

# THE LAST OUTGOING

A CAPTAIN JOHNNY NOVEL



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### Chapter One — Wasn't Me

The port engine started making a new noise four miles off Egmont Key, on a Tuesday, with three insurance adjusters from Dayton in my cockpit and one of them already committed to being sick.

It wasn't a bad noise yet. Bad noises announce themselves. This one was more of a suggestion — a small tick down under the deck plates, patient and regular, like a man at the back of a church who knows a secret and is willing to sit through the whole service before he tells it.

I did what any professional would do with a noise like that. I turned up the radio.

"You hear that?" Marco said.

Marco is twenty-two and takes two classes at Hillsborough Community College, both of which he reports are going great in a tone that suggests litigation. He calls everybody chief. Me, his mother, the guy at the parts counter, and one time, with real feeling, a manatee.

"Hear what," I said.

"That tick."

"Fuel pump."

"That ain't the fuel pump."

"It's the fuel pump, Marco."

He gave me the look you give a man who has just told you the check is in the mail, and then he went aft and baited a rod for the adjuster named Dale, who had been holding the port rail for eleven minutes with the expression of a man reading his own obituary and finding a typo in it.

The other two were named Gary and Other Gary. That's not a joke I made up to be charming; that's what they called each other, and by nine in the morning I had stopped fighting it. Gary had a hat from a golf course in Naples he wanted me to know about.

Other Gary had brought his own cooler, which is a thing people do when they've been on a boat once and formed opinions.

It was October, which in Tampa means the summer has agreed to negotiate. The bay had that hard flat shine it gets before the wind fills in, and the sky over the Skyway was doing something in peach and gunmetal that I've been looking at for twenty-two years and have not yet gotten around to being tired of. Somewhere south of us a freighter was coming up the channel at the speed of a decision being made by committee.

"Captain," Gary said, "we gonna catch something or we sightseeing?"

"Both," I said. "Sightseeing's included."

"What's the fishing cost, then?"

"Eight hundred," I said. "Sightseeing's what you get for free."

Other Gary thought that was funny, which I appreciated, because I have been telling that one since the second Bush administration and it has begun to develop a limp.

We got into kingfish about twenty minutes later, which saved my life in the sense that a charter is really just a four-hour argument you win or lose in the first hour. The first fish went off Dale's rod and the boat did what boats do — everybody forgot they had a spine or a mortgage and turned into a crowd at a parade. Dale stopped being sick. That's the thing nobody puts in the brochure. A man can be sick for an hour and cured in a second, and the medicine costs four ounces of something silver going the other direction.

He fought it badly and beautifully, and when Marco got the gaff in and swung it over the rail, the fish came aboard in a long sideways commotion of chrome and bad intentions, and Dale from Dayton, Ohio, an adjuster of claims, made a noise I hadn't heard a grown man make since my father watched the Bucs beat somebody they had no business beating.

"That's a fish," I said.

"That's a *fish*," Dale agreed.

Gary got one. Other Gary got two, including the big one, which is a violation of the natural order of charters — the loudest man is not supposed to be rewarded — but the Gulf doesn't take suggestions.

And under all of it, the whole four hours, patient as a Baptist: *tick. tick. tick.*

\* \* \*

The run in was flat and gold. That's the part I'd sell if I could figure out how to package it. Everybody's sunburned and quiet, the fish are in the box, somebody's got a beer sweating on the gunwale, and the city comes up out of the water in front of you like it's just been invented — the Bayshore curve, the sailboat masts stacked up at Davis Islands, the downtown glass catching the last of it and throwing it back at you as though it were doing you a favor.

Marco was hosing down the transom. Dale came up and stood beside me at the helm, hanging on to the grab rail the way first-timers do, like the boat might go somewhere without him.

"Do you ever get used to this?" he said.

People ask me that about twice a month. The honest answer is complicated and involves my bank account, my back, and a marine diesel mechanic named Lloyd who I owe money to and who has a laugh I hear in my sleep.

"Not so far," I said, which was also true, and shorter.

He nodded and looked out at it and didn't say anything else, which put him in the top ten percent of people I have taken fishing.

They tipped well. Insurance men usually do — they spend their whole lives assigning a number to things that can't be replaced, and I think it gives them a soft spot for anybody who's clearly operating at a loss. Gary shook my hand with both of his and told me he was going to look into boats. He will not look into boats. That's fine. It's a nice thing to say on a dock at five in the afternoon with your face full of sun, and I've said worse things at that hour.

Then they walked up the pier toward the parking lot in their new hats, and the noise from the port engine, which had been a suggestion all day, cleared its throat and made a proposal.

\* \* \*

I've had the *Wasn't Me* since 2011. She's a 1979 Bertram 31, which to the uninitiated is a boat and to the initiated is a diagnosis. I bought her from a dentist in Apollo Beach who was in the third act of a divorce and wanted her gone the way you want a tooth gone. He came down to the dock to hand me the keys and stood there for a minute with his hand on the cabin roof, and then

he said, "She'll take anything you point her at," and got in his car and drove away, and I have thought about that sentence roughly nine thousand times since.

The name came with her. I have been asked about it every single working day for fifteen years, and I have never once been the first person to think of the joke.

"Wasn't me," Bett Alvarez said, when I came up the pier with the fish box.

"Every time."

"One of these days I'll surprise you."

"Don't. It's the only stable thing in my life."

Bett runs the fish house at the end of Ballast Point, which is a plywood counter, three coolers, a scale that has been legally certified since before the moon landing, and the best smoked mullet dip on this side of the state — a claim I will defend in any parking lot of your choosing. She is sixty-one and has forearms like a longshoreman and reading glasses on a chain, and she has been standing in that same eight feet of shade so long that the county has essentially given up on making her leave.

She weighed the kings and wrote it in the book, and while she wrote it she didn't look up.

"Lloyd came by," she said.

"Did he."

"He said he'd stop by your slip but he didn't want to embarrass you in front of a charter."

"That's very sensitive of Lloyd."

"He wanted me to tell you he's not mad."

"Lloyd's never mad."

"No," she agreed. "That's the worst part about him."

She tore off my copy of the ticket and held it out and finally looked up over the glasses.

"How's the port engine, Johny."

Ballast Point has maybe forty regulars, and every one of them can hear the difference between a Detroit that's happy and a Detroit that's thinking about something. I'd run in past the fish house at idle. She'd have heard it through a wall and a window unit.

"It's got a tick," I said.

"Mm."

"It's the fuel pump."

Bett took her glasses off, which she does the way other people crack their knuckles.

"Sure," she said. "It's the fuel pump."

\* \* \*

It was not the fuel pump.

Lloyd got there at seven the next morning, which is a violation of everything I know about marine mechanics, and stood in my engine room for forty minutes with his head cocked like a bird that's heard something in the grass. Then he came up into the cockpit and sat on my fish box and wiped his hands on a rag that made them worse.

Lloyd Petrakis has been putting his hands inside boats in Hillsborough County since 1984. He's got white hair he cuts himself and he weighs about what a bag of mulch weighs and he is constitutionally incapable of exaggerating anything, which is a wonderful quality in a mechanic and a devastating one in a man about to give you a number.

"Well," he said.

"Just say it."

"You got a rod knock."

I looked at the water for a second. The water had nothing.

"How bad."

"It's not bad *yet*." He said it kindly, which was worse. "You could run it. You could run it a month, two months. Every time you start it you're spending something you can't put back, but you could run it."

"And then?"

"And then one day you're out at the ledge with people on the boat and you *don't* run it."

I have known Lloyd for nineteen years and that's the only threat he has ever made, and he doesn't even make it as a threat. He makes it the way a doctor tells you what a cigarette does. It's not personal. It's just the arithmetic.

"What's the number."

He'd already written it. That's the thing about Lloyd. He'd written it on the back of a parts invoice, folded once, and he handed it to me the way you'd hand a man his own X-ray.

Twenty-two thousand for the rebuild. Thirty-one if the crank was hurt, and he'd know when he got in there, and he'd know in

about two hours, and he could not start until I said go, and he could not say go for me.

I did some arithmetic of my own, standing there in the sun with a piece of paper in my hand. I had eleven charters booked between then and Christmas. I had four thousand and some change in the boat account and eight hundred in the other one, and a slip fee, and an insurance payment, and a girl in Gainesville named Sara who is nineteen and studying something with the word *environmental* in it, and whose tuition I pay in pieces, on time, every time, because it is the only line item in my entire life that I have never once been late on and I would rather sink the boat.

Eleven charters, in a good stretch of weather, with no cancellations, in a season where two hurricanes had already come up the Gulf and made everybody's uncle in Ohio decide maybe next year.

"Take your time," Lloyd said, standing up.

"I don't have any."

"No," he agreed. "But take it anyway."

\* \* \*

Ronnie Deem came down the pier at four that afternoon, which is not a coincidence, because nothing Ronnie does is a coincidence and because there is no piece of information in Ballast Point that stays fresh past noon.

Ronnie runs the *Gulf Queen II* out of the shrimp basin, and he carries three phones, and I have never in twenty years seen him carry a fish. He's got a good face — that's what people don't understand about Ronnie. If you were casting a movie and you needed a guy who coaches Little League and cooks a hell of a Thanksgiving, you'd hire Ronnie Deem out of the first fifteen minutes and never look at another actor. He shakes your hand with the warmth of a man who is genuinely glad you exist.

"Johnny."

"Ronnie."

"Heard your port side's got a cough."

"News travels."

"News don't travel," he said. "News just sits here and everybody walks past it." He leaned on my spring line, comfortable, like a neighbor. "Lloyd give you a number?"

"He did."

"He give it to you folded?"

"He did."

Ronnie laughed. It's a good laugh. "Man's got a sense of theater."

We stood there a while, and he looked at my boat the way you look at a house you used to live in.

"She's a good hull," he said. "Ain't nothing wrong with her but money."

"That's true of most things."

"It is. It surely is." He looked at the water. Somewhere behind us a pelican did that thing where it makes hitting the water look like an insult. "You know I run some freight now and then."

Here it was. It had taken him ninety seconds, which for Ronnie is practically a filibuster.

"I've heard that," I said.

"Nothing exciting. Boat leaves, boat comes back. Fella needs something moved from a place to a place, and he'd rather it went on water than on I-75, and I don't ask why because it's not my business why, and neither would you." He turned and looked at me with those good honest eyes. "One night. One outgoing tide, one incoming, home before the sun's up proper. Nine thousand dollars, cash, in your hand on the dock."

The tide was going out under us. That's not symbolism. That's just what it was doing. Ballast Point runs about two knots on a good ebb and you can watch it work at the pilings and it makes a small sound like somebody turning pages.

"Nine," I said.

"Nine."

"For one night."

"For one night, and no questions, and you never hear my name attached to it again."

I want to tell you that I said no immediately. I did say no. I said, "No, Ronnie," and I said it in a voice with nothing in it, and he nodded like he'd expected exactly that, because he had, because Ronnie Deem has never once in his life asked a question he didn't already know the answer to. He clapped me on the shoulder and told me to tell Sara he said hey, which I did not care for, and he walked back up the pier whistling something.

So I said no.

But I want to be honest with you, because if I'm not honest with you at the start of this then there's no reason for either of us to keep going: by the time he got to the end of the dock, I had already done the math.

Nine thousand, plus four in the boat account, plus eight hundred, plus eleven charters at eight hundred a piece if the weather held and nobody's uncle in Ohio got nervous.

Twenty-two thousand.

It came out to twenty-two thousand and change.

I stood there on my own boat in the last of the light with a folded piece of paper in my pocket, and I listened to the water going out, and I thought: *well, that's a hell of a coincidence.*

It wasn't, of course. Ronnie had known the number before I did.

That's the part I'd like back.

## Chapter Two — What Bett Weighs

Bett Alvarez has run the fish house at the end of the Ballast Point pier since 1994, when her father died on a Sunday afternoon between the two o'clock and the three o'clock, sitting upright on his stool with a pencil behind his ear and a mangrove snapper on the scale. The story around here is that he finished writing the weight first. I've never been able to confirm that, and I've never once tried, because it's a better world with the story in it.

The place is a green tin roof on pilings with three walls, which in Tampa is the correct number of walls. There's a chest cooler older than Marco, a scale that was calibrated during a different presidential administration, a hand-lettered sign about what she will and will not clean for you, and a radio that gets exactly one station and doesn't get it well. In August the ice sweats and the whole building smells like low tide and lemon Pine-Sol, and if you grew up here that combination will put a lump in your throat at fifty paces.

I came up the pier that evening with nothing to sell, which Bett noticed before I'd cleared the bait shop.

"Where's my fish," she said, not looking up.

"The gentlemen from Ohio kept them."

"All of them?"

"They were very excited about them."

"Mm." She wiped down the board with a rag that had been white during the Clinton years. "Adjusters."

"How'd you know they were adjusters?"

"Johny." She looked at me over the top of the reading glasses she keeps on a lanyard and has never, in twenty years, used to read anything. "Four men come off a boat and three of them are taking pictures of the *fish*, and one of them is taking pictures of the *cleats*. That one's the adjuster. The rest are just his friends."

That's Bett. She weighs fish and men on the same scale, and the mercy of it is she'll tell you the number either way.

She reached into the cooler under the counter — not the customer cooler, the other one — and set a beer on the board and slid it across without being asked, which is her entire vocabulary of affection. I've watched that woman refuse to sell a forty-dollar grouper to a man she didn't like and then hand a stranger a beer for free because he had a certain look on his face.

I imagine I had a certain look on my face.

Down at the slip, Marco was hosing the cockpit, going at the nonskid with a brush like it had said something about his mother. He'd been at it forty minutes on a boat that got fished by three men who mostly sat. The kid cleans like he's being graded. He came aboard two summers ago knowing nothing except that he wanted to know things, called me *chief* in the first ten minutes and has called every living soul chief ever since, including, I have heard with my own ears, his own mother.

"He still down there?" Bett said.

"He's doing the waterline."

"There's no fish blood on the waterline."

"I've explained that to him."

"Boy's gonna scrub the gelcoat off that hull and then transfer to USF and never think about us again," she said, with a warmth in it you had to be listening for. "Good. Somebody around here ought to end up with a degree instead of a lien."

The thunderheads were doing their three o'clock business four hours late, stacked up purple and gold over the antenna farm at MacDill with the light going through them sideways. A phosphate ship stood out in the channel, red-hulled and patient, waiting for a pilot. Up north the Bayshore balustrade ran off toward downtown, white as a good set of teeth, and a girl on a

bicycle went along it with her hair doing something the wind wanted.

I've looked at that same view most days of my life and I'd like to tell you I never take it for granted. But you do. That's the deal. You take it for granted for thirty years and then one evening you're standing there with a folded piece of paper in your shirt pocket and the whole thing looks like something you're being shown for the last time.

"Say it," Bett said.

"Say what."

"Whatever it is you came up the pier not to say."

I turned the beer around on the board a couple of times.

"Port engine's got a spun bearing," I said. "Cracked the block."

She didn't say *oh no*. Bett doesn't do that. She let it sit there a second so it would be real, which I appreciated more than sympathy.

"Lloyd?"

"Lloyd."

"Then it's true," she said. "What'd he write?"

"Twenty-two."

Bett set the rag down. Out on the water a mullet came up and went over sideways and slapped back in, the way they do, for no reason anybody has ever established.

"Thousand," she said.

"And change."

"*Change*." She said the word like it had personally offended her. "Lloyd Pettus is the last honest man in Hillsborough County and he'll put the *change* on there to keep himself company."

"He wrote it in pencil."

"He always does. Man's been apologizing in pencil for fifty years." She shook her head. "What's the boat holding?"

"She's holding fine on one. She's just not a business on one."

Which is the whole thing, right there. A thirty-one-foot Bertram with one good engine is still a beautiful object. It's a lovely thing to sit on at the dock. But a charter captain with one engine is a man who is going to be towed in front of paying customers eventually, and it only has to happen once. Word gets down the pier faster than it gets across the water. That's not a Tampa thing, that's a dock thing. Docks run on gossip and diesel and neither one has ever been in short supply.

Bett went quiet a while. She has a way of being quiet at you.

Then she reached under the counter again, past the beer cooler, and came out with a cigar box. Not a metaphor. An actual cigar box, Ybor, older than me, with a picture of a woman on the lid who has been reclining on that lid since before the Depression.

"No," I said.

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"I know what's in the box."

"There's four in the box."

"Bett."

"Four thousand, and it'd be back by Christmas, and you know it would."

"That's your roof."

"That's my roof *fund*," she said. "The roof's been leaking since '09 and it has grown accustomed. It drips into a bucket and the bucket has a place it sits, and if I fixed it now the bucket would have to be told." She pushed the box an inch toward me, which for Bett is throwing herself at my feet. "Take the four."

And here is where I'd like to describe some noble reason I said no.

The truth is that four wasn't twenty-two. That's what I told myself, and it's even true — four thousand dollars against a twenty-two thousand dollar hole is a man bailing the *Titanic* with a coffee cup, and everybody standing around can see the cup. But underneath that true thing was the other thing, which is that I have been *Captain* Johny on this pier for a long time, and there is a version of that man who takes a woman's roof money out of a cigar box, and I did not want to meet him.

Pride's an expensive vessel to keep in the water. Nobody ever tells you the slip fees.

"Keep your roof," I said. "I'll get it."

"How."

"Bank."

Bett laughed. It's not a nice laugh. It's a good laugh, but it isn't a nice one.

"Banks," she said, "love a fifty-four-year-old man with a forty-seven-year-old boat."

"I've got a relationship over there."

"You've got an *account* over there, Johny. That's what a relationship is to them, and it's a one-sided one, and you're the

side that calls." She put the cigar box away without any drama about it, which was a kindness. Then she picked the rag back up, and something in her shoulders changed, and I knew before she opened her mouth that we were done with the money part of the evening and into the part she'd actually been waiting to say.

"Ronnie Deem came in here Tuesday," she said. "Asking after you."

The beer had gotten warm on the side I'd been holding. I turned it around again.

"Ronnie asks after everybody."

"Ronnie asks after people," Bett said, "the way the bank asks after a house."

"He bought two dozen mullet off you last month."

"He bought two dozen mullet off me last month *and paid cash and tipped me* and asked about my sister's hip by name," she said. "Roberta. My sister's name is Ana." She let that land. "He knew my sister had a hip. That's the part. He didn't want mullet. Nobody wants two dozen mullet."

"Maybe he likes mullet."

"Nobody likes two dozen mullet, Johny, they like *knowing what's in your cooler*."

Out past the end of the pier the tide had turned and started going out, the way it does, without announcing it, so that you only notice because the crab trap floats have all swung around to point the same direction, like a room full of people who heard something behind you.

"He asked what you were running," she said. "He asked was the Bertram still sound. He asked did you still take the boy out with you." She scrubbed at a spot on the board that I'm fairly sure wasn't there. "He asked it all friendly. Everything that man says is friendly. He'll ask after your health, and then your mother's health, and then he'll ask you what time the tide runs, and you'll answer all three the same way, and that's how it gets done."

"He offered me work today," I said. "At the dock."

Bett stopped scrubbing.

"What kind."

"He didn't say. Said he had a thing that pays like six months. Said think about it."

"And you said."

"I said no."

She looked at me for a long moment over those glasses.

"Say it again," she said.

"Bett."

"Say it again on Thursday," she said. "Anybody can say it on Tuesday."

The sun went down behind the bridge the way it does about two hundred nights a year here, which is to say ridiculously, like something showing off in a talent contest it has already won, and Marco came up the pier with the hose water still on his forearms and his sunglasses pushed up in his hair, and said, "Chief, we're clean," and looked at the two of us, and looked again.

"What," he said.

"Nothing," I said.

That was the first one. It's important to me that you know it was that small — not a lie about a body, not a lie under oath, just a decent-sized man on a wooden pier saying *nothing* to a kid who was going to spend the next four hours studying for a marine biology exam in a room he shared with a cousin.

They start that size. Then you feed them.

## Chapter Three — A Tour of Doors

I want it on the record that I tried. I know how that sounds coming from a man in my position, like the fellow who tells you he definitely used his blinker, but I did, and I'd like it counted.

Wednesday I put on the good shirt.

I own four camp shirts in a rotation and one shirt with buttons that go all the way up, and that last one lives in the back of the closet in a dry-cleaner bag like a witness in protection. I wore it to my father's funeral, to Marco's mother's Christmas party, and to the bank.

The young man at the bank was named Tyler and he was, I want to be fair here, extremely nice to me. That was the problem. If he'd been a jerk I'd have had something to push against. Instead he had a little sign on his desk with his name on it and a photograph of a dog, and he listened to the entire thing — the block, the bearing, the twenty-two — with his head tipped a little sideways, and he typed some, and he said, "Okay, so, let me just see what we can do here," and then he read his screen for a while

with his mouth slightly open, and I watched a young man's face learn something about me that I already knew.

ere is what a bank sees when it looks at Captain Johny

It sees a sole proprietor in a seasonal business in a  
ane state. It sees a deposit history with a hole in it every  
September. It sees a 1979 Bertram, which the bank does not  
understand is one of the finest hulls ever laid up in this country  
and which the bank understands very well is forty-seven years  
old and depreciating in a way that resembles falling. It sees a man  
with no cosigner, no salary, no collateral that floats less than it  
sinks.

"So the good news," Tyler said, "is you're pre-qualified for a  
personal line of —"

"How much."

"Four thousand."

Four again. Four was following me around that week like a  
dog that had decided I was its person.

"At what," I said.

"Twenty-nine point nine nine."

I did a piece of arithmetic in my head, and then I looked at  
the photograph of Tyler's dog, which was a brown dog of no  
particular breed with a tennis ball, and I said, "That's a good-  
looking dog," and he brightened all the way up and said "That's  
Chief!" and I said, "Well, hell," and left.

Thursday I went to the credit union, where I have been a  
member since 1997, on the theory that a credit union is a bank that  
likes you. A credit union is a bank that likes you at nineteen  
percent.

Friday I called the insurance company. This part is my  
favorite, in the way that a bruise is your favorite. My policy covers  
the engines for basically everything a boat can do — fire, sinking,  
lightning, a tree falling on it, theft by persons unknown, and, I am  
told, a specific and named list of hurricane behaviors. What it  
does not cover is an engine wearing out. There's a word for it in  
the policy. The word is *maintenance*. I had three insurance  
adjusters on my boat on the day it broke, and not one of the four  
of us could do a thing about it, and if there's a God he was doing  
crowd work that afternoon.

Saturday I priced the truck. The truck's a '14 F-150 with  
214,000 miles and a bed liner full of rod holders and dried mullet

scale, and the man at the lot walked around it twice and offered me nine thousand and I nearly took it before I remembered that a charter captain without a truck is a man who cannot get ice.

Saturday evening I took the guitar out of the case.

It's a Gibson J-45, a '68, sunburst, with a crack in the top that got glued in the eighties by a man in Gulfport who did it right. My mother bought it for me the year I turned sixteen with money she made cleaning three houses in Palma Ceia, and she did it in a way that made it clear she'd rather I sat on a porch playing it than did most of the other things sixteen-year-olds do in this town, and she was correct. I looked it up on the internet, which is where a man goes when he wants to be told a number by a stranger. The internet said between four and six.

Four. There it was again. Wagging.

I put it back in the case, and I want to tell you it was because of my mother, and some of it was. But some of it was that a man will sell his truck and his boat and his blood before he sells the thing he does when nobody's paying him, because that's the last piece of evidence he has that he's a person and not a business.

Sunday I called Deb.

We were married nineteen years. She lives in Sarasota now with a very pleasant man named Gary who sells medical devices and who I would like, honestly, if I ever let myself. She and I get along fine these days. Ours is the kind of amicable a hurricane is once it's gone past — the sky's blue, the birds are out, and there's a boat in somebody's living room.

"How much," she said, before I'd finished the wind-up.

"I didn't call for —"

"Johnny."

"Twenty-two."

She was quiet, and I could hear a dishwasher in Sarasota.

"I don't have twenty-two," she said. "I've got maybe three that isn't Gary's, and it's not — John, it's not that I wouldn't."

"I know."

"I would. You know I would."

"I know it," I said, and the terrible part is I did know it, and it would have been so much easier if she'd been cold about it. There's no fight to have with a person who says yes to a thing they don't have. You just stand there in your kitchen holding a phone.

"Is she that bad off?" Deb said. "The boat?"

"She's fine on one."

"You're not fine on one," Deb said, and then, more gently, because she has known me since I was twenty-nine and could see around every corner I ever built, "You always did think if you just kept getting up early enough it would work out."

"It's worked so far."

"It hasn't, though, sweetheart," she said. "It's just been slow."

I told her to say hey to Gary. I meant it about seventy percent, which is the highest it's ever been.

Monday I did the thing I'd been not-doing all week, which was sit at the little chart table with a legal pad and add up every future dollar I could honestly see coming. Two charters booked for the following week. A tarpon trip in May with a repeat client from Ocala who tips like a man apologizing for something. Sunset cruise for an anniversary. The Kiwanis thing, if they call back.

Eleven thousand, four hundred, over five months, before fuel, before ice, before bait, before the slip, before insurance, before Marco.

Before Marco.

He came down the dock about six with his backpack on one shoulder, and he had his sunglasses up in his hair, and he had the specific loose walk of a twenty-two-year-old who has decided to be casual about something.

"Chief," he said. "You got a second?"

"I've got several."

He stood there and did a thing with the dock line that didn't need doing. That's how I knew.

"So the deposit for fall's due the fourteenth," he said. "It's — they moved it up. It used to be the first of August, and they moved it, and I've got most of it, I've got like most of it. I just wanted to ask, like — are we running much? Next few weeks? 'Cause if we're running I'm fine. I'm totally fine."

The tide was going out. The floats had all swung around and were pointing at the bay like they'd heard something.

"How much are you short," I said.

"I'm not — it's not like that, chief, I'm just asking about hours."

"Marco."

"Six hundred," he said, to the dock line. "Ish."

And I stood there on my own boat, with a folded piece of paper in a drawer four feet from my hand and eleven thousand dollars of visible future in a legal pad, and I looked at a kid who was going to be the first person in his family with a bachelor's degree, and who had scrubbed a waterline that did not have any blood on it, and who called me chief.

"Plenty of work," I said.

It came out easy. That's the thing nobody warns you about. Everybody warns you that the first one is hard. Nobody warns you that the first one is *easy*, that it comes out of you smooth and warm and shaped exactly like kindness, and that the kid's whole face changes and he says *okay cool, okay, thanks chief* and goes off up the dock about four inches taller.

Nobody warns you that it feels good.

That was Monday. Ronnie Deem found me on Sunday. I've got the order wrong, and I'm leaving it wrong, because that's the order it happens in your head afterward — you go looking for the moment you decided, and it's never where you left it.

## Chapter Four — The Pleasant Man

Ronnie Deem doesn't come find you. That's not how it works. What happens is you turn around and there he is, and it's been arranged so completely that you feel rude for having been surprised.

Sunday I was at the Sunday jam.

There's a place on Interbay with a screen porch and a floor that slopes toward the water like it's thinking about it, and every Sunday since before I had a license a rotating cast of the semi-employed sets up in the corner under the ceiling fan and plays until the ice runs low. It is not a gig. Nobody gets paid. There's a coffee can, and the coffee can is a joke that has been running for thirty years. I play rhythm and sing about one in four, and there's a retired dentist named Sal who plays a lap steel like he's apologizing to it, and a woman named Dorothy who is eighty-one and knows every Merle Haggard song ever cut and will not tolerate a wrong chord.

We were four bars into a thing of mine about a heron that steals bait — it's not a good song, but it's got a chorus people can find — and I looked up and Ronnie Deem was leaning in the

doorway with a beer he hadn't drunk any of, smiling at me the way you'd smile at your kid in a school play.

He waited for the song to end. That's important. A man who wants something from you interrupts. Ronnie waited, and he clapped, and Dorothy said something to him and he laughed like it was the best thing he'd heard all week, and by the time I got my guitar in the case he had two fresh beers and a table in the corner, and the whole thing had the terrible momentum of hospitality.

"That heron song," he said, when I sat down. "That yours?"

"Afraid so."

"That's a good song, Johny." He said it plainly, no salesmanship in it. That's the trap, and I want you to understand that I knew it was the trap and I sat in it anyway, because I'd written that song on the flybridge over two weeks and Ronnie Deem was the fourth human being in history to remark on it. "You ever put those down anywhere? Record 'em?"

"There's a fella in Gulfport with a garage."

"You ought to." He turned his beer a quarter turn on the table. "Man makes a thing, there ought to be a copy of it somewhere. Otherwise it's just weather."

Ronnie is fifty-eight and looks fifty-one and dresses like a man on his way to a nice lunch — pressed guayabera, khakis with a crease, boat shoes with no socks, a watch you'd have to know about to notice. He's got the shrimp out of Port Tampa: four boats now, his daddy's fleet before him. He has never in his life raised his voice at me. I have known him since we were both kids on the same water, and I have watched, over about thirty years, the specific way people's faces change when they say his name, and it is not the way faces change when you say the name of a man who yells.

We did fifteen minutes of the good stuff. Dorothy's hip. The dredging. Whether the county was going to do anything about the pilings. Who'd died. He asked about Deb by name and about Gary by name — I have never told Ronnie Deem the name Gary — and he did it so warmly that I answered.

Then he said, "How's the Bertram running?"

"She's running."

"Both sides?"

And there it is. I want to be precise about this moment, because it's the one I've turned over the most. He did not say *I hear*

*your port engine's got a spun bearing.* He did not say *I know what Lloyd wrote on that paper.* He asked a two-word question with his eyebrows up, friendly as a man asking after your golf game, and left the entire rest of it for me to say out loud in my own voice.

That's the craft of it. He never has to threaten anybody. He just makes a little space in the conversation exactly the shape of the truth, and then he's quiet, and you fill it. You always fill it. Silence is the most expensive thing in the world and Ronnie Deem buys it wholesale.

"Port side's down," I said.

"Aw, hell." And he sounded like he meant it. He *did* mean it, is the thing. That's what nobody understands about men like Ronnie. He wasn't faking sympathy. He felt sympathy, in whatever room he keeps it in, and in the next room over he was doing arithmetic, and the wall between those rooms has been up so long he doesn't hear through it anymore. "Lloyd give you a number?"

"Twenty-two."

Ronnie whistled low. "For a block."

"For a block, and the labor, and he's not charging me for the pull."

"He wouldn't." He nodded slowly, a man taking a piece of bad news about a friend. "That's a lot of money to find in July."

"It's a lot of money to find in any month with an R in it."

He laughed at that — a real laugh, a good one — and I felt the small, disgusting warmth of having made him laugh, and I want that on the record too. I liked him. I have always liked him. That's the part I can't get anybody to understand when I tell this, and it's the part that matters most: if he'd been a snake I'd have seen a snake. Nobody drowns in weather they can see.

"Let me talk to you about a thing," Ronnie said.

"Ronnie."

"Just talk."

"You said Tuesday, and I said no Tuesday."

"You did," he agreed. "You said it good, too. Straight out. I respected it." He turned the beer another quarter. "But Tuesday you didn't have a number. Now you got a number, and a number changes what a man's saying no to. Tuesday you were saying no to *a thing*. Today you'd be saying no to twenty-two thousand dollars. Those are different sentences."

I didn't say anything. Under the fan Sal started in on something in G and got it wrong twice.

"One night," Ronnie said. "Yours is the right boat for it. That's the whole reason it's you and not somebody else, and I want you to hear that, because I know what you're thinking and it's not that. You've got a hull that'll take the chop off the mouth and you've got a draft that'll go up a canal, and there's maybe nine boats in this bay that are both those things and I know every one of the men that own 'em, and you're the one I'd trust to not put it on a bar in the dark."

"What's the cargo."

"Fella and two bags."

"What's in the bags."

"Nothing that's yours," Ronnie said, pleasantly. "That's not me being cute. It's genuinely not yours. You never touch 'em, you never look in 'em, and if a person was to ever ask you what was in 'em, the true answer's *I don't know*, and a true answer is a hell of a thing to have in your pocket."

"That's a beautiful way to describe a bad idea."

"It's a *clean* way to describe a *simple* idea," he said. "You run out past the key, you pick up at a spot I'll give you, you come up the Little Manatee to a private dock at Ruskin, you tie up eleven minutes, you come home. You're back in your slip before the coffee's on."

"At night."

"At night, on the outgoing, which is when a man with your license would want to do it anyway, because it's flat and it's empty and there isn't a soul out there but the shrimpers, and the shrimpers are mine."

Out on the porch the fan turned. Somebody's kid was hitting the screen door open and shut, open and shut, and their mother had stopped saying anything about it.

"Thirty," Ronnie said.

I have thought about the fact that he said the number at that moment, after the door and the fan and the beer and the heron song, and not before. He'd had it in his mouth the whole time. He was waiting for it to be worth more.

"Tuesday you said nine," I said.

"Tuesday I did."

"Same boat. Same water. Same night."

"Same everything," Ronnie agreed, comfortable as a man discussing rain. "Tuesday it was worth nine because Tuesday you'd have been doing *me* a favor. Today you'd be doing yourself one, and a man does himself a favor a whole lot more carefully than he does one for me. That's worth money. That's worth *real* money." He turned the beer another quarter. "I don't price the run, Johnny. Never have. I price the fella running it."

That is the single most honest sentence anybody said to me the entire summer, and it was said to me by the man who ruined my life, in a screen porch, over a beer he'd bought me.

"Thirty thousand dollars," he said, "cash, half up front, for one night's work you're qualified for, on a boat you already own, in water you know better than the chart does."

Twenty-two for the block. Six hundred for Marco's deposit. Four back to Bett's cigar box, which she'd never take, and which I'd get into her hands somehow anyhow. Insurance in September. And a piece left over, sitting in a coffee can, in case the other engine ever got any ideas.

That's the arithmetic. I'd like to pretend it took a while. It took the length of a breath. The number had been living in me since Lloyd handed me that folded paper, and Ronnie Deem had just walked up and put a key in it.

"Why me," I said. "Really."

"I told you why."

"You told me about my draft. Tell me the other why."

Ronnie smiled, and for one second — one — something behind his face came to the window and looked out at me and went away again.

"Because you've never done it," he said. "A man that's never done it is careful. Fellas that have done it get bored, and bored's what gets a boat stopped." He finished the beer he hadn't touched all night in two swallows and stood up and put his hand on my shoulder, warm, the way an uncle does. "And 'cause your name's on the transom, Johnny, and everybody on that pier knows what your name means. Nobody looks twice at a boat that's got your name on it."

He went to say goodnight to Dorothy. He knew Dorothy's name.

I sat there with my hand around a beer I didn't want, in a screen porch I've been coming to since I was nineteen, and I did not say yes.

I said I'd think about it.

Which is yes wearing a hat.

## **Chapter Five — Fifteen Thousand Dollars in a Grocery Bag**

The money came Wednesday, in a Publix bag, which is the single most Tampa detail of this entire story and I didn't even notice it at the time.

A kid brought it. Maybe nineteen, board shorts, a Rays hat with the brim still flat, earbuds in. He walked down my dock in the middle of the afternoon in front of God and Bett and half the pier, handed me a grocery bag with a folded top like his mother had packed him a lunch, said "He said you'd know," and left. There was a bunch of bananas in it. Under the bananas there was fifteen thousand dollars in banded hundreds.

I have thought about those bananas for two years. I've decided they weren't a joke and they weren't cover. I think somebody's aunt genuinely put bananas in that bag at some point and the bag simply kept being a bag. That's how it actually goes. People think this business is all signals and code words. Mostly it's a nineteen-year-old with earbuds in and produce.

I stood in the cabin with the bag on the chart table for a while.

Fifteen thousand dollars in cash is smaller than you think and heavier than you think. It doesn't look like money. Money in the movies is a suitcase and a light shining up out of it. Fifteen thousand looks like something you'd find in a drawer at an estate sale and wonder about. I put my hand flat on top of it, which I could not tell you the reason for.

Then I went and did four things in an order I'd been rehearsing since Sunday without admitting I was rehearsing anything.

First I called Lloyd and told him to order the block.

"You get your money?" he said.

"I got my money."

There was a pause on the line the exact length of a man deciding not to ask a question. Lloyd Pettus has been in and

around boats in this county for fifty-two years. He has watched men find twenty-two thousand dollars in July before. He knows the whole catalog of ways it gets found, and he knows the short list, and he is old enough and tired enough and about to lose his own yard to a condo, and what he said was:

"Well. That's good, then."

"That's good," I agreed.

"Take me eight, nine days on the block. Longer if the freight people do what they do."

"That's fine."

"Johny." Another pause. This one had something in it. "You want me to bill it in pieces? So it's — you know. Two, three invoices."

And that was Lloyd offering, in the only language he had for it, to help me be a man who came by twenty-two thousand dollars in a way that looked like a series of smaller, more reasonable events.

"One invoice is fine," I said. "Put it all on one."

"All right," he said, and I could hear him writing it down, in pencil, and I have never in my life been so grateful to a man for not saying a word.

Second, I paid Marco's deposit.

I didn't hand him cash. That's the thing I got right in a week where I got very little right — you do not hand a twenty-two-year-old six hundred dollars in hundreds out of a Publix bag. I drove to HCC on Thursday morning in the good shirt and stood in a line behind two freshmen and paid it at the window with a debit card off my own account, which had four hundred and eleven dollars in it, plus the six hundred I'd walked into the bank and deposited an hour earlier like a normal man depositing normal money.

The woman at the window asked if I wanted a receipt for my son.

I said yes.

That's not a thing I've told anybody. I've got no business claiming that word. But she said it, and there was a line behind me, and I let it stand, and I drove back down Dale Mabry with a receipt in my shirt pocket feeling like the last honest man in Florida, which is a hell of a trick to pull on yourself while you've

got fourteen thousand four hundred dollars of a shrimper's money in a bag under the V-berth.

Third, I took the four to Bett.

She wouldn't take it. Obviously she wouldn't take it. We did the whole dance, and it ended the way I knew it would, with her saying "I didn't loan you anything, so there's nothing to pay," and me saying "It's for the roof," and her saying "The roof and I have an understanding." So I did what you do with Bett Alvarez, which is nothing at all, out loud, and then on Friday I called the roofer myself and paid him and told him not to say who, and Bett found out inside of six hours because it is a pier, and she came down to my slip and stood there with her arms crossed and did not thank me.

"Where'd it come from," she said.

"I've had a good couple weeks."

"You've had two charters in three weeks and one of 'em was the adjusters."

"There's the Ocala fella."

"In May," Bett said. "The Ocala fella is in May, and it's July, and you're a bad liar, Johny, which up until this week I would have told you was the best thing about you."

The tide was doing what it does. I looked at the crab floats.

"I want you to say something to me," she said.

"Bett —"

"Say you didn't take work off Ronnie Deem."

There's a version of this where I lie to her. I've run it many times since, in the shower, at three in the morning, on the water. In that version I say *I didn't*, easy and warm, and she looks at me and decides to believe it because she wants to, and the whole rest of it happens anyway, and the only difference is that I'd have had one more thing to carry.

What I actually did was stand there.

Standing there is an answer. Bett read it in under a second — she reads a man the way she reads a fish, by the eye and the gill and the way it's holding itself — and something went out of her face that I've only ever gotten a little of back.

"Ah, hell, Johny," she said, quiet.

"It's one night."

"It's never one night."

"It's a boat ride, Bett. I take people places on a boat. That's the job. That is literally the job I have."

"Don't do that," she said. "Don't do the funny thing. I've watched you do the funny thing since you were thirty and I know exactly what it's for." She took her glasses off the lanyard and put them on, which I'd never seen, and looked at me through them like she was checking a weight. "Does the boy know?"

"He's not going."

"Does. The boy. Know."

"He's not going," I said again. "I'm running her alone."

And that was true when I said it. I want that counted too, for whatever it's worth, which is nothing.

Fourth, I got out the tide table.

There's a specific comfort in a tide table. It's the last honest document in America. It doesn't care who you are or what you've agreed to do; it just tells you, to the minute, when the water is leaving. Ronnie's night was a Thursday, ten days out, and I sat at the chart table with the little book and a pencil and worked it the way I've worked a thousand trips.

Low at 11:52 p.m. at the mouth. That's a hard outgoing from about nine, which meant the run out past Egmont would be with the water and the run up to Ruskin would catch the first of the flood, which is exactly what a man would want, and which Ronnie Deem had already known when he picked the date, because Ronnie Deem does not pick a date without knowing what the water is doing.

I laid the parallels on the chart out of pure habit and walked the course off, the mouth to the pickup, the pickup up to the Little Manatee, and I marked the two bars I'd want to be awake for, and I checked my own numbers twice, and somewhere in the middle of that it stopped being a thing I was thinking about and became a trip I was planning.

That's how it gets you. Not the money, in the end, and not the fear. It's the *competence*. It's that I am extremely good at exactly one thing on this earth, and here was a man asking me to do that one thing, at night, in my own water, for more money than that one thing had ever paid me — and there is a part of every craftsman that cannot resist being asked for the difficult version of what he does.

I put the tide table away and sat in the dark cabin a while with the boat moving the little bit she moves.

Nine days later the block came in on a truck from Jacksonville, and Lloyd started the pull, and there was no getting off it after that. You can give back a bag of money. You cannot give back an engine that's already out of the boat.

I've noticed that's usually how they build these things. They don't ask you to jump. They just quietly move the dock.

## Chapter Six — One Engine

Lloyd wanted the boat on Tuesday.

He'd cleared a spot in the yard and had the hoist scheduled and a kid coming in to help him pull, and he called me Monday morning to say bring her round the point at first light, and I sat in my cockpit with the phone against my ear and heard myself say:

"Can you give me till Friday? I've got a charter Thursday night."

There it was. Small. Reasonable. The kind of thing a working man says to another working man about a calendar.

"Thursday night," Lloyd said.

"Private thing. Sunset and moonrise, folks want the moon."

"Uh-huh." I could hear him not writing that down. "On one engine."

"It's flat water and it's four hours and I'll baby her."

There was a silence with fifty-two years of boatyard in it.

"You know what I'd tell anybody else," he said.

"I do."

"I'd tell 'em a single screw on a twin hull handles like a shopping cart with a bad wheel, and at night, in a channel, with people aboard —"

"Lloyd."

"— and I'd tell 'em the boat don't care how good they are." He blew out a breath. "Friday. First light. And Johnny — you baby her."

He hung up before I could thank him, which I've since decided was on purpose.

So here's the mechanical truth of the thing, and I'll keep it short because I know how men talk when they get going about

engines and I've bored enough people at enough bars to know the look.

A thirty-one Bertram is a twin-engine boat. Two Cummins down under the deck, one on each side, and everything about the way she moves through water and the way she moves *sideways* in a marina depends on having both of them — you put one ahead and one astern and she'll walk into a slip like a lady stepping off a curb. On one engine, all that goes away. You've got one screw turning one direction, and it wants to push the stern one way, always the same way, and you get no free pivot and no free anything. You can do it. Every captain worth the paper can do it. You just do it slow, and you plan every turn about ninety seconds before you get there, and you never, ever put yourself somewhere you can't back out of.

Which is a fine way to run a boat and a poor way to run a life, and I'd like the record to show I noticed the symmetry at the time and did it anyway.

Tuesday and Wednesday I got her ready the way you get ready for something you've told yourself is nothing.

I ran the good engine an hour at the dock and watched the temps and listened to it the way you listen to a person's cough. I changed a fuel filter that didn't need changing. I checked the batteries and the bilge pumps and the float switches, ran the spotlight, put fresh batteries in two flashlights and a third one in a dry bag under the helm seat. I pulled the ladder and stowed it. I greased the windlass. I re-taped a spot on the port dock line where it'd chafed.

And then, Wednesday afternoon, I did the thing that told me exactly what I actually believed about what I was doing: I taped over the anchor light.

Not the running lights. I ran my running lights the whole night — I want that clear, because that's the difference between a captain and an idiot. But the all-round white on the mast, the one that lights you up like a birthday from a mile off when you're sitting still — I put a piece of gaffer's tape over about a third of it, so that from the north you'd have to look twice.

I stood back and looked at that piece of tape for a while.

You know what you're doing when you tape a light. There is no explaining a taped light to yourself. I have not once in thirty-one years on this water taped a light, and I did it on a Wednesday

afternoon in broad daylight with my hands perfectly steady, and then I went and got a sandwich.

The other problem was harder, and I'd been walking around it since Sunday.

I could not run the job alone.

I want to be fair to myself for one paragraph, because there's a version of this where I'm just a man making excuses, and there's a version where I'm right, and the truth is I was right, which is what made it so easy to be the other thing. A night run on one engine, into a canal I'd been up exactly twice in daylight, to a private dock I'd never seen, with a passenger aboard who I did not know — that is a two-man job. Not for the money. For the lines. Somebody has to be on the bow when you come into a strange dock in the dark, because the alternative is a fifty-four-year-old man leaving the helm of a single-screw boat to go handle a line, and that is how boats end up on rocks and how men end up in the water between a hull and a piling, which is a bad place to be and the last place a lot of good captains have ever been.

I needed a mate.

I had exactly one, and he was twenty-two, and he'd just gotten his fall deposit paid by a man he thought had had a good couple of weeks.

I ran through the alternatives. Ricky Vance, who mates for the Bayside boats and who would absolutely have come and would absolutely have talked about it. A retired Coast Guard fella named Petey who lives on his sailboat off Davis Islands and who would have said no and then thought about why I'd asked. Sal from the jam, who is a dentist and sixty-nine years old and cannot hold a line against a running tide.

I stood on my own deck and pretended to consider all three of them for about ten minutes, the way you pretend to read a menu at a place you've been going to for twenty years.

Then I called Marco.

"Chief."

"You working Thursday night?"

"I'm working whenever, chief, you know that."

"Night charter. Private party. Out at dark, back around two, maybe three."

"Two or three in the *morning*?" He wasn't complaining. He was excited. That's the thing about that kid — you tell him a boat's

going somewhere strange at a strange hour and his whole voice changes. "That's — okay, yeah. Yeah, what is it?"

And here it is. This is the sentence. Everything after this in the entire book is downstream of the next twenty-two words, and I said them standing in my galley looking at a coffee cup with a manatee on it.

"Photographer out of Sarasota," I said. "Doing a night thing, long exposures, moon over the water. Wants the mouth of the bay and then a spot up toward Ruskin."

"Long exposures, that's sick." I could hear him moving, doing something else while he talked, the way twenty-two-year-olds do. "So like, we're anchored a lot? Or running?"

"Running mostly. Couple stops."

"On one engine, though?"

He said it easy. No suspicion in it at all — it was a mate checking a fact with his captain, the way I'd taught him to.

"Flat water," I said. "Slow speed. It's a picture trip, not a fishing trip."

"Okay." And I heard him accept it, completely, in about a quarter of a second, because I had never once in two years told that kid a single thing that wasn't true. That's the terrible efficiency of a good reputation. It's a *battery*. You spend thirty years charging it and then you can pull an enormous amount of current out of it all at once, and nobody checks the meter, and the only person who knows what you've done is you.

"Four hundred," I said.

There was a pause.

"Chief, that's — for a night run? That's like triple."

"It's a night run on a Thursday with a client who's paying stupid money for the moon," I said. "Take it before I sober up."

He laughed, and said "Yes sir," and said he'd bring the good spotlight from his uncle's, and asked if he should bring the long lens the guy might want to borrow — Marco has a camera, and it is his one expensive thing, and he had already decided to be useful to a photographer who did not exist — and I said sure, bring it, and I hung up and set the phone down on the counter very carefully, like it was full to the brim.

Then I went up on the flybridge and sat in the chair and watched the light go orange over the antenna farm, and I had a

conversation with myself that I'd been putting off since Sunday, and it went about the way those go.

*It's four hours. He's on the bow for maybe six minutes of it. Nobody's going to be at that dock but Ronnie's people, and Ronnie's people aren't going to do a thing in front of a twenty-two-year-old with a camera. He'll never know what he was on. He gets four hundred dollars and a story about a night run and he'll tell it for years and never once know what the story was actually about, and that's a good outcome, that's the best outcome, and if I take Ricky Vance instead then Ricky knows, and if Ricky knows the pier knows, and if the pier knows then it isn't one night anymore.*

Every sentence of that was true.

That's what I'd like people to understand about how a man like me ends up where I ended up. It wasn't a moment of weakness. It was about nine hours of extremely good reasoning.

The tide table said the water would start going out Thursday around nine, hard, all the way till ten of midnight. It said it plain and it said it early and it didn't care one way or the other, which by then was the only relationship in my life that hadn't gotten complicated.

I went down and looked at the tape on the anchor light one more time before bed.

I left it on.

## Chapter Seven — The Outgoing

We left the slip at 9:20 on a Thursday night with the water already running hard out of the bay, and for about forty minutes it was the best night of my year.

I need to say that part or the rest of it doesn't make sense.

There is nothing on this earth like Tampa Bay at night in July when the wind lies down. The water goes to black glass with the city smeared across it — the downtown towers, the blue of the bridge lights, the orange sodium off the port, all of it lying on the surface and coming apart slow under your wake. The heat lets go about ten. The air off the Gulf comes in and it's twenty degrees kinder than it was at four in the afternoon and it smells like salt and rain that hasn't happened yet. You can hear a bottlenose blow forty yards off and not see a thing. Every channel marker out there is a green or a red star you can steer by, laid out in a line by

somebody who wanted you to get home, and I have been steering by them since I was nineteen years old.

Marco set up his camera on the starboard rail with a little clamp thing he'd made out of a piece of PVC and hose clamps, because he's the kind of kid who makes a thing rather than buys it, and he was taking thirty-second exposures of the skyline going by and coming over every few minutes to show me the back of the camera with his whole face lit up green from the screen.

"Chief. *Chief*. Look at the bridge."

"That's nice work."

"That's a thirty-second at f/8, and look, look how the water goes — it goes *flat*, like it's a *floor* —"

"It's good, Marco."

"I'm gonna show the guy. Maybe he'll — like, do you think he'd look at 'em?"

"I imagine he would," I said.

The one engine was behaving. Eleven hundred RPM, temp where it lived, a steady pull in the wheel I was holding out without thinking about it, because a boat running on her starboard screw alone wants to walk her stern around and you spend the whole night quietly telling her no. Down under the deck plates to port there was nothing at all — no tick, no anything, just an empty engine with a cracked block sitting there like a body in the trunk. The good one sounded like it always sounds, which is like a big man breathing while he works.

At 10:05 we came down past the tip of the Interbay peninsula and MacDill's fence line, and the last of the city let go of us, and it got properly dark, and Marco came up and sat in the second chair on the bridge with his knees up.

"Chief, can I say something?"

"You will anyway."

"This is the best job anybody's got." He said it looking out at the black. "Like — I've got a friend at Amazon. He does like four in the morning to noon. And I'm out here."

"You're out here for four hundred dollars getting your circadian rhythm ruined."

"Yeah, but *look at it*."

And I looked at it, because he told me to, and it was a hell of a thing, and I turned the wheel a couple degrees for a marker I could have found blind, and I thought: *if I could stop time right here*

*I'd take it. I would take this exact minute and live inside it and give back the whole rest of the year.*

That was 10:05. Ronnie's mark was a set of numbers about two miles southwest of Egmont, and we came up on it at 10:41.

There's nothing there. That's the point of it. It's open water in the mouth of the bay, deep enough, out of the shipping lane by a comfortable margin, with the Egmont light doing its slow business off to the northeast and the Skyway strung up behind us like a necklace somebody dropped. I came off plane — we hadn't been on plane, I'd been running her at displacement speed all night to be kind to her — I came down to idle and put her in neutral and let her lie there rocking, and killed the spreader lights, and we sat in the dark with the water slapping the chine.

"So he's coming *to us*?" Marco said.

"That's the arrangement."

"That's kind of sick, actually." Pause. "Is he like — famous?"

"I couldn't tell you."

We waited eleven minutes. I know because I looked at the clock about four hundred times. Marco took pictures of nothing, of black water and a lighthouse, and I stood on the bridge with my hands on the rail and understood, with total clarity and for the first time all week, that I had made a mistake — not a moral one, I'd already worked around that, but a practical one, which was that I had brought that child out here.

Then there was a boat.

It came from the south with no lights showing, which is a thing that gets a man killed and also a thing that tells you exactly who you're dealing with, and it resolved out of the dark about eighty yards off as a center console, maybe twenty-four feet, two outboards, running slow. There was a man driving it who never once looked at me, and a man standing in the bow.

They came alongside like professionals — no shouting, no fenders flying around, the driver put it exactly where it needed to be — and the man in the bow put one hand on my gunwale and stepped across into my cockpit like a guy getting off an escalator.

He was maybe forty-five, and he was the wrongest-looking thing I'd seen all year.

He had on a golf polo, tucked in, and clean canvas shoes, and he was carrying a leather bag on a shoulder strap. Not a dry bag. A *briefcase* bag, the kind a man carries into an office. He had a soft

face and a decent haircut and he was sweating in a way that had nothing to do with July, and he looked at the deck of my boat like he expected it to buck.

The other man handed two dry bags across — black, roll-top, the kind you'd buy at any tackle shop in the state, each about the size of a duffel and heavy enough that the man passing them grunted. Marco reached out and took the first one automatically, because he's a mate and something came at him, and I said "Set it down," a little sharper than I meant to, and he set it down.

Then the center console pulled away and was gone into the dark, south, and it was three of us.

"Evening," I said.

"Hi. Hey." The man put his hand out and then didn't seem to know if that was right, and shook mine anyway. His hand was cold. "Emile."

"Johny."

"I know," he said. "Sorry. I mean — they said. Your name." He laughed at nothing. "It's on the back of the boat."

"That it is."

Marco had gone very quiet by the rail, and I could feel him doing arithmetic behind me — no camera, no tripod, no cases, a briefcase bag and two dry duffels and a boat with no lights that had come out of the dark and gone back into it — and I want to be honest and say that a better man would have used that exact moment. Right there. Turn the boat around. Hand Ronnie back his fifteen thousand out of a Publix bag and tell Lloyd to bill it in pieces after all.

Instead I said, "Marco, get Mr. Emile a water out of the box."

And Marco said, "Yes, chief," and went and got it, because that is what he was trained to do and I knew exactly what he was trained to do when I said it.

I put her ahead slow and came around to the northeast, and the flood was just starting to make, and we started up toward the Little Manatee with the water helping us for the first time all night.

Emile sat in the fighting chair, in the dark, holding a bottle of water he didn't open, with his bag on his knees and both arms around it.

About twenty minutes up he came up the ladder to the bridge, which nobody does without asking, and stood there holding the rail with both hands.

"Can I ask how long?"

"Forty minutes, about."

"Okay." He didn't go back down. He looked out at the dark for a while. Somewhere behind us the light on Egmont went around. "Do you do this a lot?"

"Do what?"

"This."

"I run a charter boat," I said.

"Right." He nodded a bunch of times. "Right, right, no, that's — yeah."

He was quiet again, and then he said, in a completely different voice, a smaller one:

"Is it deep here?"

I looked over at him. You couldn't see his face, just the shape of him against the loom of the city way back behind us.

"Twenty-two feet," I said. "Little more in the cut."

"Twenty-two feet," he repeated, like it was a number he was trying to memorize, and then he said "Thank you," and went back down the ladder, and sat in the fighting chair with his arms around his bag until we got there.

I have gone over that exchange more times than any other four sentences in my life.

At the time I thought he was scared of the water. Some people are, and they don't say so, and it comes out sideways as questions about depth. I've had grown men on my boat in flat calm ask me what happens if it flips.

I know now that he wasn't asking me whether it was deep enough to drown in.

He was asking me whether it was deep enough to hide something.

And the reason I know is that when we came back down that same water four hours later, he wasn't on the boat.

## **Chapter Eight — Eleven Minutes**

The Little Manatee comes into the bay south of Apollo Beach through a stretch of water that looks like nothing on a chart and is

nothing in daylight and at one in the morning is a genuine problem. The channel's narrow and it wanders, and there's a shoal on the north side that has moved twice in my lifetime, and the markers out there are the kind the county maintains when the county remembers.

I ran it at idle with Marco on the bow with the handheld spotlight, and it took twenty-five minutes to make what should have been eight.

That's the part of that night I'm least ashamed of. I ran a single-screw boat up a bad channel in the dark and I didn't touch bottom once, and there was a stretch in the middle where the marker I wanted wasn't lit and I put Marco's light on the mangrove line and read the water off the current seams instead, and it worked, because I have been doing this since before that kid was born.

There's no moral credit in it. A man can be very good at something and still be doing the wrong thing with it. But it was the last hour of my life where I was entirely, uncomplicatedly good at my job, and I've kept it.

The dock was where Ronnie said it would be.

Private, on the south bank, a hundred yards up from where the houses stop — a concrete seawall with a floating section and two pilings, in front of a low building with a metal roof and no sign on it. Two vehicles parked with their lights off: a pickup and a white panel van, backed in. Three men standing on the dock, and one of them had a light he kept pointed at the water in front of us instead of at our faces, which is the courtesy of a man who's done this before.

I came in against the last of the flood at about the speed you'd walk into a dark bedroom.

"Bow line," I said, and Marco went, and I want to describe what he did because it was beautiful. He got the line over the forward piling on the first throw, took a wrap, and then — without being told, at twenty-two years old, on a boat with one engine in a strange dock at one in the morning — he *paid it out slow* so the current worked us in against the fenders instead of slamming us. That's a mate. You can teach the knots in a week and that in about four years.

"Nice," I said.

"Chief." He didn't look up. His voice had gone flat. "There's no cameras."

"What?"

"There's no cameras on those guys. There's no gear. There's no —" He tied off. "That's a van, chief."

The three men came alongside. Nobody said hello. One of them, a big fellow in a fishing shirt, put a hand down for the first dry bag, and Marco looked up at me on the bridge.

He held there about a second and a half.

I've had two years to think about what was in that second and a half, and I've concluded it wasn't suspicion. Marco knew by then. He'd known since the center console came out of the dark with no lights. What was in that second and a half was a kid giving his captain one last chance to say *don't touch it*.

And I stood up there with my hand on the throttle and I did not say it.

He handed up the bags.

Emile got off the boat like a man getting off a plane he'd been sure was going down. He didn't say goodbye to me. He said, to the big fellow, "Is Ron here?", and the big fellow said "He's not coming down," and Emile said "He said he'd be here," and there was a small quiet on that dock that had a lot in it.

Then Emile went up the ramp toward the metal building with his briefcase bag under his arm and his shoes making a sound on the concrete, and one of the men went with him, and that is the last time I ever saw Emile Fontaine.

The big fellow put a hand on my gunwale.

"You good on fuel?"

"I'm good."

"There's a fella'll come by the dock tomorrow." He was already turning away. "Same as before."

Eleven minutes, Ronnie had said. I looked at the clock when Marco threw the line off, and it had been nine.

The man had even been honest about that.

We came back down the river with the light off, because I could feel the seams now and I'd rather have my eyes than a light, and neither of us said anything for a long time. Marco stayed on the bow past when he needed to. When he finally came back and climbed up to the bridge he sat in the second chair with his knees

up the same way he had on the way out, and it was the same kid in the same chair on the same boat, and everything was different.

The bay opened up around three. The city came back, way off north, doing its trick on the water.

"There wasn't any photographer," Marco said.

"No."

I've been asked why I didn't lie again. I'd lied to Lloyd on a Monday and Bett on a Friday and to this kid on a Tuesday, and I was, by then, a man with some fluency. I could have said the photographer canceled and Ronnie's outfit had a cargo run and I took it to fill the night. He'd have wanted to believe it. He'd have worked hard to believe it.

The reason I didn't is small and I'm not proud of it: I was tired, and it was three in the morning, and I had run out.

That's all. Not conscience. Fatigue.

"What was in the bags?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Chief."

"I genuinely don't know, Marco. That was the arrangement, and I didn't ask, and I'd tell you if I knew." I kept my eyes on the markers. "The weight was wrong for cash and wrong for guns. That's as far as I got."

"Was it drugs?"

"I don't know."

"Is that a *no*?"

"It's an I don't know," I said. "It's the only true thing I've got in my pocket and I'm going to keep hold of it."

He was quiet a while. Then he said, "How much did they pay you?" and I told him, because at that point the alternative was another lie and I couldn't find one, and I heard him make a sound like he'd been hit in the chest with a ball.

"*Thirty*."

"Yeah."

"And I got four hundred dollars." He wasn't angry when he said it. That's the thing that got me. He said it like a man reading a diagnosis off a chart, trying to get the words right. "Chief, you didn't — you didn't ask me. You didn't tell me and then ask me. If you'd have told me, I could've said no, and then it'd be me saying no. Now it's just — it's just something that *happened* to me."

"I know."

"I've got a kid brother."

"I know."

"No, but you don't, chief, because if I get — " He stopped. Started again, quieter. "My mom's got the house in her name and my name's on the account for the tuition and if I get picked up on a boat with two bags on it, that's — that's not a bad night for me. That's my whole thing. That's the whole entire thing."

The engine did its steady breathing. The sky over toward Ruskin had that faint grease of light on it that means the day's coming whether you're ready or not.

"You're right," I said.

"Don't — " He rubbed his face with both hands. "Don't do the agreeing thing."

"It's not a thing. You're right. I used you, and I used the fact that you trust me to do it, and there's no version of it where I didn't know that." I was very calm. It's strange how calm you can be. "I'd like to tell you it won't happen again and that's an easy sentence to say at three in the morning, so I'll say the other one instead: it was one night, it's finished, and Monday morning I'm going to hand you enough money that you're a semester ahead instead of a semester behind, and after that you can decide if you want to keep working for me. And if you don't, I'll write you a reference to anybody on that pier and it'll be the best thing I ever wrote."

Marco looked at the water for about a mile.

"I don't want the money," he said.

"You do, though."

"...Yeah," he said. "That's the crappy part. I do."

We came into Ballast Point at 4:35 in the morning with the sky going gray behind the antenna farm, and I put a twin-engine boat into her slip on one engine in a dead calm with a kid on the bow who did everything right, and we tied her off and washed her down out of pure habit, and when we were done Marco stood on the dock with his backpack over one shoulder.

"Same as before," he said. "That guy said 'same as before.'"

"He did."

"That means there was a before, chief."

And he went up the dock, and that was the first time in two years he didn't say chief on the way out.

## Chapter Nine — A Good Week

Friday at first light I ran her around the point to Lloyd's on one engine with three hours of sleep in me, and by noon my port engine was hanging in the air on a hoist with a hole in it you could see daylight through, and Lloyd stood there looking up at it with his hands in his back pockets.

"There she is," he said.

"There she is."

"Spun the bearing, walked it out the side." He shook his head, admiring it almost. "That's a violent thing, a block letting go. You hear it?"

"I heard it start. Four miles off Egmont."

"Tick?"

"Little tick."

"That's her telling you," Lloyd said. "They always tell you. It's just they tell you in a language costs twenty-two thousand dollars to learn."

The second fifteen came Saturday. Different kid, same walk down the dock in the middle of the day, no bag this time — a padded envelope, which somehow felt worse. I signed nothing. Nobody said anything. He handed it over and looked past me at the boat and said, "That's a nice boat," and I said thank you, and he left.

And then, I want to tell you, I had the best two weeks I'd had in four years.

That's the thing nobody puts in these stories. There's supposed to be a lightning bolt. There's supposed to be a moment where the sky opens up and the universe makes you pay for it. What actually happens is that you get away with it, immediately and completely, and the money is real and it does exactly what money does.

Lloyd got his block in on the Tuesday and had her back together in nine days, and I stood in that yard and watched a man who'd been doing it since 1974 drop a rebuilt Cummins into my girl and line up the coupling with a bar and his thumb, and when he fired her the first time the two of them came up together for the first time since June and they *matched* — that hum where two engines find each other and lock in, which is the single most satisfying noise available to a man in my line of work.

I paid him in full, one invoice, and he wrote PAID on it in pencil.

Marco's fall tuition got paid the rest of the way and then some. I did that one at the window too. He came back to work on the second Monday — I'd been most of a week thinking he wouldn't — and he came down the dock with his backpack and said "Chief" and I said "Marco," and that was the whole conversation we had about it, and we ran a half-day for a family from Brandon and caught eleven mangrove snapper and he laughed at something I said around eleven o'clock and it was not a fake laugh.

Bett's roof got fixed. The roofer put a new section over the back half in a day and a half, and Bett stood there watching it happen with her arms crossed and her mouth in a line, and when it was done she moved the bucket out from under it and put it by the door, and she did not throw it away, and I have thought about that bucket more than is reasonable.

I bought a fuel filter housing I'd been wanting for three years. I paid my slip through December. I put nineteen hundred dollars in an actual savings account, which the bank was thrilled about, and Tyler with the dog called me personally to say congratulations, and I did not laugh at him because he was being sincere.

And on a Thursday afternoon I sat on the flybridge with the J-45 and the boat rocking a little and I wrote the whole back half of a song I'd been stuck on since spring — the one about the fella whose luck comes in and he can't stop checking the horizon for the bill. It's a good song. It's the best one I've got. It came out of me in about forty minutes and I'd been unable to touch it for six months, and I'd like to know what to do with the fact that I got it out of a Publix bag.

Here's the honest summary of that fortnight: I was better at everything.

I was kinder. I was more patient with clients. I told better jokes, because a man who isn't doing arithmetic under the conversation has room to be funny. I sat on the bow one evening and watched the sun go down behind the bridge without one single thought about money, for the first time in probably two years, and I remember noticing the silence in my own head and thinking, *oh — that's what other people have.*

If it had stayed like that I'd have never done another one for Ronnie Deem. That's the truth, and I've held onto it, because it's about the only structural defense I've got. I wasn't hooked. I hadn't developed a taste. One night, a hole filled in, done — I was *out*, and I felt out, and I felt like a man who'd stepped one foot over a line and stepped back and could still see the line behind him.

Three things happened at the end of that second week.

The first was small. Bett called me up to the fish house on a Wednesday and pointed with her chin at a man on the pier taking pictures of the boats. Not a tourist. Tourists photograph the water and the pelicans and their wives. This fella was photographing *transoms*, slowly, one at a time, from a good distance, and he had the kind of camera Marco would have wanted to talk to him about.

"Been out there an hour," Bett said.

"Could be anything."

"Could be," she said. "It's not."

He got to mine and took two, and then he lowered the camera and just looked at her a while, at WASN'T ME sitting in her slip with new paint on the transom lettering because I'd had it touched up with money I had, and then he walked back up the pier and got in a gray sedan.

The second was that Ronnie Deem sent me a bottle of rum.

Not a note. A bottle of decent Barbados rum in a box, left with Bett, who took it in because that's what you do at a fish house and then set it on my gunwale like it was something she'd found floating. A gift is a receipt. A gift says *we're friends now* and *there's a record of it*, and both of those are true at once, and both are for him.

I put it in the cabinet over the sink, unopened. It's still there.

The third came on a Saturday morning, and it was Marco, at 7:40, on the dock, holding his phone out to me with his hand not quite steady.

It was a Tampa Bay Times piece off the local wire. Fifty words, no picture, the kind of item that runs because a paper has to run something.

**HILLSBOROUGH —** Deputies are asking for the public's help locating Emile R. Fontaine, 44, of Riverview, last seen July 24. Fontaine is described as 5'9", 180 pounds. Family members

**say the disappearance is out of character. Anyone with information is asked to contact the sheriff's office.**

July 24.

I stood on my own dock in the early sun with a coffee in my other hand and read it twice, and then I looked up at Marco, and Marco was looking at me with an expression I had never once seen on that kid's face in two years.

He was waiting to find out what I'd say. That's all it was. He was waiting to see what kind of man I was going to be about it, so that he'd know what he was standing on.

And I said — and God help me, it came out easy, warm, shaped exactly like reassurance, the way they do once you've got the hang of it —

"Well," I said. "He got off that boat."

*He got off that boat.* Perfectly true. Every word of it verifiable. Three men on the dock at Ruskin saw a living man walk up a concrete ramp carrying a leather bag, and I could put my hand on a Bible about it in front of a judge and my heart rate wouldn't move a beat.

Marco looked at the phone, and looked at the water, and he said, "Yeah," and he put the phone in his pocket, and he went and got the hose.

And that's the end of the part where I could still have called somebody.

The tide table for that morning said the water started going out at 6:12. It was already most of the way gone by the time we untied, and the crab floats had all swung around and were pointing at the bay, the whole line of them, like a room full of people who'd heard something behind me.