

I

The Belly Up in Solana Beach had absorbed its decades. The floor had worn smooth along the paths people took between the stage and bar. The walls were skinned with thirty years of concert posters, their colors faded by time. The air held a density that came mostly from sweat, whiskey, and spilled beer. Sea salt carried three blocks inland settled into the fabric the way the Pacific coastal layer settled into canyon folds at dawn. The stage lights had been burning since six, casting amber pools across the floor. I'd tried more than once to wash that smell out of my clothes, but the room was stronger than the detergent I used.

We were six musicians — Levi Simon, Jesse Simon, Lamar Gleason, Carlos Morales, Guillermo Bautista, Winston Ruger — collectively the Simon Gleason Band, a name that made people assume Simon Gleason was one person. It was actually a compression of surnames, a collision between the Simon brothers and Lamar that had happened by accident in the first year we were together and a venue manager needed something for the marquee. The music had grown since then, morphed a bit, but the name had stayed. What mattered, and what I had learned over ten years of Friday nights, was when we found the pocket and stayed there, we stopped being six separate people and the music stopped belonging to any of us. Simon Gleason was on tonight, that was for sure. I felt it in my hands and in my sternum. You could just feel it in the way the room's air shifted when we'd hit the first chord and locked in.

We were playing in A minor, the bones of a slow 1-4-5 blues progression at the foundation, something else in the skin of it once Guillermo's

congas got underneath it. A structure simple enough to be dangerous because nothing hid what a player couldn't do.

Jesse stood stage left with his Fender Precision bass, the sunburst finish worn pale at the edges where his forearm had rubbed it smooth over years of fingers walking strings with an authority that suggested he'd never questioned rhythm's primacy. He wasn't showy at all. He didn't need to be. Just a solid bottom to the sound.

Lamar always stage right. His gold Les Paul slung low against his hip, left hand making different small shapes when he wanted a note to bend, going still when he didn't. Each phrase came fully shaped then released. Ben Simon would have called it fire without hurry, back when he still talked about music instead of discipline. I recognized that 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 around.

Carlos sat behind the drum kit with the ease good drummers found when they'd settled into the pocket and decided to stay there — brush, snap, ghost note — making the rest of us sound better than we had any right to sound given all the rehearsals we skipped and the life that got in the way between gigs. He played a split second behind the beat, like Charlie Watts. He had a kind of discipline and made the groove breathe instead of rush. Most drummers pushed, but Carlos pulled. It changed how the song moved. I watched him from center stage night after night 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 groove, his upper body almost still, all the work happening below the elbow. He was from Ensenada down in Baja, his father had played trumpet in a salsa band on a cruise ship. Simon Gleason had been one thing before him and a different thing after. He wasn't just a good addition but a multiplication, Carlos pulled the beat back, Guillermo

pushed it forward with the congas, and the tension between them was the engine our sound ran on.

Winston, youngest and newest of our crew, was at the Fender Rhodes piano center stage, already inside the chord 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 same grin he'd had since we were students at San Pasqual High. "Levi here still thinks he's gonna settle down one day."

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

Carlos called over the PA from behind the drum kit. His Mexican-accented English only made it funnier. "Only if the right woman show up, man, and she come with a tuning fork and a cattle prod."

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

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

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

My 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 these versions of ourselves that didn't exist outside these moments.

Between sets I stepped off stage and felt the temperature shift. It was cooler away from the lights. I found Carlos and Lamar at the bar where they always stood between sets, taking up the same positions they'd taken for years. A TV mounted above the liquor bottles had been running news on mute all night, the way they often did in bars, present and ignored. 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.

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. It was a commercial building somewhere off the 5 in Los Angeles, a reporter holding a microphone, people being led from a roll-up door with their hands zip-tied behind them.

Carlos went very still.

I looked at Guillermo. He stared at the screen, beer untouched, reading the way people read when they suspect the story might be about them.

“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. A hired gun. He played a yellow Telecaster as if it were a tool he’d spent a lifetime learning to use. Nothing wasted. Every lick precise. He’d played on records that kept lights on and groceries bought in half of southern California.

“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. 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, amps turned off, the electric 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. A persistent coastal dark and San Diego to the south an urban light beacon.

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 a few sounds of Solana Beach doing what it did on a weekend. You could hear people coming out of bars after last call, the traffic on the PCH, and somewhere a car stereo running through something with bass heavy enough to reach us out here.

Jesse flicked ash and grinned, and there it was, the impossible faith, the belief in human decency that was as unshakeable as the change of the tide. I’d grown up alongside him and never fully understood but never stopped relying on him either.

“Nah,” he said. “People don’t hurt each other like that. Not here.”

And the awful part of it, what 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.

The ranch always looked the same, which was both a comfort and a lie. What you could see was unchanged, but pressure was building along the fault lines running beneath the soil. There was the same washboard dirt road curling off 78, one I'd driven thousands of times, with the 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, the leaves dark and waxy in the late afternoon light, fruit hanging heavy on the branch. The place smelled alive when I rolled down the window; earth and irrigation water, fertilizer, a faint sweetness underneath that only showed itself at dusk when the heat finally gave up its chokehold 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 carrying a duffel bag and the silence of men who'd watched something collapse after being told it was worth dying for. My grandfather picked him up in the beat-up International Harvester pickup he drove until the day he died and took him straight to the ranch he'd been working since the early sixties. He'd planted avocados when citrus was still the king, had seen something in the valley's microclimate, the way the marine air pooled in the fold between mountains, the deep alluvial soil that had been building since before anyone thought to call it San Pasqual Valley. He 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 without any discussion, without

ceremony. That's how it worked then. The ranch passed from father to son, and wanting something different wasn't part of the conversation. He expanded the groves over the years, added acreage in the hills above Escondido where the land was cheaper and the water was harder to come by, but the fruit grew dense and oily. He turned his father's forty acres into a hundred and twenty that stretched across both sides of the valley, each purchase making another wager against change.

Ben's truck sat parked crooked near the equipment shed, driver's side door hanging open like he'd stepped away for a minute and forgotten to come back. Radio playing low inside. It was news, not music. Never music anymore. He said once that music required something from you that news didn't. He hadn't elaborated and I hadn't asked. I shut the door as I passed and the sound clicked off like I'd cut a wire. He'd left his spiral notebook on the seat, covered in his careful handwriting. My father had been making a lot of lists lately. Supplies, schedules, irrigation repairs, all the small things he could still fix.

The house held the warm smell of roasting chicken and rosemary, which meant my mother was trying to make us feel normal. Sarah moved through the kitchen with the steady efficiency she'd carried my whole life, a nurse even when she wasn't wearing scrubs, and especially when the damage lived beneath the surface and revealed itself just a little at a time.

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

"Wash your hands. Dinner's almost ready." Sarah never looked up from what she was doing. Some forms of love didn't require eye contact.

The water ran pink over my fingers at the kitchen sink, a rusty residue from the morning's work on my truck that didn't quite come off. It made me think of sinks in hospitals and gas stations, water that left you feeling cleaner whether you were or not. The towel smelled like bleach and fabric softener, my mother's belief that clean surfaces held larger chaos at bay.

Ben sat at the dining table with another notebook, a 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. An acknowledgment without ceremony. A 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 was needed, simple habit moving him through motions his mind had already left behind. He came through the door bringing the smell of the garage beneath his apartment with him: petroleum products, old wood, and a stale scent that never quite aired out no matter how many times you opened the bay doors. I always thought of it as the smell of machinery waiting for a second life. He kissed Sarah's cheek.

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

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

At Caleb's name the room changed pressure. It was barely noticeable unless you knew where to look.

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 drum kit, nobody deciding, just happening. Now it had outlasted all the changes, a small ordinary thing remembering what the room itself no longer could.

The white Ram diesel announced Caleb before he appeared, a low rumble easing too carefully into the drive. More control than was called for. He stepped inside and paused to wipe his boots on the mat, the

gesture formal now, as if through the years he'd become a guest in this 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, now sharpened into something harder. His hair was still regulation-short, the Corps two years gone. He smelled of soap and something sharper underneath. I couldn't figure if it was aftershave or drilled-in discipline.

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. Their avoidance was practiced, smooth, a choreography learned over time where neither of them trusted where a single look might lead.

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 we'd refined over decades. Nobody had to think about where the food went. The thinking was reserved for everything else. Silverware clicked against plates. For several minutes all you could hear was chewing and the refrigerator's hum and the cicadas starting up outside, clocking in for their 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, his sentence working 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, keeping his hands busy, his mind 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, this tension spreading around the table.

Ben’s response came automatic, reflexive. “They’re doing their job.”

Sarah set her fork down quietly, but with purpose. 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. Their baby will be a citizen. They were just doing their job then too.”

The table went quiet. Sarah picked up her fork and set it against her plate and didn’t eat. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen.

Ben’s jaw moved but nothing came out.

Jesse repeated it, not quite a question, not quite agreement, “their job.”

“It’s complicated,” Ben said.

That word again. The kind that made people feel as though they’d done something simply by saying it aloud.

Jesse’s voice sharpened at the edges and 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. “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, his 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 the unsaid.

“And when enforcement breaks the law?”

“That’s what the system’s for.”

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

“Jesse.” Sarah’s voice sharper now, with an 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. What followed felt less like silence and more like bad weather pressing against the windows.

“Boys.” Ben’s voice, trying to restore order, remind them they were family.

Sarah called toward the hallway, voice a bit 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, but old enough to sense when the air was wrong and 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 of someone checking the weather before deciding to go outside.

Caleb's voice softened in the way it never did for anyone else, transformed into something that carried actual warmth. "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, 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. "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 cut through the room. No one answered immediately. Ben and Sarah exchanged a look that came from decades of 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. Elena was too young to understand it, which meant she'd probably understood it for years.

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

"That's what everybody keeps saying. Complicated." She set her fork down. "But it just seems like everybody's mad at everybody else, and nobody will tell me 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 say a word. 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 Sarah's satisfaction, 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.

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. I hadn’t been up that hillside in more than twenty years.

I drove out of the valley. The groves went dark on both sides of the road and then there was just the headlights and the 78.

The warehouse was waiting: eighteen hundred square feet, my guitar collection hanging 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.