# Prologue

The dawn chorus was already in full swing as Tony Sicily was gently roused from sleep, not by the shrill of his alarm but by the lively serenade of birds gathered in his meticulously cultivated backyard. This sanctuary, a labor of love, boasted an assembly of woodpeckers tapping rhythmically against the palm trees, the melodious call of cardinals and bluejays, and even the vibrant chatter of miniature parrots, creating a symphony that celebrated the new day.

Tony’s ventures, particularly his lucrative dealings with Rocco in the Marlboro Cigarettes market, had borne fruit, affording him the luxury of this peaceful retreat. At fifty-five, his disciplined commitment to fitness allowed him to defy the years, his physique more akin to a man in his forties, a fact that didn’t escape Rocco’s envious remarks.

Beside him, Angelina, his wife, lay in peaceful slumber, the chaos of colorful pillows around her only adding to her allure. The morning light caressed her exposed skin, highlighting her Mediterranean beauty, her long black hair framing a face that carried the grace of her ballet years.

Emerging from the shower, the aroma of his bath gel lingering, Tony dressed in a manner that straddled casual and refined—a fresh pair of boxer shorts followed by linen shorts, a crisp polo shirt, and his favored brown Sperry top-siders. Running his fingers through his hair and finishing with a splash of cologne, he was ready to face the day.

“Angelina, are you up?” he called gently.

Her eyes fluttered open. “Yes, what’s your plan?”

“I’ve got an early meeting with Rocco. Thought I’d grab coffee at Versailles first,” Tony replied, his voice carrying a hint of the day’s urgency.

“What time is it?” she inquired, a trace of sleep still in her voice.

“Almost eight.”

Her response was immediate, a flurry of motion as she prepared for her Zumba class, leaving a promise of “tonight” hanging in the air, a tender note amidst the morning’s rush.

The day’s tranquility was shattered as Tony neared the garage, the sudden, insistent barking of their young puppy cutting through the morning calm like a warning siren. Peering through the window, Tony’s gaze fell upon a tableau that seemed ripped from the pages of a tense thriller. Several sleek black cars had commandeered his driveway, their imposing forms casting long shadows in the early light. Surrounding his home was a cadre of ATF agents, their figures clad in the unmistakable bulk of bullet-proof vests, creating an intimidating barrier. In their hands, weapons were held with a professionalism that spoke of readiness and purpose, their stances alert and focused. This unexpected assembly of force, encircling his sanctuary with a palpable intensity, signaled a dramatic pivot in the day’s unfolding narrative.

The tranquility of the morning shattered, Tony confronted the agents through the intercom, his voice a mix of incredulity and assertiveness. “What’s happening?”

“We’re here for Tony Sicily. There’s a warrant for your arrest,” came the stern reply, the seriousness of the situation dawning on Tony as the agent mentioned charges from a federal grand jury.

Angelina, suddenly jolted from the remnants of her slumber, emerged into the chaos, her figure enshrouded in a plush white robe that contrasted starkly with the severity of the scene before her. Her eyes, wide with a mix of fear and disbelief, scanned the unfolding situation as Tony was restrained with handcuffs, his freedom abruptly curtailed. The vulnerability in her posture, her hands clutching the fabric of her robe as if seeking comfort, painted a poignant picture of her alarm. Her scream, a visceral response to the sight of her husband in custody, tore through the morning air, a stark and jarring contrast to the serene beginning of their day. This outcry reverberated against the stoic, unyielding faces of the agents, their expressions etched with the cold determination of duty, unaffected by the emotional turmoil they had instigated.

“Tony, what’s going on?” she demanded, her fear for him evident in her eyes.

An agent, his weapon ominously pointed, reassured her with a cold professionalism that belied the charged atmosphere. Tony, protective even in his vulnerability, positioned himself between the danger and his wife, his defiance clear.

As the agents led Tony away, the promises of the day unraveled, leaving Angelina alone with her fear and the looming shadow of uncertainty. The ATF’s arrival not only disrupted the serenity of their sanctuary but also signaled the beginning of a tumultuous chapter in their lives, one filled with legal battles and the harsh realities of facing federal charges.

# Chapter 1

Lukas Dante’s story begins in the picturesque fishing village of Pachino, Sicily, where the Mediterranean Sea whispers tales of yore to those who listen. Born to Angelini Dante and Michaela Fabrici, Lukas was the singular legacy of a family intertwined with the sea’s rhythm. Angelini, alongside his brother Marcello, commanded a formidable fishing vessel, a behemoth that danced with the waves under the moon’s gaze. This vessel wasn’t just a means of livelihood; it was a vessel of adventure, charting courses along the enchanting Sicilian coast, from Syracuse to the mystical islands of Malta, Sardinia, and Corsica, and the historic ports of Ragusa, Pantelleria, Agrigento, Palermo, and Messina. Their nights at sea harvested the ocean’s bounty—prawns, anchovies, grouper, local sea bass, sardines, octopus, clams, and the elusive calamari—which they would peddle at dawn in the next port, a testament to their nocturnal labors.

Their journey wasn’t solely about the catch. On serendipitous occasions, they’d stumble upon treasures of cigarettes, liquors, wines, and other culinary delights, turning their vessel into a floating bazaar that brought exotic tastes to each port.

At eight, Lukas was a striking figure among his peers, his height, blonde hair, and green eyes a beacon of youthful vigor. His allure wasn’t just skin deep; it was said he inherited the charm and grace of his mother, Michaela, a woman of stunning beauty with roots stretching back to Catalonia, Spain.

Angelini, a figure carved from the sea itself, stood tall and lean, with jet-black hair and eyes that mirrored the depths he sailed. His hands, etched with the tales of the sea, and his arms, strong from wrestling with the waves, spoke volumes of his life’s dedication.

The narrative then shifts to a young Tony Sicily, a mere twelve years old, perched on the steps of his family home in 1962, amidst the transformative tide of La Revolucion. His observant eyes took in the flurry of village life as it converged on the plaza for the fiesta honoring the Virgin of Candelaria. It was a snapshot of time, capturing the essence of community and tradition in the face of change.

Enter Maria, Tony’s cousin from Miami, a bridge to a world beyond the confines of Sicily. Having carved out a life in Miami on the strength of a worker’s contract, Maria brought with her whispers of a different existence, encapsulated in the simple act of sharing a pack of Viceroy American cigarettes with Tony. Her presence, a blend of the familiar and the exotic, offered Tony a glimpse into a realm of possibilities, far removed from the revolution’s shadows.

“May I have one?” Tony asked.

“Tony, if your father’s bus drives by and Alcides sees you smoking, you are going to get in trouble,” she said.

“It’s okay; he knows I smoke. I’ve been smoking American cigarettes since I was eight. I’m twelve now, and I work in the warehouse,” he said. “I want to go to Miami. I don’t like La Revolucion. We cannot get ham, bread, or American cigarettes.”

“What warehouse are you working at?” she asked. “You are just a kid.”

“Sabatez, unloading trucks of detergents.”

“You are not playing baseball anymore?”

“All the time. I go to Cascorro’s poor neighborhood and play con los Negros,” Tony said.

# Chapter 2

As Tony Sicily found himself seated on a flight bound for Miami, his mind was awash with the parting words of his parents at the Havana airport. Confusion lingered in his thoughts—why the need to seek out someone named George upon arrival, connected somehow to a figure named Pedro Pam and a mysterious camp in Miami? The possibility of staying with his cousin instead seemed far simpler, yet unexplored.

Clad in a sweater lovingly crafted by his mother, Tony adjusted his Panama hat, a gesture that spoke of his attempt to find comfort in the unfamiliar. Seeking a semblance of normalcy, he requested a cold Coca-Cola from the steward, just as the captain’s voice filled the cabin, announcing their imminent arrival in Miami.

Upon touchdown, Tony hesitantly made his way to the exit, each step heavy with the weight of uncertainty about what awaited him in this new city. Navigating through Customs, he found himself repeating the same question to passersby, “Are you George?” This search culminated when a man, whose appearance—mid-forties, of medium stature, with brown hair—seemed to fit the vague description Tony had been given, approached him with a simple inquiry, “Estas solo?”

Confirming his solitude, Tony was led to join a group of children, each carrying their own stories of journeys undertaken, gathered beside a van where an elderly man awaited. This man, introduced as Brother Pedro, signified the next phase of Tony’s journey as they departed for the camp, leaving behind the familiarity of the airport for the unknown.

The camp itself was a collection of modest one-story structures, its ordinariness belied by the presence of a basketball court and a baseball field, symbols of normalcy and perhaps, hope. Brother Pedro’s welcoming words, promising milk and sandwiches, offered a brief respite to the children, a momentary pause in their shared narrative of displacement.

However, it was the sight of a cigarette vending machine in the reception area that unexpectedly brought a smile to Tony’s face. Amidst the upheaval and the unfamiliar, this small token of familiarity whispered to him that perhaps, just perhaps, this new place might hold its own charms and possibilities.

# Chapter 3

The camp’s daily schedule was a whirlwind of activity. Mornings were dedicated to academics under the tutelage of the Marist Brothers, who brought a piece of Havana with them through their educational ethos. Afternoons were a stark contrast, filled with the camaraderie and competition of sports, as the boys divided their time between the basketball court and the baseball diamond.

Tony, with his agility and keen sense of the game, successfully tried out for the under-thirteen basketball team. His prowess was particularly evident during a game that pitted them against a team from the city, where Tony’s performance caught everyone’s eye.

Weekend excursions to Miami Beach provided a welcome respite from the structured days at camp. These outings, orchestrated by the Marist Brothers, offered the boys a taste of freedom and leisure as they enjoyed the ocean and shared picnics on the sand. It was during one such weekend that Tony’s life took a memorable turn.

While meandering along the beach, he noticed a girl in the water near the shore, her presence radiating with a kind of effortless allure. She beckoned Tony to join her, her voice carrying over the waves. Standing nearly as tall as him, her blonde hair and striking blue eyes stood out against the backdrop of the sea, her figure accentuated by her swimwear.

Introducing themselves in the brief interlude that followed, Tony found himself drawn into an unexpected moment of intimacy. “I’m Tony,” he said, met with a smile and the introduction, “Virginia,” as she ventured closer. The ensuing interaction, marked by Virginia’s bold curiosity, ushered Tony into a whirlwind of new sensations and feelings, setting the stage for an unforgettable chapter in his life.

She lowered her bikini and straddled him until they joined together. “Oh, Tony, you feel so big.” In that moment, Tony knew that he was going to be addicted to that feeling forever.

# Chapter 4

Tony found himself at a crossroads, contemplating the future of his enterprise amidst the recent legislative changes that outlawed the sale of “gray-market” premium cigarettes. His role as a liaison for manufacturers and importers of budget-friendly, generic cigarette brands suddenly faced an uncertain future.

The day had unfurled in a frenzy of calls from coast to coast, with clients clamoring for Marlboro cigarettes, now a relic of the past. Tony found himself repeating a mantra of sorts, informing each caller that the era of the gray market had come to a definitive end.

His workspace was modest yet functional, divided into a reception area, equipped with a desk and a multifunction fax-copy machine, and his own office. The latter was a more personal space, adorned with a cherry-wood desk, the essentials of modern communication, and a credenza repurposed as a minibar. The walls bore witness to his love for golf, displaying various breathtaking vistas of courses.

Navigating the corridors of the second floor, Tony made his way to the core office of the bonded/domestic warehouse, the hub where he placed the bulk of his orders.

The receptionist, a striking blonde, busied herself with a stack of invoices as Tony inquired about Alfredo, the man behind the operations.

“He’s currently on a call,” she informed him.

As Tony lingered near the copier, he caught the attention of Alfredo’s assistant, Chiriana. Cloaked in a Diane Von Furstenberg wraparound dress that complemented her voluptuous figure and framed by her long, black hair, she exuded a captivating allure. Her playful interaction, laced with a hint of flirtation, set the stage for their rendezvous later that evening, an encounter Tony reminisced about with a mix of excitement and anticipation.

The following day, amidst the routine of his office life, Tony’s reflections were interrupted by a call from Alfredo, who teased him for his absence at the previous night’s basketball game—a game that could have used Tony’s prowess.

Tony offered a vague excuse about a meeting in Fort Lauderdale, a conversation cut short by the pressing need to address an incoming call from Ohio, signaling yet another twist in his day-to-day challenges in navigating the tumultuous world of cigarette sales post-legislation.

# Chapter 5

“Hey, Rob. Caught your call just as I was wrapping up another. What’s the situation?” Tony inquired.

“Morning, Tony. We’ve just wrapped a discussion with a duo from Miami, Rocco and Rosario. They’re pitching us to distribute Maxxon, a brand out of Paraguay,” Rob shared.

“And who exactly are these guys?” Tony probed.

“Rocco and Rosario,” Rob repeated. “They’ve secured a $100,000 deposit from Mark for 10,000 master cases, each with sixty cartons, and now they’re looking for us to transfer the remaining $4.5 million.”

Tony quickly ran the numbers. “That’s 600,000 cartons, hitting us at $7.50 each. We’re talking a markup of over a dollar per carton from the usual rate. Has Mark lost his senses?”

“Look, Tony, at a competitive price, we can offload these cigarettes, truck by truck. But fronting the cash? That’s not happening. Ever heard of these fellows?” Rob asked.

“They’re news to me. I’ll dig around.”

“We’ve directed them your way, mentioning you’re our go-to guy in Miami for purchases. So, you’re on point to negotiate a fair price, and we’ll forward payment per truckload as needed,” Rob outlined.

“Did they leave a contact?” Tony asked.

“No, I’ve passed your details instead. I’d rather not get involved,” Rob admitted.

“Alright, I’ll take it from here,” Tony assured.

After a brief pause, Tony reached out to Alfredo.

“Alfredo, ever come across importers named Rocco and Rosario?” Tony queried.

A moment of silence lingered before Alfredo’s voice broke through, “Yes, I’m familiar. What’s up?”

“They’ve approached a client in Ohio with their Maxxon cigarettes from Paraguay, telling them I’m the broker here. What’s your take?”

Alfredo’s advice was clear, “Tony, tread carefully. Rocco and Rosario are bad news. Never send money upfront. You hitting the gym later?”

“Not tonight. Got a late meeting, then dinner plans with Angelina,” Tony replied, mentally noting Alfredo’s warning about the duo.

# Chapter 6

On a radiant Friday afternoon in January, Miami boasted a perfect seventy-two degrees, the sky a canvas of unbroken blue. Tony, seizing the day, rang up Caffe Abbracci, a cherished Italian bistro nestled within the heart of Coral Gables, securing a table for two at 8 p.m.

“Angelina, we’re set for dinner at Caffe Abbracci, eight sharp,” Tony informed her. “I’ve got business at Port Everglades, but I’ll head straight there afterward.”

“Just make sure you’re on time. You know how it is—sitting solo at the bar makes me a magnet for unwanted attention,” Angelina playfully warned.

“Should that happen, just let Benedetto know. He’ll look out for you; he’s a pal,” Tony reassured her.

Upon arriving at Port Everglades, Tony smoothly passed through the security checkpoint and made his way to John Baldovino’s warehouse. Ascending the steps to the office, he rapped on the door, greeted by John’s robust welcome. The office, a testament to times past, housed two aged wooden desks, a rotary phone next to a computer monitor, and a metal cabinet, its surface etched with rust.

“Good evening, John. How’s life treating you?” Tony greeted in Italian.

“All good, thanks. And yourself?” John responded.

“Not too bad, thanks. Managed to offload all your premium stock before the deadline?” Tony inquired.

“Absolutely. Cleared out everything. Now, I’m eyeing a venture into manufacturing in Paraguay—aiming at the value brand market,” John disclosed.

“Speaking of Paraguay, heard of Rocco and Rosario? They’re pushing a brand there,” Tony probed.

“Yeah, I’ve crossed paths with them. Even discussed launching my own brand. What’s your interest?” John inquired.

“They approached a client of mine in Ohio. Looks like I’m brokering their deal. Got any insights on their credibility?” Tony pressed.

“Steer clear. Those two are nothing but trouble. I wouldn’t send a dime ahead,” John cautioned.

“Got any more details on them? Names, company?” Tony sought further.

“Rogelio ‘Rocco’ Vacca and Rosario Eacobacci. Run something called Gulfstream, if memory serves,” John provided.

“Thanks, John. Let me know when you’re ready to market your value brand. I’ve got a network ready,” Tony offered.

“Will do. Take care, and thanks,” John concluded.

As Tony drove towards Coral Gables, his mind lingered on John’s words. ‘A pair of rats,’ was it? This bit of intel painted a clear picture: dealing with Rocco and Rosario demanded caution.

# Chapter 7

The sleek black BMW smoothly halted in front of the restaurant, where Pablo, the valet, promptly greeted Tony with familiar warmth. “Good to have you back, Mr. Sicily. I’ll keep your car upfront for you.”

“Thanks, Pablo,” Tony responded, adding a request for his wife’s Mercedes to be brought around as well.

As Tony strode through the double doors of Caffe Abbracci, he was met by the radiant hostess, Marisela, whose charm and elegance were unmatched. “Evening, Marisela. Looking lovely as always. How’s your day been?” Tony greeted her with his characteristic flair.

“Mr. Sicily, ever the charmer,” Marisela teased, playing along. “I’m doing wonderfully, thanks. And yourself?”

“Only complimenting the truly deserving,” Tony quipped back with a grin.

The warmth of the reception area, lit by candlelight and furnished with Victorian elegance, welcomed him. Benedetto’s hearty voice soon enveloped Tony in familiar camaraderie. “Good evening, Tony. How are you?”

“In good spirits, my friend. Is my wife here yet?” Tony inquired, already knowing Angelina would be waiting.

“Yes, she’s at the bar,” Benedetto confirmed, directing Tony to their usual table.

Navigating through the dimly lit bar, Tony’s gaze found Angelina amidst a couple of overeager admirers. Rising from her seat, she was a vision in red, her elegance unmatched, sparking a mixture of admiration and envy.

“Finally, you’re here,” she sighed in relief, their lips meeting in a tender embrace.

“Let’s get to our table. Another drink for you?” Tony suggested, his affection evident.

With a nod to Luca, the bartender, Tony ordered their drinks before turning his attention back to Angelina, brushing off the triviality of his meeting to savor the moment.

Marisela soon announced their table was ready, prompting Tony to leave a generous tip before they followed her to the dining room. Tony couldn’t help but admire the graceful poise of both women as they led the way, a testament to the allure of confidence and beauty.

Settled at their preferred corner table, they were enveloped by the restaurant’s elegant ambiance, surrounded by the silent company of celebrity portraits. Tony’s order to Paolo reflected his familiarity with the menu, a prelude to an evening dedicated to culinary delight and intimate conversation.

Returning home later that evening, the intimacy of their bedroom beckoned. Angelina’s playful inquiry about Tony’s earlier observation led to a moment of raw admiration as she stood before him, the embodiment of allure and desire. “What do you think?” she asked, a rhetorical question that left Tony in awe of her timeless beauty.

# Chapter 8

Tony’s morning routine was interrupted by a call.

“Tony, Rocco here. Rob passed along your contact. We need to discuss business.”

“Morning, Rocco. Sure, my office could work. It’s in the same complex as Alfredo’s place,” Tony offered.

Rocco, pausing, decided on a different venue. “How about Houston’s in Coral Gables for lunch?”

“1 p.m. works for me,” Tony agreed, a hint of caution in his voice. He wondered about Rocco’s reluctance to meet near Alfredo’s, a thought that lingered as he prepared for the day.

Houston’s, known for its bustling atmosphere and discreet seating, was an ideal spot for such a meeting. Tony, arriving early, settled at the bar with a drink, scanning the entrance for Rocco and his companion.

When two men matching Alfredo’s description entered, Tony greeted them. Their initial exchange was brief before a hostess led them to a more private setting.

Rocco broached the subject of their brand Maxxon, mentioning the significant financial exchange they expected from Rob and Mark for the distribution rights in Ohio and Northern Indiana.

Tony outlined the conditions: the funds would come through him for product verification before any transaction was finalized, and the asking price needed adjustment.

Rocco bristled at the terms, visibly agitated by Tony’s stance. However, Rosario’s calming gesture eased the tension.

“Monday at 10, then. We’ll review the stock in the Free Zone,” Tony proposed, organizing the specifics of their agreement.

As they parted ways, Rocco’s dissatisfaction was palpable, his parting words to Rosario revealing a veiled threat towards Tony—a reminder of the precarious nature of their dealings.

# Chapter 9

Rocco and Rosario were busy overseeing the handling of a large consignment of premium, unstamped cigarettes in a nondescript warehouse. Their scheme involved bypassing Florida’s state stamp requirement to funnel the would-be tax proceeds into their own accounts, a lucrative but illegal operation that had been running smoothly for over a year.

In the midst of orchestrating the movement of crates, with Billy maneuvering the forklift under Rocco’s direction, the operation came to an abrupt halt. A fleet of unmarked vehicles skidded to a stop outside, and a mix of uniformed and plainclothes officers surged towards the warehouse entrance. As they stormed the loading dock, their commands echoed through the air, “Freeze! Hands where we can see them! You’re under arrest!”

Rocco, caught off guard, demanded, “What’s the meaning of this? Is there a warrant?”

A detective, brandishing the necessary paperwork, confirmed, “Yes, we have a warrant.”

“And who exactly are you representing?” Rocco pressed.

“The ATF, state division,” the detective replied, without missing a beat.

Rosario, seeking clarity amidst the chaos, inquired, “What are the charges?”

“You’re facing multiple felony charges, including the illegal possession of unstamped cigarettes,” was the stern reply.

Rocco’s request to make a phone call was swiftly denied, with the detective informing him, “You’ll get your call after we process you. Let’s move out.”

The swift intervention marked the beginning of a significant crackdown, as Rocco and Rosario found themselves ensnared in the legal consequences of their clandestine activities.

# Chapter 10

Business had been sluggish for Tony lately. He found himself reaching out to international manufacturers in hopes of securing an exclusive deal to rejuvenate his offerings. The challenge was compounded as several local brands had been dropped in numerous states, primarily due to their failure to contribute to the master settlement agreement.

During this lull, Tony’s phone broke the silence.

“Hey Tony, it’s Rocco. How’s it going? Listen, I’ve got a friend visiting with his girlfriend, and they’re itching for a game of tennis. You in?”

“Sure, I’m up for it. Where are we playing? Just a heads up, I might be a bit out of practice,” Tony responded.

“We’ll hit the courts at the Biltmore. After, we can catch up over drinks. My friend’s got some products that could interest you,” Rocco mentioned.

At the Biltmore Tennis Center, Tony was introduced to Renato and Ashley. Renato, Rocco’s tennis buddy, and Ashley, who teamed up with Tony, made for an interesting mix. Ashley’s athletic build and striking appearance contrasted with Renato’s more compact, intense demeanor.

Following their game, the group retreated to the hotel’s bar to unwind and chat over refreshments.

“So, Renato, where’s home for you?” Tony inquired.

“Originally from the Dominican Republic, but I’ve spent most of my life in New York,” Renato shared. “Actually, I was wondering if you have any connections with the Native American tribes upstate?”

“I do, actually. What’s on your mind?” Tony asked, intrigued.

“We’ve got access to Marlboros,” Renato hinted.

Rocco jumped in, “This could be huge for you, Tony. Truckloads of product.”

Tony hesitated, “Selling gray-market Marlboros isn’t exactly legal.”

“These aren’t gray-market; they’re legit, straight from Philip Morris,” Rocco clarified.

“And how did you come by them?” Tony probed.

“Best you don’t know,” Renato suggested.

Tony decided, “I’ll have to pass. I’m actually on the lookout for a solid value brand for the tribes. Anyway, I’m off to a trade show in Vegas tomorrow. Wish you all the best.”

After Tony excused himself, the trio lingered, plotting their next steps.

“Tony’s no fool. We’ve got to tread lightly here,” Renato cautioned.

Ashley, somewhat distracted, remarked, “He’s quite the looker, isn’t he?”

But Rocco was already scheming, “It’s money he’s after. He’ll bite eventually.”

# Chapter 11

Tony swiftly arranged his essentials into his carry-on and set off to Miami International Airport in his BMW, Las Vegas bound for the International Tobacco Trade Show. Before boarding, he made a quick call to Angelina.

“Angelina, I’m en route to the trade show in Vegas. I’ll be at the Las Vegas Hilton,” he informed her.

“Just keep me posted, love,” she responded.

Thanks to a timely upgrade, Tony enjoyed the luxuries of first class during his flight, indulging in some scotch and rest.

Upon arrival and while navigating towards the taxi queue, his phone buzzed with a call from Mark. “Hey, Tony, you’ve touched down in Vegas?”

“Yeah, just got here. How about you?” Tony replied.

“I’m over at the Mandalay Bay. You?”

“The Hilton for me. Is Rob with you?”

“No, he’s back in Florida,” Mark answered.

“Alright, I’m off to catch some sleep. We’ll catch up later,” Tony said, planning a brief respite.

Post-check-in, Tony’s first stop was a refreshing shower, followed by a brief moment of relaxation in the hotel’s king-size bed, a luxury interrupted by another call.

“Tony, it’s Rocco. You meeting with Mark in Vegas?”

“Yeah, planning on it. What’s it about?”

“Those Marlboros, think Mark’s interested?”

“Doubtful. His folks deal directly for Marlboros.”

“And the tribes?”

“I’ll see.”

The following day, badge in hand for the trade show, Tony couldn’t help but notice the array of stunning individuals heading towards the convention center.

Navigating the event, Tony admired the variety of representatives at each booth, his attention eventually captured by a particularly striking woman of medium build, her dark brown hair and green eyes accentuated by her mixed heritage. Approaching her, Tony complimented, “Morning, you’re easily the highlight of the show.”

“Thanks, that’s sweet of you,” she replied, scanning his badge. “And where might you be from with such charm?”

“Jamaican, actually. And you? Italian roots?”

“Cuban-born, but Italian blood runs through me. How about we grab a drink after this wraps up?”

She pondered, then offered, “I’m free after five.”

# Chapter 12

Tony was hunched over his desk, meticulously reviewing documents. The downturn in business was palpable, exacerbated by the delisting of several brands he distributed due to non-compliance with the master settlement agreement. In an effort to stir up some activity, he reached out to his contacts in upstate New York.

“Karina, hope you’re well. How’s everything at the reservation?” Tony initiated.

“Doing okay, Tony. And yourself?”

“It’s been tough; sales are down. Is there anything specific you’re looking for that I might help with?”

“Actually, I’ve been struggling to source premium brands. Any chance you can assist?” Karina inquired.

“I’ll see what’s available here. How would we handle shipping?”

Karina promised to send over the details of Piedmont Freight, a carrier she trusted for her shipments to Salamanca, sparking a plan in Tony’s mind.

This conversation brought Tony back to the time he first met Karina through a friend from Ohio. Their immediate connection had blossomed into a strong friendship, with Karina now spearheading a significant distribution operation on the Salamanca reservation.

Meanwhile, at Rocco’s residence in Coral Gables, a strategy session was underway with Rocco, Renato, and Rosario.

“Rocco, it’s crucial Tony buys into this Marlboro scheme, thinking they’re illicit. It’s a key condition of your deal with the DA for your cooperation with the ATF,” Renato emphasized.

Rocco, understanding the gravity, dialed Tony again. “Tony, we’ve got a new product line we’d like you to manage. Meet us at our warehouse tomorrow at 10.”

“Sure, send me the details,” Tony agreed.

The next day, as the ATF prepared their surveillance outside the warehouse, a notable arrival in a large SUV was identified by the agents as CIA, soon followed by Tony.

Inside, the warehouse was a facade of legitimacy, with employees busily engaged at their desks.

“I’m here for Rocco,” Tony announced upon entry.

Directed towards the warehouse’s depths, Tony was met by Rocco and introduced to Roberto, the operator of the facility, and Renato, who was eager to showcase their Marlboro products.

“Let’s take a look at these,” Renato suggested, presenting two cases of Marlboros for Tony’s inspection.

“They seem like genuine domestic Marlboros,” Tony observed.

“That’s because they are, straight out of Virginia,” Renato claimed, proposing a deal for the cases at a significantly reduced rate.

Tony, cautious, declined immediate possession. “I can’t store these. Do you have more, perhaps a few hundred cases?”

Affirmative, Renato confirmed availability, prompting Tony to request a detailed inventory breakdown for a potential buyer in New York.

# Chapter 13

Having swapped contact details with Renato, Tony departed from the warehouse, his mind racing with the potential of this new venture not only as a lucrative opportunity for himself but also as a means to assist Karina.

By the following day, after receiving the specifics from Renato, it was decided that Tony would settle the transaction with a cashier’s check.

Dialing Karina, Tony relayed the good news. “Karina, I’ve managed to secure 192 cases of Marlboros, priced at nineteen dollars per carton. Interested?”

Without hesitation, Karina affirmed, “Absolutely. I’ll get Valerio on it.”

“Remember, I’ll need the payment upfront,” Tony reminded her.

Karina assured him that the financials would be handled promptly via a wire transfer upon receiving his invoice.

Connecting with Valerio next, Tony laid out the logistics. “Valerio, Karina mentioned you’d handle the pickup here in Miami for her. Can you manage Thursday?”

“Thursday works. Send over the details, and we’ll ensure the funds are wired to you in advance,” Valerio confirmed.

With the financials securely in place, Tony proceeded to the warehouse on Thursday, cashier’s check in hand, ready to finalize the purchase of the Marlboros.

Upon the truck’s arrival, Tony was introduced to Pepe, Renato’s partner, and promptly facilitated the unloading and inspection of the Marlboros, ensuring the product matched the agreed terms.

With everything in order, Tony completed the transaction, expressing his interest in future deals to Rocco and Renato.

After Tony’s departure, Rocco, Renato, and Pepe huddled to contemplate their next steps.

Rocco, seeing the smooth execution of their plan, couldn’t hide his satisfaction. “This sets us up perfectly,” he remarked.

Pepe then outlined his role moving forward, especially with Renato’s relocation to New York, emphasizing the need to maintain the illusion of the Marlboros’ questionable origin to Tony, ensuring plausible deniability should any suspicions arise.

As they wrapped up, the consensus was to lay low, giving Tony the impression of the Marlboros’ dubious legality, thereby securing their operation’s secrecy for the foreseeable future.

# Chapter 14

After numerous attempts to reach Renato only led to his voicemail, Tony couldn’t help but ponder the worst. Given the precarious nature of their business, any outcome seemed plausible. Concerned, he reached out to Rocco for any leads.

“Rocco, it’s Tony. Any word on Renato’s whereabouts?”

“He might’ve headed to the Dominican Republic. Why not try Pepe? Here’s his contact,” Rocco suggested, providing Pepe’s number.

Upon calling Pepe and encountering yet another voicemail, Tony left a message, hoping for a callback.

During a quiet dinner with Angelina, Tony shared his concerns about the slowing pace of his business and his plans to attend the upcoming trade show in Myrtle Beach, seeking new opportunities.

At the trade show, amidst the hustle of attendees, Tony’s spirits lifted when he crossed paths with Karina. Distinguished and poised in her white shirt and black trousers, her presence brightened the event. Recognizing Tony, she greeted him with a warm smile.

“Tony, great to see you. How’s business?”

“It’s challenging. I’m here scouting for anything promising,” Tony replied, his tone reflecting the struggle.

Karina, ever the opportunist, inquired, “Any luck finding more premium brands?”

“I’m on it. You’ll be the first I call when I find something,” Tony assured her, ever committed to fulfilling her needs.

Karina, seizing the moment, added, “While you’re at it, I could use some Rodger’s. Think you can handle that?”

“Absolutely. Just shoot me the details,” Tony responded, ready to meet her demands.

# Chapter 15

As the new year dawned, Tony found himself navigating through the early days of 2008 when Rocco’s call came through, hinting at a new opportunity with Pepe and some Marlboros on the line.

“Should I reach out to Pepe then?” Tony queried, sensing the urgency in Rocco’s voice.

“Yeah, he’s expecting your call,” Rocco replied, a hint of mischief in his tone.

Without delay, Tony dialed Pepe, unaware of the surveillance net tightening around their conversation. “Pepe, Tony here. What’s the situation?”

“Tony, I’ve got a hefty load this time—over 400 cases, and let’s just say they’re extremely urgent,” Pepe informed him.

Tony, treading carefully, asked, “And where might these be coming from? You’re not lifting them, I hope?”

Pepe’s reply was cryptic yet ominous, “Better if you don’t delve into that. Expect a breakdown by text, and we’re looking at pick-up for next Tuesday.”

“Understood. I’ll coordinate the logistics,” Tony assured.

Once Tony received the specifics from Pepe, he promptly got in touch with Valerio to set the wheels in motion.

“Valerio, there’s a haul coming in—450 master cases of Marlboros. I’ve allocated 250 for Karina and 200 for your side. They’re set for Tuesday morning pick-up. I’ll ensure the invoices are sent to Zulema. We’ll need the finances sorted by Monday,” Tony detailed the plan.

“Much appreciated, Tony,” came Valerio’s grateful response.

# Chapter 16

Months had passed since their last transaction, and now, Rocco and Pepe were gearing up for another deal, this time planning to introduce Valerio directly to them for future transactions. The strategy was simple: Pepe would entice Tony with an offer of 600 cases of Marlboros, and during the pick-up, they would ensure their contact information was handed off to the driver for Valerio.

Pepe wasted no time in reaching out to Tony, pitching the new batch of 600 cases at nineteen dollars per carton. Tony, seeing an opportunity, coordinated with Valerio for the pick-up and financials, marking up his profit margin in the process.

Tony’s arrival at the warehouse was greeted by Roberto, who directed him towards the action at the back where Pepe and Rocco were overseeing the operation.

Rocco, spotting Tony, called out, “Glad you could make it, Tony. Just let the driver know we’re almost set here.”

“Alright, but I’ll need to tally the cases first,” Tony replied, eyeing the busy scene.

Pepe chimed in with the specifics, “We’ve got 430 reds and 170 whites ready to go.”

As the piedmont driver pulled in and Tony began overseeing the load-in, Rocco took a moment to discreetly pass the driver a note with their numbers for Valerio, suggesting he get in touch directly next time.

With the transaction completed and the truck fully loaded, Tony handed over the agreed payment to Pepe, who hinted at future dealings, “We’ll be in touch when the next batch is ready.”

# Chapter 17

Following his arrest, Tony found himself in an interrogation room in Doral, facing the possibility of becoming a confidential informant. His refusal was adamant, demanding legal representation for any further discussions.

The tension in the room shifted when Pepe, previously disguised in a ski mask, revealed his identity.

“Tony, it’s me, Pepe, from the Marlboro case. I was undercover,” Pepe disclosed, attempting to jog Tony’s memory.

Tony, however, denied any recognition. “I’ve never seen you before in my life,” he countered, distancing himself from any connections to Pepe or the mentioned individuals.

Subsequently, Tony was processed at the federal detention center, where the reality of Rocco and Rosario’s betrayal sank in, lamenting his misplaced trust in them.

As time passed slowly in detention, Tony remained isolated, rebuffing attempts at conversation from fellow inmates. Finally, in the late afternoon, he was escorted to his arraignment, where he pleaded not guilty to the charges presented against him. Bail was set, and soon after posting it, Tony reunited with Angelina and his lawyer, Fat Marcus.

“Meet me at my office tomorrow, Tony. We need to strategize,” Fat Marcus advised, already planning to engage with the prosecutor for insights into their case.

The next day at Marcus’s office, Tony was greeted by the imposing figure of his attorney, who shared that the prosecutor had a substantial amount of evidence, including voice recordings and video surveillance involving Tony and undercover operatives.

Realizing the depth of his predicament, Tony identified Rocco and Rosario as the likely informants, a revelation that prompted Marcus to consider all connections that might shed light on the case.

Concerned about legal fees, Tony broached the subject, to which Marcus outlined the cost of his defense. Tony committed to meeting the financial requirements, eager for any advantage they could leverage in his defense.

# Chapter 18

In Fat Marcus’s office, Tony handed over a $25,000 check with a promise, “I’ll have the rest for you before we go to court.”

Marcus updated him on his findings. “I had a word with Rocco’s wife. She’s out of the loop on this case, though she mentioned Rocco’s legal tangles back in ’04.”

“It was Rocco and Rosario who looped me into this mess,” Tony reflected.

“I’ve asked for every piece of evidence the DA’s got—indictments, recordings, you name it,” Marcus continued.

“We need to dig into Rocco, Rosario, and those ATF agents. Where’s all that kickback money?” Tony pressed.

“An investigation on them will run us another $10,000,” Marcus cautioned.

With little hesitation, Tony agreed, revealing, “I’ve got evidence of the pay-offs I made to Rocco.”

Then came the matter of Valerio, Tony’s co-defendant, who was staring down a lengthy sentence. “His lawyer suggests he might turn on you in court,” Marcus warned.

“Valerio? I went out of my way for that guy,” Tony lamented, betrayed by yet another supposed ally.

# Chapter 19

During his next visit to Fat Marcus’s office, Tony found himself briefly waiting before being ushered into Marcus’s office, slightly behind schedule.

“Tony, meet Nayib. He’s a private investigator who’s coming on board to help us out. He’ll be working on an hourly rate,” Fat Marcus introduced.

Nayib, with his imposing height and seasoned demeanor, revealed his background as a former police detective with two decades of experience.

“Pleased to meet you,” Tony greeted, seeing a glimmer of hope in this new addition to their defense strategy. “My main concern is digging into the backgrounds of the informants and undercover agents involved in my case. I suspect they’re not as clean as they claim.”

# Chapter 20

In a crucial meeting within Marcus’s office, Tony was briefed by Fat Marcus and Nayib on significant developments regarding Rocco, Rosario, and questionable ATF operations. Nayib, having unearthed substantial dirt on Tony’s adversaries and a damning audit of the ATF, laid out the findings.

Tony, eager for vindication, questioned the strategic use of this information, particularly concerning the cashier’s check he’d handed over to Rocco. Nayib revealed its deposit into a Key Biscayne bank account under a company controlled by Rosario, unraveling Rocco’s past as a busted felon turned ATF informant through a plea deal.

The conversation then shifted to the ATF audit, exposing a staggering mishandling of millions of cartons of cigarettes and misappropriated funds over several years.

“Can we leverage any of these revelations during the trial?” Tony pressed, seeking avenues to bolster his defense.

Marcus, uncertain, contemplated consulting with the prosecutor, leaving Tony frustrated and contemplating the competency of his representation, especially when Marcus mentioned needing to confirm with Prosecutor Arsenal.

Tony’s insistence on summoning Rocco and Rosario to the stand underscored his determination to fight his charges head-on.

Days later, a call from Marcus introduced another financial strain: a new attorney requiring $15,000 for drafting motions. As legal expenses mounted, Marcus suggested enlisting Rosario as a defense witness, a strategy Tony immediately criticized, fearing it would only lead to Rosario’s evasion.

Tony’s reluctance was clear: “It’s risky. Warning him might just push him further out of reach.” This skepticism towards Marcus’s tactics underscored Tony’s growing concern over the direction and effectiveness of his defense strategy.

# Chapter 21

Contemplating the lucrative potential Tony’s case presented, Fat Marcus reached out to Lydia, hoping to coordinate a meeting with Rocco and Rosario.

“Lydia, hope all’s well. I need to discuss Tony Sicily’s situation with Rocco and Rosario. Can we arrange that?”

“Sure, Marcus. How about this Thursday at 10 a.m.?” Lydia proposed.

“Perfect. See you then,” Marcus confirmed, seeing an opportunity to further his own interests.

Seated in the lavish confines of Rocco’s Coral Gables home, Marcus laid out Tony’s defense strategy, highlighting the evidence Tony possessed against Rocco and Rosario. He detailed Tony’s intention to subpoena them, hinting at the potential for public scandal.

Rocco, with a long-standing familiarity with Marcus, made a proposition to safeguard their reputations by financially incentivizing Marcus to compromise Tony’s defense.

With a handshake sealing the deal, Marcus assured them of his cooperation, betraying Tony’s trust for personal gain.

# Chapter 22

With the trial looming, Tony visited Marcus’s office, ready to settle his legal fees, blissfully ignorant of the clandestine discussions that had taken place.

“Tony, there’s a plea deal on the table from Arsenal. Plead guilty, and he’ll push for a lighter sentence, but you’d need to testify against Valerio,” Marcus briefed him, gauging his reaction.

“And your response to that was…?” Tony probed, expecting Marcus had already dismissed the proposal on his behalf.

“I’m obligated to present you with any offers from the prosecution,” Marcus reminded him.

“Then make it clear to him — I’m no informant,” Tony asserted, his stance unwavering. “What’s the status on our trial prep? Are the subpoenas for Rocco and Rosario in motion?”

“Yes, we’re on track. Everything will be set for the trial,” Marcus reassured him, though his words lacked the conviction Tony sought.

Leaving Marcus’s office, Tony remained oblivious to the betrayal brewing within. Marcus, meanwhile, sat back, satisfied with his machinations, now focused on fulfilling his end of the bargain with Arsenal.

Later, discussing his growing doubts over Marcus’s loyalty with Angelina, Tony expressed his unease. Angelina, attempting to soothe his worries, reminded him of their long-standing relationship with Marcus. “He’s been in our corner for decades, Tony. Trust that he’ll come through,” she advised, hoping to dispel his concerns.

# Chapter 23

On an early October Monday in 2014, Tony and Angelina prepared for a crucial day at the federal court in downtown Miami. Tony, in a sharp navy blue Italian suit complemented by a white shirt and red tie, and Angelina, turning heads in a stunning red dress and high heels, presented a united front.

Upon passing the security measures of the court building, they rendezvoused with Fat Marcus on the twelfth floor, outside courtroom one. Marcus guided them to their designated table on the left side of the courtroom, arranging the seating with himself on the aisle and Tony directly beside him.

The prosecutor’s setup was opposite, with the jury box awaiting its occupants. At the courtroom’s heart stood the judge’s bench, where Judge Donald Middleton would oversee the proceedings, flanked by positions for the court clerk and reporter. Notably, evidence including cases of Marlboros and a display outlining the financial aspects of the case adorned one side of the room.

Assistant District Attorney Federico Arsenal, alongside a presumed assistant, both noticeably younger and earnest, were already present, engaging in a discussion near their table. Among them were Pepe and Renato, the ATF agents integral to Tony’s charges.

As proceedings commenced, the courtroom rose in respect for Judge Middleton, an individual whose demeanor suggested both wisdom and impartiality. The case against Tony, identified in court documents as conspiracy related to purportedly stolen goods, was formally introduced.

Regrettably, Fat Marcus’s handling of the defense left much to be desired. His lackluster approach to motion arguments and a faltering cross-examination of the prosecution’s witness markedly contrasted with Arsenal’s meticulous and compelling presentation. The playback of recorded conversations involving Tony particularly underscored the prosecution’s narrative, casting doubt on Tony’s innocence.

Disheartened by the day’s events, Tony considered dismissing Fat Marcus, fearing the potential impact of his attorney’s apparent ineptitude on the trial’s outcome. However, Angelina counseled patience, hoping for a turnaround in their defense strategy.

# Chapter 24

On their way to court the next day, Tony revisited his concerns about Fat Marcus’s competence. Angelina, maintaining her stance, urged patience.

In court, Fat Marcus’s lack of familiarity with legal protocols became glaringly evident. His attempt to present an unauthorized document to the jury was promptly objected to by Arsenal, with the judge upholding the objection and educating Marcus on proper court procedures.

His cross-examinations were uninspired, often seeking guidance from Tony on questioning strategy, which further highlighted his inadequacies. The situation deteriorated when Stefano Valerio, once Tony’s co-defendant turned state’s witness, took the stand. Valerio contradicted earlier statements, claiming Tony had indicated the cigarettes were stolen and denying any return of a mistakenly wired $180,000, despite Tony’s immediate rectification of the error.

Efforts to summon Rocco for testimony faltered as he and his wife became unreachable, leaving a significant gap in the defense’s strategy.

With Arsenal concluding his case on the back of Valerio’s damning testimony, Tony resolved to take the stand in his own defense, a move fraught with risk but necessary.

During Tony’s testimony, Fat Marcus’s line of questioning remained superficial, failing to address the core of the allegations. However, Arsenal’s cross-examination was relentless, casting Tony in an untrustworthy light and challenging his integrity with references to past criminal behavior and insinuations of dishonesty.

Tony defended his character and intentions, insisting on his ignorance of the cigarettes’ alleged stolen status and criticizing Arsenal’s prosecutorial approach as misaligned with the pursuit of justice.

As the exchange between Tony and Arsenal intensified, Tony’s insistence on his innocence and critique of the prosecution’s motives highlighted the trial’s contentious nature, leaving his fate hanging in the balance.

# Chapter 25

The morning after Tony’s testimony, both he and Angelina shared a somber realization about the trial’s likely direction, despite Angelina’s belief that Tony had presented himself convincingly on the stand. Upon their arrival in court, Tony’s immediate concern was whether Rocco would fulfill his commitment to testify, a question to which Fat Marcus responded with vague reassurance, citing a conversation with Rocco’s lawyer.

The pre-closing discussions highlighted a critical omission in the defense strategy as Fat Marcus declined to challenge the notion of a “buyer and seller relationship,” a key element that could have negated the conspiracy charge. This decision left Tony and Angelina apprehensive about the closing arguments.

Arsenal, seizing his final opportunity to sway the jury, meticulously replayed portions of the recordings implicating Tony, accentuating his belief in the merchandise’s illicit origins and the substantial profits gained, all while painting Valerio’s dubious testimony as factual, concluding with a definitive accusation of guilt.

In contrast, Fat Marcus’s closing attempted to humanize Tony, emphasizing his family-oriented nature and his inquiries about the legality of the cigarettes, which were met with assurances from the undercover agent. However, Marcus’s narrative inexplicably shifted, inadvertently implicating Tony as Valerio’s broker in the illicit dealings, a move that bewildered Tony and felt like a betrayal of his trust.

The jury’s deliberation was brief, returning with a verdict just after lunch. The solemn query from Judge Middleton was met with a heavy affirmation of guilt from the jury foreman, a conclusion that, while not unexpected by Tony, cemented his fears about the trial’s outcome and the impending sentence.