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Five days after getting back to the desert for his father's funeral, Curt got a call from his Uncle Dave. "I guess you're not still queasy around blood and dead things, yeah?"

"Not so much."

"You up to work? Your mom says you're dependable now."

Uncle Dave ran the family's assisted living and hospice facility in Palm Springs. The family business going back to the 1960s. "That you've been helping her out with the bills and such since Curt Sr. left the building."

That was true. His mother had never paid a bill in her adult life, Curt's father in charge of every cent that entered and left the house. Every credit card, every utility, all of it in his name. Now he was dead and she was unmoored by the weight of it all, Curt spent hours every day going over the minutia portion of being a responsible member of civil society. Something he'd never exactly perfected.

"I've been trying."

"My big sister is a mess," Uncle Dave said, without even an ounce of sympathy. "But you're ready to finally be a bread winner? Take up the mantle?"

"I'll take whatever I can." He needed to make some money, as ever, but also, he was feeling like maybe a fresh start that didn't involve fleeing from places was a smart next move. Even with the situation, it was nice to be home. Could be he'd stick around for

a bit, fall in love, start a family, whatever that looked like. Truth was, he was mostly here to be with his mother. She had ten years left, at the most. Less if she kept up her pack-a-day of unfiltered Camels and T-bone steak addiction, Curt trying to get her into vaping and alternative meats, but grief rarely demands a turkey burger.

For now, his third gummy hitting just right, Canadian tourists playing bad golf thirty yards away from the patio of his mother's country club home, Curt was content to be ... present.

For her.

For himself.

For his friends and family.

Too many years he'd been gone, physically or emotionally, and what good had it done for anyone? He'd even entertained the thought that maybe he'd pick his clubs back up, though his knees and hips kept telling him that boat had long since sailed, sunk, and was now a reef. He couldn't even dependably run a hustle anymore. He was a desert person now, that's how it was going to be, and that came with certain limitations.

He should have known. No one in the family ever really got out of this place. Not forever, anyway. Historically, if you were a Hollas you either stayed in the desert and worked in the family business or you came back when you hit the actual dead-end, got your three hots-and-a-deathbed, hoped for a nurse with a liberal sense of morphine distribution, and lived out your last days in relative comfort.

Which wasn't so bad. The family business had evolved from a literal last resort to the "Last Resort You'll Ever Stay In!" Or at least that's what it said on the billboard on I-10 coming into town. And maybe that wasn't too far from the truth: The Willows had an indoor pool, a private movie theater, a full library, had monthly bus trips out to the outlet stores in Cabazon for those

still ambulatory enough to go shopping, employed a team of decent cooks, even offered room service.

If you weren't actively dying, it was a pretty nice place to live. Could be working there was just what he needed, now that he'd exhausted every other avenue of self-employment. Sitting at forty-two years old without health insurance or even a credit card that wasn't prepaid wasn't a recipe he wanted to keep cooking.

"You got a suit? Saw you weren't in one at the funeral."

"No." He'd left most of his clothes behind. Again.

"No problem, we always have extras here," Uncle Dave said.

"You got them cleaned, right?"

"We're professionals," Uncle Dave said. "What are you now, forty-four regular?"

Curt had no idea. "I'd guess forty-two."

"You're guessing," Uncle Dave said, "that's forty-four."

"What am I doing?" Curt asked.

"To start, we'll have you doing pickups, drop offs, a little office work, some mop up, that sort of thing," Uncle Dave said. "And listen, if I yell at you or make an example out of you, it's not personal, okay? I love you all the same, but I can't be doing that nepo baby shit around here."

"Like when you coached me in juniors." Those five miserable years. Nothing like wearing the Hollas Home for the Aging logo on a polo shirt and visor, this being back when assisted living and hospice places were called homes for the aging. They'd rebranded a few years ago and were now called The Willows Resort & Assisted Living & Memory Care Spa. Too many "&" in Curt's opinion, but he wasn't in charge of marketing.

"That's right," Uncle Dave said, "we had some good times. And if you'd taken a single direction, you'd probably be playing on the PGA Tour now. Or at least be a club pro somewhere."

The closest he got to pro anything were the years he spent in Las Vegas working that town's hustle circuit. Mondays at Summerlin's Tournament Players Club. Tuesdays doing private lessons wherever, Silvio and Lori playing their roles, acting like they were first timers and by the end of the lesson, they were driving the ball a couple hundred yards down the fairway, tipping him hundreds, getting the other shitty players to do the same with the promise that they, too, could be Tiger Woods in a few more lessons, the three of them splitting the profits. Wednesdays up in Reno, same con. Thursdays at Shadow Creek. Fridays at Sun City, giving legit lessons, since those were still a good source of income. Weekends wherever the whales were playing. In between, sushi, strippers, ketamine, rental cars, and shooting automatic weapons on BLM land.

What a time.

That was a real crew, like a family, really, until Lori got in a pinch and snitched them out to the kinds of people who didn't call the cops to solve their problems. Silvio took off with all he had, and most of Curt's stash, back to Spain. Curt ran to Cancun for a few months, where he still had some friends on the links, then back up to Pebble Beach, but that took a shit quick, which started a bad run of things he'd rather forget, had tried mightily to conceal, and was pretty sure would show back up one day. He felt safe for now. Mostly.

Still, he'd lost a decade waiting out the Vegas guys to get caught up in something bigger, so that they might forget about Curt and his relatively minor indiscretion of cheating at high-stakes golf, which eventually happened a few months before Curt's dad died. Curt opened the *New York Times* app one day and saw some familiar Russian names getting indicted for rigging million-dollar poker games alongside half of the NBA.

"Be here at 9 a.m.," Uncle Dave said. "And listen, around the other employees, call me Mr. Hollas."

"You make your employees call you Mr. Hollas?"

"No," Uncle Dave said. "Just you."

First couple months at The Willows, Curt mopped up piss and blood and God knows what else, handed out over-the-counter drugs—half the place was hooked on Pepcid, the other half was dope sick on Lactaid—and picked up medical supplies from Scrubs & Bandages, a discount spot in Desert Hot Springs that kept irregular hours and employed too many twitchy dudes with neck tattoos to be totally legit. He was also in charge of the condom closet, which was busier than usual since another round of the clap was working through the joint. The epicenter of venereal disease these days was assisted living facilities. Kids bagged it up. Old folks didn't care until it was too late.

He'd periodically get asked to put on his one inherited suit and roll out in the ambulance with a nurse to bring folks over from their homes or hospitals, get them tucked in, and make sure they lived long enough to run their credit cards. It was easy work, by and large, and Curt could see how being Uncle Dave one day wouldn't be so bad. There was never a problem with running out of stock in this business, that was for sure.

Uncle Dave paid him twenty-five bucks an hour, cash, and true to his word treated him like absolute shit between the walls but then would take him and a few others out for a couple cold ones at the Hair of the Dog, which is where they were this Friday night. Uncle Dave was doing his usual drunk show—regaling anyone who would listen with stories about serving in Iraq during Desert Storm—when his cell phone buzzed and he headed outside to take the call.

"Did he even really serve?" Dawn asked. She'd worked at The Willows going on a decade now. She'd been married to Curt's second cousin Jody, but then Jody ran off to start a band, ended up getting busted up in Washington trying to smuggle weed over the border, so now she was raising their kid Mickey alone and Jody was doing ten to fifteen in Walla Walla. Curt had met Dawn when they were kids but didn't really know her on an adult level before starting the job.

"In the reserves," Curt said. "So, he was thirty years old when he was out there." Uncle Dave was in his late sixties now.

"Did he kill anyone?"

"He says he did."

"That's not what I asked."

Curt followed Dawn's eyes out the window. Uncle Dave was pacing out front of the bar, taking notes on the little leather Marine Corps Field Notes pad he kept in his pocket.

"If I had to guess," Curt said, "I'd say he probably did. If only to see what it was like." Curt could tell him. It felt like the universe getting sucked out of your eyes and he wasn't even sure if the one guy he'd left for dead had even died. Knowing he'd left someone to die was bad enough. He was dedicated to trying to get back to feeling like a human again. That lost decade, he had to hope it stayed that way. It found him, there would be problems.

"He has a gun in his desk upstairs. Said he took it off an Iraqi he detained," Dawn said.

"I don't know anything about guns." At least not owning them. He'd had his share pointed toward him.

"He said it's a Tariq, whatever that is. I guess it's better than like an ear or something." She seemed to consider all of this. "That's all pretty sad," she said eventually. She finished off her Corona, then fished the lime out of the bottle and ate it, rind and

all. "I guess I always assumed everything he said was bullshit. I mean, you can buy those notebooks on Amazon."

Dawn was in her early forties, about the same age as Curt. After Jody left, she'd gone to nursing school, so she had her RN license, did a few years of ER work at Desert Hospital, periodically took some visiting nurse gigs during Covid, had even been nice enough to give Curt some lessons in phlebotomy when she found out he wasn't nervous around needles, though her main job these days involved the hospice patients. She administered palliative care and read to them or sat and listened to them talk if they didn't have regular visitors. She also found out her patients' favorite songs so she could put together playlists for when they were alone, the codgers drifting in and out of reality to Frank, Dean, Sammy, Elvis, maybe Aretha. Curt had the idea that maybe in a few more months, once he got his shit together and found his own place, he'd ask her out, see if she wanted to maybe catch a minor league hockey game or go up to Joshua Tree to do some star gazing or ... whatever she was into.

Curt could be into what Dawn was into.

That wouldn't take much.

But first he needed to come up with first and last month's rent and maybe some wheels that didn't have a stranger's name on the registration. It was the second week of July, hot as living hell outside, but for the first time in forever, Curt felt like there was a reason to look forward to the fall. He'd have a plan in place by then.

Uncle Dave came back in then, sat down between Dawn and Curt, carefully yanked a page from his pad. "One of you two sober enough to drive?"

