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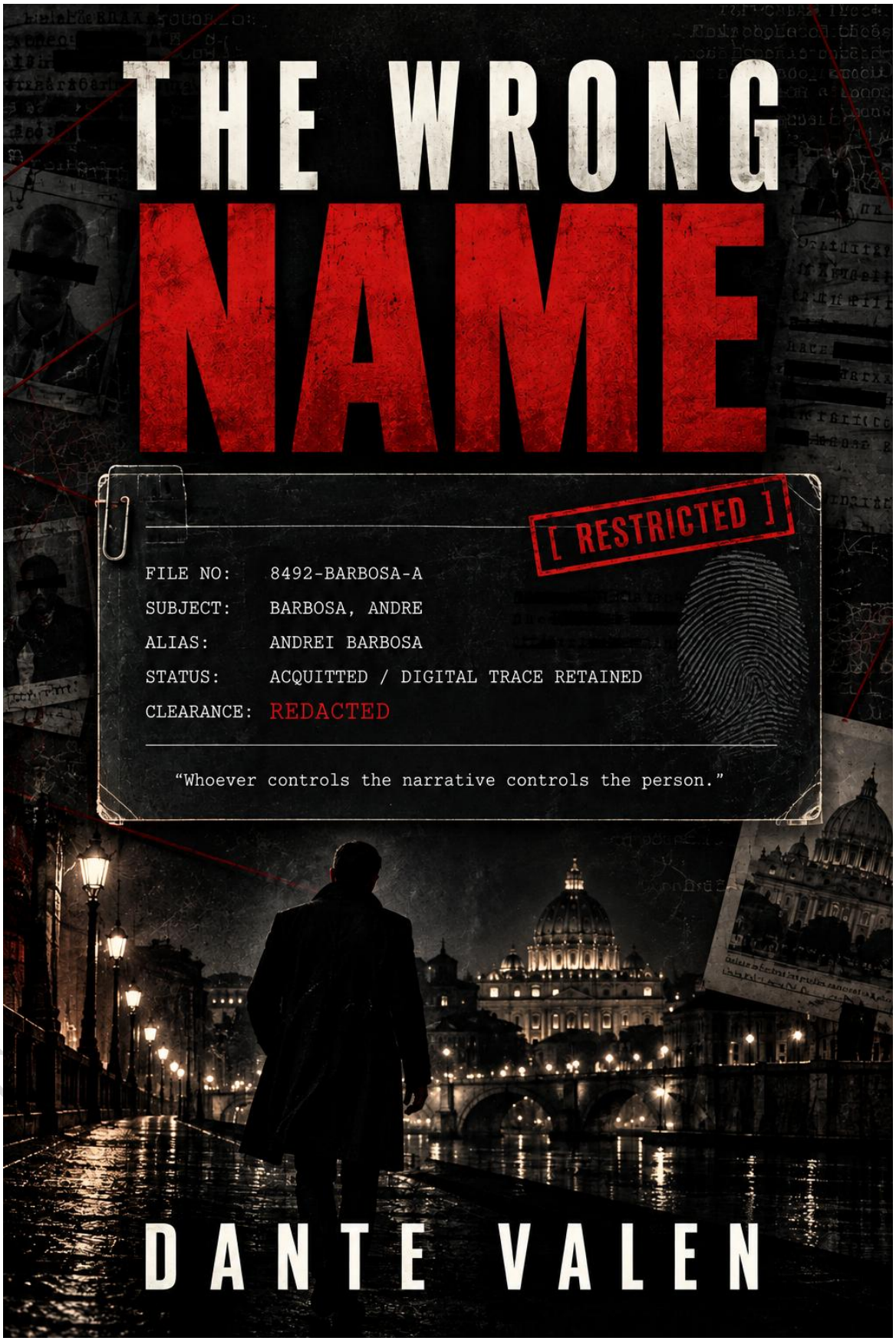

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Part 1: Wrong Name

Chapter 1 — Gratuitous Violence?

Andre had turned 18 three months ago, and he was thrilled about getting his driver's license. Every day he took the car out, it brought a fresh sense of thrill and freedom. His lecture on Digital Marketing was set to start at 7:00 PM, so he made sure to leave on time.

He put his backpack in his old Volkswagen hatchback, pulled out of the garage, and closed the gate. "How can my parents still have a manual gate?"

He put the car in reverse to turn onto the street that connected to his. Distracted as usual, he rarely checked for traffic before leaving home. His mind was wandering, as it often did, right as he was about to shift into first gear. Then he heard a harsh scream:

"Get out of the car! Get out of the car right now, or we'll blow your head off!"

His world spun, and a cold shiver ran down his spine. His heart skipped a beat. He popped the gearshift into neutral and forgot the handbrake. He stepped out of the car with shaky legs and his hands up.

"Is there a safe in your house?" The question made no sense and left Andre completely bewildered. "Is there a safe in your house, kid?! Answer me fast!"

"No, there isn't—not that I know of," he replied. The criminals glanced around. One of them said:

"Throw this idiot in the back! Let's get outta here! Someone comes by, we're screwed!"

"Get in the back seat, kid! Go, move!" the gunman ordered, pointing the barrel at Andre's head. "Keep your head down! Don't you dare look at us, or we'll pull the trigger! You understand me? Answer me, kid!"

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"Yes, I understand," Andre said, his voice trembling. He stared at a stain on the floor mat, struggling to swallow. Hunched over completely, Andre couldn't fathom any reason for this.

"Why are you doing this? What did I do?"

"Shut your mouth, kid!" shouted the hooded man beside him. Andre felt the cold metal pressed against the back of his neck. "You don't ask questions! You don't speak unless spoken to! And you better do as you're told!"

All Andre could hear was the metallic clinking of guns, followed by the breathing of the gunman sitting next to him in the back seat. He was totally lost, unable to process the fear. There wasn't the slightest chance of fighting back. Of the five men, Andre saw at least three holding guns. "Mom's gonna be mad I didn't brush my teeth." The bizarre thought flashed through his mind.

"Hand over your wallet! Hurry up!" said the guy in the front passenger seat. Andre slowly reached for his wallet and handed it over. On the center console, Andre had a pack of clove cigarettes. "You smoke, kid?"

"Sometimes..." Andre said, unsure why he was asking. One of the men smelled strongly of cigarettes.

"Gotcha." The gunman seemed to loosen up a bit. "So, man, word on the street is you weren't born rich. You pulled an online bank heist. So where's the cash??"

The words sounded muffled, as if underwater. Andre couldn't make them out and stayed silent. "My pants are dirty," he thought.

"Where's the internet money, kid?? I'm talkin' to you, goddammit!"

"What? Money? I didn't hear you, what?"

"Third and last time, where's the money you stole online???" the gunman yelled.

"What, me? What?" Andre protested. "You guys got the wrong guy! I didn't do anything like that! I barely use the internet!"

"Don't play games with us, kid! We will fucking kill you! Where is the money??"

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At that moment, a police cruiser passed by in the opposite direction. The criminal looked in the rearview mirror and saw the cruiser pulling a U-turn. "They turned around, they're behind us!!"

All five of them panicked.

"They saw us! They saw us! Let's kill this motherfucker and make a run for it!!"

They slammed on the gas until they lost the cruiser. The police don't know anything, Andre thought. Soon they turned onto a dirt road. The car rocked violently, bouncing and jolting over bumps. There was no chase, but the police car had rattled the crew.

"Let's dump this damn car! The cops noticed! They'll track us down in a minute!" said the hooded driver.

By the time Andre realized it, they had stopped. They were on a dirt road. Before getting out of the car, they gave him instructions:

"Count to 100, then get out. The keys are already in the weeds, kid. You're free today. But we know where you live." And they vanished into the night. Andre started counting. He reached sixty. "I'm counting too fast." He started over and reached eighty. In the total silence, an odd sense of calm washed over him. His body, tense until now, suddenly relaxed. He felt an urge to laugh, but felt embarrassed for obeying so obediently.

Suddenly, real fear hit him. If he got out too early, he really might get shot. He decided to count to another 100. He started fast—"Eleven, twelve..."—when the memory of his driving test flooded his thoughts. "What was I just doing?" He remained completely bent over in the back seat, staring at the floor. Fear returned, and he started counting again.

Fifteen minutes had passed since the criminals told him to count and left. Andre was still motionless. Finally, he sat up. He looked side to side, seeing nothing through the windows but pitch blackness. Without realizing it, he was moving far too slowly. He reached around trying to find the front passenger seat lever.

He was groping too low, feeling every fiber of the seat fabric under his fingers.

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When he finally stepped out of the car, Andre didn't have many options. It was past eight o'clock. The area was rural, the road unpaved. The sky was overcast, deepening the darkness. Look for the keys without even moonlight? That bastard probably threw them across the field. Only then did he realize they had taken his phone. He stopped thinking rationally. Acting on impulse, he picked a direction and started walking. "Where am I? Will there be anyone else on this road?" he thought. "Where are the lights..."

After walking a few yards, he thought, "Okay, I can see the ground a bit better now." Struggling through the dimness, he spotted a narrow dirt lane that seemed to lead to a house. There were two faint light posts about two hundred yards away. Andre didn't think twice. Automatically, he thought, "It won't be hard to find someone there," and turned down the lane.

He didn't make it far before he heard loud, deep barks. By the time he caught sight of the dogs charging toward him, they were already too close. He turned around and ran like hell. But in the dark, with no sense of direction, he ran headfirst into a barbed-wire fence. As he scrambled up, a deep cut on his hand began dripping blood. Yet he felt no pain at all.

He pushed himself up with difficulty and kicked at the dogs as best he could. As soon as the dogs backed off, he bolted again.

He made it back to the main dirt road. Andre walked on, his heart pounding. He couldn't be too far from something familiar. That brought a sliver of relief. "At least they didn't kill me. My God, what kind of messed-up situation was that? An internet heist?! How did I end up in this?!" Only then did he notice the gash on his hand—"Look at me!" He froze for a few seconds, staring at every detail of the cut. He stretched his hand out, and it bled faster, dark blood oozing from a deep tear.

Andre found it odd that he couldn't remember what happened right before reaching the paved road. Looking down at his footsteps, he noticed a trail of blood on the ground. The gravity of it didn't register. Up ahead, he spotted a payphone. "I can't believe these still exist here!" Without noticing, as he stepped inside, he left a smudge of fresh blood on the outside of the booth.

He tried dialing 0 + his home number for a collect call. The line didn't go through. He tried again. There was a dial tone, but then total silence. "Damn it! Broken phone!"

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He was still praying for the phone to work when he heard the close rumble of a diesel engine. He recognized that sound from riding in his grandfather's Ford F-1000 back in the countryside. Terrified, he glanced out of the corner of his eye. At his 4 o'clock, a bright flashlight seemed to shine directly into his face. He looked again. He saw an officer resting a handgun on the side mirror.

"Are you holding drugs?"

An officer interrogated him with a gun drawn. The other stepped out of the cruiser, ordered him to turn around, searched him, and slapped handcuffs on his wrists. Andre couldn't comprehend why this was happening. Inside the back of the police cruiser, the questioning continued:

"Where are you coming from?"

"I was robbed! I was at home and five guys showed up with—"

"Right. Where do you live?"

"Eucalipto Street, no house number..."

"Where were you coming from just now?"

"I was leaving home when—"

"Where is your house?"

"I live near here, on Eucaliptos Street..."

"What's with the blood? Were you in a fight?"

"I fell into a barbed-wire fence..."

"Are you dealing drugs?"

"No!"

"Are you high on something?"

"No!"

"Just tell us where you were right before you ended up here."

They repeated the same question over and over until Andre grew impatient. "This can't be happening. Am I really gonna get arrested now?" he thought. The third time the cop asked, "We already know that, just explain what happened from the beginning," Andre said, on the verge of tears:

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“I already explained, man!” He couldn't wrap his head around the absurdity of it all.

“Watch your mouth, kid! Show some respect!” the passenger officer snapped.

Andre tried guiding them along the road, unsure if they would actually find the car. But they did. When they arrived, the officers looked surprised.

“Is this your car?”

“My parents’...”

For some reason, the officers radioed for another unit and got out. Placed near the front bumper of the cruiser, just a few yards from his car, Andre watched them search the doors, glove box, trunk, hood, and back seat.

At that moment, something told Andre everything was going to be fine. The car was registered in his father’s name, and the registration document was in the glove compartment. The officer called out from a distance without context—Andre only understood what he was checking years later:

“What’s your father’s name?”

“Ruben Barbosa.”

The name matched the car registration. The driver officer then approached Andre for the first time and mentioned they had heard a report over the dispatch radio from a local resident who, around 7:00 PM, saw five people with t-shirts wrapped around their faces.

At that point, the officer took off his handcuffs. They agreed to drive him home. Only his mother was there; as far as she knew, Andre had already made it to his lecture.

The officer asked to speak with her in private, and the conversation seemed to go on forever.

Andre couldn't process anything that had transpired over the past hour. Exhausted, he crouched down on his haunches. He fixed his gaze on the driveway, and everything around him blurred for minutes on end.

“We’ll leave a note that you’ll come down to the precinct tomorrow. Any idea what time?” the officer asked.

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"Probably in the morning. Ruben is traveling and gets back late tonight."

"Alright, we'll let them know you'll be there in the morning."

"Okay," Andre's mother said.

The officers drove off fast, as if rushing to another call.

Once inside, his mother wanted to know everything.

"Son, what happened to your hand? Did they hurt you? Who did this?"

"No, Mom, nobody touched me..." Andre said, almost as shaken as she was.

"Where did this happen? There's so much blood on your clothes!"

"I fell on my own, Mom, into a barbed-wire fence..."

"Why did you fall? Did they throw you into a fence?"

"Mom, it was pitch black and dogs were chasing me... I didn't see the fence and I got cut, but it's not that bad... I'm fine now, don't worry."

"Oh, my sweet boy—" His mother burst into tears.

"It's okay, Mom, calm down. I'm right here now, that's all that matters."

Andre started crying too. They hugged each other tightly.

"Son, God let this happen to protect you from something worse..."

"I know, Mom, I know. It could've been so much worse... I'm gonna take a shower now, I just want to get out of these clothes."

Even after a kidnapping attempt, Andre wanted to pretend everything was normal. He wanted desperately to believe it was.

"Can you drive me to the lecture? Even if I only catch the end of it?"

"Wash that cut with soap and water first, or it's going to sting terribly under the shower..."

"Okay, Mom..."

"Are you sure you want to go to that lecture? Wouldn't it be better to rest?"

"No, Mom, I've been waiting for this for three months..."

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"Alright, go get showered and I'll take you."

As he was heading out, Ruben called Andre's mother. Andre had already agreed with his mother that he preferred going to the police station the next morning.

"Your father wants to talk to you. Here," she said, handing over the phone.

"Hello..." Andre said hesitantly.

"Andre." Ruben paused. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, Dad, I'm okay."

"What happened...?"

"I don't know... I can't really remember clearly, my head feels foggy."

"What did they want?"

"They kept talking about stolen money from the internet. I don't understand..."

"Internet? Stolen?" Ruben sounded incredulous. "Did you do something?" The question felt like a slap in the face to Andre.

"Of course not! How could I have done that when I barely use the computer?!"

"That's true, Andre. Where do you think they got that from?"

"I don't know. But since five of them showed up, maybe they thought it was enough money to split five ways... I don't know what money they mean, I just study, I've never made money in my life!"

"Did they lay a hand on you?"

"No... they just threatened me with guns."

"And what were they saying?"

"That they were gonna kill me... finish me off... They kept calling me a rich kid, saying I stole money online..."

"Your mom said you have a cut. Where is it?"

"On my hand, but it stopped bleeding..."

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"Did they stab you?"

"No, I fell by myself in the dark."

"Why did you fall?"

"Because I was running away from three wild dogs in the dark."

Ruben went silent. He realized an overwhelming amount of chaos had unfolded in a very short time.

"What do you mean?"

"When they abandoned the car, I had to walk down a road until the police found me. Before that, I had to escape from some vicious dogs."

"Holy shit..." Ruben had no other response.

Andre fell silent. He knew his father had never experienced anything remotely like this. Ruben didn't seem to know what to say either. Andre understood why his mother asked questions, but he couldn't quite grasp what his father was driving at. It didn't cross his mind to ask "why?", or to ask how his parents were making sense of what happened.

"We'll go to the police station tomorrow morning, alright?"

"Yeah."

"And you're heading to the lecture now?"

"Yeah, we just pulled up. I need to get inside."

"Okay. Meet me at the station tomorrow at 9:00 AM, got it?"

"Got it."

"Did you recognize any of their voices?"

"No... it felt like they were speaking a different language... super agitated. I have no idea what they thought they wanted with me."

The tragedy was set in motion. But they had come for the wrong name.

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