

Stefan Welter

24 Shell Road

Mill Valley, CA 94941

415-341-4504 stefan@welterventures.com

LAKE LANDS

The Velvet Cartel Chronicles

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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

Chapter One

1-ACCIDENT (1987)

In the late spring of 1987, Charles Kline's four-year-old granddaughter, Nora Perkins, sat in the back seat of his brand-new Porsche 911. According to her mother, Nora had told all her friends how much she loved that car.

Charles Kline had waited two years for the call from Zuffenhausen. When it finally came, he traveled to Germany to collect the Porsche directly from the factory. He sported a big grin as he waved goodbye to his family at the airport.

After taking delivery of the car, he accepted the engineer's invitation for a test drive on the companies' own test track. The newly upgraded 3.2 -liter Carrera engine delivered more than enough power to get an inexperienced driver into trouble. Charles handled it with ease.

Proud of his new acquisition, he drove the Porsche to Hamburg, where it was loaded onto a container ship bound for the United States.

Twenty-seven days later, Charles picked it up at the port of Baltimore. Even though he was immensely proud of the car, he made a point not to flaunt it. After all, the last thing he needed was unwanted attention.

Anne Perkins, Nora's twenty-four-year-old mother, sat in the passenger seat beside her father who was taking the Porsche through its paces along the windy roads of Upstate New York.

She had married her high school sweetheart, Richard Perkins, after becoming pregnant during their courtship. They were young and unprepared, yet neither of them ever questioned keeping the baby.

Anne was clearly in a good mood, Charles could tell. She seemed to enjoy the fresh East Coast summer breeze, humming along to the tunes playing on the radio.

Charles 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, 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 to surprise her. Charles knew how much work his daughter put into becoming a well-respected legal researcher, and she deserved an unexpected treat. Since there were no fancy restaurants in Norville, he had 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.

Charles understood that Anne never truly understood what he did for a living—for obvious reasons. He never spoke about it. She knew he was wealthy and lived on a stately lakeside estate, but lately she had begun scrutinizing his lifestyle more closely, searching for answers.

“How can you afford a car like this?” she had asked the first time she saw the Porsche.

Whenever the subject came up, his answer was always the same.

“I’m a business consultant.”

If she pressed him about the type of consulting he did, Charles would offer a vague explanation before changing the subject.

Richard eventually confided in Charles that Anne had grown increasingly uncomfortable not knowing how her father had built his wealth. Rumors about Charles had begun circulating around the law firm where she worked.

“People are jealous,” Charles would tell his daughter. “Work hard, ignore the gossip, and if anyone gives you trouble because of me, let me know. I’ll take care of it.”

His generosity made the questions easier to ignore. Charles supported Anne and Richard financially whenever they needed help.

One evening, after a few glasses of wine, Richard finally voiced his opinion.

“As long as you don’t end up in jail, we’re grateful for your support.”

Charles laughed when he saw his daughter drive an elbow into Richard’s ribs, hard enough to make him wince.

On the drive to dinner, Nora sat mesmerized in the back seat, watching the bright red scarf around her mother’s neck dance wildly in the breeze like one of those inflatable tube men outside used-car dealerships.

Anne had turned up the radio when a song she liked came on. She shouted to her father that the song was called *Heart of Glass*, by Blondie. Charles was slightly annoyed but tolerated the loud music. He liked seeing his daughter happy. He loved being a grandfather, but feared his daughter would forgo her graduate degree after she dropped out to take care of Nora.

Fortunately, he loved spending time with Nora and got along with his son-in-law. Life would have been miserable if he didn’t get like 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 lights along the lakefront, which Charles explained, warned sailors to immediately seek shelter in the

nearest harbors. Raindrops pattered on the car roof as the wind picked up, sending leaves curling around the road.

Anne spotted a teenage boy riding his bicycle along the shoulder of the road. He had stopped his bike and turned towards them. The boy must have heard the roaring sound of the Porsche. As they passed him, Anne leaned out the window, waved, and blew him a kiss. Then she turned, giggled, and reached into the back seat to tickle Nora's nose. Charles couldn't help but smile.

Then, out of nowhere, a looming shadow lunged in from the side. For a split second, Charles caught the unmistakable outline of a pickup truck, only inches away from the Porsche. His eyes darted to the rearview mirror, where Nora clutched her toy rabbit tightly against her chest. Their eyes met. There was nowhere to go. Charles jerked the steering wheel anyway, desperately trying to avoid the collision.

Then a blinding white flash, followed by the ear-piercing scream of twisting metal. Glass exploded. Limbs were thrown in every direction. It all happened in slow motion. The Porsche flipped and tumbled down an embankment toward the lake.

It rolled.

And rolled.

And rolled.

Then everything went black.

That summer evening marked the beginning of the end of Charles Wilbur Kline.