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3rd Period

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Be Friends with a Wolf, but Keep One Hand on Your Ax

As I walked into the restaurant, I began to get nervous and started sweating bullets. Although, I wasn't particularly hungry, I was going to have to sit and have a full meal. I hadn't called this meeting, of course. You couldn't call a meeting with the boss. He called you. He set the time. He decided the place. You just had to be there, and you wouldn't be late. That is how I had ended up there. He had called me the night before and simply said he wanted to talk. "Meet me at the restaurant on 4th and Union, 3 o'clock," was my instruction. So I pulled up at the restaurant at 2:45 and waited until it was nearly 3 o'clock to go in. I went in and walked straight to the back, as far from the door and any windows as possible. I knew where he would be; he sat at the same table every time. The restaurant was dimly lit with small hanging bulbs over each table. It had white table cloths, but they stood out as if they didn't belong. There was elegant artwork next to holes in the walls and cheap blinds to keep out the afternoon sun. It was as if it was desperately trying to be upscale, though just missing the mark.

The first thing I noticed when I saw him was his appearance. Although he was in his fifties, he was in good shape and healthy. He was clean-shaven. As always, he was wearing a nice suit, but no tie. Today, the suit was jet black with a red dress shirt open at the collar with a hand-stitched pocket-handkerchief to match. I could see the chain hiding under his shirt from which I knew a gold cross hung. His dark brown hair was speckled with grey and gelled back in his usual style. He wore a simple pair of reading glasses with black frames as he thoughtfully

studied the menu. He spun the gold ring on his right ring finger around and around as if by a nervous habit. I'm sure he had eaten every item on the menu at least twice, but he took the time to read the entire menu as I slid into the seat across from him.

When he had finished, he took off the glasses, put them in his coat pocket, and closed the menu. I slowly took in more of his features. He sat with his hands under his chin, leaning on his elbows. Although I had never seen the boss this close before, I had known he had a scar that ran down the right side of his face. The scar itself did not surprise me. Rather, it was how he seemed to highlight it, to show it off. Everything about him—the shape of his face, the way he sat, the way he tilted his head—seemed to accentuate the scar and make it more noticeable. I also knew he would have a Glock 19 handgun near him somewhere. I looked around. It could have been tucked in the back of his belt, resting in his lap under the table, or just sitting next to him on the booth. No matter where it was, I knew he would be able to reach it quickly. Through all of this, we sat in silence.

Within a few minutes, a waitress came over, and he ordered a serving of penne pasta with bolognese sauce for each of us. I didn't know what this was but knew better than to disrespect the boss by asking such a trivial question. Only after she had left did he say, "Hello, Ricardo. How are you today?" I nodded in response, sensing he wanted to continue uninterrupted. My assumption was verified a moment later when he continued, "I'm sure you are wondering why I wanted you to come here in the middle of the day." Again, I nodded. "As a businessman, I must be mindful of the turnover of the..." he paused, choosing his words carefully, "products that I sell. Does that make sense?" I nodded once more. "Well, it appears that you have been hindering that process." This time, I gave him a questioning look, but remained silent. "You see, I have brought in sellers that can push the product better than you. I've been thinking back and talking to

some of the other guys. You've been getting into trouble a lot lately. You have been putting people in dangerous situations. Within the past month, three guys have been shot while on jobs with you. I am starting to question your judgment, Ricardo. Regardless, the cops are getting pretty close to pinning you down."

He paused, allowing me a moment to interject. "All due respect, sir, but you're wrong. I can avoid them. I've been working for you longer than any of the other sellers. You know you can trust—"

"I know, Ricardo," he interrupted, "but what if they do pin you? How do I know you won't give up my stores for a deal? I don't, Ricardo. No matter how much I trust you, I can't know that for sure. Now, I *could* just shoot you, which, I assure you, would be a whole lot easier for me." His napkin was spread out on the table as if he had already eaten. As he spoke, he reached his right hand down from beneath his chin and tapped his napkin. I immediately knew his gun was under the napkin. I instantly became uneasy but maintained eye contact with him. "But," he continued, "I'm going to help you instead."

He stopped talking and we both looked at each other for a while. I tried to look through his brown eyes in search of his intentions. I could not figure out why he would want to help me, but I was grateful that he did. He stared back at me, no doubt sensing my curiosity. Within a few minutes, the waitress brought out our food and the stare-down ended. The boss turned to the waitress and thanked her graciously. When he turned back to me, there was a seriousness in his eyes that had not been there before. He leaned in close to my face and said, "Pay attention now, Ricardo, and I will quite possibly give you the best advice you have ever gotten." So, he told me a story, and for the entire time I simply listened attentively, taking in every detail I could.

“I’m sure you’re wondering how I gained so much respect and power,” he began. “Well, it was around Christmas time of my senior year of high school. My younger brother, Johnny, was in his sophomore year, and my father took both of us around when he went on deliveries and pickups. It was December 20th when he called Johnny and me out to a warehouse on 21st and Broadway. My father was meeting a seller and wanted both of us to see how a deal went down and to learn how to drive a hard bargain. We were running late and pulled up alongside his car on the back side of the warehouse a few minutes after the deal was set to start. We went in through the back door which was slightly open.

“When we walked in, I quickly took in my surroundings. The warehouse extended far to my right and left and had a high ceiling with braces spanning its entire length. Even though it was the middle of the day, it was dark inside the warehouse. Still, I could see that there were small groups of wooden crates scattered about the warehouse. I also noticed the stairs off to the right as I came in the door. Within a few seconds, I knew where they led. There was a small path along the walls of the warehouse made of metal pipes high in the rafters of the ceiling. It would have offered the perfect vantage point to see anything that happened on the floor below. I could see that my father and two of our dealers, Victor Cruz and Antonio Flores, were standing in a row facing away from the door. Across from them was a man who was obviously in charge of the operation and two more standing back, away from the group. I recognized the man standing with my father as Miguel Diaz, one of my father’s regular sources. I didn’t recognize either of the other men, though.

“From a distance, I couldn’t tell what they were saying, but I expected it was about the street price in relation to the price they were expecting to get for the drugs. I knew my father would be spinning numbers around to make his price seem fair even though it wasn’t. I had seen

him do it scores of times to dozens of sellers. But, as we walked up to the group, I could sense something was wrong. First, my father's positioning wasn't right. He stood with his back to the door I had entered, so I couldn't see his face. This was completely uncharacteristic of him, because the first thing he taught me was to be able to see any possible threat—you can find a picture of an open door next to 'threat' in the dictionary. Second, there were two big, black SUVs parked in the warehouse. This was disheartening because it meant that Diaz had brought backup. The last tip that something was wrong came when I figured out where the sellers' extra insurance was. They were on the path in the rafters. I found two of them easily; one was at each end of the long building. From where I stood, I could tell they had rifles and could see the extra piece on the end assuring me that they had silencers. I couldn't tell what kind of guns they were, so I didn't know the distance or accuracy they would have in such a confined space.

“I reached out my arm toward my brother, hitting him in the stomach and stopping him dead in his tracks. He followed my gaze to the sniper to the right of us. Instantly, we both knew something bad was about to happen and there was nothing either of us could do about it. I turned toward Johnny and made a motion for him to follow me. We ducked behind a pile of wooden crates out of sight of the snipers and the group with my father. Johnny and I squatted here for a few minutes and strained to listen to what my father and Diaz were saying. ‘That price isn't competitive. I think you've started ripping me off,’ I heard a voice say. ‘Well,’ my father countered, ‘I'm just running a business. I can get a cheaper product from a dozen sellers if you want me to leave.’ As he turned to do so, the voice came back, ‘I just want to make sure that you are not playing me.’ They continued on in this way for a few moments; Diaz would accuse him of scamming people, my father would rebuke him, and Diaz would accuse him again.

“Eventually, they both started yelling and accusing each other and the situation became utter chaos. I watched from behind my bunker as my father and Diaz started circling each other and came nearly to blows. As this happened, Cruz and Flores and the other three sellers moved back from the fight and away each other. My father and Diaz pulled out their handguns simultaneously and pointed them at each other. Caught in a stalemate, both men froze. Not sure what to do, the sellers’ insurance policy showed itself for the first time. The two men who were serving as Diaz’s bodyguards pulled out assault rifles. As they did so, the two dealers who were standing with my father took out handguns. I saw the two men on the path above us, as well as two more I hadn’t seen, rise to their feet, guns ready to shoot.

“I tucked back behind the boxes and looked at my brother. I instantly noticed the fear in his eyes through the façade of manliness he was trying to uphold. ‘Stay here,’ I hissed. ‘Just stay here and don’t let anyone see you.’ I reached to my lower back and pulled out the small Beretta my father had given me for my 18th birthday. Meanwhile, my father tried desperately to calm everyone down. ‘Alright, I see our deal is off,’ he tried, ‘we’ll just be going now,’ he said slowly, trying to get to the back door. ‘It’s too late for that,’ Diaz sneered. ‘You tried to play me and now you’ll have to pay the price.’

“I stood up and started walking toward the group with my arms extended and the gun pointed straight at Diaz. He was the first to see me, spinning his gun and training it on my head. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded, taken aback. My father turned so he could see me and Diaz at the same time. When he saw me, I could see the amazement then fear roll over him as he realized the predicament we had gotten ourselves into. Ignoring Diaz, I went and stood beside my father. ‘That doesn’t matter, Diaz,’ he said, drawing his attention. ‘I’m the one that you are angry with, right? I’m the one that ripped you off,’ he continued, changing his tone completely. Surprised by

my father's sudden admission, Diaz lowered his weapon slightly. After that moment, everything felt as if it happened in slow motion.

“The first shot rang out and a hail of bullets started coming down from the platform above. My father had taken his opportunity and fired three quick shots at Diaz. Then, he turned to me and yelled, ‘Get down!’ I quickly dropped to the ground, unsure what else to do. The other sellers didn't see me as a threat, so they shot at my father, Cruz, and Flores first. Within seconds, I saw my father fall. I was caught in the cross fire, and took a bullet to the shoulder. I was losing blood fast and blacked out soon after getting wounded. When I finally came to a few hours later, I was able to survey the damage. My father lay where I had seen him fall. Cruz and Flores were sprawled close by. I also saw Diaz and one of his bodyguards on the floor. As I walked around, I spotted Johnny by the back door, with two shots in his back. Evidently, he had tried to get out in the chaos but had been spotted by a sniper.

“I learned a lot of things that day, but the single most important thing I learned came from the actions of my father. He knew when he got into this business that it was going to be perilous, because he would be working with many hazardous people. That day wasn't any different; in fact, it probably held more risk than most days. So, my father knew to pull out his gun when he was confronting Diaz. If Diaz had pulled out a gun and my father hadn't, he would have been defenseless. Diaz would have been able to kill everyone there and get away easily. But, because my father was ready to defend himself, Diaz was killed and his gang never gave us any trouble again.”

By the time he finished his story, we had both finished eating our meals and the dishes had been cleared. I stared at him with my mouth gaping open. “Do you understand what I am saying, Ricardo?” he asked. Not waiting for a response, he continued, “When you work close to

danger, you need to be ready to protect yourself at all times.” I nodded. “Good. Just be careful, Ricardo,” he told me. “You can go now.” I got up to leave, but before I reached the door he called me back. I went back to the table and leaned down so he could whisper in my ear. “And don’t forget,” he said, “I always have a backup plan.” He tapped his napkin with his right hand and looked at me with a sly smile. I gulped hard, nodded once more, and walked out of the restaurant.