

BOOK ONE

THE
TRUTH
CHASERS



ROLLING THUNDER

A NOVEL

MARK
MYNHEIR

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1

**UNION CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION,
RAIFORD, FLORIDA**

It breaks my heart when a killer goes free.” The corrections officer adjusted his gun belt around his plump waist. A buzzer echoed through the thick, overly painted walls of the hallway, and the huge brown door slid open on the railings, like a rock being rolled away from a tomb.

Frank Moore shuffled through the entrance into the administrative portion of the prison, a place he hadn’t seen in thirty-three years. Stooped slightly at the waist and walking with a cane, Frank quickened his pace to the window that read “Property & Evidence.” His new state-bought clothes barely clung to his emaciated body.

“You seem to be in a hurry, Frank.” The officer chuckled with the two other guards who were escorting him. “Like you got someplace to go.”

Frank pulled his inmate ID from his pocket, ignoring the pesky minder standing uncomfortably close behind him. A

woman approached the window and took his ID and paperwork. With a quick scan of his processing forms and a raised eyebrow, she walked toward the back of the office without saying a word.

“What are you gonna do with yourself now that you’ve finally made it outta here?” the officer said loudly enough for everyone around to hear. “Maybe look for gainful employment?”

Frank tilted his head slightly, eyeing the man. “I got unfinished business.”

“What kinda business could you have, old-timer?” The guard fiddled with his gun belt, which seemed to have a difficult time staying in place around his super-sized figure.

Frank turned and faced his heckler. Leaning toward him, he said, “The *unfinished* kind.” His eyes burned with passion and fury, locked in a stare with the portly officer, who let out a nervous chuckle then looked toward the floor. Although Frank’s once strong body was wrecked and weak, his spirit was vibrant and alive with anticipation.

The clerk returned to the window. She handed him a paper bag that contained everything he brought to prison with him—a black leather wallet; a pack of Wrigley’s chewing gum, spearmint; and a baseball cap, the Mets.

She handed Frank a check from the state of Florida for eighteen hundred dollars—a paltry sum for thirty-three years, but it would be enough to get him where he needed to go and to finish what he needed to do. If everything went well, it wouldn’t take that long anyway.

“Have you seen the warden?” She adjusted her glasses to read his checklist.

Frank nodded while tapping his gnarled fingers on the counter. As he waited for her review, he opened his wallet, exposing his driver’s license, which had expired in 1971. His

chipped and faded picture could still be made out. His coal-black hair from so many decades ago had now been replaced by gray wisps sparsely covering his head. His once rugged facial features had softened and drooped.

He closed his wallet and placed it in the small bag he carried. He knocked the dust off his Mets cap. Pushing back his errant strips of hair, he cinched the cap on his head, adjusting it for a snug fit.

“It looks like everything is in order, Mr. Moore.” The clerk handed him his paperwork. “Good luck on the outside.”

Frank snatched up his belongings and steadied himself with his cane.

“Well, old-timer, you ready?”

“Let’s go,” Frank said, already marching toward the only door standing between him and the world outside. The guard signaled the man in the control booth, and with one more sharp buzz, he pushed the stiff metal door open, holding it for Frank, who stopped just short of the threshold.

The midafternoon sun pierced the doorway, illuminating the darkened corridor, and a slight breeze wrapped around Frank. He bathed in it. The wind swirled around his creased, leather-worn face like soft, gentle fingers drawing him toward the world that awaited him. He had forgotten what wind felt like.

Breezes didn’t blow inside the walls of Union, not even in the yard. But as rare as a breeze was, rarer still was a condemned man walking through that door. Home of Florida’s death row, Union didn’t give up its murderers easily. The likes of Ted Bundy, Gerald Stano, and countless other infamous killers were all carted out of Union feet first. Now Frank Moore was poised to do what few other murderers sentenced there had ever done.

With a deep breath and all the strength he could muster, the seventy-three-year-old man leaned forward and plunged into freedom.

“Good luck, old-timer,” the guard said as the door slammed behind him. “You’re gonna need it.”

The free-flowing wind and unabated sunlight overwhelmed Frank, who rocked back in awe, lifting his hand over his eyes to see. The cascading sunshine on the dense swampland of Raiford replaced the gray cement walls and barbed wire that had served as Frank’s horizon for more than three decades. Palm trees and saw grass were within reach, and a flock of egrets sailed just over the tree line. The low rumble of thunder in the distance signaled the coming of the afternoon rains that dominated Florida’s summers.

He felt good, for the first time in a long time. But he didn’t care about feeling good. If getting out of prison were his only goal, it would have been a great day. But that was just the first step. More urgent matters needed tending to if his plan was to work. There wasn’t time to waste worrying about feeling good. He hurried toward a taxi already waiting in the parking lot.

The driver opened the door, and Frank didn’t slow down as he slid onto the backseat.

“Where to?” the driver said as he jumped in the front and put the cab into gear.

“The bus station.” Frank rested against the seat and closed his eyes. “Hurry.” His jaw muscles wrenched back and forth as he groaned and clenched the small of his back, the pain throbbing rhythmically with every heartbeat. A crack of lightning forced his eyes open—a long-awaited expectancy filled him. Nothing short of death was going to stop him.

Maybe not even death.

2

THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE, TALLAHASSEE

Satellite trucks and a horde of reporters were camped outside the governor's office as his motorcade rounded the corner. Once they saw him coming, the multitude flowed from the front lawn into the street, blocking two lanes of traffic. Three police motorcycles sliced their way through the reporters and led the governor's Lincoln toward the curb. The press enveloped the car before it even stopped.

"This isn't going to be fun," Governor Ronald "Mac" Maclartey said to his driver. A little over two years before, "Mac" had plowed into the governorship of Florida like a Mack truck. He promised sweeping reforms in all of the state agencies. He promised leaner, smarter government, and for the most part, he made good on those promises—until yesterday. That's when a reporter for the *Orlando Sentinel* broke the story that could put the brakes on any aspirations he had of being a two-term governor.

Dylan Jacobs. It was a name that in twenty-four short hours had become synonymous with bloated, ineffective—if not corrupt—government.

Dylan had been placed in foster care about six years before, and his tragic story was like so many others in state custody. His mother was a drug-addicted prostitute, and no one really knew who his father was. She couldn't attend to her own needs, much less those of a four-year-old boy, so Dylan was removed and placed into foster care. She died of an overdose not long after he was taken. Dylan had disappeared, lost in a sea of helpless, wounded children.

Mac had called for a grand jury investigation, but that would take time. The public wanted answers now. *He* wanted answers now. How could a four-year-old vanish from the state system without anyone noticing?

The former judge turned governor now had to face a problem he didn't create but was most certainly going to be held accountable for.

The media smothered his car, already barking questions before the governor could open the door. Three massive state troopers shoved their way through the mob, forcing the reporters back enough to open the car door.

The siege began. "Where is Dylan?... Who's responsible?... What are you going to do about it?"

Mac exited his Lincoln and held his hands up, hoping to silence the crowd. The state troopers held the hysterical mass of reporters back. Boom microphones dangled over the governor's head, and reporters pushed their tape recorders around and in between the troopers like weeds growing through a picket fence.

"Please...please move back," the governor pleaded, jostled a bit by the crowd. "I will give a formal statement as soon as I

know all the facts. But until then, I'm just asking for a little patience."

"How long has Dylan been missing from foster care?" a reporter yelled as the others chimed in. "Do you think he's still alive?"

"I'll have a formal statement for you as soon as possible." He forced his trademark smile. "Thank you."

The officers formed a hedge around the governor and whisked him through the crowd, cutting a wake through the sea of reporters up the steps and into his office, where George Anez and David Lyman were waiting.

"Both of you, my office, now!" Mac stormed past his secretary, who was waving a fistful of messages. "Hold my calls. All of them."

George and David glanced at each other and shook their heads. David went in first; George followed with his head down, like a scolded puppy.

As a former prosecutor in Mac's courtroom, George had been a close friend of the governor for years. When Mac took over, the Department of Family Services was in shambles, and George was selected as director to lead that division, not because of their friendship, but because Mac knew he was a tenacious, get-it-done kind of guy. But more important, George had integrity. This newest dilemma piled onto the embarrassment of the already demoralized agency shrouded the director in shame like a burial cloth, from head to toe.

"How did this happen, George?" Mac marched behind his large, well-polished walnut desk; a lone laptop and a single lamp adorned the top.

David pulled a chair away from the wall and placed it on the Florida State seal embroidered on the rug covering nearly the entire center of the room.

George pulled a chair in front of the desk.

“Don’t bother sitting down. You’re not going to be here that long.” Mac stood to the side of the window and stared at the media spectacle below. “How long? How long has he been missing?”

The question lingered without answer for enough time to give the governor opportunity to release a displeasing hiss. George finally said, “We don’t know...we’re not sure...yet.”

Mac regarded the ceiling, then turned to George. “That’s not the answer I’m looking for. We’ve got an Amber Alert issued, and every law enforcement agency in the state, if not the nation, is looking for him. We better know a lot more. And we better know soon.”

“Yes, Governor.” George stood in front of his desk like a schoolboy being chastised by the principal. “I understand how important this is.”

“I truly hope so.” Mac’s gaze locked onto George. “Because this could mean both of our careers. I think you know what I’m talking about.”

George nodded and then swallowed hard, as if choking down a shot glass full of sand.

“As you’ve already guessed, I’m turning the investigation over to FDLE,” Mac said, shifting his attention back to David.

“With all due respect, Governor, my people can handle this. Give us a little more time. We’ll uncover what happened and find this kid.”

“Sorry, George.” Mac closed his eyes and held his hand up. “It’s gone way too far for that. FDLE has statewide law enforcement powers, and they’re the only ones equipped to take on this kind of investigation. Besides, you’ll be too busy cleaning up that mess of a department. And I want you and your people to give full access to David’s team—all of the

people and documents involved in this thing. I want complete cooperation. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes sir," he said, sweat beading on his forehead as he adjusted his glasses.

"That's all, George." Mac leaned forward with both hands on his desktop. "Now get it done."

George Anez vanished from the office in a flurry of purposed footsteps. Mac had been hard on him. Dylan's disappearance wasn't George's fault, but now wasn't the time or place to be cordial. They had spent enough time together that he knew George wouldn't take it personally.

David Lyman sat stoically in his chair, sliding back slightly as the governor turned his focus to him. Straightening his red power tie and crossing his legs, David exuded a quiet confidence that George lacked.

As the former chief of police for Miami PD, David was well accustomed to the treacherous political waters, although it was becoming increasingly clear that the pressure was certainly going to be turned up on him now. His salt-and-pepper hair was neatly combed, and he looked more like a TV anchorman than a seasoned police chief.

"This makes me sick," Mac said. "I want your top agents on this. I want every lead tracked down, every rock overturned. Plain and simple, I want this kid found—dead or alive. I want answers, David, and I want them now."

"I understand, sir. It'll be done today," he said, trying not to look upset about having this load dropped in his lap.

"That's all." Mac massaged his forehead. "You can go."

David, too, wasted no time leaving the office.

"One more thing," the governor called.

David poked his head back around the corner.

"Don't make us look bad. Everybody's watching on this."

“Yes sir.” Then he was gone.

Mac plopped onto his chair and let out a deep sigh. These were the days he questioned his sanity for running for governor. His wife had pleaded with him for weeks not to even consider it. He’d spent enough years in service on the bench, making the kinds of life-or-death decisions that kept invading his sleep. She’d hoped for a peaceful retirement. Some travel. Maybe some quiet time alone with her husband. But he felt drawn to the position.

This case was more than just political expediency for him. The pictures of Dylan that had been on the news since the story broke haunted him. One picture in particular struck a nerve: Dylan was wearing a red-and-white-striped shirt and a giant smile. He bore a scar from his cleft lip, but other than that, he resembled Mac’s own grandson, Nelson. The similarity disturbed him.

How could a small boy who looked so happy in his picture have met with some awful demise and nobody noticed? He felt sick to his stomach.

It was painfully obvious that Dylan Jacobs was not going away anytime soon—personally or professionally. He must have answers, if for no other reason than to be able to look at his grandson again with a clear conscience.

3

MELBOURNE, FLORIDA

A police car and two unmarked units pulled up to a dilapidated house in an older section of Melbourne. Most of the homes along the street were built in the late fifties, early sixties, and were in varying stages of decay. This house was the worst on the block. Bottles and papers overflowed from trash cans spilling onto the driveway. The unmowed lawn crept well beyond its barriers, growing up through a faded plastic slide in the front yard like a malevolent spider engulfing its prey.

Two agents with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement exited the first unmarked car and were careful not to slam the doors. Being noticed too soon could be a bad thing.

Agent John Russell slipped his coat on and clipped a badge to his belt next to his holstered Glock 9mm. Reaching his arms above his head, he stretched his tall, muscular frame to chase the morning creaks from his bones. The forty-year-old

investigator walked to the curb and scanned the house. He checked his clipboard, making sure his paperwork was in order, and brushed back his dark brown hair that was just sprouting some flecks of gray.

John's partner, Tim Porter, paused before getting out of the car.

"Need some help?" John offered his hand.

"Nah, I got it." With one hand on the roof and the other on the doorjamb, Tim hoisted his bulky body from the car. A little shorter than John, the black former Marine groaned and clutched his side, rubbing his hand along his protruding midsection. He met John on the sidewalk.

John felt odd about "training" his new partner. Over twenty years of police work behind him, most of that as a homicide detective, honed Tim's instincts; he could "read" a person before they ever spoke a word. After working a couple of cases with him, John wondered who was really training whom.

Two and a half years ago, a bank robber's bullet tore through Tim's abdomen, nearly ending his career. After being shot, Tim finished out his remaining two years and then retired from the Orlando police department. But retirement almost drove him crazy. Tim wasn't ready to give up on law enforcement yet, so he brought his skills to the FDLE. With a couple of deep gulps of air, he slid his paddle holster for his pistol inside his waistband and tugged it twice to make sure it was locked in.

John, too, understood the strange attraction of law enforcement. Since he was young, John felt God's pull in his life for some kind of service. Thinking God wanted him to go into the ministry, he went to seminary and earned his degree in theology with a minor in counseling.

But as he graduated and was ordained, something wasn't

quite right. He dismissed it as the jitters about receiving a call from his first congregation. Then he saw the job posting for a detective with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. He knew then he would never be a pastor. Something deep in his spirit told him that this was his true calling. He was to be a cop. That was fifteen years ago.

John, Tim, and two officers from Melbourne PD huddled on the sidewalk. Jessica Tarrant from the Department of Family Services exited her car and carried a satchel full of paperwork to them. Wearing a suit and with her brunette hair pulled back in a tight bun, the twenty-something woman looked out of place for an early morning visit such as this. But she didn't have to do the rough stuff. Her only responsibility was to look after the children. She was already sweating, and the sun hadn't even cleared the trees.

"Thanks for your help." John shook her hand. After a few hasty introductions to the officers and Tim, John laid out the plan—Stacie Morris was coming with them, one way or another.

Once John was sure everyone understood, they snaked their way up the cluttered path toward the front door. The two officers took up the rear behind Tim, John, and Jessica.

"I hate this part of the job." John crept onto the porch, moving just off center of the door, one of the little habits he'd picked up through the years. Standing in front of a door—or "the fatal funnel"—was always a bad idea, especially if someone decided to shoot through it. "It's a shame. She's the best informant I've ever had."

"It's gotta be done." Tim peeked into the front window then jerked his head back. Jessica stayed at the bottom of the steps; the officers stood back from her, spread out on either side so they could cover the windows and corners of the house.

John knocked on the door. He could hear movement in the house, but no one came to the door. Standing on tiptoe, he glanced into the window at the top of the door but couldn't see through the grime. He shrugged at Tim and knocked again.

The door flung open, and a bony young woman greeted them. Her face instantly crinkled in confusion. Pasty white with dark circles under her eyes, she appeared to have just woken up. Her brown hair was stringy, matted, protruding in several different directions like a cat caught in the rain.

"Detective Russell." She scratched her head. "What's going on? Who are these people?"

"We've got to talk, Stacie. We're gonna need to come in."

"Excuse us, ma'am." Tim pushed the door wide open so everyone could enter without a problem.

John crossed the threshold and nearly retreated as the overpowering stench of soiled diapers and refuse assaulted his nostrils. The inside of the house made the outside look manicured. Papers, diapers, and fast-food wrappers littered the floor and couch. Dishes were heaped in the sink, mold dotting some of the plates like fat, furry caterpillars. He couldn't believe she was living like this, even worse, raising her children in this. His stomach churned and threatened to eject his breakfast on the already nasty floor.

"What's...what's happening, Mr. Russell?" She wiped her face with her hand as if it were numb. "I did everything the court said. I've been doin' real good."

"Your drug test came back. You tested positive for cocaine...again."

"That's not possible." She clamped her hands on the sides of her head, as if to keep it from exploding. "I haven't used in a long time, at least six months. The test has to be wrong."

She picked up her toddler, who was crawling through the

assorted debris on the floor and was in dire need of a diaper change; a three-year-old boy peered around the corner from a back bedroom, too frightened by the commotion to come out.

“Tests don’t lie. Besides, I can take one look at you and tell you’re using again.”

“All right. All right. I used a couple of times last week.” She turned her back to John and picked some papers off of the couch in a vain attempt to clean. “But I have it under control. I’m not using nearly as much as I used to. I can still take care of my babies.”

“You knew the rules.” John walked closer and looked her straight in the eyes. “The only reason we were able to keep you out of prison the first time was your promise to stay clean and to take care of your children. You’re not doing either.” The calm tone in his voice belied the anger brewing just under the surface. How could she do this to her own children? He would never understand child neglect and abuse. It made this part of his job much more difficult. He let his comments sink in, and it gave him time to compose himself.

“I testified and gave you everything you wanted. Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing anything to you. Look around, Stacie. You can’t take care of yourself right now, much less your children.” John was not in the mood for any more of her denials. Her drug habit was destroying both her and her children.

“I went to the judge for you, again, and pleaded with him to give you another chance. Thankfully, he agreed. You have two choices—come with us and go to rehab, or come with us and go to jail for violating your probation. Either way, you’re coming with us. Only you can decide how. We have placement for your children in foster care until you get out—that is, if you choose rehab.”

“No! No! You’re not takin’ my babies.” She shook her head wildly and clenched her youngest to her breast. “You’re not takin’ them. I’m not going anywhere with you. This isn’t fair.”

One of the officers grabbed her arm to pry the baby away. “Give him to me, ma’am,” he said, grunting. “Make it easy for everyone.”

“No!” She backed into the corner of the room, squeezing her child tight.

The officer pushed a chair out of the way and went for her again.

John took hold of his arm. “It’s okay. Give me a minute.”

Reluctantly, the young cop relented as Stacie’s wails pierced John’s eardrums and his spirit.

“I love my babies,” she said, hunching over. “You’re not takin’ em. I can handle this. I have everything under control.”

The older child sprinted from the room and grabbed his mother’s leg. Tim stood between the front door and her, blocking any idea of escape. The two officers backed off some and let John talk with her.

“I know you love your children,” John said. “That’s why you’ve got to let us help you.”

He didn’t want to do anything to make the situation worse. Even though she was drug-addicted and overwhelmed, she was still their mother. And no mother gives up her children easily. If she got violent, the four men in the room could certainly subdue her and wrench her children away from her, but at too high a cost for John. The children had already been through enough; they didn’t need to witness that.

In the months leading up to this, he’d developed a good rapport with Stacie, trying his best to keep her off the drugs. He’d always been fair and understanding. He prayed she would remember that.

“This isn’t the kind of life you want for your children. Or for yourself, either. But you’ve got to get back on your feet before you can be any good to your kids. You won’t be any good to them in prison or on the streets...or worse.”

She stood quietly, surrounded and backed into a corner, trembling.

“I’ve already got you a room at rehab,” he said in a soft, soothing voice, his hands up. “I pulled a lot of strings for you. Now I’m going to help you through this. I promise. I’ve never lied to you, and you know that. I give you my word. When you’re released from rehab, I’ll help you restore your family and get back on your feet.”

Her shoulders relaxed some.

“I know you want to do the right thing for your children,” John said, praying that he was getting through to her. “Don’t fight us on this, and I’ll keep my word.”

“I wanna do the right thing, but I’m scared. I don’t want to lose them. I couldn’t handle that.”

“I know, Stacie. You’re just gonna have to trust me.”

John reached out and lifted the toddler away from his mother. He passed the boy to Tim, who hurried out of the kitchen toward the front door.

Stacie wiped the hair from her face and picked up the three-year-old. “Mama loves you,” she said, trying to stay composed. “You’re gonna stay with these nice people for a while, but I’m gonna be back real soon. I love you, baby.”

She kissed the boy and handed him to John, who passed him to Jessica. As she left with the boy, Stacie darted after them.

John stepped in front of her, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t do it. They’ll arrest you, and our whole plan will be shot. If you want to get your children back, you’ll have to listen to me. Trust me. Let them go.”

“I don’t want to lose my babies, Mr. Russell.” She let loose with a guttural cry that only a broken, defeated mother could give. She wrapped her arms around John and wept.

Shocked at first, he didn’t know how to react. Then he lowered his hands slowly and held her for several minutes as she vented the agony of her shattered life.

One of the officers sighed and checked his watch. John ignored him and took his time, making sure she was ready to go with them. He gave her last-minute instructions and promised to meet up with her at the rehab center to check her progress and give her updates on her children. She hugged him again.

Calm and more composed, Stacie went with the officer. She waved at John and Tim from the patrol car as she went by.

“You did a good thing back there.” Tim slid into the driver’s seat and buckled himself in. “I don’t know if I would have had that kind of patience. Twenty years on the streets will ruin a man like that.”

“I just try to help people. That’s all.” John took his coat off and loosened his tie. The whole ordeal drained him, and it was still early. He didn’t know if he had anything left to tackle the rest of the day. “That’s why I took this job, and it’s the only reason I stay—to help people like her. She’s a broken spirit. The drugs are only a symptom of that.”

Tim pulled away from the curb and did a U-turn in the street, glancing back at Stacie’s house. “You’re not gonna get all Christian on me again, are you?”

“I might.” John chuckled. “I just might.”

“Well, at the risk of sounding like a heathen, I can’t agree with you about her.” Tim shook his head. “I don’t buy that whole ‘victim’ thing. Bad decisions lead to bad consequences. It’s that simple. The reality is, we can’t help these people

because most of them don't want to be helped. We try to do the right things and protect the kids, but that's all we can do. It's up to them to help themselves—and most don't or won't."

"We can help some people." John closed his eyes for a moment, thanking God for a peaceful end. "Maybe not all, but some. I like to think everyone we come in contact with is a little bit better off because of it—even if they don't realize it."

"I think I finally have you pegged, Russell." Tim smirked. "You're an idealist; that's what you are. John, the idealist."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Not a bad thing," he said, shaking his head. "Only a misguided thing."

Frank jerked violently as the bus driver's voice boomed throughout the Greyhound. "We're pulling into the Melbourne station for those getting off here. For everyone else, we'll be leaving in twenty minutes. So take some time to freshen up if you need to."

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep, but it didn't really matter. He was where he needed to be. Frank snatched his bag from underneath his seat and stood, trying to force himself into the line getting off the bus. Everyone was moving a bit too slow for his liking.

He saw an opening and shuffled into the aisle. Cane in one hand and his bag in the other, he hobbled down the steps.

Still dazed from sleep, he balanced himself against a cement pillar outside the station. He never imagined a day when just sitting would take such a toll on him. He massaged the small of his back and groaned.

Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a small pill bottle. *Two should do.* He popped the pills into his mouth.

Many years had passed since he'd been to Melbourne. Back in the early sixties, he worked with a construction crew that traveled the state building houses. While working in Melbourne, he spent a couple nights in the county jail, courtesy of a drunken disorderly charge. A lot had changed since then. Had he not been told where he was, he would've never recognized the place.

Leaning against the pillar, he pulled a manila folder from his bag and scanned the various clippings and reports compiled through the years. It took twelve years and three different private investigators to find who he was looking for. Now did he have the strength to carry out his plan? At this point, he didn't have any other choice. He looked at the name on his report again—John Russell, 1443 Staten Place, Melbourne, Florida.

After a couple minutes of rest, he hobbled toward three cabs parked at the curb. Too much time, too much energy, and too much planning had gone into this to stop now.

Strength or no strength, pain or no pain, it was time to finish what he'd started.