

## ONE

**H**e's gone."

The sheriff stopped polishing his shield and looked up, scowling.

"What do you mean, he's gone? Did you check the radio station?"

"Three times," the deputy said.

"How about my neighborhood?"

The deputy nodded. "No sign of him anywhere."

After brooding for a few moments, the sheriff got up and walked across his office, going out of his way to kick a waste basket and send wadded scraps of paper scattering across the floor. He opened a closet door and stared in the mirror as he carefully pinned the buffed shield to his uniform shirt. Then he studied his reflected image and smoothed the shirt over his broad chest. He tilted his head forward, as if examining his scalp for bald spots, and ran a hand through his closely-cropped dark hair.

When he was back at his desk, he looked at the deputy with narrowed eyes and said, "Do you suppose he took off?"

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“That’s my guess. He wasn’t home the first time I checked, so I circled back a couple of hours later. Stuff was scattered around his house like he’d left in a hurry. Clothes seemed to be gone, his music equipment, his—”

“You went inside?”

“Yeah, I went inside. I wanted to—”

“Jesus Christ, Lee! What if someone saw you? After everything we’ve done to set this up?” The sheriff looked away and shook his head.

“Relax, no one saw me. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem, you say? *Shouldn’t?*”

“Poor choice of words. There *won’t* be a problem.”

The sheriff glared at him. “How did you get in? Did he forget to lock the door?”

“I used my tools,” the deputy said.

“Oh, great,” the sheriff said sarcastically. “You broke in. When you were prowling around like some third-rate burglar, did you at least check to see whether the merchandise was still there?”

“Third-rate burglars know better than to tear up floorboards.”

The sheriff sensed that his top deputy was offended by his questions and softened his tone. “You’re right, that wouldn’t have been a good thing to do. I just hope to hell nothing has happened to the merchandise. That would be a total disaster.”

The deputy didn’t say anything.

“I bet the bitch tipped him off,” the sheriff muttered after a few moments. He jabbed the desk with the tip of his Bic pen. “We’ve got to move. I’ll get ahold of Nikki and we’ll run over to Judge Paduca’s house and get a warrant signed before the old goat gets liquored up and on his high horse about the Fourth Amendment. You get your team assembled and be ready to go.”

The deputy asked, “Are you coming with us?”

The sheriff shook his head. “Nikki and I are going to have lunch at a very public place. I need to establish separation. If people hear rumors about him and the bitch, I don’t want them starting to look my way.”

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The deputy's resentment had been building, and as he walked out, it bubbled to the surface. *Gutless bastard. He gets us into this mess and now he's looking out for his own tail as usual. Jerk . . .*



That afternoon, Pete Thorsen sat on the porch of his lake house with his feet propped up on a wicker table and his laptop computer resting on his thighs, basking in the splendor of the September afternoon. Marty Robbins' "Devil Woman" drifted softly from his Bose music system, and as he listened, he idly scrolled through the draft manuscript of the article he was writing for *The Fjord Times* about a Norwegian relative who'd fought in the Civil War. He poked at the keyboard now and then to delete a comma or change a word or add a bit of description.

He found it hard to concentrate and the lake barely a hundred feet away kept drawing his eyes. While he'd seen it countless times, he marveled at the way the water changed hues from cobalt blue in the middle to layers of lighter blue-green closer to shore. Ripples no larger than what would have been created if he'd tossed a handful of pebbles into the water lapped gently against the narrow sand beach. He knew the tranquility would change when late autumn's chilly wind whipped the lake's surface into frothy waves. For now, though, everything was perfect.

Marty Robbins was beseeching the devil woman to set him free when Pete heard a droning sound in the distance. Faint at first, then louder. Irritated, he scanned the lake for the source of the disturbance, expecting to see a mechanical watercraft of some sort approaching from the east. A tourist on a jet ski, maybe. He saw nothing except two sailboats near the north shore, their white sails gleaming in the afternoon sun and their hulls slicing gracefully through the water.

The din grew louder still, and Pete realized the noise was coming from M-22, the two-lane highway that ran along the western edge of the lake. It wasn't the rhythmic *clack-clack-clack* of crazy old Calvin Seitz's rattletrap pickup, the memory of which always took him back to those nightmarish days the previous spring, but a dull roar, like rocks in

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a spinning barrel. Then he heard music as well. He clenched his teeth, thinking it might be a bunch of teenagers out for a mid-afternoon joy ride in a muscle car with a modified muffler, or a local tradesman taking a break from his work, cruising the area with a can of Leinies in one hand and country music blaring from open truck windows.

The racket became a cacophony. Through an opening in the foliage, Pete saw yellow flash past his driveway, followed by a change in the angry rumble of the engine to a rough growl as the vehicle stopped. During the momentary lull in noise, he recognized the throbbing of one of Jerry Lee Lewis' frenetic tunes.

He saw a flash going the other way as the vehicle reversed, then an egg-yolk yellow convertible with tail fins resembling those of a Batmobile came in his driveway and pulled to a stop five feet behind his Range Rover. The driver wore a Western-style tan hat and had oversized sunglasses. He shut down the engine, but didn't get out of the vehicle. He'd obviously left the ignition key on, though, because Jerry Lee continued to pound away and the man gyrated in his seat and raised his arms and snapped his fingers, then dropped his arms again and thumped on the steering wheel as the pulsing song came to an end.

Pete watched wide-eyed as the driver's head sagged back as though he were spent from the emotion of the experience. After a few moments, he came to life again and hoisted himself over the driver's-side door, hitched up his jeans, and swaggered toward the front door with a huge grin showing under his hat. Pete thought, *I must be dreaming.*

He wasn't. It was Jimmy Ray Evans, a friend from his army days. When Jimmy Ray was twenty feet from his house, he looked up and caught a glimpse of Pete through the screen and called in a voice that must have been audible across the lake, "Hey, partner, it's your old buddy, Jimmy Ray! I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd pay you a visit!"

Pete put his laptop on the coffee table and went out to greet him. He was barely down the steps when his old friend engulfed him in a bear hug, then grabbed his hand and pumped it enthusiastically.

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Pete, still reeling from Jimmy Ray's sudden appearance, said, "That was an impressive entry even for a showman like you. What brings you to the wilds of northern Michigan?"

Jimmy Ray beamed from under his hat. Pete was six-two himself, but Jimmy Ray had an inch or two on him even allowing for the crown of his imposing headgear.

"I'll tell you, partner," he said, "I just had to get out of North Carolina. You know what the temperature is down there? Over a hundred degrees. A hundred degrees for crissakes! And humid. You could hold your cup out and in two minutes it would be half full of water and you could make yourself some iced tea. I took time off from the station and pointed old Lizzie's nose north and just went. Pure serendipity that I ended up here."

Jimmy Ray continued to grin at Pete and winked and poked him in the ribs. "Must have been one of those subliminal things. Remembered what a good time I had here the last time or something."

"Old Lizzie being that yellow bomb over there," Pete said, gesturing in the direction of Jimmy Ray's convertible.

A pleased look crept over Jimmy Ray's face. "Yeah," he said. "She's something, ain't she?"

Pete stared at the vehicle a while, searching for the right words. "What is that, an old Cadillac?"

"Not an old Cadillac, partner. A *vintage* 1959 Cadillac Deville."

Pete's eyes remained glued to the vehicle. "Those certainly are impressive fins," he said.

Jimmy Ray gazed at the Deville lovingly. "Not many people know this yet, but I have it on good authority that General Motors is planning to bring tail fins back on the Caddy line. Those fins are what once made the brand the premier luxury vehicle in the world, you know. Then the marketing yahoos got ahold of things and pressured the designers to cut the fins down so the line would look more like other brands. Things went straight in the tank when that happened."

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"I can see how bringing back the fins might boost sales," Pete said, trying not to let his amusement show. "How tall are they?"

"The fins?" Jimmy Ray's brows knit together as he studied the vehicle. "I don't rightly know. I never measured them. What would you guess, maybe thirty inches?"

"Sounds about right."

"Or maybe twenty-nine inches. Really good designers don't like to be too precise, you know. They prefer to be a little off the obvious. Cuts down on copycats that way."

"I'm sure there're going to be a lot of copycats if Cadillac goes back to the fins."

"I'll tell you, Pete," Jimmy Ray said earnestly, "if you could see the looks I get every time I tool that baby through town . . . I think Cadillac is going to recapture the luxury car market from Mercedes and those Japanese car outfits. Provided, of course, one of them doesn't beat GM to market with fins."

Pete nodded sagely, trying to mirror Jimmy Ray's pensive gaze. "And you drove this thing all the way from Wilson, North Carolina?"

Jimmy Ray looked hurt. "Don't act so surprised. This machine could go to the West Coast and back without missing a beat."

"Engine sounds a little rough, though. Like it could use a tune-up."

Jimmy Ray waved a dismissive hand. "That's the way Lizzie liked her car. An engine with a little snap and crackle and growl to it. That way, when she drove through town, people would know she was coming. Kenny left things as they were because of the affection he had for his aunt."

"Am I supposed to know these names?"

"I keep forgetting you haven't spent any time in Nashville. Lizzie Catalano damned near owned that town for twenty years. Got up-and-coming artists together with record companies, arranged gigs for them in prime venues around the country. Even the big names came to her for advice, and not just when they were climbing the ladder, either. Elvis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, all of them. She gave my career a boost, too."

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“Sort of like that record guy, Sam Phillips, huh?”

Jimmy Ray’s brows knit together again. “Well, not exactly like Sam. But just as big. She was like royalty around Nashville, you know? Lizzie knew everybody and everybody knew her. She had that emporium over on Clover Street. You knew you’d made it when you walked into the place and heard your stuff being played over her sound system.”

“Mmm.”

“She had this hand-picked stable of ladies working for her, see? I tell you, every last one of them was a looker. You could take one of those honeys to the toniest spot in town and you’d get nothing but looks of envy.”

“I think you’re telling me that Lizzie ran a cathouse.”

Jimmy Ray gave him a look and said, “You’re damn lucky she’s gone now and didn’t hear you say that. She would have clawed your eyes out. Lizzie just had a broad range of civic interests and providing top entertainment happened to be one of them. Just because the merchandise she specialized in was pretty ladies didn’t make her a cathouse madam or whatever they call them.”

Pete was finally getting the picture. “So you bought this buggy from Lizzie.”

“Not directly from her. She left it to her nephew, Kenny, when she passed. For years, he hardly ever took it out on the street except when the temperature was a perfect seventy-six degrees and there wasn’t a cloud to be seen anywhere. Kept it polished to a fare-thee-well, too. When he did take it out, it was like a celebratory tour of the town in memory of his Aunt Lizzie. People would follow in their vehicles. Jesus, it was like some gigantic motorized conga line. The vehicles trailing behind Kenny would extend for blocks, all tooting their horns and playing music. C’mon, I’ll show you some of the features.”

Pete followed Jimmy Ray across the yard.

“It’s been completely restored to the way it originally was, except that Kenny replaced the transmission with a Turbo 400 unit. He didn’t try to tone down the growl, though, because that would have been

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disrespectful to Lizzie. The power on these babies is a 390 horsepower V-8, you know. Lizzie herself had the ragtop installed because she liked to tool around town in the open air and hand out cards advertising her entertainment enterprises. You know, kinda like the Rotary Club hands out candy to the kids during the July Fourth parade.”

He ran a hand across the hood. “I had the upgraded sound system installed. That’s my personal tribute to Lizzie on account of her love of music and everything she did for all of the Nashville artists.”

“I can see how you’d become attached to this machine.”

“The only problem is the driver’s-side door. I got to keep it closed at all times and slide over to get in or out of my seat. I don’t mind, though. Makes me feel like a young stud again.” He flashed the grin that Pete had seen countless times before.

Jimmy Ray walked a few steps toward the lake and looked out pensively. “Damn,” he said after a minute, “It sure looks different that the last time I was here. I guess that hard water does melt just like you said it would.” He shook his head in wonder.

“When were you here? Five years ago?”

“Four years and change,” Jimmy Ray answered. “We had a good time catching up after all these years, didn’t we?”

Pete thought back to when Jimmy Ray visited him the first time after they’d had no contact of any kind for twenty-five years. It was winter and his old army pal had been endlessly fascinated with the ways of the Yankees when the northern landscape turned to frozen tundra and fishing shacks sprouted on the ice.

Jimmy Ray continued to stare out at the lake. Finally he looked toward Pete and said, “Did they ever find that body?”