

---

O N E

---

*M*ARIE REACHED OVER HIS BODY and turned off the alarm clock, prompting a groan and a tired stretch reminiscent of some bear that had just been awoken from hibernation. After all these years, Dylan was still waiting for the time when he no longer dreaded mornings. Even after a hot shower, it took him a good two cups of coffee before he was alert enough to function. He admired—envied actually—those who could wake up refreshed before the alarm sounded.

His father, an early riser himself, had labeled him unambitious many years ago, while he was still living at home. After Donna, his mother, succumbed to breast cancer, he lost his desire to continue working for his father's air cargo outfit and moved to south Texas, where a high school buddy had a job waiting for him in new home construction. The increasing flow of retirees to the Rio Grande Valley had kept him busy over the past ten years, and the numbers would only increase. Over time, he'd developed quite a friendship with the owner, due in no small part to his work ethic on the job, and the fact that he almost never took any time off. The old guy was starting to get up in years, though, and on more than one occasion had brought up the possibility that Dylan should buy him out and take over the company. What little research Dylan had done proved the price to be extremely fair, \$600,000 for an established construction company

with an outstanding reputation, relatively new equipment, and contracts stretching into the foreseeable future. It was an opportunity he relished, but it was definitely out of his reach. The banks were willing to work with him, but they needed him to put up about half, and at the rate he was going with his savings, the old guy would be dead long before he had the necessary funds. He had long ago written it off as a missed opportunity, but it was always in the back of his mind.

He wasn't sure whether it was because he had actually followed through on his threat of leaving home or because he now had steady work, but for some reason his father, Big Bill Kovac, had softened his stance towards Dylan. After two or three years, it became apparent that Dylan wasn't going to come back with his tail between his legs and was making a life for himself halfway across the country. Dylan believed that beneath it all was probably a hidden sense of paternal pride. A weekly phone call wasn't an uncommon occurrence then, where before they struggled to say two sentences to each other during the day. Bill kept him up to date on his brother, Billy—no one was allowed to call him junior—and Dylan tried to find something new to say each week, not always meeting with success.

His father had passed away some four years ago, while Dylan was on extended vacation in Mexico with Marie. It was the first vacation he'd taken in five years, and Marie insisted there be no phones so he could relax for a change. It took her a long time to get over the guilt of Dylan missing the funeral. After about a week, however, Dylan let her know that it was actually a blessing. He recalled the crippling grief of his mother's passing, seeing her frail body on display in the funeral home, and was grateful he didn't see his father like that. He wanted to remember him as that strong, hark-working man in the baseball cap and Carhardts, not the one in his Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes lying in a casket with his hair neatly coifed and a perfect knot in his tie.

Billy didn't call as much as their father had, but Dylan understood. After all, his kid brother was trying to run the business now.

It wasn't long, however, until things began to slip out of control. Billy may be an excellent pilot, but he didn't know the first thing about

keeping a small business afloat. He had called Dylan once looking for suggestions after he'd lost the UPS contract his father had held for several years, a staple of income for the business. He was frantically trying to line up other contracts, but the leads were drying up. He stopped short of asking Dylan to come home and help, but the undertones were there. Billy, the family golden boy, needed the prodigal son to save the family business. Somehow, Dylan expected the moment to be more satisfying.

He was about to pack up and take a leave of absence from work when Billy called about a year ago to tell him about a new contract he'd negotiated flying in and out of Winnipeg. He was a bit vague on the details, but he assured Dylan it would save the business, and Billy thought that maybe he'd done something right for a change. Dylan offered his kid brother his congratulations; secretly relieved he wouldn't need to fly back home. Billy had called only twice since, both times assuring him the business was flourishing.



He could smell the coffee as soon as he stepped out of the shower. She was always good at bringing a cup into the bathroom so he could have some as soon as possible. Just like every other morning, the hot water loosened his muscles enough that a neck roll and a back twist resulted in resounding *cracks* that Marie always regarded as sickening, but they had become a part of his daily routine, helping him limber up for the day. He kept hoping, ridiculous as it may be, that someday all these aches and pains would magically cure themselves. Admittedly, it was his own fault that he was in this shape. He pushed himself back to work before his body was completely healed after a work accident left his shoulder shattered and two vertebrae cracked. The pain would always be there, he knew. What was it that old guy back home called this type of pain? Oh yea. It was like a tattoo. Permanent evidence of temporary stupidity. After unsuccessfully attempting to rub the sharp pain out of

his shoulder, he resigned to the ritual four ibuprofen washed down with lukewarm coffee. They weren't exactly painkillers, but at least they took the edge off.



Marie refilled his cup as he sat at the kitchen table watching the weather channel. The recent dry spell had been working in their favor, and all the crews, including his, were well ahead of schedule. It looked as if Mother Nature would be smiling on them for at least another few days. It was one of the catch-22s of construction. Do a job well and ahead of schedule, and occasionally you work yourself out of a job if another isn't lined up right away. Word travels, though, and sometimes your reputation will win you the next contract.

The phone rang just as he was pulling on his boots. *Damn*, he thought. Chances were, someone was calling in sick. Sure enough, Larry, one of his framing carpenters, was looking for the morning off to go to the doctor with his wife, who was expecting their first child. It was a little easier to approve when they were this far ahead of schedule, and all his crew knew that. At the same time, they also understood how time off could not be a regular occurrence. Larry, however, rarely took a day off, so any speech would be a waste of breath. He wished them both well and said he'd see him in the afternoon. He pulled his notebook out of his shirt pocket and looked over the crew assignments to see where he could spare a man to take up the slack.

He kissed Marie and headed for the door, lunchbox in hand, when the phone rang again.

"Christ, now what?" he sighed. It would take a lot of convincing for someone else to get the day off.

"Hello."

"Dylan?" It was a female voice at the other end.

"Yea?" he replied, still unsure with whom he was talking.

"Dylan, this is Cathy."

He began searching his memory. The connection was such that he knew it was long-distance, but he couldn't think of any Cathy from his past.

"Who?"

"Cathy Baldwin."

Dylan stood in the doorway, stunned. Cathy was a secretary at the FBO back in Ashawa, where he grew up. It was no secret to anyone that she had a huge crush on Dylan in their high school years; in fact, she took the job to be close to him when he used to work for his father's cargo business. The relationship never blossomed past the first year of dating, however. She was a pretty girl, but back then he was more interested in finding a way out of Ashawa, and any long-term relationship was out of the question. He hadn't heard from her since Big Bill's funeral, which explained his astonishment at hearing from her now, out of the blue.

"My God, Cathy, how are you?"

The name "Cathy" raised an eyebrow on Marie, and Dylan responded with an eye roll that essentially told her to get real. He had told Marie several times that she had nothing to worry about, that anyone who screwed around on his wife or girlfriend deserved all the misery they got. The running joke was that one woman was trouble enough to keep happy, why would he want to double his workload?

"Well, okay, I guess. How about you?"

"I guess I can't complain. What's up?"

"Well, I'm not sure where to start..."

Her voice sounded odd, like a child hesitant to tattle. He hoped this wasn't about an overdue fuel bill from his brother. He'd had quite a few of those in the past, but they'd stopped a couple years ago.

"Listen, Dylan, I don't know what you've heard, or even if you've heard anything...in fact, I don't know if they even have your number or if they know where you are...but anyway, I thought you

might want to hear it from someone you knew as opposed to some stranger who doesn't even care..."

Dylan now remembered why their relationship didn't last. Like his mother, Cathy could talk for hours and not say a damn thing.

"Listen, Cathy, it's great to hear from you, but this is really bad timing. I was just on my way out the door to work and..."

"Dylan, Billy's dead."

The entire world went silent.

"What?" he managed, the shock reducing his voice to a raspy whisper.

The ringing in his ears was followed by a sickening cramp in his stomach that almost caused him to double over. Even if he wanted to speak, he wouldn't be able to. The thought that it might be a mistake didn't even occur to him. Cathy wouldn't call with news like this unless somehow she was absolutely sure.

"Dylan? Honey, are you still there?"

Dylan grabbed the doorframe and regained his balance.

"Yea, I'm here, Cath," he replied after clearing his throat.

Marie instinctively ran to his side, helping him back to the kitchen table. She knew better than to ask questions right now; the best thing she could do would be to kneel next to him and hold his hand for a while. It was glaringly apparent that whatever bad news he had just received was going to take some time to deal with. No sense being a pest now.

"What the hell happened?"

"Some kind of explosion on the plane while he was flying to Winnipeg. They found the wreckage about an hour ago."

"How did you find out?"

"Someone saw it happen and called the Sheriff. Dad's on the volunteer rescue squad, and they were called out about a half hour after that. I just listened to the scanner until Dad called to tell me it was Billy."

Dylan caught himself caressing his forehead with his free hand, his eyes clenched tightly shut, as if trying to relieve a non-existent migraine. It took every ounce of concentration to grasp what Cathy was telling him without exploding into a thousand questions.

He took a deep breath.

“Okay, Cathy, do you have Joe’s number?”

“Who?”

“Joe Maki, the Sheriff.” He had to remind himself that not everyone in Ashawa has been on a first-name basis with the local law enforcement since childhood, out of friendship in his case, however, not delinquency.

“Yea, hold on.”

As well informed as she may be, Dylan decided it would be best to get the facts from someone who was trained to gather them. He diligently copied the number down and read it back to her just to be sure.

“Listen, Dylan, is there anything I can do?”

“Just stay available if I need to get back in touch with you, okay?”

“I sure will, hon.”

Dylan thanked her for taking the time to call and hung up the phone. He told Marie the news and she embraced him, the tears welling up in her eyes for a man she had never met.

“My God, baby, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Dylan held Marie to his chest, each question that raced into his head replaced by another before he had the time to ponder an answer. He tried to recall what Billy looked like the last time he saw him, what his voice sounded like the last time they spoke. He recognized the emptiness in his gut from his father’s passing, though tears and the feeling of uncontrollable loss had yet to surface. He’d had his fair share of loss in his life, and he’d wondered if all of that somehow made this one a little easier to bear. He honestly didn’t know at this point if he would ever weep for his sibling’s passing. He felt cold, almost numb.

He contemplated the irony of being the last surviving Kovac. First mom, who had been suffering for so long that her death was actually a blessing. Then dad, whose heart attack took him suddenly, although with his work habits and diet everyone knew it was coming.

But no one expected Billy to go next. For the first time, he found himself admiring his little brother for staying put and working so hard to keep their father's dream afloat. Kovac Air Cargo had become admired in Ashawa, an example of a local family's hard work paying off. It was apparent to everyone that while he shared dad's passion for flying, Billy didn't inherit his instincts for business. But dammit, he busted ass and kept trying until he got it. The family name was kept intact.

Dylan knew, however, that the business was done now. Even in his current state of shock, he knew the reality was that there was no way he could ever hope to return home and take over. It had been too many years away, and he really never had the fire in his belly that was required to run a business like that. This was it. The family name rested with him, and it would probably never be back in Ashawa.

It took a good ten minutes before his crisis survival instincts kicked in. He wiped his tears on the back of his hand, as if to disallow their existence, opened his eyes wide, and took a deep breath. For a brief moment, he wondered if these would be the only tears he would shed. There would be ample time to contemplate all these things later.

"Okay," he said aloud, reminding himself to keep his head. First thing's first. Obviously, he was headed home. Being the last surviving family member, there was no one else to make the arrangements. *Home*, he thought. It had been a long time since he thought of that little town in Minnesota as home. It was simply the place he grew up and ran away from as soon as he was free. Of course, there were times when he recalled the various shades of green in the forests surrounding his family's homestead. Especially when he grew weary

of the redundant adobe coloring of the south Texas landscape. But once he left, he never really looked back.

He shook his head to bring himself back to the here and now. *C'mon, Dylan, snap out of it. Deal with it, dammit!*

He looked at his watch and decided he should call work before he attempted to call the Sheriff. God only knew how long he would be on the phone gathering details.

His boss was about as accommodating as could be expected under the circumstances and assured him he would have all the time he needed. Dylan's crew was one of the best in the company, and he'd built up a substantial amount of vacation time, which he never used. He called his lead carpenter next, informing him that he would be gone for perhaps a week or more to take care of a family matter, jumping into job assignments before he had a chance to ask any questions. His co-worker took the hint early and didn't bother prying for details.

Dylan hung up the phone and sighed heavily, wanting to be sure he had all the loose ends tied up here before he dove into the trip home. He scratched down a checklist of things he would need to do, marking off the phone calls he had already made. He would need a plane ticket back home and asked Marie if she could take care of that on the neighbor's phone while he called the Sheriff.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Dylan paused for a moment, realizing he hadn't thought of that. Marie could be an asset in a situation such as this, but more than likely she would just be in the way. He just wanted to fly home, deal with this, and get back again. Deal with it. Right. Like it would be that simple. He knew that there would probably be a time while he was up north when the emptiness would hit him and he would lose control of his emotions, and despite the years between them, that was something he didn't want her to see. He had taken a week away from her after Big Bill's death so he could drive out to South Padre Island and come to terms with it in his own way. At some

point during that week, he couldn't remember which day exactly, he finally accepted the loss of his father while standing barefoot in the sand, tossing seashells back into the gulf. It was 'alone time' that he needed now. She had understood before, and Dylan felt sure she would understand now. He searched for a way to leave her home without telling her she wasn't welcome.

"Nah," he said, "you don't have to bother. I shouldn't be gone very long, and there's no reason for you to burn up your vacation time too."

"You sure? It's not a problem, really."

God bless her, always playing the caretaker.

"I'm sure, honey. I'm fine, really."

She smiled a sad smile, telling Dylan that she understood his motives without actually uttering a word. She dabbed away her tears with a fresh tissue and began searching the yellow pages for airlines that served the Valley.

Dylan had calmed down considerably now, although the stress of the morning had brought on a pretty sharp headache. He downed a few more Ibuprofen and dialed the Sheriff's number written on his pad. Flipping to a clean sheet to take notes, he glanced at his watch. 7:55. His entire world had changed and it wasn't even eight o'clock yet.