

MacLoughlin's Game – Coming Soon!

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Chapter 1

The compact disc player in Jonathan's leased Volvo skipped when he hit another rain filled pothole. He cursed the car, the hole, and then himself out loud for ever agreeing to meet his younger brothers.

What a pair they were. Lazy. Stupid. And as useless as his old man wasting away in that luxury geezer motel. He could almost smell his inheritance burning. "Miserable bastard. Can't even croak on time."

He gunned the engine and blew through a stop sign, deciding that the only people who would be driving in this neighborhood, at this hour, would be in stolen cars or selling crack. He had insurance. "Screw them if they can't take a joke."

The engine lurched, then gasped as Jonathan downshifted mercilessly from forth to second in an attempt to avoid a forgotten speed bump at the entrance to his brother's garage. He failed and the car popped from the ground and skidded sideways to a stop.

Disgusted, he left the smoking vehicle and walked up the drive toward the office. He glanced briefly at the faded sign clanking in the night air. Once it read, "Sam & Windy's Gas & Garage." He almost laughed. The twins hadn't fixed anything of value in weeks and the only gas came from them consuming too much beer and Mexican take-out. It seemed the sign sensed the change and faded itself accordingly. Now a town joke, "Sam & Windy's rage," was an easy target for spray paint and dispersions.

Jonathan pulled back a flimsy screen door and entered the office. He surveyed piles of dusty folders and crumpled food containers thrown everywhere but the trash. He smirked wickedly.

"Nice. You two ever heard of a broom?"

Sam looked up from his racing form, nodded hello, and returned to his reading. Windy flashed a mustard yellow grin and motioned for Jonathan to sit down.

"Want a drink?" asked Windy, through a thick cough.

Jonathan shook his head and watched his brother's trembling hand pour three fingers of scotch into a dirty coffee mug. He looked worse than usual; weak, thin, so gray it appeared as though his blood had been sucked out and replaced with formaldehyde. He'd been sick for years but the last few months had been particularly harsh. The brothers ignored his condition, but reality remained.

"Off the wagon?"

Windy looked puzzled. "Hell, I ain't never been on."

"What about you, Sam?" asked Jonathan. "I thought you gave up the ponies when Mom died. Can't even give her that much, huh?"

Sam dropped the paper to his lap and grinned. "Like you're perfect, slick. I hear you fucked up things down at Brustman & Harding's pretty good."

"So you read the papers now? Surprise, surprise. At least I had a job to lose. What do you have? A family you never see, and a business you and this jag-off here ran into the ground. Every parent's dream."

"You're behind the times. She's an ex-wife Jonny. Filed the papers Friday."

The news surprised Jonathan. Norah threatened divorce constantly. She even called him for both personal and legal advice on occasion, but he never thought she would actually see it through. Norah was an Irish Catholic with immigrant parents and a nun for a sister. If the guilt didn't kill her, the family would.

When she first phoned him, Jonathan relished the idea of dragging his brother through court. She had been his life-long friend and Sam all but abused her physically. But now, faced with the reality of the situation, he couldn't help pity his brother. He'd been through the mill recently and the taste of the split still soured his expression.

"Sorry," said Jonathan, trying his best to mean it.

"Like hell you are. You couldn't care less if you tried." Sam tossed the form toward a rusted metal desk and watched as it toppled a pile of unopened bills. "Pour me some of that scotch Windy."

The two men toasted his divorce and quickly refilled their glasses. Jonathan got the feeling that Windy knew less about Sam's marital problems than he, but any excuse to drink was a welcome one. The only thing that amazed Jonathan more than Windy's callousness was the fact that he continued to breath regularly. His drinking should have killed him long ago.

Jonathan drifted. He remembered sneaking into his father's liquor cabinet. The brothers took turns nipping at various bottles, while their friend Tommy kept watch at the door. By the third sip Jonathan and Sam were green and fighting for the bathroom, but the taste never bothered Windy. He just called them babies as they puked. Then he took another slug just to prove he wasn't faking. A natural at twelve. The kids they were had been impressed by the feat, but now the thought of Windy's shriveled liver made Jonathan cringe. He regretted luring the twins to the booze that day. It was stupid. But he regretted even more having a father who kept such things unlocked. What if they were younger and it had been a gun?

Suddenly, Jonathan was overcome with a desire to flee. The where to wasn't important. He just had to get out.

"Look boys, as much as I love these get togethers, I'm afraid I have to take off. I'm an out of work lawyer now with a lousy rep and no friends. The pavement is calling and I've gotta fight the crowd."

"Good luck," said Sam.

"What's that crack about?"

"Face it," said Windy. "You're screwed. That kid you defended raped and butchered seven girls, college girls who lived in that little city. What kind of a cold-hearted bastard could argue for someone like him?"

"I get paid to be a bastard. Just like Dad did."

"Not any more," said Sam. "They dumped your ass as soon as the case made the national press. Gotta love that loyalty, huh Jonny-boy?"

"Dad would have never taken the case," said Windy.

"Oh yeah, he was a real saint that one," said Jonathan.

"Maybe not, but he wouldn't have bashed the victim's parents like you did. What the hell kinda of a defense strategy was that?"

"The only one we had. He pleaded not guilty and I had to go with his word. My job was to get the kid off by any means necessary. I hung the jury. Dad would have been proud."

"Of course, especially when that news reporter made your client cry. She got in four minutes what none of you retards could get in four months. He spilled it on national television and made you look like a royal screw up. Dad woulda puked."

He knew Windy was wrong in assuming too much from too little, but he wasn't in a fighting mood. He tried to turn the argument into an old game he and Windy played during his law school days.

"Objection. Counsel is speculating," said Jonathan.

"Overruled."

"You can't overrule me. You're opposing counsel."

Windy took another nip of Scotch and slammed the cup to the desk. "Fine, I'll get Judge Sam to do it."

"Overruled," said Sam. He hated games and lawyers, but marveled at the thought of pissing-off Jonathan.

"Why?" asked Jonathan.

"Those were the facts as they would have happened."

"Oh, I see. Practicing a little psychic law, are you Windy?"

"He confessed for Christ's sake. They should have his head on a platter."

"No dice. The confession was inadmissible. The verdict was reached, the case adjourned, and in this country buddy you can only be tried once for a crime."

"That's bullshit."

"That's the law."

"Same thing. Dad was never that way."

Jonathan waved an angry hand in the air and almost sneered at Windy. "Oh get over it already. The guy was a scum bag. He hit us, ignored Mom, and dismissed anyone who suggested he was an addict. The only thing he lived for was Jack Daniel's, cash, and the courtroom. He would have tried the case in a heartbeat, only he would have won and kept the kid from the cameras. He wasn't much of a person, but he was a damn good lawyer. I'll give him that. Why can't you see him for what he was?"

"You mean is," said Windy.

Sam smiled broadly. "Man, just look at us. Are we his kids or what? Like three pricks in a pod."

"Whatever," said Windy.

"I didn't come here to argue all night," said Jonathan. "I'm out of here. Happy drinking boys. Throw one back for me."

"Wait Jon," said Windy, hopping from the desk with surprising agility. "We've got problems."

"We don't have shit. There is no we. Not any more. Isn't that right, Sam?"

Sam turned to the floor as if it would provide him an answer. It didn't. He shifted his glance to the wall. No luck. He tried the clock. It ticked away endlessly. Out of objects, his face grew cold. He fought back a struggling sense of guilt and pounded the table hoping to disguise it as anger.

"I'm not talking to this smug asshole."

"The hell you're not. Tell 'em Sam. Tell 'em what you told me."

"Forget it. Go. Get the hell out of here." Sam brushed away Jonathan like lint from a suit pant and rose to refill his glass. "I'm fine."

"And I'm the one in denial? You gotta talk to him Jon."

"What? What's so urgent that you call me here at two o'clock in the friggin' morning?"

Sam sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. He hated having to crawl, especially to his older brother. It would never be forgiven, never forgotten. Nothing ever was in his family.

"I'm in a bit of a bind."

"How much?" asked Jonathan.

"Seventy-five."

"Hundred?"

"Thousand."

"What? How the hell could a nothing like you run up that much of a tab? Nice joke boys, but I'm not in the mood."

Jonathan turned to leave but Windy was already there. "Listen to him Jon. Things are bad, all around. We have to stick together."

"Like you stuck by me during the trial?"

The twins fell silent. There was no arguing that point. Neither of them offered so much as a phone call after things turned ugly. His first big case had gone sour, without warning without word. He was too green to handle what it became, but that didn't shield

him when the shit began to fall. They left it alone, everyone did. Jonathan would take that to the bank, and the grave.

Moments past as the three men fixated on the clanking door. What a waste it was to live such lives, to be such men. How ever did they get this way? Three brothers, inseparable in youth, now filled with disgust for each other and contempt for a father they once admired. It was as if they were all lying in that hospital bed with him, just waiting to die. Or perhaps more accurately, failing to live.

Escape. It was all they had left, all they desired. But they wanted to escape themselves, and that, as many discover, is impossible.

"It wasn't my money," said Sam, breaking the silence.

"I'm listening."

"I was running numbers for Franky out of the restaurant. You'd be surprised how much cash he takes in. I was skimming from the top here and there as usual, nothing too much. I suspected he knew and let it slide. In his line everyone steals. I was just another expense."

"And then?"

"Then I started borrowing big time. Sometimes I took from the back office, now and then I hit the registers, but mostly I lifted from the numbers and the bookie cash. The tips I got from the boys down on Union Avenue usually paid off. I replaced what I took from my winnings. And if I lost, I covered it by borrowing from Donato."

"Donato knew what you were up to and still lent you money?"

"He didn't actually know for sure know, but the guy's smart. He suspected. Anyway, it wasn't that much at first. Besides, you know him. If ever the day came I couldn't pay, he'd cover his ass by ratting me out to Franky. Then he'd score some real points by offering to whack me as a personal favor. He's a real prince."

"So what happened?" asked Jonathan.

"I took the spread on the Steelers game. Who knew they could suck so much after last year. Two games into the season and they're playing like Girl Scouts. Lost to an expansion team for Christ's sake. The fuckers. I lost it all this morning."

"The whole seventy-five today?"

"Yeah. Ah, you know, plus my usual five."

"Eighty? You're into him for eighty? Are you nuts?"

"Apparently so," said Sam with a smile.

"Yeah, this is real funny jag-off," said Windy, throwing his hands up to a God he had long since forgotten.

"And now what?"

"I need money, Jonny. Big time. Sunday's a big day for Franky. The only good thing is that he doesn't know yet. He won't find out until tomorrow morning when they tally the receipts."

"Talk to him. Talk to him now. It's the only way."

"Get real. The action on the game was hot. He's expecting a good take. You gotta understand Jonny, I'm not just responsible for the eighty. I took that money from bets made against mine. Franky is gonna have to cover their winnings out of his own pocket. That's intense cash."

"How much?"

"Can't say for sure, but based on what I collected alone, I think we're talking like two fifty."

Jonathan sunk in his chair. There was no way he could raise that kind of money. Sure he had the condo, but it was new and no banker would ever give him a second mortgage with the kind of equity he had accumulated thus far. He almost laughed. It never occurred to him before how little he was worth. All these years of patting himself on the back. College. Law school. His much bragged about private pilot's license. Even the old man

was impressed with that one. But here and now his accomplishments didn't mean squat. His net worth was donut, and he still owed about forty grand in student loans.

"Sammy. I can't swing that much. Not by a long shot."

"Dad can," said Sam.

"With the hospital meter ticking away? Be serious. I'd be surprised if he even had that much to begin with, not that he would ever give it to you."

"He might," said Windy, ducking from the icy glances that followed his comment. "I'm serious. Maybe if we wait a little longer. Who knows? Anything is better than... than."

"Than what?" asked Jonathan.

"You know," said Sam, taking a slug of Scotch.

"Funny."

"Jonny, Franky is gonna kill me when he finds out. There is no questioning that. If I don't make a deal with him and come up with the cash in a hurry I'm dead."

"So you'd kill pop?"

"Not me...us. I need you guys to help me pull it off."

"No fucking way."

"Jonny, it's me or him. Not a wonderful choice I know, but that's all I have man."

"You see this?" asked Windy. "You hear this craziness? This is why I called you. He's completely lost it. He wants us to kill our own father."

"He's already dead. He just lies there like a piece a wood."

"A coma is not dead," said Windy.

"It is for him and you know it. Of all people, you should admit that much. He's been like that for two years already. What, you think you're gonna drink him well? He's not waking up and he is not getting any worse. He's just existing as is. He should have died with Mom in the plane. Him and his stupid planes. God, it's just like him to pull something like this. Stubborn bastard. Why didn't he just die?"

Sam covered his eyes for a moment and then cleared his throat heavily. "I never liked him. I'm not gonna stand hear and lie to you guys about that. But even he doesn't deserve to live this way. He wouldn't have wanted it."

"It's convenient for you to think of his welfare now," said Jonathan.

"We've been talking about it for months big shot. Right Windy?"

Windy stroked a chin full of three-day stubble and raised his glass. He took a sip and refused to swallow, as if the action would excuse him from having to speak. It didn't. His Adam's apple chased the liquor to his belly and it landed with a resounding thud. Slowly, his answer wrestled itself from his tongue.

"Yeah."

"And you didn't tell me? Thanks again boys."

"Oh get off it. You're never even here. You don't see, you don't hear, and you don't know a Goddamn thing about the situation. You'd get your share and be happy with the getting. We all know what's in the will, twenty-five percent each with the rest going to old man Grayson."

"Who?"

"Pop's first flight instructor. But don't worry. The guy's in his early seventies at best and may not even remember the will. The good news is that if he kicks before dad, we all get a third."

"Charming to the last," said Windy.

"How much is there?" asked Jonathan, surprised at his harsh curiosity.

"I figure we'd clear a good three to four hundred a piece after taxes. You gotta take out legal fees and burial costs, but it's still a nice chunka change. Franky would wait for the processing if you explain things to him. I'd even throw in an extra fifty grand to cover the hassle factor."

"That's big of you."

"Well, I'm that kinda guy."

"Of course, that would leave you with nothing?"

"Better than being dead."

"I guess. And you're sure about the numbers?"

"Searched his office myself."

"You went in there?"

"Christ Jonny, we ain't kids no more. I can go where I wanna go. Besides, the will was just sitting there in the drawer by his .45. No lock. No foul. Right?"

"I guess."

"Guess nothing. The old man had more than we ever imagined; way over a million, mostly in cash, and we lived like friggin' bums. Miserable bastard. The money is real Jonny, and it's going to waste supporting a life nobody wants anymore."

"Jesus Christ," said Windy. "He's our father."

Sam leapt from his chair and pushed an angry finger into Windy's chest. "What? You want play martyr? You want to sugar coat things? Well fuck you buddy. We're all screwed in our own way. Each of us would benefit if the old man died. So let him. Let's do this thing while there's something left to spend. Good riddance."

Jonathan reached for the bottle. Was he really here? Where these men his blood? He swirled the liquid about the bottom and then held it to his nose. The strong scent surprised him and he winced slightly. He cleaned the top with his shirt cuff, licked his upper lip in anticipation, and swallowed the remainder in a single gulp. He replaced the bottle on the desk, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked toward Sam.

"You're not talking euthanasia, are you?"

"Takes too long and cost too much. Lawyers and liberals saw to that. There's no way we could get a plug-pulling in time to save my ass. Just as well, I misplaced Dr. Death's home number. We have to do it ourselves."

"It's murder," said Windy.

"Yeah. You can rationalize it down to mercy killing if you want, but we have too much to gain for it to be anything else. We'd be offing our father for money. It's that simple."

"What do you mean we?" asked Windy. "I have no reason to take part in this nonsense."

A tall, robust man in a dark tailored suit emerged from the shadows. He was gray in beard, but solid in appearance. Jonathan guessed sixty, though a much younger age would have been equally acceptable. His skin, defying nature, held remarkably taut even to such trouble areas as the neck and chin. Jonathan searched for hints of cosmetic surgery, but there were none, save a botched attempt to dull a wicked scar which mapped a trail down the jaw line from his left ear to rounded chin. He was tanned, polished, and remarkably relaxed for someone who had overheard a murderous plot.

"I beg to differ Mr. Holiday," said the stranger.

Suddenly Jonathan was trembling. What if he's a friend of father's? What if he's a cop? He pushed the thoughts aside and stepped toward the man.

"What do you mean?" asked Windy, more concerned with the stranger's challenge than his appearance.

"You have more to lose than anyone, even your dear brother Samuel over there."

"What is he talking about?" asked Jonathan.

"Tell them Jacob. That is your real name, is it not?"

"How did you...?"

"Well I hardly think your parents would have named you Windy. So tell them Jacob, about the status of your liver, your kidneys. Talk with them about the cost of transplants and dialysis, and the fact that without care you'd be lucky to last half a year. It should prove quite interesting."

"Is he for real?" asked Sam.

"In a manner of speaking," said the stranger.

He raised his ivory walking stick and admired the countless nicks and dents spread about its length. His smile made it clear that the instrument's purpose was not to help him amble about. He flipped it from end to end, spun it through his fingers, and kicked it to a halt. He laughed.

"You all have reasons for wanting your father dead. And you all will gain remarkably from his passing. Money, yes. But that is the least of what you seek. Freedom from addiction, a chance to live, a new career. In short, new lives and beginnings for you all. But to have them, you must allow the unthinkable to happen."

Sam bolted from his chair and darted toward the old man. He hated people to begin with, but those who got in his business without invitation were simply asking for trouble. He threw a punch. Jonathan was sure of it, but the only thing that landed was Sam's ass on the floor. The stranger almost giggled.

"Who are you?" asked Jonathan.

"The name's MacLoughlin. I'm here to help you fellows."

"Sammy-boy would argue that point."

"Drunken men are best left to their chairs," said MacLoughlin.

"I guess so."

"Gentleman, it would be impossible for any of you to be directly involved with your father's demise. Even if only one does the killing, you would all run a tremendous risk. Given your record of loyalty, if one was captured, all would fall. No, you will need alibis and I have the best one possible."

"And that is?" asked Sam, wiping blood from his mouth.

"Simply my good fellow, that you were never there."

"So who's gonna kill him, you? Don't let that lucky shot go to your head."

MacLoughlin snapped his stick toward Sam and watched in delight as he nearly shed his skin. There was no luck involved in anything the old man did. He was purpose in action.

"Look, whoever you are, we're not killing my father," said Windy.

"That's admirable given your condition Jacob, but it's hardly truthful. Lie to yourself if you wish, but you are only one vote of three. In the end you brothers must stick together. Ironic, only in the planning of your father's death do you bring him the happiness he sought all his life. His sons together. What a simple request."

"Nothing's ever simple buddy," said Sam with a sneer.

MacLoughlin ignored the comment and the hint of attitude. "I assume you are the leader of sorts."

Jonathan gave a cautious nod.

"Good. So with Samuel at yes and Jacob no, it's up to you to cast the deciding vote. Shall I kill the old boy or not? Tell me quick as time grows short for your siblings."

Jonathan sat in silence. For him it was easier to accept the stranger's existence and uncanny ability to know things that should not have been known, than for him to admit to himself that the next word he uttered would decide the fate of the man he called Dad.

He jammed images of Christmas and birthday parties into his brain. He ran the entire archives of his childhood at full speed from start to finish hoping to uncover even a single moment of happiness that included his father. Nothing came. Jonathan realized for the first time that the motionless figure embedded with tubes and surrounded by machines and nurses was not much of a man. He was even less of a father, a husband, or a friend. And as much as Windy like to pretend it so, the accident had nothing to do with these facts. He was a distant, abrasive, demanding old son-of-a-bitch. Jonathan hated him. And yet, for some reason, he couldn't make the decision. Perhaps it was because Jonathan saw so much of himself in the man.

"Tough, isn't it?" asked MacLoughlin. "It's all on you Jonathan. But it doesn't have to be."

Jonathan's expression turned curious.

"I propose a game of chance. This way your father's fate will not rest with you, but rather, it will lie in the cards."

He unbuttoned his jacket and removed an unopened deck. He disposed of the cellophane, shuffled intensely, and laid it smoothly across the desk.

"I'm a sporting gent, so here's my proposal. I'll play a game of high card with Jonathan. If I win, I'll dispose of your problem and collect one hundred thousand dollars for the trouble. If Jonathan wins, I'll pay off that Mr. Franky, and see about getting Jacob to a qualified physician."

"And what does Jonny get out of it?" asked Sam.

"Either way he gets his dream, his freedom. You don't think he ever really wanted to be a lawyer, do you?"

The twins looked at Jonathan with surprise.

"Jon?" asked Windy.

"Never mind Jacob. You know what I mean Jonathan, don't you? Here's your chance to live the dream. Just pick a card."

Jonathan offered a glance that told all in the room that his personal desires would not be discussed. What he chose, he chose. It was his business, his fault, his fate. And until he could figure a way to live otherwise, he'd rather play the part of the Bronx kid who made good; than not. He would never speak of regret. He couldn't. He was thinking now, trying to decide. He always hoped that if ever faced with a moral decision, he would do the admirable thing. The trouble is, he wasn't an admirable man. He realized his true nature the moment he drew the card.

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