneath his weight.

Mack followed and kept the weapon trained on him.

"Sit."

Johnny lowered himself onto the center bench.

Mack untied the dock line but did not start the engine.

The sirens approaching Gethsemane grew louder.

"You're running out of time," Johnny said.

"So are you."

"What do the Russians want?"

"My money."

"How much?"

"More than I have."

"Reno?"

Mack's jaw tightened.

Johnny smiled.

"I heard about the stripper."

"You don't know anything."

"Russian payroll. Ongoing investigation. Married federal agent makes bad decisions with a witness and ends up owing money to people who don't forgive debt."

"She wasn't a witness when I met her."

"I'm sure Barbara appreciated the distinction."

Mack struck Johnny across the face with the pistol.

Johnny tasted blood.

"Leave Barb out of this."

"She left herself out twelve years ago."

"You always did talk too much."

"Usually because other people don't say enough."

Mack moved closer.

"The Russians threatened my daughter."

Johnny's humor disappeared.

"They know where she lives. Where she goes to school. They sent photographs."

"That changes things."

"It changes everything."

"No. It explains everything. That's different."

Mack pointed toward the cases.

"We take the skiff to an airstrip west of here. I've got a pilot who'll fly us to Vegas."

"With three million dollars?"

"It pays the debt."

"And then?"

"I hand them you."

Johnny stared at him.

"The Russians don't know me."

"They don't need to."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you have accounts in Switzerland."

"You don't know if those accounts exist."

"They believe they do."

"You promised them access codes you don't have."

"I have you."

Johnny shook his head.

"No plan. Just desperation."

"Desperation gets things done."

"It also gets daughters killed."

Mack struck him again.

Johnny nearly fell from the bench.

"You mention her one more time—"

"I'm trying to keep her alive."

"Then give me the codes."

"What happens after I do?"

"The Russians pay themselves."

"And me?"

Mack looked toward the dark canal.

"That depends on how cooperative you are."

"You hand me over, they torture me until I tell them every account, contact, and access code I've ever had."

"Probably."

"Then they kill me."

"Possibly."

"You always were a terrible friend."

"You were never my friend."

"That isn't what you said when you needed Bo to trust you."

Mack raised the pistol.

Johnny continued.

"You drank with us. Ate with us. Sat beside Kenny's boys at Widow's Walk. You gave Bo advice and handed men to Atticus whenever he needed proof you were loyal."

Mack's expression changed.

There it was.

Fear.

Johnny leaned back despite the pain in his wrists.

"Do your superiors know about those men?"

"You're bluffing."

"Atticus asked you the same question before you killed him."

Mack moved closer.

"No one heard that conversation."

"You and Atticus weren't the only people keeping records."

"What records?"

"Sanchez believed every partnership needed insurance."

"Sanchez is dead."

"Insurance matters most after death."

Mack pressed the barrel beneath Johnny's chin.

"Where is it?"

"Switzerland."

For several seconds, neither man moved.

"What's in the file?" Mack asked.

"Names. Dates. Payments. The men you delivered to Atticus. The two Bo made you kill personally."

"They were murderers."

"You left that out of your reports."

"I was undercover."

"You executed Atticus after he was wounded."

"He attacked me."

"The first shot was self-defense. The rest emptied your magazine."

Mack's eyes narrowed.

Johnny could not tell whether he believed the file existed.

That was the advantage of a good lie.

It did not need to be completely true.

It needed to contain enough truth that the other man could not risk testing it.

"You try to charge me," Johnny said, "Oscar gets the Atticus file. So does Barbara. Every newspaper in the country learns how the legendary Mack Donnelly built his Dawber County case."

"You go public and every conviction gets challenged."

"That sounds like your problem."

"Your friends go free."

"The ones who survived."

"Bo goes free."

"He's getting out in two weeks anyway."

Mack gripped the pistol harder.

"If the file exists, why haven't you used it?"

"I never needed it before tonight."

"You're coming with me."

"If you sell me to the Russians, instructions release everything."

"To who?"

Johnny smiled through the blood on his teeth.

"Would you bet your daughter's life that I'm lying?"

Mack stared at him.

The sirens reached the church entrance.

Doors slammed.

Men shouted.

Oscar had arrived.

Mack looked toward the outboard motor.

"Get down."

Johnny remained seated.

"You start this boat, every agent at the church hears us."

"I said get down."

"You still need me alive."

Mack struck him in the stomach.

Johnny doubled over.

A shadow moved across the dock behind Mack.

Johnny saw it but said nothing.

Willis Childress stepped onto the walkway with his pistol held by the barrel.

Mack began to turn.

Willis swung the grip like a hammer.

The blow landed behind Mack's ear.

Mack collapsed into the skiff.

Willis looked toward Johnny.

"Jesus. You two really don't know when to stop."

Johnny raised his cuffed hands.

"A little help?"

Willis stepped into the boat and searched Mack's pockets.

He found the handcuff key and released Johnny.

"You all right?"

"I've had better reunions."

Willis saw the three cases.

"That the stash?"

"Three million survived."
"You sly devil."
"You going to shoot me?"
"Why would I?"
"Tradition."
"You gave me the men who killed my brother."
Willis looked toward the church.
"Daly confessed. Kinder's dead."
"I heard."
"We had an agreement."
Johnny pointed toward two of the cases.
"Take them."
Willis stared at him.
"Two million?"
"Every dollar I promised."
"You ain't going to argue?"
"I'm tired."
Willis lifted the first case.
"You sure this ain't another Malone trick?"
"It is. Just not the one you think."
Willis carried the case onto the dock.
Suds emerged from the shadows and took it from him.
They returned for the second.
"What are you doing with the last million?" Willis asked.
"Taking care of unfinished business."
"Switzerland?"
"Not yet."
Willis glanced at Mack.
"He told me the Russians want my accounts."
"You got Russians now?"
"Apparently."
"Your problem."

"That appears to be the consensus."

Mack groaned.

Willis lifted his pistol.

"Want me to shoot him?"

Johnny looked down at the unconscious agent.

"Tempting."

"He was going to sell you to Russians."

"He also has a daughter they threatened."

"That supposed to make me feel sorry for him?"

"No. It makes him useful."

Johnny rolled Mack onto his stomach and fastened one handcuff around his wrist.

He secured the other cuff around a steel dock support.

Then he removed the plastic evidence bag from Mack's jacket.

His scorched lighter rested inside.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

Johnny opened the bag and took it out.

The lighter felt warm despite the rain.

He placed it in his pocket.

Willis watched him.

"You always steal evidence from federal agents?"

"Only when it belongs to me."

Mack regained consciousness.

He pulled against the cuff.

"What happened?"

"You experienced a temporary setback," Johnny said.

Mack looked toward the missing cases.

"Where's the money?"

"Diversified."

"You son of a bitch."

Johnny knelt beside him.

"If you tell Oscar what happened here, Barbara receives the Atticus file."

"There is no file."

"Maybe."

"The Russians will still come after my daughter."

"Then tell them I escaped with the money."

"They won't believe me."

"You're a professional federal agent. Lie better."

Johnny stood.

Willis and Suds carried the two cases toward the Maroon vehicles.

"You coming?" Willis asked.

"In a minute."

"You trust the sheriff?"

"Not remotely."

Willis smiled.

"Then you understand him."

He disappeared into the rain.

#

Sheriff Buck Dawber found Johnny alone beside the skiff.

Mack remained cuffed to the dock several yards away.

Buck looked at him.

"Federal agent appears to be having a difficult evening."

"He slipped."

"Into handcuffs?"

"Repeatedly."

Buck held the shotgun at his side.

"The money?"

"Two million went to Willis."

"You paid a gang leader at a church?"

"I paid a grieving brother who kept his side of an agreement."

"What about the last case?"

Johnny stepped into the skiff and opened it.

Bundles of hundred-dollar bills filled the waterproof interior.

Buck stared.

Johnny removed half and placed the money into two canvas bags.

"Five hundred thousand dollars."

"For what?"

"To remember tonight exactly the way it happened."

Buck's face revealed nothing.

"And how did it happen?"

"Warden Kinder murdered Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress. His guards tried to kill Tiana Ross. They fired upon two DEA agents and brought armed men to Pastor Bubs's church."

"Every word of that is true."

"That's what makes it easy to remember."

"And you?"

"As far as your report is concerned, I disappeared before you arrived."

"Reyes saw you."

"She's unconscious. When she wakes, she can honestly say she saw Kinder's men attack me, Bones, and the DEA."

"Mack saw you."

Johnny looked toward the dock.

"Mack has reasons to be cooperative."

Buck studied the money.

"You expect me to take that?"

"I expect you to decide what your memory is worth."

"My memory is fine."

"Then consider it a contribution to your retirement."

"You bribed my brother for years."

"Bo demanded payment. You and I are having a conversation."

"What happens when Bo learns you paid me?"

"You'll be five hundred thousand dollars richer when he asks."

Buck looked toward the church.

Billy stood beneath the front overhang with one of Buck's deputies. The boy looked too much like Timmy.

"You brought my nephew into this."

"Billy brought himself."

"He's Timmy's son."

"I know."

"Bo won't forgive him for standing beside you."

"Then protect him."

Buck looked back at Johnny.

"With your money?"

"With whatever works."

For years, Buck had enforced Bo's authority because the family and the county had become impossible to separate. He had accepted favors, ignored shipments, and convinced himself that loyalty prevented worse men from taking control.

Then Timmy died.

Bo called it suicide.

Buck had never completely believed him.

Now Bo's prison partner had brought armed men to Gethsemane and nearly killed Timmy's son.

Buck picked up the canvas bags.

"What happens to the remaining five hundred thousand?"

"I leave with it."

"And if Oscar asks?"

"You never saw the case."

"What about Donnelly?"

"He'll say Kinder's men took the money."

Mack shouted from the dock.

"I'm not saying a goddamn thing for you!"

Buck looked toward him.

Johnny raised his voice.

"Then tell Oscar about Reno."

Mack fell silent.

Buck returned his attention to Johnny.

"What did he do in Reno?"

"Ask him."

Buck carried the bags toward his patrol car.

At the end of the walkway, he stopped.

"You brought the war back with you."

Johnny looked toward the bodies in the churchyard.

"It never left, Buck. You just kept wearing the badge over it."

Buck walked away.

#

Bones and Alex reached the dock moments later.

Alex carried a county map and a box of ammunition. Bones carried the shotgun.

He saw Mack cuffed to the support.

"What happened to him?"

"He fell," Johnny said.

Bones looked at the handcuffs.

"Must've been a complicated fall."

"Get in the boat."

Alex saw the open case.

"That's all that's left?"

"Five hundred thousand."

"We started with five million."

"Welcome to business."

"What happened to the rest?"

"Willis received two. Buck received half a million."

"You bribed Sheriff Dawber?"

"I invested in local government."

Bones stepped into the skiff.

"What about Billy?"

Johnny looked toward the church.

Billy remained beside Buck.

"He made his choice."

Alex hesitated.

"We're leaving him?"

"He's with his uncle."

"Bo is his uncle too."

"That is something Billy will have to decide."

Alex climbed into the boat.

Bones took the motor controls.

Johnny untied the line.

Mack pulled against the cuff.

"You won't get away with this."

Johnny looked back.

"I already did."

Bones started the outboard.

The engine came to life.

Alex secured the remaining case beneath the center bench.

The skiff pulled away from Gethsemane.

Johnny watched the church recede through the rain.

Tiana remained with Reyes and Bubs.

Willis had Deon's killers and two million dollars.

Buck controlled the local crime scene.

Oscar had arrived with only two agents and no understanding of what had happened.

Mack Donnelly was cuffed to a dock with every reason to lie.

For the first time since returning to Dawber County, Johnny was alone with Bones and Alex.

His son and the young man who thought like him.

Behind them waited Billy, caught between two uncles and the truth about his father.

Ahead lay the dark channels of the Everglades.

Johnny reached into his pocket and removed the scorched lighter.

He struck the wheel.

A small flame appeared.

Bones looked back.

"Where are we going?"

Johnny watched the fire dance above the inscription.

SORRY, CHARLIE.

"Somewhere we can turn half a million dollars into an empire."

The skiff disappeared into the swamp.

This ending gives us the victory, the cover-up, and the cost. Johnny escapes without being charged, but everyone now owes someone—and Bo Dawber is coming home.

CHAPTER TWELVE
THE OFFICIAL STORY

Aisha Reyes awakened to the sound of a woman praying.

The words came softly at first, little more than whispers beneath the ringing in her ears. She opened her eyes and saw the water-stained ceiling of Gethsemane Baptist Church above her.

For a moment, she could not remember how she had gotten there.

Then the pain beneath her shoulder brought everything back.

The boats.

The gunfire.

Tiana falling beside her.

Johnny Malone running toward the canal.

Mack following him.

Reyes tried to sit up.

"Don't," Tiana said.

She was kneeling beside the pew where Reyes had been placed. Her blouse was streaked with blood that belonged to other people. A cellular telephone rested on the floor beside her.

"The bullet went through," Tiana continued. "Pastor Bubs says it missed the bone."

"He a doctor?"

"No."

"Then I'd like a second opinion."

"You're getting one."

Outside, sirens approached from the county road.

Reyes turned her head. Pastor Bubs stood near the open church doors, his shirt soaked with sweat and someone else's blood. He had wrapped a strip of white altar cloth around his forearm where Warden Kinder had cut him.

Beyond him, bodies lay across the churchyard.

Corrections officers.

Sheltons.

Brodys.

Men who had come to Gethsemane believing five million dollars would be waiting for them.

"How long was I out?" Reyes asked.

"Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen."

"Where's Mack?"

Tiana hesitated.

Reyes saw the answer in her face.

"Where is he?"

"He went after Johnny."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Reyes forced herself upright despite the pain.

Tiana placed a hand against her good shoulder. "You need to stay down."

"My partner just ran into a swamp after a man he's been hunting for twelve years."

"Johnny was carrying money."

Reyes looked at her.

"How much?"

"I don't know."

"That wasn't the question."

"Enough to make reasonable men unreasonable."

Reyes swung her feet onto the floor.

"Mack Donnelly has never been reasonable."

#

Sheriff Buck Dawber stood beside the body of Warden Vernon Kinder.

Kinder lay facedown near the edge of the canal. Two bullets had entered his back. A third had struck him behind the ear.

Buck had seen enough shootings to recognize an execution when one was lying at his feet.

Willis Childress stood several yards away, his pistol hanging loosely from his right hand.

Pastor Bubs had already returned to the church.

The surviving corrections officers had surrendered. The surviving Sheltons and Brodys had either fled into the swamp or dropped their weapons when Buck's deputies arrived.

Nobody had seen Willis fire the first shot.

Everybody had heard the last three.

Buck looked toward the tree line. No sign remained of Johnny Malone, Bones, Alex Gregory, or the money.

Five hundred thousand dollars waited beneath an old raincoat in the trunk of his patrol car.

Johnny had not asked Buck to lie.

He had merely paid him to remember events in the correct order.

Buck removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Put the gun down, Willis."

Willis looked at Kinder's body.

"He killed my brother."

"I know."

"He had Deon's throat cut open in a prison morgue."

"I heard Daly confess."

"He deserved worse than this."

"That doesn't change what I said."

Willis turned toward Buck.

For a dangerous moment, neither man moved.

Then Willis placed the pistol on the ground.

Buck motioned for a deputy to collect it.

"You arresting me?" Willis asked.

"Not yet."

"What's that mean?"

"It means Warden Kinder was armed. He had taken Pastor Bubs hostage. He refused to surrender."

Willis studied him.

Buck continued.

"When Kinder reached the canal, he turned toward you with his weapon."

"He didn't turn."

Buck stepped closer.

"He turned toward you with his weapon."

Willis finally understood.

A faint smile crossed his face.

"You're a generous man, Sheriff."

"No," Buck said. "I'm a practical one."

He looked back toward the churchyard.

"Take your people and disappear before the federal agents get here."

"You didn't see me?"

"I saw you defend yourself against an armed fugitive."

"And after that?"

"After that, I was examining the wounded."

Willis nodded toward Kinder's body.

"What about him?"

"He's the answer to every question anybody's going to ask."

Willis started toward the trees.

Buck caught his arm.

"Two million dollars buys a lot of trouble."

Willis's eyes narrowed.

"How much did Johnny give you?"

"Go home, Willis."

"That ain't a denial."

"You've got five seconds before I remember you differently."

Willis smiled and disappeared into the swamp.

#

Millie Bubs arrived in an ambulance with two elderly members of the congregation.

She climbed out before the vehicle had stopped moving.

Her husband stood on the church steps.

His white shirt was torn. Blood covered his arm. His face looked twenty years older than it had that morning.

Millie ran to him.

Bubs met her at the bottom of the steps and wrapped both arms around her. She buried her face against his chest.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It's over."

"Where's Deon?"

Bubs closed his eyes.

Millie pulled away enough to look at him.

"Where is he?"

Tiana stood in the church doorway.

Millie saw the answer before either of them spoke.

"No."

Bubs held her tighter.

"No," Millie repeated. "Deon is in Miami."

"He went to the prison," Bubs said.

"He would've called."

"He went to see Kenny Gregory."

"He would've called me."

"Millie—"

"He always calls."

Her knees gave way.

Bubs caught her before she struck the ground.

The cry that escaped her carried across the churchyard. Deputies stopped what they were doing. Paramedics lowered their eyes. Even the handcuffed corrections officers fell silent.

Tiana turned away.

Deon Childress had been her employer, her mentor, and the man she had believed would someday become more than Dawber County had ever allowed him to imagine.

Now he was another body in an official report.

Millie clung to her husband.

"They took our boy."

Bubs looked past her toward the bodies scattered across the property.

"Yes," he said. "They did."

#

Oscar Fuentes arrived with two DEA agents and the expression of a man realizing every assurance he had received that morning had been wrong.

He climbed from an unmarked sedan and stared at the bullet-scarred church, the burned vehicles, the bodies, and the sheriff's deputies moving through the wreckage.

"Madre de Dios."

Buck met him near the gate.

"You Fuentes?"

"Special Agent in Charge Oscar Fuentes."

"Sheriff Buck Dawber."

Oscar surveyed the scene again.

"My agent said they were taking fire."

"They were."

"From whom?"

"Depends which part of the shooting you're asking about."

Oscar looked at him.

Buck removed a small notebook from his shirt pocket.

"Warden Kinder brought corrupt corrections officers into Dawber County to recover money connected to the old smuggling operation. The Sheltons and Brodys joined them, then turned on each other. Kinder's people killed Kenny Gregory and Deon Childress at Reform Prison. They attempted to murder attorney Tiana Ross on Alligator Alley. Today, they came here looking for the money."

"You got all that in the last hour?"

"One of Kinder's officers confessed."

"Where is he?"

Buck pointed toward the rear of a deputy's cruiser.

Guard Daly sat in the back seat with his hands cuffed behind him. His bearded face was swollen, and dried blood covered his mouth.

"Attorney Ross recorded the confession," Buck said. "Daly gave us the names, the method, and Kinder's orders."

"Where's Kinder?"

"Dead."

"Of course he is."

"He took Pastor Bubs hostage and attempted to escape."

"Who shot him?"

"Willis Childress."

Oscar stared at him.

"Deon's brother?"

"That's right."

"Where is Willis now?"

"He pursued armed suspects into the swamp."

"And you let him?"

"I had wounded people here."

Oscar looked toward the canal.

"Where's Mack Donnelly?"

Buck glanced at his wristwatch.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

#

They found Mack handcuffed to the dock behind the church.

He sat with his back against a piling, one wrist secured to an iron support. Mud covered his trousers. Blood ran from a cut above his left eyebrow.

His pistol was gone.

So was Johnny Malone.

Oscar stopped at the edge of the dock.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

Mack lifted his head.

"Took you long enough."

Oscar walked closer. "What happened?"

"Malone happened."

"You handcuffed yourself to a dock?"

"He had help."

"Who?"

"Willis Childress."

Buck crouched and unlocked the handcuff with the key Johnny had left beneath Mack's boot.

Mack rubbed his wrist.

"He took the money?" Oscar asked.

"Malone had already pulled it from the swamp."

"How much?"

"Three million. Maybe more."

Buck showed no reaction.

Oscar extended a hand and pulled Mack to his feet.

"Where did they go?"

"Into the swamp."

"You didn't call it in?"

"Malone took my radio."

"What about your phone?"

"Lost it in the fight."

Oscar looked at the handcuffs, then at Mack's injuries.

"You were chasing a suspect alone?"

"I was chasing five million dollars in drug money."

"With no backup?"

"I didn't have time."

"You always have time to call for backup."

"Save the lecture."

Oscar stepped close enough that only Mack could hear him.

"I sent you here because you told me Johnny Malone was alive. I let you reopen a twelve-year-old investigation because I believed you might finally get this obsession out of your system. Now I have dead corrections officers, dead civilians, a wounded agent, a murdered attorney, and Johnny Malone disappearing into the Everglades with millions of dollars."

"That about covers it."

"And you're making jokes?"

"It's been a long day."

Reyes's voice came from behind them.

"It's about to get longer."

She stood at the top of the dock with her wounded arm in a sling. A paramedic followed her, protesting every step.

Mack looked genuinely relieved.

"You all right?"

"I got shot."

"I noticed."

"Then you ran away."

"I went after Malone."

"You left your wounded partner in the middle of a firefight."

"I saw Tiana pull you inside."

"You didn't know whether I was alive."

Mack said nothing.

Reyes descended the dock.

"What happened out here?"

"I arrested Malone."

"For what?"

"Drug proceeds. Obstruction. Conspiracy. Pick one."

"Did you read him his rights?"

"I didn't get that far."

"Did he resist?"

"Willis hit me from behind."

Reyes studied the bruise above his eye.

"And Malone took your gun?"

Mack's hand moved instinctively toward his empty holster.

"Willis did."

"Where are the handcuff keys?"

Buck held them up.

"Found them under his boot."

Reyes looked from Buck to Mack.

Something did not fit.

She had seen Mack's face when he spotted Johnny leaving the church. He had not looked like an agent pursuing a suspect.

He had looked like a starving man watching food being carried from the room.

"Where's Malone's lighter?" she asked.

Mack's jaw tightened.

"What?"

"The lighter Director Roland found at the house. You had it when we left Miami."

"Lost it."

"You lost evidence?"

"Malone took it."

Reyes held his gaze.

"You seem to have lost quite a few things today."

#

They gathered inside Gethsemane Baptist Church.

Oscar stood near the altar with Buck, Reyes, Tiana, and the surviving federal agents. Pastor Bubs sat beside Millie in the front pew.

Billy Dawber remained near his uncle.

He had said little since Johnny, Bones, and Alex disappeared into the swamp.

Buck watched him from the corner of his eye.

In the shape of Billy's face, he could still see Timmy before Vietnam—handsome, fearless, and convinced the Dawber name meant something better than what Bo had turned it into.

Billy noticed him staring.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You think they're coming back?"

"Who?"

"Alex and Bones."

Buck considered the question.

"Not tonight."

"What about Johnny?"

"Johnny Malone always comes back when it's least convenient."

Oscar placed Daly's recorded confession on the altar beside several evidence bags.

"This gives us Kinder," Oscar said. "It gives us the prison murders, the attempted hit on Ross, and the assault on this church."

"Waylon Wiggins confirms Kinder's orders," Reyes said. "He says Kinder promised the corrections officers a cut of Malone's money."

"Does Wiggins connect Bo Dawber to any of it?" Oscar asked.

Buck looked at her.

"No," Reyes answered. "According to Wiggins, Kinder worked independently."

Buck said, "Bo's still in federal custody."

"For two more weeks," Oscar replied.

"He had nothing to gain by helping Kinder."

"Five million dollars?"

"If Bo knew where that money was, he wouldn't have waited twelve years to collect it."

Oscar turned to Mack.

"What do you have on Malone?"

Mack stood near the back wall, smoking despite the NO SMOKING sign above his head.

"I saw him with the money."

"Did anybody else?"

"His son."

"Not helpful."

"Alex Gregory."

"Also gone."

"Willis."

"Gone."

Oscar turned toward Tiana.

"What did you see?"

Tiana folded her arms.

"I saw armed corrections officers attack a church. I saw Agent Reyes shot while protecting me. I saw Warden Kinder abduct Pastor Bubs. I did not see Johnny Malone carrying drug money."

"You were with Malone."

"I'm an attorney."

"His attorney?"

"As of today."

Mack laughed.

Tiana looked at him.

"Something amusing, Agent Donnelly?"

"You picked one hell of a client."

"I understand he has one hell of a federal agreement."

Oscar's expression changed.

"What agreement?"

"A cooperation agreement executed with the FBI in 1991. My firm has requested a certified copy."

Mack stepped away from the wall.

"That agreement doesn't cover today."

"What happened today?" Tiana asked. "Was Mr. Malone arrested?"

Mack glared at her.

"Was any money seized from him?"

"No."

"Did any federal agent other than you see him possessing illegal proceeds?"

Reyes looked down.

Mack said nothing.

"Did Mr. Malone fire upon law enforcement?"

"No."

"Did he participate in the attack on this church?"

"No."

"Then what exactly are you charging him with?"

"He escaped federal custody."

Tiana looked at the others.

"Was the arrest witnessed?"

Silence filled the church.

Buck finally spoke.

"I saw Agent Donnelly escort Malone toward the rear of the property."

Mack turned toward him.

Buck continued.

"I assumed they were seeking cover from the gunfire."

"You saw the cuffs," Mack said.

"No. I saw two men walking."

Mack understood then.

Johnny had bought the sheriff.

He wondered how much.

Tiana faced Oscar.

"If your agency wants to question my client, contact my office. If you issue a warrant unsupported by evidence, we will challenge it. If Agent Donnelly makes public accusations concerning events covered by Mr. Malone's federal cooperation agreement, we will respond accordingly."

"What does that mean?" Oscar asked.

"It means Johnny Malone helped the federal government destroy the largest smuggling operation in South Florida. Your agency rewarded that cooperation by allowing one of its agents to pursue a personal vendetta against him for twelve years."

Mack's face reddened.

"You have no idea what Malone is."

"No," Tiana replied. "But I'm beginning to understand what you are."

Oscar stepped between them.

"That's enough."

He looked at Reyes.

"Can you support an arrest?"

Reyes thought of Mack leaving her bleeding in the churchyard.

She thought of the strange desperation in his eyes.

She thought of the missing gun, the missing telephone, the missing lighter, and a legendary agent found handcuffed to a dock after pursuing millions of dollars without backup.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

Mack stared at her.

Oscar nodded.

"Then there is no warrant."

"Mack," Reyes said quietly, "if Malone stole evidence from you, we'll include it in the report."

"He did."

"And if something else happened on that dock, this is your last chance to tell us."

Mack glanced at Oscar, Buck, and Tiana.

Johnny's warning returned to him.

Atticus Shelton.

The two men Mack had killed to protect his cover.

The Russians.

His daughter.

A Swiss insurance file that might or might not exist.

If Mack told the truth about the dock, he would lose his badge. He might lose his freedom. If the Russians learned he had failed, he could lose something far worse.

"Malone escaped," Mack said. "Willis Childress helped him. They took the money."

Reyes waited.

"That's your statement?"

"That's what happened."

She nodded slowly.

"Then that's what I'll write."

Mack could hear the doubt beneath every word.

#

By sunrise, the official story had begun to take shape.

Warden Vernon Kinder had operated a criminal conspiracy from inside Reform Prison.

He and several corrections officers murdered Kenny Gregory to discover the location of money hidden after the 1991 Dawber County smuggling investigation.

When attorney Deon Childress discovered the murder, Kinder had him killed as well.

Kinder then ordered an attempt on Tiana Ross's life.

After learning Johnny Malone had returned to Dawber County, Kinder assembled a group of corrupt officers and local criminals and attacked Gethsemane Baptist Church.

The conspiracy ended in a gun battle.

Kinder died attempting to escape.

The remaining officers were arrested.

The missing money was believed lost or removed by unknown parties.

Johnny Malone was considered a witness.

Not a suspect.

Not yet.

Buck signed the preliminary report.

Oscar read it twice.

Reyes refused pain medication until her statement was complete.

Tiana called her law firm in Miami and told them they had acquired a client whose assets might be substantial enough to alter the future of the firm.

Pastor Bubs sat with Millie as morning light entered through the damaged church windows.

Billy remained beside his uncle's patrol car.

He did not know about the money hidden in the trunk.

He only knew that Bones and Alex had left him behind.

"You could've gone with them," Buck said.

Billy looked toward the swamp.

"Johnny didn't ask me."

"Would you have gone?"

"I don't know."

Buck placed a hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"Your father spent his whole life being pulled between men who claimed to know what was best for him."

"Uncle Bo?"

"Among others."

"What was best for him?"

Buck looked toward the rising sun.

"I wish I knew."

A deputy approached.

"Sheriff, federal prison called. They want to know whether somebody should notify Bocephus Dawber about what happened."

Buck looked at the church, the bodies, and the dark water beyond the dock.

"No," he said. "Bo probably knows already."

#

At Reform Prison, Bocephus Dawber sat alone in the interrogation room.

His orange jumpsuit was freshly pressed.

A cup of coffee steamed before him.

The door opened, and Guard Waylon Wiggins entered under the supervision of a federal marshal. His wrists were cuffed. His corrections uniform was stained with mud and blood.

Bo did not rise.

Waylon stopped across the table.

"Kinder's dead," he said.

"I heard."

"Daly talked."

"Daly was always weak."

"They know about Kenny and the lawyer."

"Deon Childress."

Waylon lowered his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"Use his name."

"Deon Childress."

Bo picked up his coffee.

"What about the money?"

"Gone."

"Willis?"

"Gone."

"Johnny Malone?"

Waylon hesitated.

"Gone."

For the first time, Bo smiled.

The federal marshal stepped forward.

"That's enough."

Bo ignored him.

"Sheriff Buck?"

"He controlled the scene."

"Of course he did."

Waylon leaned closer.

"Johnny's back, Bo."

Bo took a slow drink.

For twelve years, prison walls had separated him from Dawber County. During that time, the town had decayed, the families had turned on one another, and frightened men had fought over the remains of the empire he built.

Now Kinder was dead.

Kenny was dead.

Sanchez was long buried.

Atticus was gone.

But Johnny Malone was alive.

Bo set down the cup.

"When do I leave?"

The marshal looked at the paperwork in his hand.

"Fourteen days."

Bo leaned back in his chair.

Outside the narrow window, the morning sun rose over the prison fences.

"Two weeks," he said.

He smiled again.

"Tell Dawber County I'm coming home."

END OF NOVELLA
BOOK THREE
The King Comes Home

"A king doesn't come home to find his crown. He comes home to learn who had the nerve to wear it."—Bocephus Dawber"

Chapters 1 through 14

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."

#

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.

#

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.

#

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.

#

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."

#

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."

#

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."

#

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 fami-

lies 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.

#

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 Jaspar," 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.

#

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.

#

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.

#

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."

#

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.

#

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.

#

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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