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LAKE LANDS

The Velvet Cartel Chronicles

by STEFAN WELTER

Author's Note:

Although this book contains material drawn from the world in which we live—including references to real places, events, and cultural context—it must be read as a work of fiction. All dialogue is invented. All incidents and events have been imagined. Nora, Rose, and every supporting character are products of the author's imagination, as are the inhabitants of the fictional town of Norville in Upstate New York.

There are Stars exploding around you, and there is nothing you can do.

From a poem by Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir

Spring

Chapter One

THE ACCIDENT (1987)

In the late Spring of 1987, four-year-old Nora Perkins sat in the back seat of her grandfather's brand-new Porsche 911. She proudly told anyone who would listen how much she loved that car. It smelled of success. Her grandfather, Charles Kline, had waited two years to get the call from Zuffenhausen, after which he traveled to Germany. He had a big smile on his face when he waved goodbye to his family who accompanied him to the airport on his way to Germany.

He picked up the Porsche, known as the G-Series, at the factory and then drove it to Hamburg to be shipped to the United States. He then patiently waited twenty-seven days, after which he picked it up at the port of Baltimore.

The car was fitted with a newly upgraded 3.2 -liter Carrera power plant, a marvel of precision and power. It delivered immense rear-wheel torque that could easily get inexperienced drivers in trouble, especially around tight corners. Fortunately, the friendly German engineers had warned Charles and encouraged him to test the car and its maneuverability at the companies'

own racetrack.

Charles was immensely proud of the car, though he made a point not to flaunt it. After all, the last thing he needed was unwanted attention. His friends knew how much he loved German precision engineering and encouraged him to spring for a decadent, dark green metallic finish that cost an additional three thousand dollars.

Nora's mother, Anne Perkins, was twenty-four at the time. She sat in the passenger seat next to her father who was taking the car through its paces along the windy roads of Upstate New York. Anne had married her high school sweetheart Richard Perkins and they had gotten pregnant right away. Even though they were very young and unprepared, there was never any question they would keep the baby.

Anne was clearly in a good mood. She enjoyed the fresh East Coast summer breeze that cooled her face, humming along the tunes from the radio. Grandpa had surprised them both. First, he'd gotten a bouquet of flowers, then he picked up Nora early from preschool. Together they had waited outside the offices of Norville Heritage Law Firm for his daughter to finish her shift as a paralegal. When Anne exited the building, Nora and her grandfather jumped out from behind a bush and surprised her. Charles knew how much work his daughter put into becoming a well-respected legal researcher, and she deserved an unexpected treat. He had been told by a zookeeper that dolphins in training learned twice as fast if they received treats not directly tied to their performances. Not that he was comparing his daughter to a dolphin. She was much prettier in his eyes, with her long, blond hair. Since there were no fancy restaurants in Norville, he'd booked a table at a French Bistro a few towns over. It was situated on the lake and known for its delicious French onion soup and crispy, thinly cut fries that came wrapped in used newspaper cones.

Anne didn't understand what her father did for a living. He seemed to have plenty of money, lived in a stately house, and claimed to be a business consultant. Asked about the type of consulting, he would give vague answers and then change the subject. Anne would often bring up the subject with her husband, expressing how uncomfortable she was not knowing what her father exactly did for a living. The staff at her law firm had been spreading rumors, and she knew they talked about her father behind her back. Richard would tell her not to worry—that people were just jealous of his lifestyle. After all, Charles Kline generously supported the couple with financial contributions.

“As long as he doesn't end up in jail, we should be grateful he supports us,” Richard would say, a few glasses of wine into the evening.

On their way to dinner, observing from the backseat, Nora was captivated by her mom's bright red scarf, which bounced around in the breeze. It reminded her of the inflatable dancing puppets she'd seen at used car dealerships. She tried to figure out if there was a pattern to the movement, but no, it was completely random.

Nora's mother turned the radio way up when *Heart of Glass* by Blondie came on. Charles was slightly annoyed but tolerated it. He liked seeing his daughter happy. He didn't understand why they'd had Nora at such a young age. Anne claimed it was an accident. He'd feared his daughter would forgo her graduate degree after she dropped out to take care of the baby. He knew it was still hard for women to reach positions of power and status, but the eighties had brought some change. He encouraged her anytime the topic came up. Fortunately, he loved spending time with Nora and liked his son-in-law. Life would have been miserable if he didn't get along with Richard.

For a while, they drove along the rolling hills, listening and whistling to the music. The

weather changed, like it often did upstate after a hot, humid day. Towering cumulonimbus clouds saturated with water vapor reached high into the atmosphere. Their color changed minute by minute, growing darker, greener, more ominous. Nora pointed out the blinking yellow storm lights along the lakefront, warning sailors to seek shelter in the nearest harbors. Raindrops pattered on the car roof as the wind picked up, sending leaves curling around the road. Nora's mother spotted a teenage boy on a bike at the side of the road. He must have heard the loud car approaching, stopped his bike and turned towards them. As the Porsche passed by him, Anne leaned out the window, waved at the boy and blew him a kiss. She turned around and giggled and reached out to tickle Nora's nose.

Then, out of nowhere, a looming shadow approached their car from the side. For a split second, Nora made out what looked like a pickup truck, inches away from them. She yanked her toy rabbit with both hands and held it tightly against her chest. A bright white flash nearly blinded her. She closed her eyes and what followed was the ear-piercing noise of the impact. Glass shattered, metal bent, arms and legs flung in all directions. It all happened in slow motion. The car flipped over and tumbled down an embankment towards the lake. It rolled and rolled and rolled. This would mark the beginning of the end of Charles Wilbur Kline.