CHAPTER ONE

The Belly Up in Solana Beach had absorbed its decades. The floor had worn smooth along the paths bodies took between stage and bar and bathroom. The walls were skinned in thirty years of concert posters faded to the color of memory. The air held a density that came from layered breath, from sweat and whiskey vapor and salt carried three blocks inland and settled into the fabric the way fog settled into canyon folds at dawn. Stage lights cast amber pools across the floor. The fixtures had been burning since six. I had tried more than once to wash the smell out of my clothes. The room was stronger than detergent.

Individually we were six musicians who answered to our own names — Levi Simon, Jesse Simon, Lamar Gleason, Carlos Morales, Guillermo Bautista, Winston Ruger — but collectively we were the Simon Gleason Band, a name that made people assume Simon Gleason was one person. It was a compression of surnames, a collision between the Simon brothers and Lamar that had happened by accident in the first year when a venue manager needed something for the marquee. The music had grown since then, taken in more, but the name had stayed. What mattered — what I had learned over ten years of Friday nights — was that when we found the pocket and stayed there, we stopped being six separate people and became a single thing with one intention. Simon Gleason was on tonight. I felt it in my hands, in my sternum, in the way the room's air had shifted when we'd hit the first chord and locked in.

We were playing in A minor — the bones of a slow blues progression at the foundation, that 1-4-5, something else in the skin of it once Guillermo's congas got underneath — a structure simple enough to be dangerous because nothing hid what a player couldn't do.

Jesse stood stage left with his Fender Precision, the sunburst worn pale at the edges where his forearm had rubbed it smooth over years of Friday nights identical to this one, fingers walking strings with an authority that suggested he'd never questioned rhythm's primacy. He wasn't showy. He didn't need to be.

Lamar held stage right with his gold Les Paul slung low against his hip, left hand making small shapes when he wanted a note to bend, still when he didn't. Each phrase came shaped and released. Ben Simon would have called it fire without hurry, back when he still talked about music instead of discipline, and I recognized the phrase surfacing in my mind as inheritance, the way his voice still inhabited my thoughts even when he wasn't present. Especially when he wasn't present.

Carlos sat behind the kit with the ease drummers found when they'd settled into the pocket and decided to stay — brush, snap, ghost note — making the rest of us sound better than we had any right to sound given the rehearsals we skipped and the life that got in the way between Fridays. He played a split second behind the beat, Charlie Watts discipline, which meant the whole thing breathed instead of rushed. Most drummers pushed. Carlos pulled. It changed how the song moved. I watched him from center stage and registered, again, what I had been registering for months: a stillness about him that hadn't been there before, the small contained alertness of a man who had started keeping track of exits.

Guillermo stood stage right of Carlos with his hands already deep in the conga pattern, his upper body almost still, all the work happening below the elbow. He was from Ensenada. The band had been one thing before him and a different thing after, and the difference was not addition but multiplication — Carlos pulled the beat back, Guillermo pushed it forward with the congas, and the tension between them was the engine the groove ran on.

Winston was at the Fender Rhodes center stage, already inside the changes, fifteen years younger than the rest of us and playing like he'd been doing it for forty.

Between songs Jesse leaned into his mic with that grin he'd been carrying since we were students at San Pasqual High. "Levi here still thinks he's gonna settle down one day."

The room laughed — easy, warm, the sound of people who'd decided they were all in this together even when they weren't.

Carlos from behind the kit, voice carrying over the PA: "Only if the right woman shows up man, she come with a tuning fork and a cattle prod."

Rim shot. Quick and sharp and earning the laugh it got.

I shook my head. "Y'all act like I'm a project."

Jesse deadpan, letting the silence hold the way a good bass player holds a rest: "You are." Then, after the silence had done its work: "But we love you anyway."

The grin went softer. These men were my life. Not because we were famous or rich — neither of which we were — but because when the music was right, when all of us found the same pocket, we became versions of ourselves that didn't exist outside these moments.

Between sets I stepped off stage and felt the temperature shift — cooler away from the lights — and found Carlos and Lamar at the bar where they always stood between sets, taking up the same positions they'd taken for years. Guillermo was at the end of the bar, a beer sweating against his palm, watching the room with the attention of a man who'd learned to know which rooms were safe and which ones required a different kind of accounting. The TV mounted above the liquor bottles was showing news with the sound off. Footage cut from somewhere outside a federal building — a crowd, signs, then the same scene later and worse, figures in formation moving toward the crowd, someone going down before the screen cut away. A chyron read something about Anaheim. Then the segment changed: a commercial building somewhere off the 5, Los Angeles, a reporter holding a microphone, people being led from a roll-up door with their hands secured behind them.

Carlos went very still.

I looked at Guillermo. He was watching the screen with his beer set down, reading it the way a man read something that might have his name in it.

"That's Miguel," Carlos said.

I leaned closer. The man on the screen had his head down, dark hair falling forward, two agents flanking him as he climbed the steps onto a white bus with DHS stenciled in blue along the side. He looked up once, blinking against a camera flash, and the face was unmistakable.

"Miguel Guerrero," Lamar said. "Goddamn."

We'd done session work with Miguel in Los Angeles, off and on, for the better part of a decade. He played a Telecaster like a man who'd decided it was a tool — nothing wasted, every motion deliberate. He had cut tracks on records that paid people's rent in three counties.

"He's been here forever," Jesse said. He had drifted over without my noticing. "What the hell."

"Twenty years at least." Carlos's voice had flattened the way it did when he was working to keep it level. "Married a girl from Long Beach."

"Married a gringa," Lamar said. "They got kids. They got kids together, man."

"It no matter." Carlos took a drink, the bottle sweating against his palm. "They sort it out later. Maybe."

Guillermo said nothing. He set his beer on the bar and kept looking at the screen, at the bus, at the agents flanking Miguel up the steps. He was running a calculation. You could see it.

The news cut to a congressman gesturing about security and sovereignty and the rule of law — words that sounded clean when you said them fast enough, when you didn't have to look at what they meant applied to actual lives.

"Twenty years," Jesse said. "Kids. He's as American as I am."

"More than some," Lamar said.

Carlos looked at the screen, then at the bar, then at the door. The small contained alertness — I'd been watching it for months and still couldn't say exactly when it had started. When the calculation had begun. When he'd started keeping track.

"They catch whoever they want to catch," he said. "That's what they do."

Jesse watched the news for another few seconds, jaw tight. "We ought to do something."

Nobody answered. The bartender changed the channel without asking.

After the set — the last song run out, the amp hum dying, the crowd noise filling the space where the music had been — Jesse and I went out back the way we always did after the last set, past the load-in door and the stacked empties and the dumpster that smelled like the last decade of other people's Friday nights. Jesse lit a cigarette, which he did after sets and almost never otherwise. The Pacific was half a mile west and you could smell it, even over the dumpster and the exhaust from the Amtrak rattling north to LA, and that persistent coastal dark that the city couldn't quite cover.

I told him what I'd seen in Guillermo's face at the bar.

Jesse drew on the cigarette and thought about it. "He's got papers," he said. "Everything current."

"I know."

"So does Carlos." He exhaled slow. "Didn't help tonight, for Miguel."

We stood with that for a while. The alley was quiet, just the distant sounds of Solana Beach doing what it did on a Friday — the bars, the traffic on the PCH, somewhere a car stereo running through something with bass heavy enough to reach us out here.

Jesse flicked ash and grinned, and in the grin was the thing that was always there with him — the impossible faith, the belief in human decency that was unshakeable as tide, that I'd grown up alongside and never fully understood and never stopped relying on.

"Nah," he said. "People don't hurt each other like that. Not here."

And the awful thing — the thing I couldn't have known standing there under a sky that smelled like ocean and exhaust, my brother whole and grinning beside me in the California dark — was that in that moment, I believed him too.

CHAPTER TWO

The ranch always looked the same when approached after time away, which served as both comfort and lie—the surfaces holding their shapes while pressure built along fault lines beneath. Same washboard dirt road curling off 78, dust lifting in the truck's wake, the land itself alive and exhaling. Same rows of avocado trees marching up the slope in their patient geometry, leaves dark and waxy in the late afternoon light, fruit hanging heavy on the branch. Same smell when I rolled down the window: earth and irrigation water and fertilizer, faint sweetness underneath that only showed itself at dusk when the heat finally gave up and the air could breathe again.

Ben Simon, my father, had come back from Vietnam in '75, stepped off a transport at Camp Pendleton two weeks after the fall of Saigon with nothing but a duffel bag and the silence of men who'd watched something collapse that they'd been told was worth dying for, and driven straight to the ranch his father had been working since the early sixties. The old man had planted avocados when citrus was still king, had seen something in the valley's microclimate—the marine air pooling in the fold between mountains, the deep alluvial soil that had been building since before anyone thought to call it San Pasqual Valley—and converted forty acres of coastal sage scrub into careful rows of Hass and Fuerte, betting his future on a fruit most Americans still didn't know how to pronounce. Ben took over the operation without discussion, without ceremony — inheritance was obligation in those days, and obligation meant you didn't question whether you wanted what was being handed to you. He expanded the groves over the years, added acreage in the hills above Escondido where land was cheaper and water was harder but the

fruit grew dense and oily, turned his father's forty acres into a hundred and twenty that stretched across both sides of the valley—a green claim on permanence, on the belief that if you worked the land long enough, it would hold.

Ben's truck sat parked crooked near the equipment shed, driver's door hanging open like he'd been interrupted mid-task and wouldn't admit it. Radio playing low inside—news, not music. Never music anymore. I shut the door as I passed and the sound clicked off like cutting a wire. He'd left his legal pad on the seat, covered in his careful handwriting: supplies, workers' schedules, irrigation repairs. My father had been making lists lately. Small mechanical tasks anchoring days that threatened to become formless.

The house held the warm smell of roasting chicken and rosemary, which meant my mother was trying to make things feel normal through heat and herbs. Sarah moved through the kitchen with the steady efficiency she'd carried my whole life, a nurse even when she wasn't wearing scrubs, especially when the emergency was quieter, when the bleeding happened inside and you had to watch for the small indicators that something vital was failing.

She didn't ask how I was. Never did. Asked instead if I'd eaten, hunger being a problem you could solve with the right ingredients and the right amount of heat.

"Wash your hands. Dinner's almost ready." Without turning around, the mechanical motion of caring that didn't require eye contact.

The water ran pink over my fingers at the kitchen sink, residue from the morning's work—engine grease or rust, something that didn't quite come off. It reminded me of sinks in hospitals and gas stations and the rehearsal space, water that was supposed to clean but mostly just moved dirt from one place to another. The towel smelled like fabric softener and my mother's conviction that clean surfaces held larger chaos at bay.

Ben sat at the dining table with another legal pad, pen resting between his fingers like a forgotten cigarette. He looked up when I entered and nodded once—the same nod he'd been giving me since I was a boy, acknowledgment without sentiment, presence without intrusion.

"You get down the hill okay?"

"Yeah."

"Traffic wasn't bad?"

"Not bad. Two bicycles maybe."

I smiled, trying to lighten the air that had already started to thicken, to build the density that came before difficult conversations. We could still talk about roads. That was something.

Jesse arrived minutes later, parking his truck beside mine with more care than the task required, muscle memory handling what consciousness had abandoned. He came through the door bringing the warehouse smell with him—dust and old wood and that metallic scent that never quite aired out no matter how many times you opened the bay doors, the smell of machinery waiting to be useful again—and kissed Sarah's cheek.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Lost track of time."

"You're fine. Caleb's not even here yet."

At Caleb's name the room changed pressure. Barely noticeable unless you were tracking temperature and tone.

Jesse took his seat at the table, the chair closest to the window where the late light fell in stripes. He'd always sat there, since we were kids. Back then it had been a simple fact—Jesse's spot, the way Carlos had a spot behind the kit, nobody deciding, just happening. Now it was something that had survived all the changes intact, a small ordinary thing that remembered what the room used to be.

The white Ram diesel announced Caleb before he appeared—low rumble easing into the drive with too much care, too much control. He stepped inside and paused to wipe his boots on the mat, the gesture formal now, as if being away had made him a guest in the place that should have felt most familiar.

He looked thinner than the last time I'd seen him, face angular where it used to be full. His hair was still regulation-short, the Corps two years gone. He smelled of soap and something sharper underneath—aftershave, maybe.

Sarah mentioned that Elena was still finishing up her homework, glancing toward the hallway where lamplight fell along the floor. Caleb

nodded. Didn't look at Jesse. Jesse didn't look at him. The avoidance was practiced, smooth—choreography learned over time when every glance risks triggering something neither of you can control once it starts.

We sat. Caleb took the chair at the end nearest the wall, his back to the corner, the room in front of him. Plates were passed with the mechanics of sharing refined over decades to the point where they required no thought, leaving the mind free to focus on not saying the wrong thing. The clink of silverware, amplified by what we weren't saying. For several minutes all you could hear was chewing and the refrigerator's hum and the cicadas starting up outside, clocking in for the night shift.

Ben cleared his throat. "They're saying it's gonna be a hot week. We'll need to start earlier. Six, maybe."

Caleb nodded, voice flat. "Heat index has been climbing. Makes people do stupid things."

The observation could have meant anything or everything, the sentence doing work in multiple directions at once.

Sarah shot him a look. Not sharp—surgical. Assessing damage, maintaining professional distance from the problem even when the problem was family. "It makes people tired. There's a difference."

Caleb didn't argue. Rarely did anymore. He ate carefully, cutting his food into even pieces—hands busy, not remembering.

Jesse pushed rice around his plate, building small mountains and flattening them. Finding his way into it. The conversation felt mined. "I saw something online. About another detention. Workplace raid in Vista."

The room temperature dropped another degree. I felt it in my shoulders, in the way everyone's posture changed, tension spreading through the space.

Ben's response came automatic, reflexive. "They're doing their job."

Sarah set her fork down with a quiet, deliberate click. She looked at Ben directly. "I had a patient last month. Thirty-two weeks along. Hadn't seen anyone in four months—not since the Oceanside raids started. Her husband's documented. The baby will be a citizen. They were doing their job then too."

The table held that for a moment. Ben's jaw moved but nothing came.

Jesse repeated it, not quite a question, not quite agreement: "Their job."

"It's complicated," Ben said.

That word again. The one people used when they wanted to acknowledge reality without taking responsibility for it, when they needed language that let them off the hook while sounding thoughtful.

Jesse's voice sharpened at the edges, lost the careful control he'd been maintaining. "It's not complicated. Someone with papers gets detained because someone else decided they looked wrong."

"You don't know that's what happened."

"I know it happens. We all know it happens."

Sarah placed her fork down carefully, metal against ceramic marking a boundary. "Can we not," she said. Not quite a question, more command than request.

But Jesse was already in it — his sense of fairness had tripped and now he was moving, and there was no pulling him back from something he could see clearly. "How long are we supposed to pretend it's fine? That people aren't being—"

Caleb interrupted, his first real contribution to the conversation, voice so controlled it sounded mechanical: "People break the law. That's what enforcement is for."

Jesse turned to him and for the first time all evening they made eye contact. Direct. Loaded. Two years of things left unsaid.

"And when enforcement breaks the law?"

"That's what the system is for."

The word came out of Jesse bitter, corroded, eaten through by the acid of watching systems fail people: "The system. The system that protects—"

"Jesse." Sarah's voice sharper now, carrying the edge that meant she was done asking.

But Caleb's jaw had already tightened, shoulders pulling back into a posture I recognized from childhood, from the moments when someone

had pushed him too far and he was deciding whether to walk away or push back.

"You think you know what you're talking about. You don't."

"I know what I see."

"You see what you want to see. You always have."

The sentence landed heavy between them, weighted with more than arguments about law and enforcement—the history of what had happened between them pressing into the room the way weather presses against glass, everyone feeling it, no one naming it.

"Boys." Ben's voice, trying to restore order, remind them they were family.

Sarah called toward the hallway, voice carrying more force than usual: "Elena."

Elena appeared in the doorway with her backpack slung over one shoulder, hair in a loose ponytail already coming undone. Ten years old—young enough to still believe in the basic fairness of adults, old enough to sense when the air was wrong, when silence had teeth.

She stopped short when she saw everyone at the table, taking inventory the way I did, reading faces, cataloging tension, deciding which conversational landmines were active. She slid into the chair beside Caleb with the careful neutrality children learned when adults were unpredictable, when the people who were supposed to provide stability instead provided chaos that needed to be survived.

Caleb's voice softened in the way it never did for anyone else, transformed into something that carried actual warmth, actual evidence that there was still a human being underneath all the armor he'd constructed. "Hey, kid."

"Hey."

She started eating, eyes moving from face to face, taking it in for later—for the moment when she'd try to make sense of adult behavior that followed rules she hadn't learned yet.

Jesse tried to smile, tried to lighten the mood. "How's school, Elena?"

"Fine." The word automatic, learned, the default response children gave when they knew adults didn't actually want details.

"Just fine?"

She shrugged, pushing rice around her plate the same way Jesse had been doing, mirroring his gesture without knowing it, proving that we learned more from watching than from listening. "We're reading this book about a mouse. It's kind of babyish."

"What would you rather read?" I asked.

"I don't know. Something real."

She paused, fork suspended between plate and mouth, and I watched her make a decision, watched her gather something that required courage. She looked at Caleb, then at Jesse, then back down at her plate. "Why don't you guys talk to each other anymore?"

The question landed like a stone through glass—clean, sharp, shattering the pretense we'd all been maintaining. No one answered immediately. Ben and Sarah exchanged a look that contained decades of practice managing their sons' conflicts. Jesse stared at his plate. Caleb's jaw worked.

Jesse finally spoke, trying to sound light. "We're talking right now."

Elena looked at him with the brutal honesty of children who hadn't learned that lies could be kind. "No you're not. You're sitting at the same table but you don't look at each other. And when Dad comes to dinner, Mom doesn't."

The observation was so accurate it hurt to hear it, hurt to have the pattern named, to have the careful arrangement of absences and presences mapped out by someone who was supposed to be protected from this knowledge.

Sarah's hand moved to Elena's shoulder, gentle, redirecting. "Grown-up stuff is complicated sometimes, sweetheart."

"That's what everyone keeps saying. Complicated." She set her fork down and looked at all of us with eyes that saw too much. "But it just seems like everyone's mad and no one will say why."

Into the silence that followed, Caleb stood. Not angry. Just done.

"I should go. Got an early shift." He said it to Sarah, not to the table.

He walked out before anyone could respond. The screen door creaked and closed. Through the window I watched him climb into his truck and sit there for a long moment before starting the engine, his silhouette backlit by the porch light.

Dinner continued after that. We talked about small things—the grove, the weather, Elena's homework—and none of it touched what Elena had said.

Later, after the dishes were done and Elena had been sent to finish her homework, after the kitchen had been restored to the order my mother required, I made it as far as the living room doorway and stopped there, one hand on the frame. Sarah and Ben were talking in low voices at the kitchen table. I didn't go in. Didn't go out.

"He can't keep doing this," Sarah said, her voice worn down to the exhaustion that came from trying to hold together something that wanted to come apart.

"Doing what? He didn't do anything."

"Exactly. He doesn't do anything. He sits there like he's guarding something and won't let anyone in."

"That's who he is."

"It's worse now. Ever since Afghanistan. Ever since the divorce. He's not right."

Ben spoke with the certainty of a man who'd decided that believing something made it true: "He's fine."

"He's not fine, Ben. And neither is Jesse. And those two can't be in the same room without—"

"Without what? They had dinner. They were civil."

The word came out of Sarah sounding like an indictment: "Civil. That's all we've got now? Civil?"

I slipped out before hearing more.

I drove home up the hill as the light died, the groves going dark against a sky that lost its color one register at a time until only shapes remained—silhouettes, the basic geometry of landscape stripped of detail. Elena's question came with me. I didn't try to answer it.

Above the upper grove was the hillside outside San Pasqual where my father had handed me a guitar the afternoon I turned fourteen, the day I understood I could translate the world into sound without having to live inside it, risk nothing but the quality of my listening. I hadn't been up that hillside in more than twenty years. The warehouse in Escondido was waiting: eighteen hundred square feet, my guitar on the wall. Some nights that was enough. Some nights it wasn't, and you knew the difference by how quiet the room got when you stopped playing.