

Part 1: The Land Grab

1: Setting the Scam

The Traveling Man, a con man currently going by the name Tom Brown, turned off the highway west of Seanboro onto the limestone gravel driveway marked by the bright red mailbox. At the end of the driveway sat a peeling, brown and white ranch-style house under a half-dead elm tree. He parked in front of the garage and got out of his black Cadillac Escalade, his leather briefcase tucked under his arm. For this job, he wore neatly barbered gray-black hair with a closely trimmed beard, fake horn-rimmed glasses, and a charcoal pinstripe suit. He stood by the car for a moment to collect himself. The morning sun was hot for September, and the air felt thick with pollen, but he took a deep breath anyway and exhaled slowing, falling into his role of land speculator, getting ready to play his part, before he walked across the gravel to the front door and rang the bell. An old man with red-gray hair thatched over a white, jowly face answered the door.

“Mr. Yost?” Tom asked.

The old fat man nodded his head. He had one hand on the doorjamb and the other hand on the doorknob.

“I’m Tom Brown. I spoke with you on the phone. Me and my associates are interested in the property you own on White Bear Lake.”

The old man laughed. “I thought it was some kind of prank call.”

Tom shook his head. “I assure you, Mr. Yost, that we are very serious.”

Yost turned his head back into the room. “Mary,” he yelled. “That fella is here about the property.”

“Really?” she called back. “Well, the house is a mess. Go out to the picnic table.”

Yost turned back to Tom. “Meet me at the garage.”

The garage door went up. Inside, the garage was decorated like a porch. The room was paneled with vertical knotty pine boards. White curtains hung in the windows. In the middle of the room was a green wood

picnic table that could have come from a city park. Two metal-framed folding chairs with a small white table between them sat to the left near the front opening. Yost hobbled down the steps from the house and indicted the picnic table with a wave of his arm. Tom sat down on one side. Yost eased himself down on the other side, gripping the table and grunting as he lowered himself. Mary Yost, stoop shouldered and white haired, shuffled out of the house. The screen door slammed behind her. She wore a light blue button-up housedress with matching slippers and was carrying two glasses of ice tea. She set the glasses on the picnic table and sat down next to her husband. “Tea?”

Tom smiled. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She nodded. “Garage is still cool.”

Tom could feel the sweat at the back of his neck. “Yes, ma’am.”

Yost took the other glass in both hands, took a sip, and set it down. “So what is this nonsense about the lake property?”

“As I said on the phone, I believe we can broker that property for you.”

“Young fella, let me review the facts for you. My grandpa farmed that land, did well, but he and my pa didn’t get along—”

“Too much alike,” Mrs. Yost said.

“Too much alike. So when Grandpa retired, he leased it to the Air Force. That was in about 1950. They used it for Cold War training—you know, secret hush-hush stuff. Congress put it on a decommission list about ten year back. After the Air Force left, we lost our income. Developers had big plans, especially for the lakefront. We put all our money in. Then some environmental folks said the land was contaminated, so we went after the Air Force for a cleanup.”

Mrs. Yost cut in. “Air Force said the land was fine.”

Yost nodded. “Judge ruled with them. So we should have had a happy ending, right?”

Tom nodded. “I know all this.”

Yost continued. “But the county said, ‘No, the paper says it’s contaminated, dangerous to people, you cannot build.’”

Mrs. Yost continued. “We borrowed to fight the county, but it didn’t do any good. Had to sell the big house to pay off the loans.”

Yost looked Tom in the eyes, a big frown on his face. “So you’re wasting your time.”

Tom took a sip of tea. “Mr. and Mrs. Yost, me and my partners know your situation intimately. We studied everything in the public record. We believe we can overturn the county’s previous ruling and get your property developed.”

“We don’t have any money.”

“You don’t need any money. Right now you’ve got nothing.”

“Worse than nothing.” Mrs. Yost chimed in. “We’ve got tax liability.”

“Exactly,” Tom continued. “We’ll do whatever it takes: overturn the county, find a developer, get the legal paperwork done. In exchange, we take fifty percent on the sale of the land.”

“Fifty percent?”

“We do all the work and pay all our expenses out of our half. All you have to do is sign this paper.” Tom took a contract out of his briefcase. “It says that we have the sole right to act on your behalf in the sale of the lake property, that we pay all expenses—all of them—and that we receive fifty percent of the sale.”

“Fifty percent is mighty high.”

“We’re taking all the risk. This is an expensive proposition.”

Mrs. Yost glanced at her husband. “Right now we’ve got nothing.”

Yost ground his teeth. “We should run this by our lawyer.”

Tom shook his head. “This only works if it’s all kept secret. Word gets out and enviro nuts start harping. I’ll be honest with you: I can’t guarantee you’ll actually get what the land should be worth. I can just guarantee that you’ll get as much as it’s possible to get.”

“As much as it’s possible to get.” The Yosts held hands.

“Give us a minute to read this contract.” Yost took a pair of wire-rimmed glasses out of his shirt pocket, slipped them on, and started reading the contract, his finger moving along under the text while his lips moved. Mrs. Yost followed along over his shoulder, squinting while she read.

Tom sat back and sipped his tea. The sun was slanting into the garage and he could feel the sweat running down from his armpits. He got out his handkerchief to mop his brow. He hoped he hadn’t sold them too hard.

The Yosts looked up almost at the same time and turned to each other. Mrs. Yost nodded her head slightly. Yost turned to Tom. “Okay, we’ll sign. I’m just warning you that you’re throwing your money away.”

Tom handed him a pen. “We’ll take that chance.”

By lunchtime, Tom was sitting in a booth at the Superior Diner with his wife, currently going by the name of Patty, and their partner Buddy Ray. Patty was forty-two, but even carnies misgussed her to be five years younger. She was thin and willowy, with her dark hair cut short in a way that made her eyes and mouth seem more childlike. Today she was wearing a black skirt suit with a pink, scooped-neck top, and a triple-strand gold necklace. Buddy, who sat across from them, was thirty years old. He was blond, heavily muscled, and wore a black crewneck shirt with a pair of khaki pants. Tom cut off a piece of his meatloaf, pushed some mashed potatoes on top of it, forked it into his mouth, and washed it down with a sip of iced tea. “So, the first step is taken care of. We are the sole representatives of Mary and Phillip Yost.”

Patty picked at her salad. “And now we assemble the pieces of the puzzle.”

Buddy set his half-eaten hamburger down on his plate and picked up a French fry. “I still can’t believe we’re going with the fifty-fifty split.”

“There’s plenty of money on this job. We’ll take two hundred and fifty thousand, if it all goes to plan,” Tom said.

“That’s beside the point. We shouldn’t leave any money on the table. We should always scrape up everything we can. You taught me that.”

“Yeah. I also taught you not to get caught. The idea is to make this score look legit. It doesn’t pass the smell test if we cheat the Yosts.”

Buddy dabbed his French fry in the ketchup on the edge of his plate. Patty looked from Tom to Buddy. “It’s time to move on, guys. We all know what you both think. It was Tom’s call. End of discussion.”

“Thank you,” Tom said.

Patty continued. “So now we can take the soil cores, deal with the county environmental officer, find our local real estate agent, and work our magic on a developer.”

“Yes, indeed,” Tom said. He glanced at Buddy. “You got the coring equipment, the GPS locator, and the property maps?”

“Good to go.”

“Then get started on the cores while we keep developing our cover. Lay a grid, get a sample from every square, document it all like a science project. This has to look convincing.”

“Come on, Tom, that’s a big-ass piece of property. It’ll take days. It’s all bullshit anyway. Can’t we just make it up?”

Tom shook his head. “Want boxes of samples tied to locations. Want a thick wad of analysis. That’s the amount of material that will enable the environmental officer to create a convincing story.”

“If we get him on board.”

Patty smiled. “*When* we get him on board. He’s a divorced guy with two kids in college. He’ll be jumping when I snap my fingers.”

“So get the cores done,” Tom said. “And then, for fun, you can find and corrupt our real estate agent. Sound fair?”

Buddy picked up his burger. “Anyone I want?”

“As long as she’ll play ball.”

Buddy bit into his burger. With his mouth full, he said, “I’ll hold you to that.”

Ten days later, Buddy was sitting in a dark back booth at the Home Run Bar and Grill, a sports bar in a strip mall on the west side of town that was a favorite hangout of real estate agents for Friday afternoon happy hour. He had a fresh haircut and shave, and his shoulders bulged out of his blue golf shirt and navy blue sports coat. The waitress who brought him his tap beer had eyed him over approvingly. He’d made a mental note to check up on her later. As he’d been sitting there, cross-checking the patrons against a computer listing of local real estate agents on his smartphone, the scene had become progressively more crowded and loud. After his second beer, with happy hour winding down, he noticed Marcie Tolliver standing by herself at the bar. She was as tall as a basketball player, busty, with auburn dyed hair and legs like an athlete. Her navy blue sports coat was a little loose and her khaki skirt was a little tight. He slipped up beside her, smiled when she glanced at him, and ordered another beer from the bartender. When he’d gotten his beer, he looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time. “How’s it going?”

Marcie was sipping at a tall mixed drink. “Long day.”

“Me, too.” He looked her up and down. “Looks like we have the same taste in clothes.”

She had a look on her face like she was going to blow him off, but after she saw his blazer and khaki pants, she said, “You’re not wearing high heels.”

He nodded. “The added height makes me too intimidating, so I have to stick to flats.”

“I’m taller than you.”

“Only in those heels, girlfriend.”

She smiled. “You got your repartee going on.” She shook the ice in her glass. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“I’m just in town with my partners working on a land deal.”

“Really? You know this is the real estate agent hangout?”

“You’re kidding. I thought agents were too competitive to hang out.”

“You can’t keep score if you don’t hang out.”

“Ouch. Now you’re sounding a little bitter.”

She drank off the bottom of her drink. “Like I said, long day. I’ve got to go.”

Buddy stuck out his hand. “I’m Buddy, by the way.”

She shook his hand. “I’m Marcie.”

“Good to meet you, Marcie. Maybe I’ll bump into you again.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.” She started to leave, but then turned back. “You really working on a land deal?”

“Marcie. So cynical. You must be having a bad week. Yeah, like I said, I’m here with my partners working on a land deal.”

“What’s that about?”

He shook his head. “We have to keep things quiet, or you local wheeler-dealers will cut us out. See, you’re not the only person who knows what a bad week is.”

She took out a business card and handed it him. “Well, if you need any local info, call me and I’ll give you the skinny.”

“Thank you, Marcie. I appreciate that. You have a good evening.”

He watched her walk away. She was already hooked; she just didn’t know it. Her career wasn’t going very well and she was sitting by herself in a bar where she should have friends or be making friends. Probably wasn’t cut out to be a real estate agent. But she did have an agent’s license. And in the very near future, she was going to have some new friends and opportunities she’d never dreamed of.

On Monday afternoon, Patty drove up to the Boford County Office Annex, a tan sheet-metal building located next to the county water works and the industrial park. She was driving Buddy's blue Ford Explorer. In the back were forty-eight core samples taken from random locations in each of forty-eight grid squares marked out on the Yost property. Each core was marked with its GPS location. She was dressed for a business meeting: black skirt suit, black flats, white collared shirt tastefully unbuttoned to show some cleavage if she bent over a report, white lacy underwear. She had an appointment with Bernie Revere, the county environmental officer, who was, by all accounts, a drinking, gambling good old boy, recently divorced with two daughters in college. She parked the Explorer on the side of the building next to the loading dock and walked around to the front entrance. Bernie was expecting her. He stood up out of his chair and extended his hand over his desk when she was ushered into the room. He was about the same height as her, five feet ten, with thinning black hair combed over the top of his head and chest hair sprouting out of the open collar of his blue short-sleeve oxford shirt. His shirt had a dirty spot on the front from where his beer belly rubbed up against his desk drawer. As she leaned forward to shake his hand, he didn't bother to hide the fact that he was looking down her blouse.

“Have a seat, Ms. Brown.”

“Call me Patty.”

He grunted his approval. “What can I do for you?”

“As I said when I called, I've got a batch of core samples from the Yost property that I'd like to get tested for environmental contamination.”

“That property is well known to be contaminated.”

“So I've heard. But those tests were done a long time ago. Testing standards have changed.”

“So you think that more accurate tests will show the property is safe to develop? That's a pretty far reach.”

“If the old tests, the ones done twenty years ago, were lost, and you did a thorough analysis, who knows what you might find.”

“Maybe.”

She took an envelope from her briefcase and set it on the desk. “Of course, we expect to pay to have the cores processed, and for the final report, all on an expedited schedule.”

“That could run into a few dollars, what with the overtime and all.” He set a hand on the desk. She pushed the envelope toward him. He took the envelope, glanced at the money inside, and put it in a drawer.

“Especially when you’ll have to take care of it yourself.” She reached into her briefcase and took out a file folder. “Let me show you what we have in mind.”

She came around the desk, put her left hand on his shoulder, leaned down, and opened the file folder in front of him with her right. “The top memo tells what we’re hoping you will find.”

“Hoping I’ll find?”

“Everybody’s got a right to hope, don’t they, Bernie?” She massaged his shoulder with her left hand. “The other papers are the records that go with the cores.”

He turned his head to look up at her and found that he was speaking into her cleavage. “Where are the cores?”

“In my truck out by the loading dock.”

“Let’s go have a look.”

They walked out through reception at the front of the building, where a thin, middle-aged woman with a no-nonsense look on her face sat behind an oak office desk. “I’ll be back in a few, Nancy,” Bernie said.

At the Explorer, Bernie opened the hatchback and looked over the cores. “You know, honey, you’re asking an awful lot for the money I’m going to make.”

Patty stood up close to him. “Since you’re not actually going to do any of the work, other than writing the report, I’d say the money’s pretty generous.”

“Yeah, but if any people get sick . . .”

“We’re not out to hurt anyone.” She reached over and rubbed the front of his pants. “In fact, we’re just trying to make people happy. The Yosts, a developer, people who want to live on the lake, and you. What could be wrong with that?”

He moved her hand away. “That’s the first time anyone tried to give me a lap dance with their hand.”

“Bernie, don’t tell me you’re shy. Why don’t we sit in the front of this truck, and I’ll see if I can’t convince you of how happy we want you to be?”

Bernie shut the hatchback. There was no one in sight. “I know a spot close by here that’s a little more private.”

“Sounds good. Let’s roll over there.”

He nodded. “I’m just telling you now that I haven’t made my mind up, and I might not make it up today.”

“No problem. Just relax. I’m sure you’ll end up making the right decision.”

They got into the Explorer and drove down a dirt road at the back of the county office annex, Bernie giving directions as they went, until they came to an old wooden shed with a large padlock on the door. “Drive around the back.”

Behind the shed was a shady spot enclosed by bushes. Patty put the car in park, and slipped out of her jacket and skirt. When she lay them up on the dash, she positioned her briefcase so that the mini-camera in the clasp would film the interior of the vehicle. In the meantime, Bernie had pulled down his pants. She straddled him in the passenger’s seat. “We always take care of our friends, Bernie; we always take care of our friends.”

“Hush up, honey. You can talk in a minute.” He unbuttoned her blouse and shoved his face into her breasts. She gripped his shoulders and rode him hard, rocking the car. A few minutes later, his head came up.

“Oh, Jesus,” he said, “oh, Jesus.”

She smiled. Her work here was done. All she had to do was make a copy of the digital recording of his office, the loading dock, and the payoff, and he was in their pocket for the duration.

At 6:00 p.m., Buddy pushed through the doors into the Home Run Bar and Grill. He was looking for Marcie. Tom had checked her out. She'd been in real estate two years, she'd had a falling out with her mentor, she was underperforming, and her husband was currently unemployed. So Buddy's intuition about her had panned out. She was the perfect local wrapper for their program. All he needed to do was close the deal. He peered through the crowd over at the place at the bar where she had been standing on Friday, and there she was, a creature of habit, beaten down by another unsuccessful day and in no hurry to go back home to her disappointing husband. He circled the bar so that he could approach from her blind side and squeezed up to the bar between her back and the back of a fat guy in a gray suit who was part of a threesome. Beer sloshed on the fat guy's hand, he gave Buddy a dirty look for pushing him over, Buddy replied with a quick consolatory smile, and then ignored the guy and stuck his hand up for the bartender. "Tap beer, please."

The bartender brought him a pint and placed a piece of cash register tape in a shot glass in front of him. Buddy nodded. "Thanks."

Marcie looked over her shoulder. "You again?"

"I could say the same thing."

She turned toward him, noting his black golf shirt, jeans, and hiking boots. "Your outfit's different today."

"I was out in the field marking lot lines. Not a jacket and tie sort of day." He sipped his beer. "How about you. I see you're dressed for success. Have any luck?"

"You know how it goes—hot and cold. I worked some prospects, but they can't quite make up their minds."

"You'll get there."

"Yeah." She lifted her highball glass, saw that her drink was nothing but ice, and set it on the bar. "Well, I should get going."

“So soon? Have one more. That’s all I’m going to have. Then we’ll leave at the same time and free up the bar.”

“You just got that one.”

He picked up his beer and drank it down. “It’s gone now. Come on, you wouldn’t make a stranger in town drink by himself, would you? One more and out into the sunshine we go.”

“Okay.”

He flagged down the bartender and indicated he wanted a round. The bartender brought them a beer, a clear cocktail of some sort, and a new bar tab receipt. “What you drinking?” Buddy asked.

“Vodka tonic.” She stirred the drink with the thin straw and then set the straw on the bar. “You just didn’t happen to end up standing next to me, did you?”

“No,” he smiled. “Had fun talking to you on Friday. Thought I’d repeat the experience.”

“And if I come in here tomorrow?”

“We’ll probably talk some more. Could be I’ll know all about you by the time I leave town.”

“That depends on what I want to tell you. Maybe I don’t want you in my life. Maybe I like you being the handsome stranger.”

“Handsome stranger? Okay, I can go with that.” He stood up on his toes and turned his profile to her.

“This what you had in mind?”

She smiled. “You are the devil.” She pointed to her wedding band. “You know I’m married, right? Or is that part of the attraction?”

He held his hands up. “Hey now. I’m not trying to complicate your life. We’re just standing here having some laughs. Everybody needs to wind down at the end of the day, make a successful transition to home life. You’re lots of fun. You’re a pretty girl. Why would I want to talk with anyone else?” He patted her shoulder and drank some of his beer.

“But you don’t have any home life to go to.”

“Empty apartment. My partners are married to each other. They want to include me, but I hate being the third wheel all the time, know what I mean?”

“So your life isn’t all sweetness and light?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I make a good living, but we’re on the road most of the year, hunting for deals or closing deals, adding the synergy that makes things happen. So sometimes things can get lonely.” He smiled. “But that’s not a problem for you, is it? Your husband is at home. Going to ask about your day. Give you the sympathetic ear. Make you feel like it’s all worthwhile. You got kids?”

“No, not yet.”

“But you’re wanting them, aren’t you?” He sipped his beer. “Of course you are. Family life. The complete package. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

The color drained from her face. His free hand was on the edge of the bar. She put her hand on top of his. “Your apartment near here?”

He nodded. “Just on the other side of the strip mall. That’s one of the reasons I came in here to begin with.”

“Furnished?”

“Yeah.”

“Bed any good?”

He turned his head and studied her eyes. “No morning backache.”

She drank down her vodka tonic. “Let’s go find out. But I’ve got to hurry. Can’t get home too late.”

The sun was bright in the parking lot. Buddy got into Tom’s black Escalade. Marcie followed in her red Taurus. They drove across the strip mall parking lot, past the Save-A-Lot grocery store, and into the apartment complex’s access street from the strip mall. Buddy pulled around the first building and parked in the end spot at the left corner of the second building. Marcie pulled in beside him. He got out and waited for her on the sidewalk in front of his car, watching her glance around nervously before she shut her car door and stepped up

to the curb. He didn't say anything; he just smiled his most winning smile, took her hand, and led her through the wooden gate to the door to his studio apartment. He got out his key and opened the door without letting go of her hand, as if the lack of physical contact would cause her to change her mind and bolt. He pulled her through the door, locked it behind them. There was a kitchenette to the left, a leather sofa and flat-screen TV in the middle of the room, and a queen-sized bed to the right. She looked the room over, but she didn't move, she didn't speak. She turned toward him and closed her eyes, her lips slightly parted. He pushed her up against the door. He kissed her lips, her face, her neck. He grabbed her sports coat and pulled it down from her shoulders so that she couldn't move her arms. He scooped her up and carried her to the bed.

“Don't—” she said.

He put her down. “You aren't going to ask me to be gentle, are you?”

“Careful with the clothes. They have to pass the sniff test.” She pushed him away, stood up, turned her back to him and stripped naked, laying her clothes carefully over the back of the sofa. He pulled off his clothes as he watched her from behind. Then she turned back to him, moving to accentuate her curves, put her arms around his neck, lifted herself up onto him, and wrapped her legs around his waist. They fell onto the bed. She laughed.

“What's so funny?” he asked.

“I was just wondering who was fucking who?”

“I guess we're going to find out.”

Afterward, Marcie got up immediately and went into the bathroom, where she wet his washcloth in cold water and began wiping herself off. Buddy followed her and stood in the doorway, naked, watching her. “You weren't kidding about your timeline.”

“My husband has a temper on him. He's never hit me, but I don't want the evening to be ugly.”

“Well, maybe you can call this business.”

She stopped wiping off her leg and looked at him quizzically. “How's that?”

“My partners and I have a deal lined up, but we need a local real estate agent to close it for us. It’s a sensitive deal, so we want someone we can count on.”

“Sensitive?”

“Not illegal. Just subject to misinterpretation. And we don’t want any misinterpretation. I’m thinking maybe you could be our agent.”

She went back to wiping herself off. “What’s it pay?”

“The agent takes a percentage, not a standard commission, so it’s the gravy train.”

“I’d have to hear the details.”

“I’d have to talk with my partners. Then they would have to meet you, but if you’re interested in the job, and you have the time to put us first, it could work out.”

She rinsed the washcloth out in the sink. “Sounds good.” She hung the washcloth over the shower curtain rod and turned to leave. Buddy was standing in the way.

“Can we talk some more tomorrow?”

“Talk?” She smiled. “Maybe. Can you meet earlier?”

He stepped out of the way.

She went to the sofa, put on her underwear and bra, and then turned back to him, patted his cheek and kissed him. “You aren’t going to turn into a puppy dog, are you?” She pulled on the rest of her clothes. Before she opened the front door, she got a business card out of her jacket pocket. “Call me after two o’clock, but not too late. My husband’s not working right now, so he’s got plenty of time to think.”

“Two o’clock it is.”

She was gone. Buddy got down on his knees and reached under the bed to pull out the laptop computer that was wirelessly connected to the camera hidden in the clock radio on the night table to the left side of the bed. He forwarded through the recording at double speed. Excellent. He wondered how Patty’s recording

looked compared to his. In the Explorer, God knows what the lighting was like; the values were probably shit. Oh, well. That was her problem. He slipped the computer back under the bed and headed for the shower.

In the meantime, Tom was meeting with Big Jim Rollins, a local mobster whose tax cover and money laundry were real estate development. Big Jim's offices were located in Sunny Grove Professional Office Park, a new complex he'd completed two years ago on land reclaimed from a private landfill. His tenants—accountants, dentists, lawyers, and chiropractors—were already complaining about water damage, ill-fitting doors and windows, and poor soundproofing, but by the time they could break their leases, he'd have the contract with county health and human services, a contract that had cost him very little in bribes to obtain, so he was going to be happy to get rid of the whiners, who would mainly be moving to one of his more expensive properties. Big Jim was not tall, but he was big around, with short legs and thin blond hair combed back on his large round head. He always wore golf clothes and he always had a fat cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth. He was sitting in a high-back, black leather chair behind a hand-built teakwood desk. Tom, dressed in a charcoal-gray suit and blue tie, sat on the other side of the desk in a low-back leather chair.

“Coffee?” Big Jim asked.

Tom nodded. “Please.”

“Eddie.” Big Jim waved at his assistant, a nondescript young man wearing khakis and a red-and-green-striped golf shirt, who disappeared into a hallway and came back with two mugs of coffee. Big Jim set his cigar in an ashtray, sipped his coffee, and looked at Tom over his cup. “So why are you here?”

“You develop land, my partners and I represent the Yosts, who have land they want to sell.”

“Everyone knows their land can't be developed.”

“Smart investors make money everyday doing things that everyone says can't be done.”

“Is that right?”

“You know it's right. You've done it many times yourself.”

“But this deal will have to get by the county environmental office.”

“And that’s why the price is less than the value of the land. Even though the land can be proven safe for development, there is extra risk because of public perception, so that risk is compensated by a price reduction.”

“This deal still seems too good to be true.”

“The Yosts know they can’t get full value for the land. They want what they can get. Right now, the property is a liability. They’ve got taxes. They’ve got trespassers—vagrants, meth labs, teenage parties. They’ve got the sheriff on the phone wanting them to increase security. And they need money.”

“So why me? Why you trying to help me out?”

“Even with a clean bill of health, banks are going to be squeamish. So we need a developer with deep pockets.”

“So what’s the discount?”

“If the Air Force had never been out there, the land would be worth over a million.”

“In somebody’s dreams.”

“You can get it for six hundred and fifty thousand. All that premium lakefront property, a beautiful woodland setting, heavy utilities already in place, near to the main road and only a few minutes from town.”

“Still have to demolish the old hangars and runway.”

“Good place to store equipment while you develop the prime land.”

Big Jim put his cigar back in his mouth and lit it with a large, carved-stone lighter. “How many of these cold calls have you made?”

Tom smiled softly. “Enough.”

“I bet.” Big Jim knocked the ash off his cigar. “Tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to give your proposition some serious thought.”

“Don’t think too long. When the land comes back clean, word will get out and the price will go up.”

“How does that hurt you?”

“Time is money. The longer the process is drawn out, the longer we stay here, and the less money we make this year. We want it quick and easy.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Thanks for your time.”

Tom left the office. Big Jim picked up his desk phone. “Lou? This is Jim. Listen, a guy named Tom Brown just pitched me a deal on the Yost property. Find out everything you can about him and his associates. And tell our mutual acquaintance to stop using the old runway until further notice. It may start getting busy out there.”

Big Jim set his cigar down and sipped some more coffee. There had to be a way to get that property for nothing or next to nothing and make it look like he paid for it. It’d be a quick way to hide the bookie money and bury some of the tavern profits.

Eddie stuck his head in the door. “Danny on the other line, sir.”

“Tell him not to call here anymore. He deals with Frankie now. Tell him Frankie will meet him at Walmart at five o’clock. Then call Frankie. Tell him to smarten up that idiot. I don’t want him using phones.”

“Got you.” Eddie disappeared. Big Jim sat back in his chair and looked out the window into the half-empty parking lot. *Time is money*. Yeah. This Tom Brown had to be working some sort of angle. And if he were working an angle, he wouldn’t want police involvement, which meant he was vulnerable to all sorts of plays. Big Jim rubbed his chin. He just had to think of one that would work after he had the deed to the land.

Two weeks later, Patty was standing under a streetlight in the twilight beside Tom’s Escalade, in the parking lot of the city park that was situated directly across White Bear Lake from the Yosts’ property. The sun had just disappeared below the trees, which cast long shadows across the picnic area. In the distance, Patty could hear happy voices coming from the barbeque pit and picnic tables on the other side of a stand of yew bushes. She

looked at her watch. 7:30 p.m. A rusty gray pickup truck came over the hill and drove down into the lot to park beside her. Bernie Revere, the county environmental officer, got out. "Hey, girl," he said.

Patty stayed where she was. He got out a cigarette and lit it, then joined her under the streetlight. "Have you got the report?"

"I do."

"Good news?"

He nodded. "You'll be pleased."

"So why are we meeting here?"

He took a drag off of his cigarette. "'Cause I need some more money."

Patty reached into her shoulder bag and took out a DVD. "Have you got something that will show this?"

"What is it?"

"A movie of you taking a bribe and fucking me to seal the deal."

He threw his cigarette down, grabbed her by the shoulders, and shook her. "You're not going to ruin my life."

Tom stepped out of the Escalade with a nine-millimeter pistol down at his side. "Don't be overdramatic, Bernie. Nobody's life is going to be ruined. Unless you don't let go of her."

Bernie dropped his arms. His comb-over had fallen down in his face. He raked it back into place.

"You're a despicable bastard."

"But I keep my word. We paid you to perform a service. You stick to your end, you'll come out okay."

He turned to Patty. "You all right?"

"He didn't hurt me." Patty put the DVD back in her shoulder bag. "It's not personal, Bernie. We've got no reason to hurt you if you don't hurt us."

"I deserve more money."

Tom put the pistol into the waistband at the back of his pants. “I get it. You thought you’d get some more cash and another fuck or two before everything was done. Now you found out you’ve been outnegotiated and your feelings are hurt.” He shrugged. “You’re just going to have to get over it.”

“The DVD?”

“When we leave town, we’ll erase the original and smash the copies. We sure don’t want to attract any attention to this deal.”

“Goddamn bullshit.”

“Give us the copy of the report and file the original. We’ll do everything we can to get out of town as soon as possible.”

Bernie went back to his truck. When he opened the door, the light came on inside. Tom and Patty watched him reach down into the floor.

Tom pulled the pistol back out of his waistband. “You come out of that truck with anything other than the report, you’re going in the lake.”

Bernie turned toward them with a fat file folder in his hand. “You’re crazy, you know that? Point that gun away. I’m a family man. I don’t want to get in no gunfight.”

Tom held the gun down along his leg. Patty took the file from Bernie. “I just don’t believe in taking chances,” Tom said. “That’s the most important thing you want to remember about me.”

A few days later, Tom, Patty, and Buddy were sitting in an office at Ace Real Estate across the desk from Marcie Tolliver. The office was snapshot typical: wood-trimmed Formica-topped desk, large window, framed licenses and diplomas with words too small to read, a large framed poster of a bucolic scene of homeowner bliss. Tom studied Marcie over the top of his fake horn-rimmed glasses. Her blue sports coat hung over the back of her chair. Her white blouse was unbuttoned to reveal some cleavage. She was as easy to read as the comics. She was a dyed redhead with an easy smile who thought her flattery and manipulation always sounded sincere.

Tom set a fat file folder on the desk, sat back down, and then leaned forward in his charcoal-gray suit, his elbows on his knees, the picture of authority with his banker-length gray-black hair and tightly-trimmed beard. Marcie glanced at Buddy with her flirty eyes; Buddy replied with a wolfish can't-get-enough-of-what-you-got. He'd been working her for the last two weeks while they'd been waiting for Bernie Revere to create his phony analysis and write his report, but now it was up to Tom to sell her on the details.

“I understand that Buddy's told you about the deal.”

She nodded, crossed her legs in her short navy blue skirt, and sat back in her office chair. “Generalities.”

“Let's be very clear with each other. That file folder contains the analysis that proves that the old Yost property isn't contaminated in any way; it's perfectly safe to build there, regardless of rumor or any previous finding.”

“Then why don't you just put it on the market?”

“Because these reports are very difficult for the layperson to understand. And once the experts start arguing—well, you know how that ends. The Yosts have nothing right now. They were going to die with nothing. So we made a deal. The Yosts get half of what we take in; we split the rest. They're happy. Big Jim Rollins buys the property for less than market price, develops it, he's happy. The difference is what we keep. You get an equal share, instead of your real estate commission, so you do even better the more you drive up the price.”

Her heels clicked on the floor as she leaned forward and set her hands on the edge of her desk. “Why Big Jim? I can think of four developers off the top of my head who'd jump at the chance to get the Yost property. Do you know who you're dealing with here?”

“We've heard of his reputation.”

“It's more than reputation. Try to find someone around here who's crossed him. Not someone who's crossed him and wants to talk about it, just someone who's crossed him.”

“We've checked around, Marcie. We know who runs the big kids' table in Seanboro.”

“Really?”

“Big Jim is going to get well on this deal. He’s going to thank us. And he’s going to thank the agent who brokered this deal. Trust me. He’s the only one around here with the deep pockets and influence with the county to carry this project through. This is a win-win for everyone who gets on the train.”

“So why me? Sounds like all you need is a real estate license. Why cut me in for a share?”

“We like everyone highly motivated to overcome any possible problems that might arise. That’s worth paying for. As the old saw goes, nobody washes a rental car. So we like everyone bought in. Sure, we could have gone with anyone. It’s a sweet deal. But you’re a friend of Buddy’s. So it’s up to you.” He smiled as his voice trailed off.

Marcie’s tongue glided back and forth along the inner edge of her upper lip like it was pressing keys on a calculator. Their story didn’t quite make sense, but they weren’t asking her to do anything illegal, she really needed the money, and she figured her share should be about twice her usual commission.

“We’re on a tight schedule. We need your answer or we need to push along.”

She glanced at Buddy and nodded. “I’m in.”

Tom stood up and extended his hand over the desk. When she took it, he put his left hand on top.

“You’re just doing your usual job. We’ve already primed Big Jim. Just push him to the deal.”

Patty flashed a toothy smile. “Congratulations.”

As Tom and Patty turned to leave, Buddy put his hand on Marcie’s shoulder. “Call me when you get off.”

Tom and Patty and Buddy walked down the hall and through the outer office where three office assistants were processing paperwork. Out in the parking lot, a soft breeze fluttered the leaves on the saplings in the median strips, but the sun reflected hot off of the new concrete. Tom switched to black wraparound sunglasses. “You did good, kid. She is definitely the one.”

“Thanks, old-timer.”

Patty smoothed down Buddy's lapels. "Keep her close."

Buddy smiled. "Not a problem."

"I bet it's not."

Tom jingled his car keys in his hand. "So now it's 'all good things come to those who wait.' See you later, kid."

Tom and Patty started across the parking lot. The lunch crowd at the Burrito Palace next door in the strip mall had filled up the parking lot while they were in the real estate office, putting their Escalade in a tight spot. Buddy turned toward his blue Ford Explorer; then changed his mind and jogged a few steps to catch up to his partners. "How about a little side project to help pass the time until Marcie squares up her end?"

Patty squeezed Tom's hand. "What you got in mind?" she said.

"A lot of cocaine ships through this town. I know a guy who sells bricks that have fallen off the truck—steep discount—and I know a guy from Pittsburgh who'll be passing through on the way home from Florida. We could double our money just passing a bag between folks who don't know each other."

"What's the timeline?"

"The next couple of days."

Tom pulled off his sunglasses and squinted at Buddy. "We've got two rules. Remember rule number one? No complications. That's why we're wearing street clothes and walking around on the outside. We make a plan; we stick to it. This gig you're talking about—it might be great. I don't know. I do know it has to wait until this job is done."

"Look, I could understand if we were actually working. But this little project will be all done before the next step in your plan. It's not going to interfere."

"It's ripples in the pond, kid, ripples in the pond. Once you toss the pebble in, the ripples start. They can't be stopped. You got time on your hands—bang your new best friend, do a crossword, catch up on your sleep. If she's any good, we'll be pushing up the timeline anyway."

Buddy frowned, but he nodded his head. “Okay, okay. It was just a suggestion. I’ll see you later.”

Buddy cut back across the lot toward his car. Tom put his sunglasses back on. “Why are you encouraging him?”

Patty smiled.

“You were just doing that to fuck with me.”

“He’s just trying to be productive. How does it hurt us? If you think he’d flip, you wouldn’t be working with him.”

“One job at a time.”

Tom looked from his wife to Buddy, watching her watch him walking across the parking lot. When did they start needing a partner? When did he become too old to hustle the girls himself? They’d pulled Buddy in four years ago as muscle on a gun job, but when they were done, they kept him on. Then he got the research out of the bank secretary—well, she was even younger than him—and he’d taken over that role ever since. Tom looked at his wife’s smile, but he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. Did he quit hustling the girls to prove his loyalty to her, because he was in love with her? And was that the same reason he didn’t stop her from hustling Buddy?

They got into the Escalade. Patty smoothed down her skirt before she fastened her seat belt. “Hey, you think Marcie will actually read that file?”

“You kidding? We’re talking IQ small numbers. She might call the Yosts, but they won’t tell her anything.”

An hour later, Tom sat beside Big Jim as he drove his golf cart down the path, navigating the distance from the middle fairway to the fifth hole green, the steering wheel rubbing the belly of his golf shirt, their clubs clanking behind them over the bumps. Big Jim yapped incessantly, bragging about developing the course, pointing out a local judge, waving at some poker buddies, hollering some vague flattery at a foursome of middle-aged women

off in the distance, all the while gesturing with a heavily ringed hand. When he finally took a breath, Tom said, “We’ve got the real estate agent roped in now, a girl named Marcie Tolliver. You just play it like she’s actually convincing you—fat chance—and you’ll be marking lots in a month.”

Big Jim nodded, stopped the cart, and took out his putter. “So she’s not on the inside?”

Tom shook his head. “She’s just part of the window dressing. Making it all look fair and square.”

Big Jim walked onto the green, examined the lay of his ball, and then turned, smiling, and pointed his club at Tom. “You’re a sneaky bastard.”

“Just trying to make a living.”

Big Jim pulled off his cap and mopped the sweat trickling down his forehead. “The con job you pulled on the Yosts, getting them to believe they need you: It’s a thing of beauty.”

“Ninety-nine percent truth, one percent fiction.”

“That simple?”

“No. It’s got to be the right one percent. That’s why you’re going to pay me. You get plausible deniability and the only large-acre undeveloped lakefront property in three counties, all wrapped up in a bow.”

“So how do I know that you’re not screwing me?”

“You’ve seen the soil and water reports. They’re all certified. But that won’t budge a banker. You’re the only one who can actually develop the land, so you’re the only person in this deal that I can’t con.” Tom examined the lay of his ball. He was three feet farther back and down the slope than Big Jim. “Besides, the most important part of my plan is leaving this town alive.”

Big Jim smiled. “Sounds like you’ve got your priorities straight.”

Tom held up a twenty-dollar bill. “Bet I make the hole in fewer shots than you.”

Big Jim squared up his cap. “You’re on.”

Buddy, still in his gym clothes, opened the door to his studio apartment. Patty was standing there—long, loose skirt, tank top, dangly silver earrings, looking as sexy as a well-toned fortyish woman could look—cradling a six-pack in a paper sack. “Where’s the boss?”

“I don’t have a boss, Buddy. Tommy’s buttering the mark. Are you going to ask me in?”

He stepped out of the way. She sauntered in, took a beer from the bag, and passed the bag to him. “I catch you on your way out?”

He shook his head. “Just got back.”

“So you’re all warmed up.” She made a circle around the room: a gym bag sat on the coffee table, the blinds were drawn, khakis and a golf shirt were laid out on the bed. “This isn’t a bad-looking place.”

He took an icy-cold beer out of the bag and set the bag on the counter at the kitchenette. “I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you here?”

She sat down on the arm of the rented leather sofa and crossed her legs. “I’d like to get in on your baggage handling project.”

He drank from his beer. The liquid felt good going down. “Tom change his mind?”

“No. This is just me and you.”

“How does he feel about that?”

“He won’t feel anything if you don’t tell him.”

Buddy grinned and took another drink.

“So was it all bullshit, or are we going to make some money?”

“No, we’re definitely going to make some money. I just got to make two phone calls.”

“Great.” She stood up, set her beer on the counter, and unhooked a catch on her skirt, which slipped to the floor at her feet. She wasn’t wearing underwear. “Do you want some of this?”

He set his beer on the counter next to hers. “Are you playing with me?”

“No, sugar, I’m not playing with you. The question is: are you going to play with me.”

“How do you know Marcie isn’t on her way over here?”

“You telling me you’re in love with her, or that you can’t handle two women at once?”

“Tom is going to be pissed.”

She laughed. “You going to tell him?”

He leaned in close to her. “I’m going to wear you out.”

“Then you better get your clothes off, baby.” She gave him a push; then she pulled her tank top off over her head and unhooked her bra.

Marcie’s husband Kenny was lying on the sofa in the living room, watching ESPN, when she came through the back door into the kitchen. The day’s dishes were scattered across the counters and the morning newspaper was still open to the comics’ page on the kitchen table. She set her handbag down on a kitchen chair and poured herself a glass of white wine.

“Hey, Marcie,” Kenny hollered over the back of the sofa, “where you been? How come you haven’t made supper?”

She walked over to where she could see him if he looked back toward her. “You work today?”

His head popped up over the sofa. “I told you that job didn’t start until next Monday.”

Marcie walked back into the kitchen, hung her navy blazer on the back of a kitchen chair, and kicked her high heels under the table. Kenny followed her in. Barefoot, he was just taller than she was. His brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He had military tattoos on his chest. His arms and shoulders were hard muscle, but his belly hung over his belt. He crowded an empty beer bottle onto the counter by the sink.

“Did you ever put on a shirt today?”

“Where you been?”

“I’ve been working on something to make us some real money.”

“Is that right?” He got another beer from the refrigerator. “Like what?”

She shooed him toward the table. “You get out from underfoot.” She turned on the oven and took a pizza from the freezer.

“Aw, how about some real food?”

“I been at work all day. I’m tired. This is the best you’re going to get unless you fix it.”

He sipped his beer. “Then I guess it’s the best I’m going to get.”

She slid the pizza onto a pan and set it on the top of the stove until the oven preheated.

“So tell me about this deal.”

She opened the refrigerator, peered around, and then started pulling salad ingredients out onto the counter. “It’s a real estate thing with some big players new to town. They’ve got something going with Big Jim Rollins, but they need a real estate license.” She turned and curtsied.

“Uh-huh.”

She rinsed some lettuce and tore it into a bowl. He came up behind her. “How much money?”

She shrugged. “More than usual. And this is no ‘sell it first,’ this is definite cash.”

He grabbed her by the hips and rubbed up against her. “That sounds real good.”

She smacked his hand. “You quit sniffing around. Supper will be ready soon.” The oven beeped. She slid out from between him and the counter and put the pizza into the oven.

Patty stood at the sink in the kitchenette of their one-bedroom apartment, rinsing leaf lettuce under the tap. Two previously cooked chicken breasts sat on a cutting board on the counter behind her, next to the dinner plates where she was going to assemble their salads. After she had come home from Buddy’s apartment, she’d changed back into the business wear she’d been wearing earlier in the day, so she’d put on a white cook’s apron over her pink blouse and black skirt. Her high heels lay on the carpet under the coffee table in the living room. Tom sat on the gray leather sofa in the living room, his feet up on the coffee table, his laptop computer in his

lap, checking their expenses on the credit cards and at their bank. He was still dressed from the golf course.

Patty shook the excess water off of the lettuce and divided it onto the two plates. “So Big Jim is good to go?”

Tom glanced up from his computer. “Yeah. He’s suspicious, but not too suspicious. He knows we’re up to something, thinks we’re screwing the Yosts, doesn’t think he can cut us out of the equation.”

“Yet.” Patty started slicing the chicken into strips to lay onto the lettuce.

Tom smiled. “Yet. That’s why we need to move fast. No screwing around.” His phone rang. “Hello?”

“Tom? This is Bernie. I tried to get a hold of you earlier.”

“I was in meetings all day. What’s up?”

“Lou Turnbolt—Big Jim’s lawyer—called me. He had a lot of questions about my report and what I knew about you guys.”

“I’m sure you handled it.”

“This is getting all crazy. Big Jim could ruin me, get me fired.”

“Nobody forced you in. You made your choice and we’ve got it recorded.”

“Mister, blackmail only goes so far. I lose my job, I’m screwed. I’ve got to have some more money.”

“I hear you, Bernie, and I want to be fair, I really do. I’ll get you two hundred dollars more. But that’s it.”

“Only two hundred? What I did is worth a lot more than that.”

“A deal is a deal. We’ve got the recording.”

“But you can’t use it without blowing up your game. You expose me, you expose yourselves.”

“Bernie, Bernie, Bernie, you think we’re amateurs? You’ve got family to worry about. I understand your younger daughter is at the state college in Portersville. I hear they have a terrible assault rate there, especially for freshmen.”

“You stay away from my daughter.”

“Keep your word and keep your mouth shut. Everything will be fine.” He ended the call.

Patty looked up from chopping some black olives. “Bernie getting cold feet?”

“Yeah. The usual.”

“You want me to put some ‘good cop’ on him?”

“I don’t think fucking him is going to make him more cooperative.” Tom closed his computer. “He just overreacted because he got a call from Big Jim’s lawyer. After he’s had time to settle down, I’m sure he’s going to see things our way.” He walked over to the counter that separated the living room from the kitchenette. “I’m really more worried about Buddy. I’ve got a feeling he might do something stupid.”

Patty looked up from putting the olives on the salads. “Why? Buddy’s been with us a long time. He’s always been reliable.”

“He’s getting too argumentative. Thinks he knows best.”

“You’re like his dad. He just wants to feel like you’re listening to him.”

“He’s getting too big for his britches. Maybe it’s time for him to go his own way.”

Patty shrugged. “Let’s get through with this score. Then you can evaluate how valuable he’s been.” She set the salads on the counter in front of Tom. “No reason to be in a hurry, right?”

Tom nodded. “So you don’t care if we move on without him after we’re done here?”

“I’m good with whatever keeps us earning and out of jail, you know that.”

He looked over his salad, the tomato slices, olives, and herbs fanned out over the chicken slices on the bed of lettuce. “This is beautiful, honey.”

“Thanks.” She passed him a fork and a knife.