

A cloud of dust followed the Cadillac as it sped along a country road west of Miami. The driver winced at every rough patch that threatened to shake the car apart. A gold chain bounced against his chest under a Hawaiian-print shirt. In spite of the air-conditioning going full-blast, his olive forehead glistened with perspiration and he ran his hand over it and through dark, slicked back pre-maturely balding hair.

Suddenly he grabbed the wheel with both hands and slammed on the brakes, his sunglasses slipping down his nose as the car skidded to a stop.

“Goddamnit.”

He threw the barely stopped vehicle into reverse, throwing a cloud of dust in the opposite direction. Slamming on the brakes again, he jammed the Caddy back into drive and swung it onto a barely visible two-track.

He eased the car a quarter-mile down the primitive driveway, stopping in front of a gate in a ten-foot high chain-link fence. A sign proclaimed, RODRIQUEZ BROS. AUTO SALVAGE. He stepped out of the Caddy into the blazing Florida sun, walked to the intercom mounted on the gate and pressed a button.

A barely recognizable, “Yeah?” filtered through the static.

“It’s Tony,” he said just as two snarling Dobermans reached the gate from the inside, barking frantically and pressing at the fence to get at the sweating man. “Give me a sec to get back in my car before you ...”

The gate began to slide open, the dogs nosing at the quickly widening opening.

“Sonofabitch,” Tony yelled as he scrambled back to the car and dove through the open door.

He slammed the door shut as the lead dog reached the car and leaped on the window. “Christ,” he said, breathing hard and trying to compose himself as the dogs bounced off the car, snarling and snapping. “Damn mangy hounds.”

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He slipped the car into drive and pulled through the gate, flipping off the dogs as they followed, continuing their vicious attack on the car. Once inside he sped up and watched them in his mirror as they disappeared in the dust.

Bouncing another quarter mile past rusting hulks of cars and piles of parts, he pulled up to a small building, its corrugated tin roof brown and dented and weather-beaten

cement-block walls flaking green paint. Stepping out of the car he shook his head in disbelief at the oppressive heat, but on hearing the dogs gaining ground up the driveway he stepped quickly to the front door.

He stepped inside to blessedly conditioned air. “Thank God,” he said, then walked down a dimly lit hallway to a grease-stained door marked LUNCH ROOM and pushed it open.

The air in the small room was surprisingly fresh, but the sunlight that filtered through dirty windows barely competed with the two bare bulbs that hung from the low ceiling. Sheldon Isaacs and Vince Jackson sat across from each other at a picnic-style table. Vince munched a sandwich while Sheldon idly flipped through the channels of a television mounted on a wall on the other side of the room.

“Tony!” Vince said, a toothy smile splitting his handsome dark face. Thirty-years old, his six-foot-two pudgy frame hid the well-muscled body of a former college wide receiver. Sheldon glanced at Tony briefly then back to the TV.

“Will you keep those goddamn dogs chained up?” asked Tony.

“Hey, Caesar and Anthony are friendly pups. They wouldn’t hurt a flea,” replied Vince.

“Those two land sharks nearly got me this time.”

“Nobody else seems to have a problem with them. Must be you. They probably smell fear.” Vince laughed and slapped the table.

“I’m going to shoot those sonsabitches next time.” “Johnny and Fred wouldn’t like that,” said Vince.

“What the hell would they care? They’re never here.” “So do you have the trucks and drivers lined up or what?”

Sheldon asked as he continued to idly flip through the channels. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

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Sheldon clicked off the TV and swung his heavy body around, his dark brown eyes quickly focusing on Tony. “Now what?”

Tony returned Sheldon’s glare. “Look, I had no problem with the drivers ... plenty of guys out there looking to moonlight. But the trucks are a little trickier.”

“How so?” asked Sheldon.

“They all have their own rigs, but I have to provide the car haulers.”

“Why is this *our* problem?” said Vince. “You have the contract for the transportation.”

Tony shifted his gaze over to Vince. “Yeah, I know, but I had to have the trailers moved down from New Jersey. It’s going to take me two more days.”

“Two days! We’ve got a barn full of hot metal that is getting hotter by the second,” said Sheldon. “We’ve got to get it out of here by tomorrow.”

Tony held his ground. “Sorry boys. No can do. Wednesday night is the earliest we can do it.”

Sheldon frowned and looked at Vince. “Johnny and Fred are not going to be happy about this.” He looked back at Tony. “They were depending on you.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. They asked if I could help them move the merchandise by mid-week, and I can. They never specified a day.”

“Maybe not to you, but they told us that they expected the cars to be outta here by Tuesday.”

“Well, now, that’s your problem. I’ll be ready to go by Wednesday ... that’s as good as I can do.”

Sheldon ran his hand through his close-cropped curly hair. “Goddamnit, Vince, I told you that we couldn’t depend on this guy. His old man shipped him to Miami because he screws up everything he touches.”

Tony blushed slightly. “You don’t know shit. Why don’t you find your own trucks?”

“I didn’t tell Johnny that I had the best connections for drivers on the East Coast,” said Vince.

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“Well, I do. And if I say that Wednesday is the earliest that the cars can be moved, I guarantee that no one else can move them sooner.”

Sheldon sighed. “You’re the big shooter, Tony. But I can tell you that Johnny ain’t gonna be happy.”

“Then tell him to find somebody else.”

“Hey, hey, relax Tony.” Sheldon’s tone suddenly became friendlier. “If you say it’s going to be Wednesday, then Wednesday it is.”

Vince smiled broadly. “See Tony, we ain’t hard to do business with.”

Tony nodded slightly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to look over the merchandise.”

“Sure thing. It’s out in the barn.” Vince waved toward a door that led outside.

Tony started to walk toward it then stopped. “Those miserable hounds are still on the loose out there.”

“Tony, you’re such a pussy.” Vince got up, walked over to the door and pushed it open and yelled, “Caesar. Anthony.”

The Dobermans raced around the side of the building and bounded up to the door. Vince stepped outside and the dogs jumped with glee, licking his hands and face. “See? Friendliest damn pups you ever saw.”

Tony watched through the window. “Just get them goddamn things out of here.”

Vince herded the dogs to a large kennel that stood amidst piles of car engines and put them in. Then he yelled back toward the building. “Come on ya pussy.”

Tony pushed open the door and walked across the dusty yard. The dogs started barking madly as soon as they saw him.

“I told you them things are vicious.” Tony gave the kennel a wide berth. “Where are the cars?”

Vince laughed. “Right over here, pal.” He led Tony to a huge pole barn. It was newer than any of the other buildings in the yard, but still weathered and suffering from lack of maintenance.

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Parked on the side was a brand-new, thirty-five foot Winnebago Journey diesel motor home. Tony stopped and looked up at it.

“Jesus, what’s that thing?”

“Oh, that’s Sheldon’s new toy.”

“What the hell is he going to do with that?”

“Sheldon don’t want to fly no more.”

“He doesn’t want to fly any more?”

“Yeah, he hates it.”

“I didn’t know he hated to fly.”

“Yeah. Can’t stand it. Like that football guy ... what’s his

name ... he wants to keep his feet on the ground.” “John Madden?”

“Yeah, that’s the guy.”

“That’s nuts.”

“I don’t know. It might be fun.”

Tony stood shaking his head.

Vince walked around the RV to the large sliding doors in the

front of the barn. He pulled out a key and opened the heavy padlock that secured the doors and pushed one open far enough to pass through and Tony followed him inside. Faint sunlight filtered through holes in the walls and a few windows high on the walls. Vince found a switch and turned on the overhead lighting system, the light bouncing off the shiny bodies of late model Cadillacs, Lincolns, Lexuses, Mercedes and Porches.

“What a sight, eh Tony? All late models and clean as a whistle.”

The cars were lined up in six rows of six plus one. “I thought there were thirty-five? I count thirty-seven,” said Tony.

“Yeah, there was a last minute delivery from Tampa,” replied Vince.

“But the car haulers I have lined up can only handle seven full-sized cars ... that’s thirty-five, Vince. I can’t take the last two.”

“You have to, Pard. The boys are expecting all thirty-seven to be shipped. Besides, half of them are Porsches ... they ain’t full- sized.”