

FATAL ODDS

Also by John F. Dobbyn

Neon Dragon

Frame-Up

Black Diamond

Deadly Diamonds

FATAL ODDS

A NOVEL

JOHN F. DOBBYN

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*There are no words in any language to express
how much love and joy I find in my best pal, my total
inspiration, my partner in every adventure, my first editor
and title writer, and the finest person I believe God
ever created—my beautiful bride, Lois.*

*I also thank God for the one who fills our lives
with an abundance of love, laughter, and pride
—our third musketeer, our son, John.*



FATAL ODDS



PART ONE



ONE

THE MANTRA THAT has soothed the furrowed brows of criminal defense attorneys from the early days of the Old Bailey to current times in Boston's Suffolk County Superior Court is simply this: The Lawyer Always Goes Home.

On the other hand, it provides little solace to one facing that most humbling challenge a lawyer can face: defending a client the lawyer truly believes to be innocent. Doing one's best and "going home" falls painfully short of the mark. The only bearable outcome is winning. And that's a curse.

That curse crowned a particular morning that began with a phone call at 5:45, shattering the first moments of actual sleep I had managed all night. I'd spent the prior six hours playing and replaying an event of the previous day that I could not drive out of my consciousness.

The horses were approaching the gate for the fourth race at Suffolk Downs. I was at the track to watch two jockeys I had known nearly as brothers since their early teens. Roberto and Victor Mendosa were born to my mother's sister on the sunny isle of Puerto Rico. In something of a rescue mission, my mother and I had brought them over in their teens to live with her in what was then the Hispanic bastion of Jamaica Plain—frequently referred to by other Bostonians as "Jamaica Spain".

Both boys had worked with horses in Puerto Rico since the time they were big enough to wield a mucking rake. Again in the form of a rescue a few years later, I got them off the gang-dominated streets of Jamaica Plain and onto the backstretch crew of a horse racing trainer of enormous talent and even greater heart, Rick McDonough. He had an eye for talent. He had them both in the saddle as exercise boys before their sixteenth birthday.

The jump from there to the calling of a jockey required three things: horsemanship, courage, and size. No teacher on earth could instill the subtle arts of horsemanship better than Rick. Courage, on the other hand, is, or is not, inborn, and no man or woman can engage in that most dangerous of all sports without a generous God-given abundance of it. Diminutive size—the ability to weigh in within ounces of one hundred and ten pounds—as Rick often said, also cannot be taught. As fate had it, Roberto and Victor were blessed with all three. By their nineteenth birthday, they were both among the ten leading riders at Suffolk Downs.

The horses were at the post. Roberto, the older brother by a year, was on Dante's Pride in post position three. Victor's horse, Summer Breeze, was beside him in post position four. I remember glancing at the tote board and noticing that Roberto's horse was the odds-on favorite at even money. Victor's horse was the second favorite at 3 to 2. All the other horses in the race were there hoping for a miracle of third money.

I was at the rail as the horses approached the gate. I gave both boys the thumbs up and got a smile and nod from each of them.

Victor's horse walked smoothly into the box like a pro. I noticed that Roberto's horse balked and pranced in front of the gate until two assistant starters locked hands under his tail and urged him into the gate. Nothing particularly unusual there. Thoroughbreds are frequently born high-strung.

I was glued to the three and four post positions during that time-stopping pause while the starter waits for every horse to have all four feet planted and head straight. I could almost feel the adrenaline rush that courses through every jockey in the gate.

Then the break. That ear-splitting bell and the clang of metal gates flying open. In a split second, the guttural breaths of horses driving powerful hips and legs in a burst of acceleration, spraying showers of dirt, were punctuated by the yips and yells of the jockeys.

I half-walked, half-ran down the rail. My eyes were glued to the brothers. Victor's four horse broke fast. He was even for the lead with the five horse to his right. I saw Roberto's three horse stumble leaving the gate. He struggled to gain footing through the first five strides. By twenty feet out, he was still not at full balance, but only half a length short of Victor's horse to his right.

Then it happened—what I kept seeing over and over that night for six hours of abortive sleep. For some reason, Victor's horse shied. He veered to the left. He cut into the path of Roberto's horse.

I heard the sickening click of metal shoe on bone. In an instant, the front legs of Roberto's horse crumpled beneath him. The horse tumbled forward, head into the dirt and body somersaulting forward on top of the flailing body of Roberto.

The other horses continued to race, while the double sirens of the ambulance for Roberto and the med-van for the horse screamed down the track from behind. I wanted to vault the rail and run to him, but the medics were on him before I could make a move. They encased his motionless body in an inflatable brace and got him into the ambulance within thirty seconds. The others were able to lead his horse into the van. Both wagons cleared the track before the other racers came around the second turn.

My strongest urge was to run to my car and drive to the Mass General Hospital where they take seriously injured jockeys more

frequently than we want to think. Instead, I ran to the finish line to wait for Victor.

Victor's horse crossed the wire in first place, three lengths ahead of the second horse. When he was able to look around after the finish, he realized that his brother was missing. He was the first one back to the unsaddling area after a sharply foreshortened run-out. He stopped, unsaddled, and weighed in within minutes. I yelled to him. He jumped the rail to come over to me. I told him what I'd seen as we ran to my car.

We arrived at the Mass General emergency room in time for a doctor to call to us over his shoulder. He was following at a run the motionless form of Roberto on a cart headed, we assumed, into surgery.

"Stay in the waiting room. I'll let you know as soon as I can."

"Doc, is he breathing?"

"So far."

TWO

VICTOR AND I waited together at the hospital for the six hours of surgery on Roberto. All through it, I was on the verge of asking Victor why his horse had veered into Roberto's path. Then I'd see the lines of pain, worry, and possibly guilt that creased his face, and the time was never right.

When the doctor finally came out, he looked like he had run a marathon. He wore that "best we could do" look as he explained that bracing and setting bones had been the minor part. Internal bleeding had been severe.

We could see people in uniform wheeling the bed down the corridor with what looked like a collage of plaster, bandages, tubes, and strings. We thanked God that somehow, inside that *mélange*, there was a breathing Roberto.

The doctor sat down in a chair beside us. "He's a tough kid." That much we knew. "We've got him stabilized for the moment. The X-rays show more fractures than that body can sustain."

Victor and I leaned heavily on each other for what we sensed was coming next. The doctor's eyes spoke the emotional investment he had in his patient. His words were directly to Victor whose family tie was written on his face.

"I wish I could say it's over. We'll know better in the next day. I know what you jockeys can take, but that boy had a trauma most of us wouldn't live through. At this point, we can only pray to God he will."

Victor was first. "Can I see him?"

"Sure." He nodded down the corridor. "Go with your brother."

I started to walk with Victor. The doctor caught my arm.

"Just one. Leave your cell phone number. I'll be here checking on him all night. I'll call you if anything . . . either way."

* * *

At 5:45 the next morning, the buzz of the cell phone snapped me out of the restless half sleep I'd dropped into after replaying the first thirty feet of that race for the millionth time. The tug between fear and prayer made me fumble the phone on the first try. I wanted, and didn't want, to hear that doctor's voice. It was a second jolt to hear the raspy voice of the trainer of Roberto's mount, Rick McDonough.

"Hey, Mike, can you get out here?"

"Yeah, Rick. What?"

"Just get out here."

* * *

I made Formula One time through the Boston streets from my apartment on Beacon Street, through the tunnel, and down side streets of East Boston that even cabbies don't know. At that hour, I had few other Boston drivers to challenge at intersections and beat on the straightaways.

They knew me at the gate to the backstretch of Suffolk Downs. At least two mornings a week, I take my wake-up shot, black, strong, and jolting, from the coffee shack at the backstretch by the racing stables in the company of trainers, jockeys, and exercise boys. It usually settles my mind, deep in that misty dawn atmosphere, to

be among the genuine people of the sport I love. It braces me for the real slings and figurative arrows of the outrageous prosecuting attorneys I do combat with beside my law partner of three years, the redoubtable old lion of the criminal defense bar, Lex Devlin.

This morning there was no comfort and no peace. As I walked the length of the twenty stalls of Rick's barn which housed the horses entrusted to his training, I was picking up a sense of profound eeriness. It's always a beehive of action at that time of the morning. Today it was like a tomb. There was no one home.

I reached the rail of the track and saw all of Rick's hot-walkers, muckers, grooms, feeders, and tackers hanging around inside the outer track rail. They looked like they were on strike.

I found Rick down the track, sitting astride his favorite retired racing thoroughbred, clocking a young roan that was breezing full-out in the straightaway. I walked down and leaned against the rail beside him.

"What's up, Rick?"

He kept his focus on the roan. "Hell if I know, Mike. Any word about Roberto?"

"Nothing yet. Maybe no news is good news."

"You're a hell of an optimist. There's no good news in this thing. You know those two over there by the coffee shack?"

I noticed he never looked over at them. I recognized the overstuffed middle-agers in suits that might once have fit two slimmer versions. If I was looking for the first good news of the day, this was not it.

"They're Boston cops, Rick. The one with a face like a grapefruit is Malloy. He's in homicide division."

Rick nodded. "You know him?"

"We've gone a few rounds in court."

"You trust him?"

“Yeah. About as far as I could throw that horse you’re riding. What do they want?”

“They asked if I’d seen Victor Mendosa. I told them no. They wanted my permission to look through the stalls. I told them to knock themselves out.”

“So why aren’t they?”

“I might have added that the last one who walked into one of those stalls without one of my people to control the horse is still walking sideways.”

“Rick, you’re a classic.”

For the first time he looked over at me. “They told me to give them a man to go with them. You know how I like taking orders. I told them all of my men are out on the track waiting for horses. They’ll be back in a while.”

Rick just tapped the walkie-talkie at his side that he used to give orders to the men back in the stables. I got the picture. Apparently all of his men in the stables heard his words to the two police on their receivers and took the hint. Hence the abandoned stables.

The two officers at the coffee shack saw us talking and ambled over, coffee in one hand and a *sopapilla*, the closest thing to a Mexican donut, in the other.

“What the hell are you doing here, Knight?”

“Detective Malloy. What a pleasure. I’m taking in the morning air. And you?”

“Always a smart-ass, Knight.”

“Actually, it’s true. I do it often. What brings you here?”

Malloy was true to his personal code of giving no information about anything to any defense counsel. “Police business. You seen that jockey, Victor Mendosa?”

Now he had me on the defensive and stifling an outbreak of sweat. “Not in a while. Why?”

“You see him, you put him in touch with me.”

He started wandering slowly back to the coffee shack, still waiting for an escort to the stables. I could sense that his ears were still tuned in to me like a wiretap.

I looked back at Rick with the slightest trace of a wink. I knew nothing escaped that old cowboy. “So tell me, Rick. How are things?”

“Okay. Except for that damned Fly Right. She’s gone lame again. Nothing but trouble, that filly.”

I knew Fly Right. She was made of steel. She hadn’t been lame since she was foaled. I picked up Rick’s message.

“You got a carrot, Rick. Maybe she needs some sympathy.”

He pulled a carrot out of his saddlebag and threw it to me. “Careful, Mike. She’ll take your hand off if she can.”

He said it loud enough to reach the listening ears. I walked down to stall seven. Fly Right saw me coming and, as always, put her head over the half door to nuzzle my shoulder and get a rub on her neck. She didn’t refuse the carrot either.

I said it low, barely above a whisper. “*Qué pasa, Victor?*”

“*Es malo, Miguel.*”

We kept it low, although I’d have bet the only Spanish word Malloy knew was “taco.” The gist of our conversation was this.

“What’s going on here, Victor?”

“I stayed at the hospital with Roberto. He never woke up through the night. Those two at the coffee shack came down the hospital corridor about four this morning. I heard them tell the nurse at the station they were there to arrest me.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. I got out of there before they saw me. I can’t go to jail, Mike. I mean it. Not here. Sometime I’ll tell you why.”

The questions running through my mind were piling up faster

than I could ask them. I looked back and saw Malloy and his sidekick walking my way. I grabbed the halter and lead line hanging on an outside hook and slipped it on Fly Right.

“I’ll get their attention, Victor. Get out of here.”

I led Fly Right out of the stall in the direction of Malloy and his buddy without looking up at them. She was a big filly, around sixteen hands, and she always pranced like she was about to spring. I got to within four feet of them and gave a sharp little tug on the lead line. She was spooky enough to bolt straight up.

Malloy nearly jumped out of his suit. He leaped backwards and came down with one leg in a bucket of wash water. The chill of the water gave him a second leap into a pile of straw and horse droppings that had been mucked out of a stall.

He rolled over his protuberant rear end until his flailing feet caught ground and took him as far from the fearsome beast as he needed to go to recover his sense of dignity, if not his temper.

He fired some ripe uncensored words at his junior partner, who almost dropped his sopapilla trying to control an ill-advised explosion of laughter. Meanwhile, I led Fly Right back to his stall, which Victor had vacated unnoticed. I slipped out myself before drawing more attention.

* * *

I drove back through the awakening city traffic to the offices of Devlin & Knight on the seventh floor of 77 Franklin Street in the heart of Boston. For the previous three years, I had had the unquestionable honor of junior partnering with the man who gave birth to more ulcers in opposing prosecuting attorneys than all the rest of the criminal defense trial bar combined. The memory of the trepidation I had experienced when I was first paired with the then

irascible icon, Alexis Devlin, had long since morphed into what could be called sincere respect and admiration—but what, closer to the fact, was the deepest love for the man who slipped into that spot reserved for the father I had lost at an early age.

Mr. D. was close to one side or the other of seventy years; and yet, by eight a.m., I could always find him and a pot of hot coffee in his corner office. I knew he was preparing for the third day of an edgy white-collar criminal trial. He was due in court by nine thirty. I also knew that he'd make the time under almost any circumstance for my morning and late afternoon drop-ins. This one was more than social.

I filled him in on what had happened at the track and the hospital and then that morning at the backstretch. He knew Detective Malloy better than I did. He could hardly control his amusement at the detective's morning flummoxing.

He knew without my asking that I needed his clout with the district attorney's office to get answers that were beyond me. He hit a speed-dial number on his desk phone, put it on speaker, and tilted his solid, block-built form back in the groaning chair. The young voice of Mary Cornelius, the receptionist at the Suffolk County District Attorney's office, gave him a greeting warmer than he was likely to get from anyone else in that office, with one exception.

"Mary, would you do me the kindness to ring the only other one in that office of yours with more brains than ambition?"

She was obviously alone at the moment. I could hear the unabashed grin in her voice.

"Mr. Devlin, for you, anything."

"Oh-ho, don't let the Dragon Lady hear that. She'll have your head on a stake."

We could almost hear the grin broaden. "I'll ring Mr. Coyne for you."

From the day I'd met Mr. Devlin, he'd told me with assurance that Billy Coyne, deputy district attorney, was the only career professional in the office with no eye on political or other advancement. He stood head, shoulders, and hips above the rest of the clan in legal acumen and, more to the point, pure old-school professionalism—meaning that if he gave his word, no power in Heaven or Hell could shake him on it. Perhaps because they were cut from the same cloth, their hundreds of one-on-one courtroom jousts had forged a respect that spilled heavily over into an unexpressed affection.

“Lex. How pleasant to start the day with a call from a worthy opponent.”

“Opponent to hell, Billy. Can't a man make a call for a friendly chat with a brother at the bar?”

“Lex, don't ever retire. I'd starve without your steady diet of Irish horse manure. What bit of unentitled information do you want to do me out of this morning?”

“Need I remind you of your own Gaelic heritage, Mr. Coyne? If I had a nickel for every snookering you've—”

“Lex, enough. We'll have this out later. I'm due in court. What are you looking for?”

“A simple answer to a simple question. There was an accident at the track yesterday. A jockey was injured. It happens he was family to my partner, Michael. This morning we hear there's an arrest warrant out for his brother. What's that sinister spiderette you work for up to this time?”

There was a pause. “Is Knight there with you?”

I chipped in. “Good morning, Mr. Coyne.”

Another pause. “I'm sorry, kid. I'd heard you were close. Roberto Mendosa died early this morning.”

It was like a brick wall you see coming, but you won't admit it's there until you slam into it full force. The breath went out of me.

I couldn't have responded even if I could have focused on the conversation. I'd been more a part of Roberto's life, and vice versa, than any member of his family except Victor. And now, in an instant—no more.

The thought of Victor brought me back to the planet.

"Mr. Coyne, what's the charge against Victor?"

"I'm sorry, kid. This is a double belt for you. The district attorney wants him charged with murder."

Mr. D. was up and pacing. "Billy, what the hell is going on over there? I know you can't control her, but this is insanity. It was a racing accident. Michael was there. He described the whole thing. It would hardly call for a steward's inquiry, let alone an indictment."

"You don't have the whole picture, Lex."

"Well, I'm listening."

"I can't."

"Billy, you're the brains and morality of that outfit. Do you go along with this?"

"I've said all I can. I'm due in court. I have a full day. Trial, lunch at the Marliave, trial all this afternoon. I have to go."

There was a catch before Mr. D. said what he was going to say in strong terms. Instead, he said it quietly. "Billy, who else?"

"No one."

Mr. D. hung up the phone. I could see the concern in every line on the old warrior's face. "Michael, I'm sorry."

"I know, Mr. Devlin."

"What about Victor?"

"I've got to find him before Malloy does. I assume we'll be representing him." I looked up for confirmation.

"With everything we've got. Do you know where to start looking for him?"

"I think so. I'll be in touch."

“Billy wants to meet us for lunch at the Marliave. That was his message. He couldn’t talk there. I want you with us to hear it firsthand.”

THREE

I COULD FEEL the past smothering me when I walked into Pepe's Bar off Hyde Square in Jamaica Plain. I hadn't set foot in the place since my early teens, but I could still walk blindfolded through the layout of tables and chairs to the long bar. The bartender didn't recognize me, but in spite of the aging, I knew him.

He wiped the bar and listened for an order without making eye contact.

"Hola, Manuel."

He looked up, but nothing registered. I said nothing. He squinted until a dawn of faint recognition brought back more hostility than I expected. I can't capture the venom in the tone, but what he said in Spanish was this.

"You dare to come back here. You think you walk in here and it's the old days? You're dead in this town." He said it, turned his back, and started to walk away.

"I need to see Paco. Where is he?"

The words stopped him. He turned around and looked in my eyes with the heat of hatred I'd never seen before. "Like it's all over and forgotten, what you left here. You're lucky to be able to walk out that door."

He turned away again.

"It's not your call, Manuel. I'll leave when I hear it from Paco. This is for Victor Mendosa. It's for his life. You call Paco now."

I walked to a table in the corner. I could feel his eyes burning into my back, but I felt sure the old man wouldn't make a move on me without someone's permission. I didn't look back, but I could hear the click of numbers punched into the bar phone. Whatever he said was too low to make out, but I heard Paco's name. I sat down and let the memories burn hot in my mind.

I saw a fourteen-year-old boy who had just lost his father to a heart attack. His mother had moved the two of them from the snow-white North Shore of Boston to the mostly Puerto Rican barrio of Jamaica Plain to be among people of her familiarity and language. She didn't know it, but she was placing her son smack on the violent border between two warring street gangs. To avoid being victimized by both, the boy had to choose between the Diablos and the Coyotes. Either one was a bad choice, but the alternative was to surrender everything from his lunch to his life to the predations of both gangs. For reasons that seem hardly adequate now, he went with the Coyotes.

Coyote headquarters in those days, as apparently in the present, was Pepe's Bar. A younger Manuel was the bartender, and the dominant ruler of the Coyotes was a warrior called Paco. There weren't many to emulate in that strutting, macho collection of outcast juveniles who fell back on violence to mask the constant fear and lack of self-worth.

But there was Paco. He was like a rough diamond in a case of costume jewelry. At somewhere in his thirties, he had come up through the same banishment to an ethnic area outside of the mainstream of "normal" society. But something about him said to that fourteen-year-old boy that there was a higher human quality, an internal strength in this man that would never surrender to self-inflating machismo. This was a *real* man, pure and simple.

The odd thing was that from the day that boy first walked into that bar, there was some invisible, unlikely bond growing between

him and Paco. No one else knew it, but to the boy it was almost tangible.

After a trial time with the gang, I could hear the words of one of Paco's lieutenants sending the boy out to pass the first stage of initiation to become a full member of the Coyotes. The boy was ordered to hot-wire a classic Cadillac parked outside of a funeral home during a wake. In those days, that was not beyond the talents of most fourteen-year-olds in that neighborhood. The part the boy couldn't quite carry off was impressing the police in a patrol car within six blocks of the funeral home that he was your average owner of a classic Cadillac.

The trial was brief. The prosecutor wanted the boy tried as an adult to "send a message to the community." Short of that, he was pressing the judge for the maximum number of years in some graduate school of criminality called a "juvenile detention home." Either way, the boy saw it as the end of his life.

Then a miracle happened. The owner of the Cadillac appeared in that pitiful courtroom that was, for most defendants who passed through it, the last station on the road to hell on earth. Miles O'Conner was defense attorney to names on the letterheads of Fortune 500 institutions who found themselves charged with what are appropriately called "white-collar crimes." He conferred with the judge and prosecutor for an interminable twenty minutes before reaching a result that sent the prosecutor off in a huff, and sent the boy off on the coattail of the man who became the boy's guardian, savior, and substitute father.

The boy's life became a different kind of hell, working at the lowliest chores in the North Shore stables of Miles O'Connor every waking moment that he was not in school or studying. But without realizing it, the boy grew into the O'Connor mindset that whatever exertion it took, no standard but perfection would be tolerated. That

mindset eventually drove him to the top of his class at Harvard and Harvard Law School. The usual social life and college frivolity of his classmates was never an issue. There was never time for it if he was to insure the man who made everything possible that he'd hear the boy's name among the top prizewinners at every level. When Miles O'Connor died, the boy realized that there was no human being on earth for whom he would more gladly walk off a cliff.

* * *

I was jolted out of the memories of those years when the door of the bar opened. I saw an older man come through the door with hard years written across his face. I didn't recognize him until he turned to look at me. Between the deep, ancient scars on his face, I could read the features of the man I had so admired as a boy.

When he walked toward my table, he limped on legs that were bent and misshapen. I thought I could see a misting in his eyes, but perhaps the moisture was in my own eyes.

I stood up, and we looked at each other. I started to say, "Paco", but the word stuck in my throat. His eyes lowered and he dropped, more than sat, in the opposite chair. As before, he was still more comfortable speaking Spanish.

"Por qué regresastes, Miguel?"

He said it with both pain and a softer emotion. "Why did you come back, Michael?"

I sat down with him. "What happened to you, Paco? You were the strongest one of the gang."

He just slowly shook his head. When he looked up, he held up two fingers to the bartender. I could see Manuel open one Dos Equis beer. Paco saw it. He hit the table with his fist. "*Dos, Manuel. Dos!*"

Manuel opened another bottle and brought them both to the table. He set one before Paco, and put the other in the center of the table before walking away. I took the bottle and held it. Paco raised his, and we drank that first sip together.

Paco sat back. "You've done well, Miguel. You took the opportunity. You made something good of yourself. I'm proud of you."

"I've been very fortunate."

"Fortunate . . . Yes, you could call it that."

I heard the bartender, Manuel, smash an empty bottle into the trash. He grabbed the lip of the bar and yelled across the room. "Fortunate, you call it, do you? And to hell with you."

Paco shook his head and waved Manuel to break it off. Manuel ignored him. He yelled from across the room, "Sometimes good fortune has to be bought at a great price! A great price!"

Paco looked at me with eyes that seemed to have aged since he came into the room. "Why did you come back, Miguel? It was better to leave it all in the past."

Manuel came out from behind the bar wringing a bar towel between his clenched fists. "You. You think you just walked away from the Coyotes? You ever heard of anyone walking away from the gang and living?"

He walked over close and put his fists on the table. "This man paid your price. You were off somewhere with the big lawyer in the safe, easy life. We didn't even know where. And a good thing for you. The gang found out what this man did for you, and he paid your price. Look at him. I didn't think he'd live at the time."

I looked back at Paco. "I don't understand, Paco. What did you do?"

Manuel leaned down in my face. "He won't tell you. That day your Miles O'Connor came to that court and took you away from a term in prison. You think a man like that just wanders into that pit of a courtroom?"

I had never thought much about why Miles O'Connor came that day. "It was his car that I stole."

"What that car cost him he could make in half of one fee. He could buy a hundred more cars and never miss a meal. It wasn't the car."

"Then what?"

"I was there when this man made a call. He set up an appointment with your Miles O'Connor. He had to plead with his secretary to fit him into his schedule."

Manuel looked down at the bent figure of Paco. He had to force the words. "Paco went to see him. He told your Miles O'Connor there was this kid he thought was worth saving. That's why he went to that courtroom."

I had trouble catching my breath to get the words out. "I never knew. Paco, I swear, I never knew."

Paco just waved his hand as if to wave it all away.

Manuel stood upright. "Then it's good you know now. Because the gang found out. What they did to him was intended for you. Look at him. Even after all that, he's more of a man than you'll ever be."

Paco took him by the elbow and turned him toward the bar. "Leave us, Manuel. Enough. I still have some pride."

Manuel grabbed the bar towel and left with one last meaningful look at me.

I turned back to Paco. "I'm so sorry. I truly never knew. All these years . . ."

Paco held up a hand. "Stop, Miguel. I see what you've done with your life. Do you think I wouldn't do the same thing again? Let's leave it there."

Paco leaned forward across the table. "Something brought you down here today. What is it?"

I leaned closer across the table. This was not for Manuel's ears.

“Maybe I can pay the debt for another one of our brothers. You heard about the death of Roberto Mendosa at Suffolk Downs yesterday?”

“I heard. You know how word travels among the brothers.”

“The district attorney is going after his brother, Victor. She’s charging him with causing his death.”

Paco blew a low whistle through crusty lips.

“I’m going to represent Victor. I’ll do everything I can for him. He’s not just a client. He’s my cousin. And he’s one of us.”

Paco nodded. “So why does that bring you here?”

“Victor’s on the run. I need to bring him in. There’s a cop, Detective Malloy. If he catches up with him first, it could be not so good for Victor.”

“I hear what you say, Miguel. Still, why does that bring you here?”

I sat back in the chair. “I owe you everything in my life, Paco. I’ll never go back on that. Anything you want from me, it’s yours. I want you to know that.”

I could see those tired eyes come alive with a fire that wasn’t there before. “I think you’re about to ask something I can’t give you, Miguel.”

“I need to find him, Paco. Malloy may be the least of his worries.”

He shrugged. “I’m an old man. I don’t fight those wars anymore.”

I leaned forward to whisper, “You’ll never be that old. I saw the tattoo yesterday. On Victor. ‘NDC.’”

His eyes took on something that looked like a defensive wall. He shrugged. “Lot of our boys have tats.”

“Not that one. They wouldn’t dare.”

Those eyes were ablaze now. The rest of his body just slouched as if in ignorance. “You been listening to fairy tales.”

“Listen, Paco. I may be a half blood, but I keep in touch. Those letters mean ‘*Nyeta de Corazón*’—‘*Nyeta* from the heart.’”

Paco just closed his eyes.

I had to crack the shell. I was so close now we could practically touch foreheads across the table. “Don’t shut down on this, Paco. Listen to me. I had a cousin in Oso Blanco Prison in Rio Piedras in Puerto Rico. Two guards thought he had a stash of drug money on the outside. They were wrong, but they tried to muscle him into giving it up. He took a beating, but he had nothing to give them. They said they’d come back the next day. They would have killed him.”

His eyes were open now. He said nothing, but I could sense every muscle tightening.

“They found those guards that night with their throats cut. Here’s a puzzle. Who do you think did it?”

His jaws just shut tighter.

“Talk to me, Paco. Every drop of that Puerto Rican blood in your veins is saying it. The *Nyetas*. They made my cousin in Puerto Rico a *Hermano*, a Brother. He told me about them later when he needed me to defend his son in this country on a drug charge. You and I both know the *Nyetas* started in prison, but they’re the strongest organized gang in Puerto Rico. They’re strong here too. In the jails, in the city. Are you going to lie to me now, Paco? You going to take the safe road and tell me you never heard of them?”

I put both my hands in a fist on the table in front of him with the forefingers and the middle fingers crossed. I know he saw the *Nyeta* sign, and he knew what it meant. He just looked away.

“You don’t know what you’re playing with.”

“I know they have thousands of members here. They make alliances with local Puerto Rican gangs here to peddle their drugs, and other things we don’t need to mention. I think that’s what happened years ago with the Coyotes?”

“I never had anything to do with drugs.”

“I know, Paco. But you’re not the boss now. Just tell me if I’m off base.”

“And if I say you’re off base, will you just drop it? You’re walking a dangerous path.”

“I can’t. I have to bring Victor in. Right now. I figure he went to the *Nyetas* to go underground. It’s the worst thing he could do. I think you could put me in touch with someone who knows.”

The fire in Paco’s eyes had gone out. He stood up. He took a couple of bills out of his pocket. His voice was strong now. “Nice to see you, *Miguelito*.” He threw the bills on the table. “But our worlds are too far apart. There’s nothing for you here. I wouldn’t come back.” The bottom fell out of my heart when he turned and limped his way out the door.

I noticed the self-satisfied grin on Manuel as he focused on washing glasses. I left with a stone in my heart and not an idea in the world of where to go from there.

I walked the two blocks to where I had parked my Corvette. The young boy I paid to watch it was sitting faithfully on the curbstone. He popped up when I held out a five-dollar bill. When he took the bill, he mumbled something in Spanish. He brushed my jacket as he ran past me.

I reached in my pocket for my keys and felt a piece of paper that hadn’t been there a moment ago. I was careful to drive out of the neighborhood before opening the paper. It had words in Spanish scrawled in broken letters. They said roughly “Nine o’clock tonight. Bench on west side of Jamaica Pond.” In heavier letters, “*Cuidado!*” “Be careful!”