

The very word “secrecy” is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths, and to secret proceedings.

— *John F. Kennedy, President of the United States*

The world is governed by very different personages from what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes.

— *Benjamin Disraeli, Prime Minister of England*

The best place to hide a lie is in a pile of truths.

— *Phoenix Jamborsky, Mayor of Twin Rivers, Montana*

## CHAPTER ONE

### **MAY 1, 2009 CREE NATION RESERVATION, ALBERTA, CANADA, ST. REGIS LAKE**

The two young men flew along the ice, the sliver of a moon granting them just enough light to see their path. They were about the same age and yelled to each other over the loud whir of the snowmobile. The smaller man drove, with the bigger one gripping him around the waist, his mouth next to the smaller man's ear. The snowmobile dragged a large, swinging metal trailer. Anyone watching might have believed the pair slightly odd, speeding across the frozen lake in the middle of the night, too fast and too directed to be out for a casual ride. No, they were clearly not crossing the lake for fun. But no one would see them on the lake. The reservation police were not inclined to patrol the ten miles of frozen lake during the day, let alone at three a.m. And besides, two crazy Indians would hardly raise an eyebrow. After all, this was not the United States, not even Canada, but the sovereign Cree Nation.

The snowmobile reached the shore and bounced up over a small hill onto the American side of the reservation. Immediately, the driver whipped the snowmobile around and back to the edge of the ice, his movements, for the first time, suggesting uncertainty. Or, to a trained eye, panic. Both men dismounted and crawled to the top of the hill, peering down across the snowy plain onto the American side of the Cree Nation. After a few moments, the smaller man reached into a bag on the snowmobile and removed a small glass bottle. He looked back over the plain, then tipped the bottle back, taking a long drink. The larger man stood directly behind the smaller one, looking this way and that across the lake. He too bent and fished through a backpack. The small man began

to twist the cap back onto his bottle. Then his brains flew out of his head and onto the fresh snow.

The stocky young man whose Canadian driver's license referred to him as Arthur Macow stood alone, staring all around, both north across the lake and south, over the small hill and across the empty plain. Nothing. Right before killing Adams, he had actually been impressed, for the first time, with the silly Indian's decisiveness. Not seeing his contacts on the American side of the lake, Adams had retreated a safe distance to assess the situation. This drug deal, and selling the American marijuana in Canada, would have earned Adams and his brother a lot of money. Yet Adams was willing to drive away at the first sign of trouble. The empty plain, for Adams, was a sign of trouble. Maybe he had not been such a monumental fool. Macow had paused before killing Adams. He had allowed Adams to get one last sip from his grubby little liquor bottle before he died. It was only fair. It was what Adams had loved most in life. But now, Macow needed to move quickly.

He crawled up the hill and looked across the snowy plain in the slender moonlight. Into America. Still nothing. He reached down and scooped up some snow. He was suddenly so thirsty. But as his heart rate slowed, he smiled to himself, the fresh powder tingling his teeth.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **ONE WEEK LATER MAY 8, 2009, CAROLINE COUNTY, NORTHWEST MONTANA**

“Sack o’ shit!” barked Sheriff Pasquali. His rifle shot echoed through the morning valley mist. The eight-point buck stood about seventy yards away, in full view of Pasquali and his hunting companions. The buck turned its head as if vaguely annoyed and then arrogantly trotted into the underbrush. Gabriel Lantagne laughed softly, taking a deep breath of the morning mountain air. He lay between Phoenix and the Sheriff, the three of them hidden from the valley below by a huge fallen tree. He too gripped a rifle but had not even loaded it. The morning target practice was for the sheriff.

“Shit, Sheriff,” Phoenix said, “you’d think by your age you’d a thought of a new epithet for when you blow a shot.” Pasquali was sixty-six years old and always used the same gruff, three-word phrase whenever he missed. Phoenix had been hunting with the Sheriff regularly for three years and claimed she’d never seen him hit anything. She had, however, heard him grunt “sack o’ shit” dozens of times. Gabe had no idea if Sheriff Pasquali directed the phrase towards the animal, towards himself, or towards whatever unknowable force had destined him to be such a piss-poor hunter.

Pasquali spit tobacco back across his body, strafing his protruding belly. “Epi-what?”

Phoenix stood up from behind the dead tree. “Your cuss of choice. Why don’t you change it up once in a while? Maybe ‘son of a whore’ or something.”

“You know I don’t care for any of your fancy phray-zee-ology.” Pasquali groaned as he hefted himself up with the help of the huge rotting log. He took out his flask, which Gabe could hardly

see inside his meaty hand, took a small sip, and held it out to Phoenix.

“You know I don’t drink during the day, Sheriff. I’ve got a job and whatnot.”

“Didn’t stop the last guy.” Pasquali held the flask towards Gabe.

“I don’t drink,” Gabe said.

“Know what Frank Sinatra said? ‘I feel sorry for people who don’t drink. For them, when they wake up in the mornin’, they know it’s the best they’re gonna feel all day.’” Pasquali’s laugh bellowed through the woods and into the valley.

“Besides, I got a trial today.” Gabe had not touched alcohol for four years but sometimes found his disciplined sobriety hard to explain. When people asked if he simply didn’t like drinking, he sometimes said, “Problem is I love it.”

“Grizzly Redford?” Pasquali said.

That Pasquali knew the name of his client who was going on trial that day surprised Gabe. But Pasquali, he was learning through Phoenix, knew lots of things. Phoenix viewed it as part of her job as mayor to hunt with Pasquali. The sheriff was, despite his anti-pretenses, an important man.

Phoenix lit a cigarette. “What would the town think if I showed up tonight half in the bag?” This jaunty, microphones-off Phoenix whom Gabe was only beginning to get to know contrasted with the earnest, almost shy city-manager type the town had elected a year ago. Correction, the almost shy but sublimely sexy librarian-type. Gabe studied her, the perfect posture and intelligent eyes, which betrayed a mystery beneath the down-home practicality she presented to the town.

“Same as they always think, darlin’,” Pasquali said. “They’d think you’re beautiful.”

Phoenix turned towards the valley, where the mist had lifted as they spoke. “Looks got nothing to do with it, Sheriff. I got elected because I was on your ticket.”

“That other fool had to go.”

“This town meeting tonight is critical,” Phoenix said. “You’re coming, right?”

“I’m coming, but that don’t mean I agree with you.”

She exhaled. “You don’t have a choice. The alternatives, I assure you, are gloomy.”

“Maybe so, maybe so. But I urge you, madam, to keep your eyes focused on the traditions of this town even as you aim to end ’em.”

“I don’t aim to end anything. The future is coming with or without us.”

The three stood quietly for a moment, looking into the valley together. Gabe knew he’d been invited on the early morning hunting venture because Phoenix wanted something from him. Just like she’d wanted him to run for the City Council and wanted him to be her assistant campaign manager when she had run for mayor.

In her first substantial act as mayor, Phoenix had jostled tradition by changing the town’s name. Gabe’s hometown had been called Weasel Junction since the early nineteenth century. Its new name, Twin Rivers, spearheaded Phoenix’s efforts, as she put it, “to build a bridge to the twentieth century.”

“Twenty-first,” Gabe had said.

She’d smiled. “One step at a time, isn’t that what they say?”

The town hall meeting to decide the name change had lasted past midnight, which qualified as an all-nighter in Weasel Junction, a far cry from Washington, DC, where Phoenix had worked as a staffer to Senator Beauregard Bryant before moving to Weasel Junction to be with her now ex-husband. “The funny part,” Pasquali had said to Gabe in private, “is they ain’t even fuckin’ rivers.” The town’s new name referred to the convergence in northern Caroline County of the Fishtail, which had always been called a stream, and Wounded Man Creek.

The only remaining tribute to the old name was Pasquali’s Weasel Junction Hunt Club, a large shack in the woods a hundred yards up the ridge from where the three of them now stood. The structure itself looked like something out of Deliverance, but inside, the shiny hardwood floors, oak bar, modern kitchen, pool table, karaoke machine, wide-screen TV, and rows of leather

couches bespoke a hidden wealth.

“My idea can work,” Phoenix said.

“It may work or it may not,” Pasquali said. “This is a strange year, and apt to get stranger. But I’m talking about something you still don’t understand, Madam Mayor. Politics.”

“I don’t understand politics?” She had a master’s degree in public policy and had worked four years on Capitol Hill for the most powerful man in Montana.

“If you understood politics, you would have announced your prison fiasco Monday morning of this week, not in back in January. You gave this God-loving town all winter and early spring to talk it over. Plus all that national news crap? Guantanamo terrorists to Twin Rivers prison? Sheeit, Phoenix, half the town thinks Bin Laden saw that shit on CNN and plans to blow up the taco joint out on Route 3. The meeting will be packed tonight. If you’d waited until Monday, only the regulars, including those do-gooders you run with, woulda showed at the meeting. You coulda won the vote, and then maybe your plan could have worked in time to prevent you from getting thrown out of office at the next election. As it is now, you’ll have a riot on your hands tonight. Don’t forget the last time somebody had a revolutionary idea on how to save the town.”

The last mayor had decided to float twenty million dollars in town bonds to help build a maximum-security prison in the hopes of securing contracts to house other states’ prisoners. At a raucous town hall meeting, Mayor Pritchard had persuaded the town to vote for the idea. But now, three years later, the Weasel Junction Detention Center, recently renamed Twin Rivers Maximum Security Penitentiary, remained empty.

“It’s an important decision,” Phoenix said. “Everyone has a right to be part of it.”

“Yeah, you really understand politics.” Pasquali spat a perfect stream of brown liquid onto the rotted log.

“Besides, the town elders see the need for change,” Phoenix said.

Pasquali looked at her through squinted eyes until something

turned his head.

“Sack o’ shit!” Pasquali jerked around and grabbed his rifle from the fallen tree.

Down the slope, now more than a hundred yards away and partially shielded by tall overgrowth, stood the same huge mule deer, this time defiantly staring right their way.

Pasquali crouched, settling the rifle on top of the tree. Phoenix knelt, reached out, and touched his shoulder gently. When their eyes locked, she winked playfully.

Pasquali sighed. “Goddamn it.” He moved aside as Phoenix settled in behind the rifle.

Gabe studied the dynamic between the old cop and the young mayor. He took a deep breath from the diaphragm, allowing osmosis to channel the still Montana air first through his lungs and then healingly along each and every vein and artery to his feet and hands. And eyes. Nothing he had ever felt in his life—not being drunk, not the excitement of winning big cases during the early part of his career, not even sex—pleased him like the utter stillness he felt whenever he walked the outskirts of his town.

Phoenix fired. The buck remained still for a second before keeling over in slow motion.

“I’ll be goddamned!” Pasquali nimbly hopped over the log while drawing his knife. Phoenix stood, watching Pasquali amble down the slope hollering with pleasure. Before Gabe and Phoenix reached the buck, the calmness left Gabe, and he thought again about his normal life. That day’s trial, the evening meeting, and why Phoenix Jamborsky had stopped him outside the courthouse the year before to recruit him into the inner workings of Weasel Junction.

“You got it from here, Sheriff?” she said. “I got work to do.”

“You sure do.” He ran his fingers along the edges of the antlers. “Not bad shooting for a Polack.” No doubt the head of Pasquali’s kill would soon join the rest of his impressive collection up at the Hunt Club.

“Doesn’t take much to outdo a fat old wop.” Phoenix turned away. “Don’t forget I need you tonight.”

Still squatting, Pasquali laughed as he cleaned his knife.  
Gabe followed Phoenix back up the hill.  
“See you tonight?” she said.  
Weeks ago, he had said her, “Terrorists to Weasel Junction  
Penitentiary? You can’t be serious.”  
“Twin Rivers, my friend,” she’d said. “Twin Rivers.  
Now he asked, “You really think you can do this?”  
“Gabe, like I told you, I’m doing it.” She winked at him.