I sat across from my soon-to-be agent and carefully read through the contract she'd handed me. It didn't take me long to get through the pages.

"Honestly, I didn't expect the reason for you not signing me up to be this," I said, motioning around at her new office, which looked nothing like her old one.

And thank God she didn't insist on representing me back then. For if she had, I would have lost out on a good chunk of my profits from the backend deal I had subsequently signed with Sean Cunningham for co-directing the film.

She gave me a genial smile. "I knew for a while that this move was coming sooner or later. The terms offered by CAA were far better than what WMA was offering me, with a fast track to becoming a partner within the next three years. And you'd notice, Noah, that it's always better to ride a rising wave if you want to get to the top."

I nodded in agreement. Julie had already filled me in on some of the details. Usually, talent agencies take 75 percent of the commissions earned by their agents. So if I earned $100,000 with a commission of 10 percent, only 2.5 percent would go to my agent, while the rest would be retained by the agency.

CAA had shaken that revenue model by charging only 60 percent from established agents, compelling many of them to switch. And since it wasn't as big as WMA yet, the chances of becoming a partner here were much higher, just as Claudia had said.

"You'll find that CAA is better suited to your needs, especially given how you want to move behind the camera as well," Claudia continued after a brief pause. "And the reason is simple. The new packaging deals we've been rolling out."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's packaging?"

"It means that CAA offers to hire everyone needed for your project from talent within our firm," she said, leaning back in her chair. "It's a win-win situation for everyone. Filmmakers can leave casting and crew selection entirely to us while focusing on other aspects of the project. And—"

"And you get commission from most of the cast and crew instead of just one actor or director," I finished.

She nodded.

I mulled over the implications of the packaging deal in silence. I hadn't worked in entertainment in my first life, so it didn't surprise me that there were parts of the business I didn't fully understand. Still, the downsides were obvious enough. If I were making a movie tomorrow under CAA, I'd be pushed to choose actors from their roster. If I wanted to hire Al Pacino, for example, and he happened to be under WMA, or some other agency, I wouldn't be able to. At least not without fighting CAA's management, and probably Claudia herself.

I hadn't faced that kind of interference yet, but I was already dreading it. Part of me wanted to stand up and walk out right then, but I didn't. The reason was obvious. CAA was going to dominate Hollywood in a few years. If these packaging deals worked, they were probably the foundation of that success.

And once something works, everyone else wants to copy it. No matter which agency I chose, sooner or later, every single one of them would end up doing the same.

And if I looked at the pros, signing with CAA would give me access to projects that were exclusive to them.

"I'll sign with you," I said after a moment. "With conditions. First of all, projects and deals I've already signed aren't included. I have a writing and acting contract with Columbia, so you can take commission only on projects outside of that."

She nodded without hesitation. "Fair enough. Anything else?"

I leaned back in the chair, the leather creaking softly as I stared at the ceiling, thinking it through. "I have a lot of ideas for future projects that I'll make sooner or later. It feels a little unfair that CAA would be making bank from a movie I write, direct, and act in, while you also take 10% from me. Don't you think?"

Claudia studied me for a long second, her expression unreadable. Then she said, "I'll be blunt with you, Noah. You're a nobody right now. Sure, you may have gotten a taste of attention with the release of your first trailer, but this is nothing. If you're not careful, it can all disappear just like that." She snapped her fingers to drive the point home.

"Unless [The Blue Lagoon] turns out to be a massive blockbuster, you'll just be another actor. [Friday the 13th] is even worse, because slasher films don't need stars. As for your third film, it's just a student project with a bigger budget. I like that you're working hard to chase your dream, but right now isn't the time to think about money. Focus on becoming a better actor and a better filmmaker. The industry standard is 10%, and unless you make yourself irreplaceable, no one's going to offer you less than that."

I hummed softly, because I knew she was right. That wasn't just true in Hollywood. It applied to every business. Once you became good enough to be irreplaceable, the sky was the limit. I still remembered the 2020s, when AI developers like me were being paid literal billions by big tech companies just to work with them. If I'd lived a few more months, I might've had a deal like that waiting for me.

If I wanted to reach that level of success in this life, I had to become the very best. Like no one ever was.

Without overthinking it, I picked up the three-year contract and signed it.

“Perfect,” Claudia said, almost purring with satisfaction. “I’ve got the ideal plan laid out for your career. You told me you’re planning to move to LA after shooting [Risky Business], right?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “It was a tough decision, but I’ve decided to drop out of college.”

Her smile widened. “Good decision. I suggested the same thing to Julie, but she wanted to continue her education. It’s nice to see someone from your generation who can think logically. Our first step will be enrolling you in acting classes once you’re in LA.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been doing exactly that for the last year. I took acting classes at Harvard. I think I’m good enough.”

She shook her head. “You can never be good enough. Unless you’re the best, there’s always room to improve.”

I conceded the point. Out of all my skills, acting was probably my weakest area right now.

“Next,” she continued, “we need you to audition for and land another big project as soon as possible. Just as an actor. I know you want to do everything yourself, but you need to pace yourself.”

That part didn’t bother me at all.

“I’ll get to learn from other directors, so I’m fine with that,” I said.

“Good,” she said, nodding imperiously. “I split my time between LA and New York, but I’ve got teams in both cities. If I’m not around, don’t worry. Someone will always be there to help you with whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Claudia,” I said, nodding gratefully. I genuinely appreciated her no-nonsense approach. I preferred it over the flowery, fake reassurances some people loved to throw around.

She waved off my gratitude. “You’re in a unique position. You got the chance to lead not one, not two, but four movies before your first one is even released. And they’re all in different genres: romance, horror, comedy, and science fiction. There’s a very good chance that at least one of them will be a hit, if not all of them. So if you really want to thank me, put everything you have into making Risky Business a good one. That way, I can get you even better roles down the line.”

After some more small talk, I shook her hand one last time and left the office. My mind buzzed with the possibilities she’d laid out for my future, and one of them might even take shape while I was working on my next film.

But that would have to wait. First, I needed to focus on the release of The Blue Lagoon.

(Break)

“Repeat after me,” the middle-aged man standing in front of us said in a clipped, no-nonsense voice. “The Blue Lagoon is a romantic fable reimagined for the current times.”

“The Blue Lagoon is a romantic fable reimagined for the current times,” Julie and I repeated in unison, glaring at him as he treated us like misbehaving kids.

The man nodded. “Good. Now remember, you absolutely can’t talk about sex or nudity. If anyone tries to steer the conversation in that direction, you redirect it back to the romantic elements of the story. And for God’s sake, don’t joke about each other crudely. You need to come across as likable young actors.”

Julie rolled her eyes. “We get it, Marcus. Just because it’s our first time dealing with the media doesn’t mean we’re stupid. We both go to Harvard, for fuck’s sake.”

Marcus pointed at her immediately, as if she’d just proven his point. “You absolutely can’t swear. At all. And then you wonder why I treat you like a kid.”

Julie turned her face away, lips pressed tight. The man sighed and turned to me instead.

“Noah, if they ask you about Julianne, you can’t comment on her looks or her body. Talk about her acting, or how well the two of you get along. Things like that, alright?”

I nodded. As much as I didn’t enjoy this part of film promotion, I knew it had to be done. I’d never faced the media in either of my lives, and coming from the era of social media, I knew just how fast public perception could change after one interview gone wrong.

“Remember, you two,” he said, fixing each of us with a stern look. “This film deals with a lot of sensitive topics, and interviewers will try to make you or the filmmakers look bad. Even if you’ve got issues with anyone, don’t air your dirty laundry on national TV. It’ll hurt you more than anyone else.”

Despite his patronizing tone, I couldn’t deny that Marcus knew what he was talking about. So far, all of his advice made sense.

“I’m ready,” I said.

“You’re not the one I’m worried about,” the publicist replied, turning toward Julie. “Do you need a few more pointers?”

“I’m fine,” she said, exasperated. “Can you just step out and send the interviewers in already?”

The man wasn’t worried about Julie for no reason. Even I felt uneasy, knowing that a single interview could turn into a train wreck if she let her frustration show.

“I’m sending in Bobbie Wygant,” he said after a moment. “She’s the softest of the bunch. She won’t eat you alive even if you mess up, but still, be careful with what you say.”

Once he left, I took Julie’s hand in mine and lowered my voice. “Calm down, Jules. Please don’t act out now, of all times. If the interview goes badly, you could miss out on good opportunities.”

She rolled her eyes, then bumped her shoulder against mine. “Of course I know that, silly. Marcus was just getting on my nerves. I can behave myself for a few hours.”

I smiled at her just as our first interviewer of the day walked in. The moment she entered, her sharp, predatory eyes locked onto our hands. That was when I realized I was still holding Julie’s. I let go immediately and stood up to greet her with a handshake.

“Ms. Wygant,” I said politely. “I’m a huge fan.”

She shook my hand, then laughed at my greeting for reasons I couldn’t place.

“I’ll make sure you won’t be a fan after today, young man.”

The faint hostility in her voice caught me off guard, as if she were trying to unsettle us before the interview had even begun. And Marcus had called her one of the better ones. I shuddered to imagine what the others were like.

We were fitted with microphones quickly before Julie and I took our seats across from Bobbie Wygant.

“Noah, Julie, congratulations on the movie,” she began, a serene smile on her face. The sharpness from earlier vanished in seconds, as if it had never been there at all.

“Thank you,” I said for both of us, keeping my smile steady.

“Everyone must look at that project and think, ‘Wow, what a fantastic assignment. Getting to go to a beautiful island and spend months there, all on your very first film. How did that feel?’”

I decided to take the lead. “I was ecstatic when I found out I got the part. I’d never even stepped outside the mainland US before, so getting to live on an island was incredible. Swimming every day didn’t hurt either.”

“Of course you’d bring up swimming,” Julie said playfully before turning to Bobbie. “This guy here is a national-level swimmer, one of the fastest in the world. After working with him, I finally understood why. He swims religiously every single day.”

Bobbie put on a look of pleasant surprise, even though she clearly already knew. The press had been briefed on us beforehand, complete with neat little conversation starters. My swimming career was one of them.

“It’s such a shame what happened with the Olympics in Moscow,” she said. “Do you think you would’ve qualified if not for the boycott?”

I shook my head. “Even before that, I was told by the head of the US Olympic Committee that I was ineligible because I’d posed for multiple photoshoots as a model. I think the rule is archaic and unfair. A lot of countries secretly sponsor their athletes, including the Soviets. It feels like Western athletes are the only ones being punished.”

Bobbie nodded sympathetically, then smoothly steered the conversation back to safer waters.

“People must be very jealous of you two for getting this opportunity, but filmmaking isn’t exactly easy work.”

“It’s not,” Julie said, shaking her head. “Until last year, I had no idea how much went into making a movie like this. It’s exhausting. The director expects us to keep track of everything at once, camera angles, sound, emotions, costume continuity. But after working on The Blue Lagoon, I’ve grown to love it.”

“The costumes remind me,” Bobbie said, a sharp glint flashing in her eyes. “You both spend a lot of time in this film without them. How do you feel about that? Did it bother you knowing the whole world will see you without clothes?”

Of course she went there.

“Not really,” I said casually. “When I signed on, it didn’t even factor into my decision. I loved the story, so I said yes. It was that simple. The first day of shooting was a bit awkward since we didn’t know anyone yet, and I was completely naked in front of them. But after a few hours on set, I got used to it.”

I couldn’t admit how much it actually bothered me initially, especially knowing my next film would have even more scenes like that. I needed to set the narrative right now.

“What about you, Julianne?” Bobbie turned to my co-star. “Did it bother you, or your family, that you were doing this film?”

Julie’s grip tightened on the arms of the sofa, and I knew instantly that Bobbie had crossed a line while talking about Julie’s family.