

# Chapter One

August, 2000

Carlos “The Hammer” Marino blew on his hands and cursed. It was cold as a flea on a well digger’s ass, as his not-so-sainted father used to say whenever Carlos dragged him out into the frigid Chicago winter from whichever bar had slurped up the old man’s weekly wages. He craved a smoke. Out of the question. The cabin was still dark, but the mark would be stirring soon, and he couldn’t risk the glow of tobacco giving his presence away. He studied the eastern sky above the jagged line of trees. A swath of gray heralded the approach of dawn. Wouldn’t be long now.

He was getting too old for this shit. At fifty-four, he shouldn’t be tramping three miles through the goddam forest in the dead of night. He’d tripped and fallen twice despite his night-vision goggles, nearly losing his GPS receiver in the layer of dead leaves and pine needles underfoot. It was the middle of effing nowhere, but the woods sounded as busy as Rush Street on a Saturday night. Annoying cricket chatter. The hair-raising cry of a screech owl. The yip and howl of what had to be a wolf. *A wolf*, for crissakes. Not to mention ominous rustlings that made him think of something large and furry with sharp claws and big teeth. It was impossible to feel safe even with his silenced nine-millimeter Beretta drawn. He was a city boy, and the wilds of Ontario held no charm whatsoever. He couldn’t wait to get this over with, hump it on back to the seaplane, and fly the fuck out of there.

He pressed the button that lit up the face of his watch. Six-twenty. He’d been in position since a little after ten the night before, at which time the cabin lights were still burning. Close to midnight, agitated male voices punctuated the stillness. The shouting lasted for maybe fifteen minutes. Then a shadowy figure appeared on the cabin’s front deck. A match rasped, flamed, and went out. A second match flared and died out. The signal Carlos had been waiting for. A third match touched the tip of a cigarette. Carlos’s habit-deprived nerves jumped with each drag until the butt finally arced through the darkness and the figure disappeared inside. Shortly thereafter, the last light went out. The Hammer gave it another hour, then set to work.

The two fourteen-foot Lund boats were beached for the night on the narrow rocky shore near the pier. No telling which boat the mark would take out the next morning, so he rigged both. First, exchange the flotation cushions for the ones he had brought along. Probably not an exact match, but any minor differences wouldn’t be noticed because of the predawn dark. Next, a tiny plug of C4 molded to the seam of each keel as close to the center of the craft as possible. Last, a radio-controlled, battery-operated underwater detonator and blasting cap sealed next to the explosive with industrial-strength waterproof tape. He’d done a couple of dry runs back in Illinois to determine the correct amount of explosive to breach the boat’s hull without causing major damage. Vince wanted it to look like an accident. It was The Hammer’s job to make sure it did.

Now all he had to do was activate the right frequency for the detonation. To eliminate the possibility of a mistake, he had brought along two preprogrammed transceivers, one now nestled in each coat pocket. Right pocket for the boat farthest from the dock, left pocket for the other one. He grinned. Eenie, meenie, miney, moe, either way to hell you go...

A sudden light backlit the trees behind the cabin and brought him to attention. The cabin was situated at the back of a deep clearing, allowing him to remain under cover near the water's edge. He could see the front deck and western facade of the pine-log structure. The light came from the far side. Probably from the mark's bedroom. Soon it went out, and another came on in the kitchen area.

Breakfast. His stomach rumbled, the thought of bacon and eggs followed by a cup of fresh coffee and a cigarette bringing a rush of saliva to his mouth.

"Come on, fucker," he muttered. "You ain't gonna need it where you're going."

He wrestled his impatience aside and hunkered down to wait.

○○○○○

Lou Pfister pushed the screen door aside and stepped out onto the front deck. He stretched, walked over to the railing, and leaned against it. His belly's considerable girth rested comfortably on the handrail. He looked up. The western sky was still pricked with stars, but a pearly bubble of light swelled above the black tree line to the east. Just enough time for him to fire up the outboard and get into position before the fish started biting. He'd snag a Walleye or two for breakfast. Call it a peace offering. After all, the guys couldn't hold it against him forever. A man had to do what a man had to do. Especially on matters of conscience.

He drew in a deep breath and allowed the crisp morning air to scatter the mental dregs of the previous night's argument. He was glad the other two guys had decided to sleep in. He needed time alone to figure out how to handle things after they got home. And to prepare for the remaining day and a half up here. One little spat didn't change the fact they were friends. The three of them had stuck together through thick and thin over the past few years, winning success for their agenda whenever the chips were down. They would just have to agree to disagree on this one issue.

He picked up his rod and tackle box and headed for the lake. Partway down the gentle incline, he stopped to take a pee. It was their habit to save the outhouse behind the cabin for their big jobs and do the other wherever they happened to be when the urge struck. They'd even had a bona fide pissing contest. And why not? There wasn't another soul between here and the seaplane base thirty-five miles to the south. They were as isolated as it was possible to be in the modern world.

And yet...

As he zipped up and continued his trek to the lakeshore, he thought about the plane they'd heard flying in low over the southeastern leg of Horseshoe Lake around dusk the night before. Their camp was located at the apex of the lake's arch. From there they had motored up and down the shoreline in both directions without noticing any other cabins. It was possible there were people on a nearby lake. Even if there were, dusk was a strange time to be flying in or out. Their own plane would show up early on the morning after next to take them back to the seaplane base where they had parked their car. Meanwhile they were on their own except for the cabin's two-way radio, which they could use to summon help in case of an emergency. Maybe that explained the plane. Maybe some unlucky fisherman had needed to be flown out early because of an illness or injury. He hoped not. Talk about ruining a good time.

He tossed his gear into the boat nearest the dock and shoved it down the gravelly slope and into the water. He rested one knee on the bow, pushed off with the other foot, and hopped in. He used an oar to leverage the boat into deeper water, then lowered the outboard motor into place. It started up on the third pull, the brash mechanized sound an obscene violation of the pristine stillness. He throttled back to a low hum and checked to make sure the safety cushions

were within easy reach. He had never learned to swim and was terrified of any body of water where he couldn't touch bottom—but not terrified enough to endure the tortuous confines of a life vest. He had tried every vest on the market, but they simply didn't make one that fit his short fat body. So he surrounded himself with flotation cushions and refused to think about the type of dire emergency that might make their use necessary.

He rotated the boat and pattered out toward the spot where they'd had some luck the morning before. When he came close, he killed the motor and let the boat drift, settling back to wait for the first rays of sun to bring up the fish. The utter serenity of earth and sky filled his heart with a peace he hadn't known for a long time. The gentle motion of the boat lulled him and weighted his eyelids. Maybe he'd take a little snooze...

A muted pop. A slight bucking of the boat. Lou's eyes snapped open. "What the—"

He didn't see the water bubbling into the boat until he felt it soak through his tennis shoes. "Hey!" he yelled, pulling his feet up. The water soon found them again.

Reality crashed in on him. Somehow, some way, the boat had been breached and was going down. In a panic, he grabbed for two seat cushions and threaded his arms through the side loops so that one hugged his chest and the other his back. By then the water was lapping around his buttocks. The weight of the now-submerged motor was dragging the boat down at frightening speed. He clutched a third cushion and started screaming for help.

∞∞∞∞

"Ken!" Tyler Marowitz reached into the upper bunk and shook his friend's shoulder. "Wake up!"

Ken Redenauer grunted but lay motionless.

"For godsake, wake up! It's Lou. Sounds like he's in trouble."

Ken rolled over and propped himself on one elbow. His sandy hair stood in a ring of spikes around his balding head. Bleary blue eyes squinted. "Trouble? What trouble?"

"Just get your ass out of bed, okay?" Ty was already struggling into his jeans. He grabbed his glasses, shoved his bare feet into his tennis shoes, and ran from the room.

The frantic cries that had wakened him were louder in the front part of the cabin. He heard the thud of Ken's feet hitting the floor as he wrenched the door open. No time to wait. He barreled out onto the deck and down the steps in the direction of the lake.

A band of pink lit the eastern sky enough for him to see the flailing figure some four hundred yards from shore. He charged toward the remaining boat and shoved it into the water.

"Ty! Wait a sec!"

He glanced over his shoulder to see Ken crow-hopping toward him on bare feet, a life preserver in each hand. Ty jumped into the boat and poled it into deeper water. He was setting the choke and pulling the cord on the motor as Ken splashed through the shallows and lunged for the gunwale. He pulled himself into the boat even as it began to gain speed.

"Here," he shouted, shoving one of the life preservers in Ty's direction.

Ty ignored him and opened the throttle. By now the cries had become weak and sporadic. Lou's head could be seen bobbing on the surface, disappearing, then reappearing in a frenzy of ineffectual flailing. Each time he went down, the interval until he struggled back to the surface grew longer. By the time they arrived at the approximate spot where they'd last seen him, the lake surface was smooth as glass. Lou was nowhere to be seen.

Ty shot Ken a wild look. "My god, what shall we do?"

Ken's response was to throw off his life preserver, strip out of his sweat pants, and dive into the frigid water. Ty struggled out of his jeans and shoes, discarded his glasses, and jumped in after him.

The shock of the forty-six-degree water took his breath away. He gasped and fought for enough air to allow him to dive. The minute his head went under, he knew it was hopeless. Night still ruled the lake, and he couldn't even see his hand in front of his face. He groped as deep as he could until he had to kick back to the surface for air. He was just in time to glimpse a pale foot disappear as Ken headed back down.

Ty was thirty-six and the youngest of the three. If Ken could continue on despite being twelve years older and twenty pounds overweight, then so could he. He drew another breath and plunged off in a different direction.

Ten minutes of fruitless searching left both men exhausted and frozen to the bone. They treaded water side by side, lips blue, teeth chattering.

"Better...get out...or...we'll...be goners...too," said Ty.

Ken nodded, and they swam over to the boat. They struggled to pull themselves in. Collapsed onto the bottom, winded and shaking uncontrollably. Their bodies gradually warmed, the sun helping as it edged above the tree line. At last they pulled themselves onto the benches and sat staring at each other.

"What the hell just happened?" said Ken.

Ty shook his head.

"Where's the boat? How could it just disappear like that?"

"Must've sunk."

"But how? And wouldn't we see some debris? It's like the lake just swallowed it whole."

"I know. Crazy. Impossible. But..." He shrugged, not needing to state the obvious. "So what do we do now?"

That was, indeed, the question of the hour. The three of them had been a voting block on the village board of their small community northwest of Chicago for the past several years. They had stood shoulder to shoulder in championing the progressive view on such issues as growth and water quality and expansion of village government. Not to mention the subject of the previous night's discussion. With a sympathetic village president leaning in their direction, they had been pretty much calling the shots. Now the entire dynamic was changed. Lou's death was not only a tragedy for his family and friends, but the political ramifications were enormous.

"First off, we'd better radio down to the seaplane base," said Ken. "They'll have to contact the Mounties and get a recovery operation going. Then I suppose we should see if they can patch us through to home. Susan needs to be told."

"Do we have to do it?" The note of panic in Ty's voice was clear.

Ken grimaced. "Wouldn't be my choice, I admit." He thought for a minute. "The Mounties probably have procedures for notifying families in situations like this. Maybe through the police department back home. But at the very least, we'd better give Sam a heads up." Sam O'Reilly was the village president of East Dundee. "This is going to be a huge pain in the ass for him. He'll need to start covering his bases right away."

Ty ran a hand through his damp hair. Nodded. The sooner they passed off the responsibility for this disaster, the better. He crawled back to the stern, started the motor, and circled the boat back toward the cabin.

The Hammer watched from his forested vantage point as the Lund boat turned and headed to shore. He'd been worried there for awhile. The last thing he'd expected was for those two yahoos to pull a Rambo stunt like that. What was their man thinking? Just proved Carlos's point that involving an amateur in something this important was effing stupid. But did Vince take his advice? Fuck, no. Brushed it off like it was a piece of lint on one of his thousand-dollar suits. Resentment rose like bile in his throat. His ass would have been the one on the line if the mark had survived. As it was, he wouldn't get any special kudos for dodging a bullet he himself had warned against.

He blew out his cheeks and bent to pick up the sack containing the flotation cushions he had removed from the boat earlier. This assignment might suck, but he couldn't complain about his life on the whole. Vince was a reliable meal ticket, and together they made a kick-ass team. That Vince sometimes failed to appreciate all the crap Carlos took on his behalf was a small price to pay for their shared brotherhood.

He turned on his handheld GPS, took his bearings, and started back toward the waiting seaplane. After fifty feet or so, he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. His spirits rose the instant the smoke hit his lungs. The mark was dead, the project no longer in jeopardy. Not a bad day's work, even if he was the only one to appreciate it.

## Chapter Two

Hannah McPherson steeled herself as she climbed the funeral home steps. She had never been a fan of funerals and their trappings—who was?—but ever since her father’s death, she had taken special pains to avoid them. She would not have come today were it not for the business and political fallout of Lou Pfister’s untimely death.

Hannah was the appointed village engineer for East Dundee and served at the pleasure of the village president and board of trustees, of which Lou had been a member. She had held the position for a year and a half. Compared to the thirty-odd-year tenure of her predecessor, the beloved Barry Lindahl, she was a relative newcomer still proving herself to the board. It would be unthinkable for her to miss this opportunity to express her condolences and shmooze any political figures who might be there.

The tragic news of Lou’s drowning had blown into the small village like a category five hurricane. The local papers spewed the gory details. The rescue attempt by the two other trustees. Recovery of the body and its return to East Dundee. Retrieval of the boat from fifteen feet of water and the ongoing Canadian investigation into what had happened. The town gossip mill rumbled over three trustees who generally voted in lockstep having retreated to a remote Canadian fishing camp in order to plot village policy out of the public eye. Suspicion and disapproval permeated the collective psyche.

Hannah reminded herself of Barry’s maxim as she reached for the entrance door: never take sides. That philosophy had served him well over the years and was the primary reason for his long run as village engineer. Elected officials had come and gone, but he had remained above the fray, refusing to get sucked into personalities. Hannah knew it was wise advice. Putting it into practice had become a greater challenge than she would ever have thought possible.

The funeral home’s reception area was crowded, not a surprise given the difficulty she’d had finding a parking place. The first person she saw was Sam O’Reilly. The village president was a short chubby Irishman, something of an anomaly in a community settled by German immigrants and heavily populated by their descendants. The village administrator and two trustees clustered around him. Hannah walked over.

Sam’s round face crinkled in a wide smile. He took a couple of steps forward, hand extended. “Hannah, girl! Nice of you to come.”

The blustery, proprietary tone of his greeting was not lost on Hannah. Nor on others standing nearby, many of whom turned to stare in their direction.

“Hello, Mr. Mayor,” she said as she reached for his hand. It felt warm and clammy. She gave a light squeeze and released her grip. He continued to hold her limp hand, his bright eyes dancing down the length of her tailored black pantsuit.

It was an ongoing contest between the two of them—the divorced, fifty-something mayor blatantly telegraphing his erotic interest, Hannah pretending not to notice and hoping she could convince him to give it up before she was forced to file a sexual harassment suit. She freed her hand with a subtle jerk, resisted the impulse to wipe it on her trousers, and turned to Ken Redenauer, one of the trustees who had attempted to rescue Lou.

He towered over her, a solidly-built man in his late forties with sparse sandy hair and a softness around the middle that the loose wings of his open sport jacket could not hide.

“This can’t have been easy on you, Ken,” she said. “I’m sorry for your ordeal.”

“I only wish we could have saved him.” The trustee’s voice was hoarse, his eyes rheumy, his nose red around the nostrils. He sneezed and reached in his pocket for a handkerchief.

Eyes still on Hannah, the mayor said, “Look at him. Damn near caught pneumonia out of the deal.” Then to Ken, “You guys did your best. Can’t ask more of a man than that.”

Rich Hauser, the trustee standing to Ken’s left, said, “Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to mix pleasure and politics.”

Rich was a youngish man, probably close to Hannah’s age of thirty-three, and the newest member of the board. He was the grandson of a former village president and had allied himself with the more conservative trustees. Which put him in direct opposition to almost every position Ken’s faction championed.

Ken looked down at the shorter man, his face hard with dislike. “There wasn’t a damn thing political about it, Rich. Me and Ty and Lou were friends who all liked to fish. So we went where fishing is king. Canada. What’s wrong with that?”

“Depends on what you were doing when you weren’t fishing.” He waited a pregnant beat, then said, “What I want to know is why a guy who couldn’t swim was out in the middle of the lake by himself without a life jacket. If you and Ty were such great pals of his, how come you weren’t out there with him?”

The cold fury in Ken’s eyes was plain to see. Village Administrator Bill Fallon exchanged a look with Hannah and stepped forward, saying, “Save it, guys. Let’s remember where we are, okay?”

“No, Bill,” said Ken, his eyes never leaving Rich’s, “it’s a fair question. We weren’t with him because we’d all been up late the night before, and Ty and I decided to sleep in. Lou wasn’t about to miss a single morning of fishing. So he went out alone. As for the life jacket, we harped on him about it all week, but he wouldn’t wear one. Said they cut into his armpits so bad he couldn’t relax and enjoy himself. He figured the flotation cushions served the same purpose.”

Rich smirked, clearly enjoying the exchange. “So it was his fault he drowned because he wouldn’t wear a life jacket?”

“No.” Ken’s jaw was so tight his lips barely moved. “I’m just telling it like it was.”

“Then what happened with the cushions? He couldn’t hang on...or what?”

A flicker of uncertainty. “Actually, that’s a puzzler. When we got to the spot where he went down, we didn’t see any debris. The cushions were buoyant and should have risen to the surface, but...” He spread his hands. “...nada.”

“Maybe he forgot to put them in the boat,” suggested Hannah.

“If he did, they vanished into thin air because we didn’t find them on shore. The Mounties are still looking into it.”

“Well, it’s a damn shame, that’s all I can say,” said the mayor. “We’ve got a lot of issues pending before the board, and now we’re a man short.”

“Not to mention *our* side now having the advantage,” said Rich. “I don’t expect that’ll last long, though. Got a replacement candidate in mind, Sam?”

A mellow female voice said, “Don’t you think we should bury the poor man before we start talking politics?”

Joanna Zeller, the lone female member of the board of trustees, moved in beside Hannah. She was a tall angular woman in her early sixties with iron-gray hair cut in an ear-length bob and leathery skin cured by many years of exposure to the sun in pursuit of her passion for golf. She had taken Hannah under her wing from the beginning, declaring that they needed to stick together since they were the only two women in a male-dominated arena. Hannah was grateful

for the leg up even as she struggled to keep their relationship from coloring her perceptions and interactions with the remainder of the board. *Never take sides*. She could almost hear Barry speak the words even as Joanna gave her shoulder a friendly pat before turning her piercing blue eyes on the men.

Sam said, “Can’t ignore reality, Joanna, no matter how painful. But I agree this isn’t the time or the place for political talk. How’s Susan holding up?”

Joanna had just come from the viewing room where Lou’s widow and family were holding court. She shook her head, her long face lined with sadness. “Not well. Noah’s doing his best to help her through it, but he’s only seventeen, and it’s tough for him, too. Have you all had a chance to go in?”

It became apparent that Hannah was the only one who had yet to convey her condolences. She excused herself and went to the counter along the back wall. She signed the guest book, tucked an envelope for a future memorial contribution into her pocket, and read the small folder that outlined Louis Pfister’s days on earth.

She took a deep breath. It was time.

Wide double doors led to the viewing room. The cloying aroma of cut flowers transported her to another time and place. Had it been only two years? Then, like now, the room was overly warm and crammed with mourners. A line of people stretched from the door to the casket, where a widow new to her role tried without much success to be brave and gracious. In this case, the offspring standing at Susan Pfister’s side was a gangly teenaged boy. Hannah could see the stoic determination on his face and knew he had pushed his own crushing grief to the background so he could coax his mother through these necessary rituals of death. She wondered what burden of guilt he carried beneath it all. The dead always left regrets behind. What memories haunted this young man’s sleep?

She sighed and took her place at the end of the line.

○○○○

“I’m telling you, it was *him*.”

Hannah was leaving the funeral home’s ladies’ room when she heard the voice in the hallway just outside. Its underlying urgency brought her up short. She held the door open a few inches and listened as the voice continued, “Him and O’Reilly and Pfister. And now Pfister’s dead.”

“How can you be sure it was him? It’s been more than twenty years.”

Hannah’s interest skyrocketed as she recognized the second speaker’s voice. Barry Lindahl, the former village engineer whose engineering and surveying firm she had purchased.

“That face ain’t somethin’ you forget,” the first voice answered. “Gives me the heeby-jeebies just thinking about it. Coldest eyes I ever seen. Him being here in town—it ain’t a good sign. Better get rid of all that stuff from back then, boss. Those suckers play for keeps.”

“Don’t worry about me.” A few ticks of silence. “You say you saw him with Sam and Lou. When was this?”

“A week or so ago. You know me. Gotta get out and about most every day, else I go stir crazy. On this particular day, I was over on the river walk when I seen ’em coming toward me. They was deep in conversation. If I was a betting man, I’d lay short odds it had something to do with what happened up there in Canada.”

“I don’t know, Willie. Seems a bit of a stretch to—”



Barry's voice dropped off. Seconds later, Hannah felt pressure on the washroom door as someone attempted to enter. She pulled the door open and waited for a middle-aged woman to pass through. Then she stepped out into the hallway.

Barry was leaning against the opposite wall some six feet away. He was surprisingly trim for a man of almost seventy. His thinning brown hair showed only a light sprinkling of gray. By contrast, the beard he had grown in retirement was pure white. Hannah thought it aged him while hiding his best feature, a sculpted mouth that women must have thought irresistible when he was young. He faced a stooped, skinny old man wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a wrinkled, ill-fitting tan sport jacket. On seeing Hannah, he pushed past the old man to give her a hug.

"Hey, stranger," he said. "Business must be hot. Haven't seen you in a dog's age."

"Well, you know how it goes. No rest for the wicked."

He grinned. "Then you must be a very bad girl, indeed. Hannah McPherson, meet Willie Popp, my longtime survey tech. You would've paid a heck of a lot more for Lindahl and Associates if this old fart hadn't taken it into his head to retire first."

Hannah shook a dry horny hand. Pale-blue eyes assessed her from a weathered, nut-brown face.

"Howdy-do, ma-am. Must say, would've been a new experience to have a boss like you. Never worked for a lady, much less a pretty one like you."

Barry smothered a smile. "Careful, Willie. Can't say stuff like that in today's workplace."

"Just as well, then. I'm too damned old to cotton to that *po*-litically correct bullshit."

Pardon my French, ma-am. So how's the old place getting on? Sloop still around?"

Jim Tanner, the firm's computer drafter, had earned his nickname by insisting his sailing craft be referred to by its technical name.

"He sure is," said Hannah. "Working ten-hour days, and even then we have to kick him out the door."

"Ol' Sloop always was a fool for work. Who you got out there pounding stakes?" His eyes swept her slim, five-foot-five frame. "Sure as heck can't be you."

She squared her jaw and said, "I've pounded my share." It was an old story. Ever since her first summer job as a surveying intern with her father's firm, men had been skeptical about her ability to hold her own in their physically-demanding profession. She had made it her mission to prove them wrong time and again. Even now, after achieving her licenses as both a professional engineer and land surveyor, she had a hard time not rising to the bait.

"The point of being the boss is you get to hire somebody else to do the grunt work," said Barry. "If you're wondering about your old job, she's got some eager young whippersnapper filling your shoes. Cory somebody-or-other."

"Williams," Hannah finished. "He worked for a construction company up in Alaska for five years. I was lucky to find him."

Willie nodded. Shifted his weight. "Uh, guess that's it, then. Time for me to skedaddle. Nice talking to you, ma'am. Give Sloop a howdy from me, okay?"

"I sure will."

He shot Barry a penetrating look. "See you, boss. And remember what I said. If I was you, I'd watch my back."

He turned away and nearly collided with a large bald-headed man coming out of the men's washroom. He danced around the man, mumbled an apology, and continued down the short hallway in a jerky, bow-legged stride. They watched him disappear through the side entrance to the funeral home.

In his wake, Hannah felt a tingle of unease. She said, “Why did he tell you to watch your back?”

A slight beat of hesitation. Then, “Who knows? He has too much time on his hands ever since retiring. Spends most of his days wandering around town and imagining a bogeyman behind every tree.”

She didn’t buy it, but she couldn’t force the issue without admitting she had eavesdropped on their earlier conversation. Was he in danger? If so, would he have confided in her had she not allowed so much time to pass since they last talked? Normally they touched base every week or so, but now it had been nearly a month. She felt a stab of guilt knowing her own busy schedule was at fault.

As if reading her mind, he said, “Hey, it’s been too long since I saw your smiling face. You eaten supper yet?”

“Nope. I changed after work and dashed straight over.”

“Come on, then. I’m buying. Providing you’re finished here?”

She grimaced. “If I utter one more trite platitude, I’ll vaporize on the spot.”

“Good. Let’s take a page out of Willie’s book and duck out the back.” He gestured toward the side entrance and waited for her to precede him out into the dying day.

## Chapter Three

Vince Buccolini's cell phone chirped. He ignored it. Today was his only grandchild's first birthday, and for the moment he had little Leanne all to himself. He could feel her warmth and vitality through the fabric of his trousers where she perched on his knee. They were playing peek-a-boo. The child's musical laugh tickled his heart. He didn't want to be disturbed.

The phone buzzed again. Annoyed, he pulled it out and looked at the display. Realized this was one he had to take. He lifted Leanne to the ground and watched her teeter across the velvet turf toward her mother, black curls bouncing with every step. A Buccolini through and through, he thought with delight. He was still smiling as he raised the phone to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry to butt in, but we got a problem."

"So talk."

"You were right. The old geezer recognized you."

Silence as Vince digested it.

"There's more. Remember the engineer? Lindahl? Him and Popp just had a powwow. Popp told him about seeing you and said to get rid of the stuff. And..." Hesitation. "...there was somebody else there. A woman."

Shit. Why didn't they just take out an ad in the Chicago Tribune? "Woman? What woman?"

"Name's Hannah something-or-other. Sounds like she took over the business from Lindahl. She came in toward the end, and I don't think she heard them make the connection to you. But she heard enough to make her curious."

"Where are they now?"

"Popp left. I stuck around to keep an eye on Lindahl and the woman. They just went out together. What do you want me to do?"

Vince thought for a second. "Stay with them for now. See if you can find out anything more. Then get back to me."

"You got it. Ciao." The line went dead.

Vince stared out over his expansive lawn. The party was in full swing, champagne flowing, the huge caterer's tent at the ready with tables and chairs arranged around a five-foot-tall fairytale castle cake. Waiters wandered among the guests with trays of hors d'oeuvres and drinks. The soft strains of Puccini wafted through the loudspeakers. He had hired the string quartet out of the Lyric Opera Orchestra. Only the very best for his Leanne.

An outdoor party had been something of a gamble. This late in September, the weather in Illinois could be unpredictable—sweltering or freezing or any gradation in between. Vince took it as a blessing from God that conditions had turned out to be perfect. Bright sunshine, temperatures in the high seventies, a light breeze blowing off the lake to keep the flies and bees at bay. If it turned cool after the sun went down, the gas heaters positioned around the tent would keep people warm during dinner. All in all, a stellar occasion.

Until now.

A long shadow fell over him from behind. "Problems?"

He turned and squinted up into the lowering sun. His brother-in-law Nick Lorenzo stood at his left shoulder.

“Hey, Nick.” He stood and shook the other man’s hand. “Wondered when you guys were gonna show up.”

“Maria got hung up on her shopping.” He pointed toward his wife, Vince’s half-sister, who smiled a greeting as she headed toward the gift table with an armload of presents. “Sacs never had it so good as when that woman walks through the door. So what’s the deal? You looked worried just now.”

One thing about Nick—he was nosy. More so than was good for him.

“Nah,” said Vince. “Just pissed. Don’t like to be bothered with business at family events.”

Nick shifted his weight, eyes bugging slightly in his swarthy face. Vince read him like a book. He wanted to say something, but he was nervous about doing it.

Nick was everything Vince wasn’t—tall, handsome and athletic. It didn’t bother Vince. The only time he had given much thought to his own looks was when he was courting his wife Iris. Once he had won her, he had dismissed society’s artificial standards for the meaningless crap they were. He might be short, stout and mostly bald, but he had more smarts and savvy and cool than Nick would ever have. Now he waited for his brother-in-law to screw up his courage and spit it out.

“Uh, I gotta ask. You’re keeping a low profile on...” He made a circular motion with his right hand. “...you know, the Green deal. Just like we said, right?”

It galled Vince that he had to take a back seat to his brother-in-law in this latest venture, but it couldn’t be helped. “I told you, Nick. It’s your baby. To win—” Vince fixed him with a steely stare. “—or lose.”

Nick colored. “Not to worry, bro. Everything’s under control. But it’s a delicate time right now. Gotta be real circumspect. It’s a huge opportunity, and we don’t want to blow it.”

“Lighten up, Nick. Nobody’s gonna blow anything. Unless you got plans with Maria for later.” He winked and slapped the other man’s back. “Now let’s go see what the ladies are up to. Must be about show time.”

They crossed the lawn to where Maria stood chatting with Vince’s wife Iris and their daughter Olivia, who had a squirming Leanne propped on her hip. Vince couldn’t help the rush of pride he always experienced when he compared his wife to other women. His dark-haired, olive-skinned sister Maria was pretty enough, although she’d been putting on weight lately. Next to her, Iris was a Scandinavian goddess—tall with shoulder-length blonde hair and classic aquiline features. She had been second runner-up in the Miss Illinois contest when he’d first seen her. By then he was a made guy in the Chicago Outfit, accustomed to giving orders and controlling those around him. For the first time in his life—no, make that the *only* time in his life, he was in the position of supplicant. He could tap his considerable powers of persuasion, but in the end, the outcome was in Iris’s delicate hands, and nothing he could do would change that fact. That she had accepted an invitation to go out with him was no less a miracle than her acceptance of his marriage proposal. He had vowed then that she would never have reason to regret her decision. To his knowledge, she never had.

Their daughter Olivia was a nice amalgam of their two genetic heritages. A little shorter than her mother, a little darker, a wide mouth short of beautiful, she was nonetheless the pride of his life. In her lay all his hopes for the future.

Some of his associates had expressed condolences when Olivia fell in love with Ralph Mueller, the Lutheran grandson of a German immigrant. Once Vince got over the initial shock, he couldn’t have been more pleased. He was foresightful enough to recognize that times had

changed and his family's future lay not in the Sicilian past, but in moving forward into the legitimate endeavors of mainstream America. Baby Leanne represented the first step. Vince prayed every day that she would soon be followed by a grandson or two. They would not bear the Buccolini name, but Vince's blood would still run strong in their veins. By the time another generation passed, all links to the old neighborhood and the old ways would be erased along with the stigma those associations implied.

He thought about his own son. Born twenty-two years before, Vito's mind had been irreparably damaged by an incompetent nincompoop who'd allowed the umbilical cord to wrap around the baby's neck and choke off the critical flow of blood during the birthing process. Today Vito was a sweet loving boy who lived in the finest institution money could buy and spent his days playing with toys Leanne would soon outgrow. Vince took some consolation in knowing the idiot doc responsible now stood in concrete boots at the bottom of Lake Michigan. But it was a band-aid on his heart, at best. Nothing could erase the pain he and Iris had been forced to live with ever since.

He shook it off, reminding himself that a new era was now dawning. Olivia and Ralph were the heralds who would usher it in. He kissed his daughter and made kitchy-koo noises at his granddaughter. She looked at him as if he were Godzilla before shrieking and burying her face in her mother's neck.

"Fickle little so-and-so," he laughed. "Practicing being a woman already."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Oh, Daddy." She offered her cheek to her uncle. "Hi, Uncle Nick. Glad you could come."

"Wouldn't miss it." He kissed Olivia, then Iris, saying, "Hey, there, pardner. Didn't see you at the office today. I thought you were coming in for a few hours."

Iris was the titular head of J & L Construction Company, holding fifty-one percent of the stock in her maiden name of Johansen in order for the company to qualify for state business as female owned. Nick was the minority partner, but he ran the show.

Iris waved her hand at the lawn full of people and said, "How could I possibly have come in today, Nick? Look around. All this didn't happen by magic."

"Of course not. But the company doesn't run by magic, either. I need your signature on a couple of contracts."

"Can't you just sign them for me? Really, it's an impossible week for me. I won't be able to make it in until next Monday at the earliest."

He grinned. "Thought you might say that. So I stuck the contracts in my briefcase and brought them along. Sign them for me later, and you're off the hook."

She gave his arm a playful punch. "You're such a tease. Why I put up with this silly partnership is beyond me."

"Oh, I can think of a few million reasons. And they're all green."

"Speaking of things green," said Vince, "whose idea was it to invite him?"

He jerked his head in the direction of two men standing beneath a large oak tree some distance away. One—medium build, curly brown hair, good-looking—was Vince's son-in-law Ralph Mueller. The other was a few years older, probably pushing forty and doing everything he could to deny it. Shaved head, buff physique, diamond ear stud, lots of gold chains. Narrow, deep-set eyes and ferret features left him several ticks shy of handsome. Bobby Green.

"Mine," said Nick, quickly adding, "He's Ralph's cousin, so in a way that makes him family."

"I thought you wanted me to keep a low profile with the Greens."

“I do, at least publicly. But it’s also a balancing act. Gotta keep everybody cozy and friendly-like until the deal’s on ice. The old man’s still skeptical. Thought it would help to shmooze the kid a little.”

“Enough!” said Iris, her voice uncharacteristically sharp. “No more business tonight. I’m going to tell the caterers to start serving. We’re here to celebrate, remember?”

Vince caressed her arm. “Of course we are, sugar. I apologize.”

Even as he said it, his eyes remained on the two men under the tree.

∞∞∞∞

“What’s it like being his son-in-law?” Bobby Green was saying. He had caught the older man’s scrutiny and was returning it stare for stare. “Look at him. Substitute Marlon Brando, and this whole scene’s straight out of *The Godfather*.”

Ralph shrugged. “He’s a decent enough guy. Worships Olivia and Leanne. As to the rest—well, I try not to think about it. There’s no real proof he’s connected. Olivia categorically denies it.”

“She would, wouldn’t she? She’s his daughter.”

“Granted. But she says she knows him through and through, and she swears his business is strictly legitimate.”

“Uh-huh. And what exactly does he do?”

Ralph made an offhand gesture. “Venture capitalism. Takes on various projects.”

“With capital from...?”

“I’m told it all started with a trucking company and a string of auto parts stores.”

“Chop shops, you mean.” A wry smile. “Can’t argue with success, though. Must be nice having all this...” He waved his arm at the lawns, gardens, tennis courts and swimming pool surrounding the Georgian stucco mansion, all perched on a bluff overlooking the north shore of Lake Michigan. “...in the family.”

“Hey, dude, you’re the one who wears the mantle of the Green empire. That isn’t exactly a shack you’re building out there in South Barrington.”

Bobby smirked. “Guess we’ve both come a long way from First Avenue.”

The two men had grown up on the same block in their quaint little town of West Dundee, East Dundee’s sister community on the opposite side of the river. In those days, Bobby went by the surname Mueller, having been formally adopted by his stepfather, Walter Mueller. Bobby had never been sure whether or not the adoption made him a bona fide cousin to Ralph, whose father was Walter’s brother. It didn’t matter. The two families were close, and the boys had spent holidays and weekends in each other’s company for years.

Then came the acting-out years, and Bobby was sent to his dad down in Amarillo. Reginald Green wasn’t thrilled with the arrangement. He was busy building an oil-based financial empire, had just married his fourth wife, and couldn’t be bothered with a rebellious teenager. After a few disastrous months, he bundled Bobby off to a military prep school. To everyone’s amazement, the boy thrived in that no-nonsense, closely-structured environment. He went on to Texas A & M, where he exhibited an affinity for business. It took awhile, but the old man eventually acknowledged that his own acumen had somehow been passed along to this little-known son, and he was persuaded to make a place for Bobby in Green Enterprises. The two hit it off, Bobby changed his legal name back to Green, and the rest was history.

Ralph, on the other hand, went the law school route and returned to practice in his home town. He and Olivia now lived in an upscale house in the nearby town of Sleepy Hollow. He said, “So what brought you back to our neck of the woods? And what’s this I hear about you hooking up with Olivia’s Uncle Nick in some land deal east of town?”

“We’re working on it.”

His smug expression stoked Ralph’s curiosity. “So? What’s the skinny?”

“Can’t tell you much more, cuz. We’re working with the village over a possible annexation, and if word gets out before we cement the deal, the price of the land will go through the roof. Suffice it to say it’s going to be good news all the way around if things go the way we envision them.”

“And if they don’t?”

He gave a slow grin. “They will. With my old man involved, you can be sure of it. We don’t call him King Midas for nothing. In fact, if you’ve got a few extra hundred thou sitting around, I’d advise you to jump in.”

“You’re looking for outside investors?”

“We will be before it’s over. There’ll be plenty for everyone.”

“You intrigue me. Let’s test my powers of deduction, shall we? Your dad, Reginald Green, made his fortune in oil, then sank his profits into several pipeline construction companies under the umbrella of Green Enterprises. Shortly after you came on board, the company expanded into the entertainment business. You guys started putting up resort complexes all over the country, especially up in the Wisconsin Dells. At latest count, you have three hotel and water park complexes up and running with a fourth under construction. How am I doing?”

Bobby grinned. “You’ve done your homework, cuz. I’m flattered by your interest.”

“Lately you’ve been scoping out a piece of farmland abutting the eastern boundary of East Dundee. That tells me you’d like to bring the fun and games to Illinois. You’re collaborating with J & L Construction instead of the Texas-based firms you’ve used in the past. J & L is a female-owned business—wink, wink—registered with the State of Illinois. That tells me you’ve got a more ambitious agenda than anyone else has guessed. Again, how am I doing?”

“You’re a downright fuckin’ genius, Ralph. But a word to the wise. Any breath of this gets out, and some very powerful people aren’t going to be happy. I know you’re Vince’s son-in-law. But remember what happened to some famous, or should I say *infamous* sons-in-law in Iraq some years back. Family only takes you so far in this world. If I were you, I wouldn’t forget it.”

Ralph’s eyebrows flew skyward. “Did I just hear you threaten me, *cuz*?”

“Me?” Bobby threw up his hands. “Of course not. Just a little friendly advice, family-member to family-member.”

“Good, because I might want to take you up on that investment offer.”

“Well, hey.” Bobby was all smiles again. “That’s great. We’ll put your name at the top of the list.”

“You do that. If it’s the sure thing you say it is, a guy’d be a fool to pass it up.”