

Prologue

FATHER AND SON

# One

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IT WAS THREE A.M. on the button when the unmarked white box truck turned onto the steep slope of Sweetwater Mesa Road and began to climb up into the exclusive Serra Retreat neighborhood of Malibu, California.

*Majestic mountain peaks rising to the left*, thought Vida Gomez as she looked out from the truck's passenger seat. *Nothing but moonlit ocean to the right*. No wonder so many movie stars lived here.

*As if the sights matter*, Vida thought, tearing her eyes off the million-dollar view and putting them back on the screen of the iPhone in her lap. What was up with her? She never got distracted on a job. She took a calming breath. She seriously needed to buckle down. Taking her eye off the ball here would not be prudent. Not tonight.

She was in the midst of typing a text when out of the corner of her eye she noticed the driver trying to look down her shirt again. No wonder she was a little off her game, she thought with a muffled sigh. The new, pudgy driver that the cartel had sent at the last minute was incompetence walking on two legs. That was just like them to send her some fat-assed chump for “training” at the last minute. All he had to do was drive, and apparently, he couldn’t get even that done.

The next time the oaf let his eyes wander, Vida made a command leadership decision. She calmly lifted the MGP-84 machine pistol in her lap and placed the long, suppressed barrel to one of his stubbled chins.

“Do you think we’re on a hot date here tonight? On the way to the prom, maybe? By all means, give me your best line, Romeo. If it’s good enough, maybe we’ll skip first and go straight to second base,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” the suddenly sweating driver said after a long, tense beat. “I made a mistake.”

“No, that was your parents,” Vida said, digging the gun in hard under his fleshy chin. “Now, here’s the deal. You can either (a) keep your eyes on the road, or (b) I can splatter what little brains you

possess all over it instead. Which do you prefer?”

“A,” the driver said, nodding rapidly after a moment. “I choose *a*. Please, señorita.”

“Excellent,” Vida said, finally lowering the chunky black metal pistol. “I’m so glad we had this little talk.”

The truck killed its lights before they pulled into the darkened driveway of 223 Sweetwater Mesa Road ten minutes later. She was about to retext the alarm company tech they’d bribed when he finally texted back. It was a one-word message, but it was enough.

Disabled, it said.

She wheeled around and slid open the small window that separated the rear of the truck from the cab. The eight cartel soldiers crouched there were wearing black balaclavas over their faces, black fatigues, black combat boots.

“*Ándele*,” she barked rabidly at them. “It’s time. What are you waiting for?”

The truck’s rear double doors opened silently, and the black-clad men issued forth onto the shadowed driveway and began gearing up. They strapped themselves into military-grade personal protective equipment, black nuclear-biological-chemical suits. Each suit had a self-contained

breathing apparatus and was made of rubber over reinforced nylon and charcoal-impregnated felt.

Vida joined her men, slowly and carefully fitting the positive-pressure mask over her face before meticulously checking the suit's material for any slits or gaps, as per her extensive training. When she was done, she bit her lip as she stared up at the seven-thousand-square-foot mission-style house behind the wrought iron gate. She let out a tense breath and closed her eyes, wondering if she was going to throw up the flock of butterflies swirling in her stomach.

She felt stage fright every time right before a job, but this was ridiculous. It was the uncertainty of what they were about to try. What they were about to do was . . . something new, something so volatile, so incredibly dangerous.

*I really don't want to do this*, Vida thought for the hundredth time.

Who was she kidding? As if she had a choice after accepting her latest promotion. The path before her was excessively simple. Either go through with what the cartel had ordered or blow her own brains out right here and now.

She stared at the machine pistol in her heavy rubber-gloved hand, weighing her options. Then,

after another moment, she did what she always did. She pulled herself the hell together and nodded to her right-hand man, Estefan. Two muffled coughing sounds ripped the warm quiet as he blew off the hinge bolts of the iron walkway gate beside the driveway with a suppressed shotgun.

“Remember, now. No guns unless completely necessary,” Vida said through the face mask’s built-in microphone as one of the men handed her a small video camera. “You all know why we are here. We are here to leave a message.”

One by one, the men nodded. The only sound now was that of their breathing from the interior speakers, an amplified metallic, metronomic hiss. Vida turned on the camera and pointed it at the men as they poured through the open gate and converged on the darkened house.

## Two

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THREE THOUSAND MILES EAST of balmy Serra Retreat, it was cold and raining along the still-dark shore of southwestern Connecticut. Downstairs, in his basement workout room, Michael Licata, recently appointed don of the Bonanno crime family, was covered in sweat and grunting like a Eurotrash tennis pro as he did his Tuesday kettlebell workout.

As he felt the burn, Licata thought it was sort of ironic that out of all the rooms in his new, \$8.8 million mansion on the water in moneyed Westport, Connecticut, he liked this unfinished basement the best. The exposed studs, the sweat stains on the cement, his weights and beat-up heavy bag. Pushing himself to the limit every morning in this unheated, raw room was his way

of never forgetting who he was and always would be: the hardest, most ruthless son of a bitch who had ever clawed his way up from the gutter of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn.

The short and stocky fifty-year-old dropped the forty-pound kettle bell to the concrete floor with a loud crack as he heard the intercom buzz on the basement phone. It was his wife, he knew from bitter experience. Not even six-thirty a.m. and already she was on his case, wanting some bullshit or other, probably for him to pick up their perpetually late housekeeper, Rita, from the train station again.

And he'd imagined that by working from home instead of from his Arthur Avenue social club in the Bronx, he could get more done. *Screw her*, he thought, lifting the bell back up. The man of the house wasn't taking calls at the moment. He was freaking busy.

He was stretched out on the floor, about to do an ass-cracking exercise called the Turkish get-up, when he looked up and saw his wife. She wasn't alone. Standing there in the doorway with her was his capo and personal bodyguard, Ray "The Psycho" Siconolfi.

Licata literally couldn't believe his eyes.

Because how could it be possible that his stupid wife would bring Ray here, into his sanctuary, to see him shirtless and sweating like a hairy pig in just his bicycle shorts?

“You’re kidding me, right?” Licata said, red-faced, glaring at his wife as he stood.

“It’s *my* fault?!” Karen shrieked back at him, like his very own silk-pajama-clad witch. “You don’t answer the frigging phone!”

That was it. Licata turned like a shot-putter and slung the kettle bell at her. Before she could move, the forty-pound hunk of iron sailed an inch past her ear and went right through the Sheetrock, into the finished part of the basement, popping a stud out of the frame on the way. She moved then, boy. Like a scalded squirrel.

“This better—” Licata said, staring death up into his six-foot five-inch bodyguard’s eyes, “and, Ray, I mean *better*—be fucking good.”

Ray, ever expressionless, held up a legal-sized yellow envelope.

“Somebody just left this on the gatehouse doorstep,” Ray said, handing it to him. “I heard a truck or something, but when I came out, it was gone.”

“What the—? Is it ticking?” Licata said, shaking his head at him.

“C’mon, boss. Like you pay me to be stupid?” Ray said, hurt. “I fluoroscoped, as usual. It looks like a laptop or something. Also, see, it’s addressed to you, and the return address says it’s from Michael Jr. I wouldn’t have bothered you except I called Mikey’s phone, and there’s no answer. Not on his cell. Not on his house phone.”

“Michael Jr.?” Licata said, turning the envelope in his large hand. His eldest son, Michael, lived in Cali now, where he ran the film unions for the family. Teamsters, cameramen, the whole nine. What the heck was this?

He tore open the envelope. Inside was, of all things, an iPad. It was already turned on, too. On the screen was a video, all set up and ready to go, the Play arrow superimposed over a palm-tree-bookended house that was lit funny. There was a green tinge to it that Licata thought might have been from some kind of night-vision camera.

The green-tinged house was his son’s, he realized, when he peered at the terra-cotta roof. It was Michael Jr.’s new mansion in Malibu. *Someone’s surveilling Mikey’s house? The feds, maybe?* he thought.

“What is this shit?” Licata said, tapping the screen.

# Three

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THE FILM BEGAN WITH the shaky footage of a handheld camera. Someone wasn't just filming Mikey's house, either—they were actually past his gate, rushing over his front lawn! After a moment, sound kicked in, an oxygen-tank sound, as if the unseen cameraman might have been a scuba diver or Darth Vader.

Licata let out a gasp as the camera panned right and what looked like a team of ninjas in astronaut suits came around the infinity pool and went up the darkened front steps of Mikey's house. One of the sons of bitches knelt at the lock, and then, in a flash, his son's thick wood-and-iron mission-style door was swinging inward.

Licata's free hand clapped over his gaping mouth as he noticed the guns they were carrying.

It was some kind of hit! He was watching his worst nightmare come true. Someone was gunning for his son.

“Call Mikey! Call him again!” Licata cried at his bodyguard.

When he looked back down at the screen of the tablet, the unthinkable was happening. The double doors to his son’s upstairs master bedroom were opening. Licata felt his lungs lock as the camera entered the room. He seriously felt like he was going to vomit. He’d never felt so afraid and vulnerable in his entire life.

The camera swung around crazily for a second, and when it steadied, the scuba-masked hit team was holding Mikey Jr., who was struggling and yelling facedown on the mattress. Two of them had also grabbed Mikey’s hugely pregnant wife, Carla. She started screaming as they pinned her by her wrists and ankles to the four-poster bed.

There was a sharp popping sound, and then the screen showed a strange metal cylinder, a canister of some kind. Billowing clouds of white smoke began hissing out as it was tossed onto the bed between his son and daughter-in-law.

*Tear gas?* Licata thought woodenly. They were tear-gassing them? He couldn’t put it together. It

made zero sense. What the fuck was this? Some kind of home invasion!? He felt like he was in a dream. He wondered idly if he was going into shock.

Mikey Jr. started convulsing first. The astronaut-suited bastards let him go as he started shaking like he was being electrocuted. After a moment, he started puking violently, with a truly horrendous retching sound. Then Carla started the same horror-movie shit, shaking and shivering like bacon in a pan as snot and puke loudly geysered out of her like they did from the girl in *The Exorcist*. The whole time, the camera was panning in and out as a hand moved blankets and sheets out of the way to make sure to get up-close, meticulous footage.

Ten, maybe fifteen seconds into the truly bizarre and hellish spasming, they both stopped moving.

Licata stood there, staring at the screen, unable to speak, unable to think.

His son Michael, the pride of his life, had just been killed right before his eyes.

“Oh, shit, boss! Boss, boss! Look out!” Ray suddenly called.

Licata looked up from the screen.

And dropped the electronic tablet to the cement with a clatter.

The mobster didn't think his eyes could go any wider, but he was wrong. Out of nowhere, two guys were suddenly standing in the doorway of his workout room, holding shotguns. They were Hispanic—one Doberman lean, the other one squat. They were wearing mechanic's coveralls and Yankees ball caps, and had bandannas over their faces.

Without warning, without a nod or a word, the shorter guy with the acne shot Ray in the stomach. Licata closed his eyes and jumped back at the deafening sound of the blast. When he opened his eyes again, there was blood all over the small room—on the heavy bag, on the raw concrete walls, even on Licata's bare chest. Incredibly, Ray, with his bloody belly full of buckshot, kept his feet for a moment. Then the big man walked over toward the weight bench like he was tired and needed to sit down.

He didn't make it. He fell about a foot before the bench, facedown, cracking his forehead loudly on one of Licata's dumbbells.

Licata slowly looked from his dead bodyguard to the two silent intruders.

“Why?” Licata said, licking his suddenly dry lips. “You killed my son. Now Ray. Why? Who are you? Why are you doing this? Who sent you?”

There was no response from either of them. They just stared back, their doll’s eyes as flat and dark as the bores of the shotguns trained on his face. They looked like immigrants. Mexicans or Central Americans. They didn’t speak English, Licata realized.

Suddenly, without warning, two sounds came in quick succession from upstairs: a woman’s piercing scream, followed quickly by the boom of a shotgun.

*Karen!* Licata thought as he screamed himself, rushing forward. But the Doberman guy was waiting for him. With a practiced movement, he smashed the hardened plastic of the shotgun’s butt into Licata’s face, knocking him out as he simultaneously caved in his front teeth.

## Four

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IT WAS TEN OR so minutes later when Licata came to on the floor of the basement's tiny utility closet. After spitting his two front teeth from his ruined mouth, the first thing he noticed was that he was cuffed to the water pipe.

Then he noticed the terrible whooshing sound and the rank stench of sulfur.

He glanced through the half-open closet door and saw a severed yellow hose dangling between two of the tiles in the drop ceiling. It was the gas line, Licata realized in horror. *Oh, God, no.*

Licata went even more nuts when he saw what was sitting on the coffee table halfway across the long room. It was a large, white bath candle.

A large, *lit* white bath candle.

“Mr. Licata? Yoo-hoo? Are you there? Hello?”

said a French-accented voice beside the doorway.

Licata kicked the closet door open all the way, expecting someone to be there. Instead, sitting on a tripod just outside the closet was a massive plasma TV with a whole bunch of cords and some kind of video camera attached to the top of it.

And on the TV screen itself, in super high definition, waved the Mexican drug-cartel kingpin Manuel Perrine.

Licata sat and stared, mesmerized, at the screen. The handsome, light-skinned black man was wearing a white silk shirt, seersucker shorts, a pair of Cartier aviator sunglasses. He was sitting Indian-style on a rattan chaise longue, drinking what looked like a mojito. There was a long, lean woman in a white bikini on the chaise beside him, but Licata couldn't see her face, just the tan, oiled line of her leg and hip, the toss of white-blond hair on her cinnamon shoulder. They were both barefoot. It looked like they were on a boat.

Licata groaned as his scrambling thoughts began catching traction. About a year ago, Licata had met Perrine in the fed lockup in Lower Manhattan, and for the princely sum of \$10 million cash, he had helped the Mexican cartel head escape from federal custody. *But does he go away and leave*

*me alone?* Licata thought. *Of course not.* The multilingual maniac calls him up a mere two months after his world-famous escape and insists on working together. Like he needed that kind of heat.

As Licata watched, a beautiful four- or five-year-old dusky girl with light-blue eyes filled the screen. Her corn-rowed hair was wet, the sequins of her bright-teal bathing suit twinkling.

“Who’s the funny man, Daddy?” the little girl said as she squatted, peering curiously at Licata.

“Back in the pool now, Bianca. I want you to do two laps of backstroke now,” Perrine said lovingly from behind her. “Daddy’s just watching a grown-up show.”

Licata watched the girl shrug and walk offscreen.

“What do you think of this TV setup? Amazing clarity, yes?” Perrine said, removing his sunglasses to show his sparkling light-blue eyes. “It’s called TelePresence, the latest thing from Cisco Systems. It’s costing me a small fortune, but I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to see and speak with you one last time.”

Licata opened his mouth to say something, then suddenly found himself weeping.

“Tears, Mr. Licata? Seriously? You of all people know perfectly well that men in this world fall into two categories, tools or enemies. You refused to work with me. What did you think was going to happen?”

Perrine took a sip of his drink and wiped his lips daintily with a napkin before he continued.

“It’s not like I didn’t give you a chance. I offered friendship, remember?” he said. “A mutually beneficial partnership. I explained to you how the world was changing. How I could help you and the American Mafia to weather that transition. In earnest I said these things.

“Do you remember what you said before you hung up on me? It was rather humorous. You said that instead of working with your organization, my Mexican friends and I ought to, and I quote, ‘go back and do what you’re good at: washing dishes and cutting grass.’”

He brushed an imaginary speck from the shoulder of his pristine silk shirt.

“Mr. Licata, as you see now, my people aren’t the type that do dishes, and instead of grass, the only things we cut are heads.”

“You’re right,” Licata said, blood from his wrecked mouth flecking the cement floor. “I was

wrong, Manuel. Way, way off base to disrespect you like that. I see how serious a player you are. We can help each other. I can help you. We can work it out.”

Perrine laughed as he slipped his shades on and leaned back.

“‘We can work it out?’” he said as he put his hands behind his head. “You mean like the famous Beatles song, Mr. Licata? That’s precisely the problem. There’s no time, my friend.”

“But—” Licata said as the downward-flowing gas finally touched the candle flame.

Then Licata, his basement, and most of his obnoxious Connecticut McMansion were instantly vaporized as five thousand cubic feet of natural gas went up all at once in a ripping, reverberating, ground-shuddering blast.



## Part One

DON'T FENCE ME IN



# Chapter 1

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AWAKE AT FIVE O’CLOCK in the morning and unable to sleep with all the incessant peace and quiet, I pushed out through the creaky screen door onto the darkened porch, clutching my morning’s first coffee.

*Dr. Seuss was right on the money*, I thought with a frown as I sat myself beside a rusting tractor hay rake.

“Oh, the places you’ll go,” I mumbled to the tumbleweeds.

The porch rail I put my feet up on was connected to a ramshackle Victorian farmhouse a few miles south of Susanville, California. Susanville, as absolutely no one knows, is the county seat of Northern California’s Lassen County. The county itself is named after Peter Lassen, a famous

frontiersman and Indian fighter, who, I'd learned from my daughter Jane, was murdered under mysterious circumstances in 1859.

As a New York cop forced into exile out here in the exact middle of nowhere for the past eight months, I was seriously thinking about asking someone if I could take a crack at solving Lassen's cold case. That should give you some indication of how bored I was.

But what are you going to do?

Bored is better than dead, all things considered.

I was sitting on an old wooden chair that we called an Adirondack chair when I was a kid, but that I guess out here was called a Sierra chair, since I could actually see the northern, snow-tipped rim of the Sierra Nevada from my porch. It was cold, and I was sporting, of all things, a Carhartt work coat, worn jeans, and a pair of Wellington boots.

The wellies, knee-high green rubber boots, were perfectly ridiculous-looking but quite necessary. We were living on a cattle ranch now, and no matter how hard you tried not to, you often stepped in things that needed hosing off.

Yeah, I'd stepped in it, all right.

Mere months ago, I'd been your typical happy-go-lucky Irish American NYPD detective with ten

adopted kids. Then I arrested Manuel Perrine, a Mexican drug-cartel head. Which would have been fine. Putting drug-dealing murderers into cages, where they belonged, happened to be an avid hobby of mine.

The problem was, the billionaire scumbag escaped custody and put a multimillion-dollar hit out on me and my family.

So there you have it. The feds put us in witness protection, and I'd gone from *NYPD Blue* to *Little House on the Prairie* in no time flat. I'd always suspected that "luck of the Irish" was a sarcastic phrase.

If I said I was settling in, I'd be lying. If anything, I was more amazed now at our bizarre new surroundings than on the day we arrived.

When people think of California, they think of surfboards, the Beach Boys, Valley girls. That's certainly what I and the rest of the Bennett clan all thought we were in for when the feds told us that was where we were headed.

But what we actually ended up getting from the witness protection folks was the other California, the one no one ever talks about. The northern, high-desert boondocks California, with log cabins left behind by settlers turned cannibals, and cow

pies left behind by our new, bovine neighbors.

But it wasn't all bad. The eight-hundred-acre ranch we were now living on was surrounded by devastatingly majestic mountains. And our landlord, Aaron Cody, fifth-generation cattle rancher, couldn't have been nicer to us. He raised grass-fed cattle and organic you-name-it: eggs, milk, veggies, which he constantly left on our doorstep like some rangy, seventy-five-year-old cowboy Santa Claus. We'd never eaten better.

From my kids' perspective, there was a definite mix of emotions. The older guys were depressed, still missing their friends and former Facebook profiles. With the younger crowd, it was the opposite. They had fallen in love with farm life and all the animals. And, boy, were there a lot of them. Cody had a veritable zoo half a mile back off the road: horses, dogs, goats, llamas, pigs, chickens.

Our nanny, Mary Catherine, who had grown up on a cattle farm back in Ireland, had hit the ground running. She was in her element, always busy either with the children or helping out our landlord. Cody, a widower, who was obviously head over heels in love with Mary Catherine, said he'd never had a better or prettier hired hand.

And we were safe up here. One thing it's hard to

do to someone who lives half a mile off a main road in the middle of the wilderness is sneak up on them.

At times, I probably could have committed a felony for a real slice of pizza or a bagel, but I was trying to look on the bright side: though the nineteenth-century lifestyle certainly took some getting used to, at least when the dollar collapsed, we'd be good.

So here I was, up early, out on the porch drinking coffee like your classic western men of yore, looking around for my horse so I could ride the range. Actually, I didn't have a horse or know what "the range" was, so I decided to just read the news on my iPhone.

Beavis and Butt-Head were coming back, I read on the Yahoo! news page. Wasn't that nice? It was a real comfort to know that the world out beyond the confines of my eight-hundred-acre sanctuary was still going to hell in a gasoline-filled recyclable shopping bag.

It was what I spotted when I thumbed over to the *Drudge Report* that made me sit up and spill coffee all over my wellies.

**MOB WAR!!? 20-Plus Dead! Manuel Perrine Suspected in Multiple Bloodbaths!**

## Chapter 2

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IT TOOK ME ABOUT half an hour of reading through the just-breaking news reports to wrap my blown mind around what was happening.

There had been seven attacks in all. Three in the New York area, and one each in Providence, Detroit, Philly, and Los Angeles. Reports were preliminary, but it was looking like the heads of all five Mafia families involved had been among those massacred in their homes last night by unknown assailants.

Wives were dead, it said. Children. A mobster's house in Westport, Connecticut, had actually been blown to smithereens.

“Twenty-three bodies and counting,” I read out loud off the *Los Angeles Times* website.

Twenty-three dead wasn't a crime, I thought in

utter disbelief. Twenty-three dead was the body count of a land war.

The scope and sophistication of the attacks were daunting. Alarms had been disabled, security tapes removed. It was still early, but there didn't seem to be any witnesses. In the space of seven hours, several mobsters and their families had been quickly and quietly wiped off the face of the earth.

An unmentioned source tipped off law enforcement that it might be Perrine. The anonymous tipster said that Perrine had offered the American Mafia some sort of partnership a few months back, a deal that was turned down. Not only that, but the article was saying that today was actually Perrine's forty-fifth birthday.

It definitely could have been Perrine, I knew. The attacks actually made sense when you realized how the cartels worked. The cartels' brutally simple and efficient negotiating tactic was called *plata o plomo* on the street. Silver or lead. Take the money or a bullet. Do business with us or die.

It was one thing to strong-arm a bodega owner, I thought, shaking my head. But Perrine apparently had just done it to the entire Mob!

You would need how many men for something

like that? I wondered. Fifty? Probably closer to a hundred. I thought about that, about Perrine, out there somewhere, free as a bird, coordinating a hundred highly trained hit men in five cities, like markers on a board. Then I stopped thinking about it. It was way too depressing.

Because it really was an unprecedented power play. The American Mafia had been running the underworld show since—when? Prohibition? Perrine, obviously, was out to change that. He was upping his cartel's influence and operation, branching out from Mexico and into the good ol' US of A.

It was truly very scary news that Perrine was on the scene again. Coming from a penniless ghetto in French Guiana, he'd somehow made his way to France, where he joined the army and worked his way into the French special forces. His fellow squad members in the French naval commandos described him as incredibly intelligent and competent, extremely competitive yet witty at times, a talented, natural leader.

What Perrine decided to do with his charismatic talent and elite commando military experience was to return to South America and hire himself out as a mercenary and military

consultant to the highest-bidding criminal enterprises he could find. Two bloody decades later, he had risen to become the billionaire head of the largest and most violent cartel in Mexico.

You would have thought that his career was over when I bagged him in New York about a year ago. It wasn't. He'd had the judge at his own trial murdered and actually managed to escape from the fourteenth floor of the Foley Square Federal Courthouse via helicopter. I should know, because I was there at the time and actually emptied my Glock into the chopper to no avail as it whirlybirded elegant, intelligent Manuel Perrine away.

So you can see why I was concerned as I sat there. Wanted international fugitives usually try to spend their time hiding, not expanding their criminal enterprises. Reports were saying that in the past few months, he had actually joined together his cartel with that of one of his rivals. Los Salvajes, they were calling this new supercartel. The Wild Ones.

And Perrine, at its head, was fast becoming a popular folk hero. Which was a head-scratcher for me, since this Robin Hood, instead of robbing the rich and giving to the poor, smuggled drugs in metric-ton loads and decapitated people.

I began to get extremely pissed off after a bit more reading. So much so that I turned off my phone and just sat there, fuming.

It wasn't the loss of five Mafia kingpins that I cared so much about. Despite the sweeping, romantic Francis Ford Coppola and HBO portrayals, real mobsters were truly evil, bullying individuals who, when they weren't ripping everybody off, loved nothing more than to demean and destroy people at every opportunity.

For example, I knew that one of the dearly departed godfathers, Michael Licata, had once pistol-whipped a Bronxville restaurant waiter into a coma for not bringing his mussels marinara fast enough. The fact that last night Licata had been blown up in his own house was something I could learn to live with.

What was really driving me nuts was that Perrine had done it. It was completely unacceptable that Perrine was still free, let alone operational. American law enforcement had never looked so pathetic. I mean, who was on this case?

Not me, that was for sure. After Perrine's escape, I'd been blackballed. Then, to add insult to injury, after Perrine had left a truck bomb out in front of my West End Avenue building, the feds

## Gone

had put me into witness protection. I'd basically been mothballed.

I love my family, but I can't describe how upset I was as I sat there, taking in the helpless, hopeless situation.

Perrine was the one who should have been hiding, I thought, wanting to punch something.

## Chapter 3

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I QUICKLY TUCKED MY smartphone away as I heard the screen door creak open behind me.

Mary Catherine, dressed in worn jeans, Columbia University hoodie, and her own pair of trusty wellies, came out with the coffeepot. Her blond hair was in a ponytail, and she looked great, which was pretty much par for the course for my kids' nanny, even this early in the morning.

I hated this farm about as much as Mary Catherine loved it. I'd thought she was going to be devastated when she was forced into hiding along with the rest of us. It turned out the opposite was true. Even a cartel contract couldn't keep my young Irish nanny down.

"Howdy, partner," she said in her Irish accent as she gave me a refill.

## Gone

“Hey, cowgirl,” I said.

“You’re up early,” she said.

“I thought I saw some rustlers out yonder,” I said with a gravelly voice.

I squinted to enhance my Clint Eastwood spaghetti Western impression.

“Turned out it was a couple of outlaw chickens. They started making trouble, so I had to wing one of them. Which actually worked out. I put a little hot sauce on it, and it was delicious.”

Mary Catherine laughed.

“Well, just don’t tell Chrissy. You know how much she loves our fine feathered friends.”

“How could I forget?” I said, laughing myself.

Chrissy, the baby of our massive brood, had taken a liking to one of our landlord’s chickens, whom she immediately named Homer, for some inexplicable reason. She’d even sworn off chicken nuggets after one of her ever-helpful older brothers informed her she was probably dipping a member of Homer’s family into the sweet-and-sour sauce.

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” she said.

“Well,” I said, “I say we grab the paper and some bagels down at Murray’s, then hop a Two train down to MoMA for the latest installation. Afterward, we could go to John’s on Bleeker for

lunch. I'm thinking a large, with everything on it, and some gelato for dessert. No, wait—we could go to Carnegie for a Bible-thick pastrami sandwich. It's like butta.”

Mary Catherine shook her head at me.

“MoMA?” she said. “Really?”

“Sure, why not? You're not the only one interested in culture around here.”

“You never went to MoMA in your life. You told me yourself you hate modern art. And the Two train! Of course. I love taking the kids on the subway. It's so much fun. Look, Mike, I love—and miss—the Big Apple as well, but don't you think you're laying it on a tad thick? Why do you continue to torture yourself?”

I gestured out at the endless space and sky all around us.

“Isn't it obvious?” I said. “There's nothing else to do.”

“That's it,” my nanny said. “Less moping, more roping, as Mr. Cody likes to say. You're coming with us this morning. No more excuses.”

“No, that's OK,” I said when I realized where she wanted me to go. “I have plenty to do. I have to go over today's lesson plan.”

Due to the truly insane circumstances, we had

decided to homeschool the kids. I was handling the English and history, Mary Catherine the math and science, while my grandfather-priest, Seamus—big surprise—tackled religion. I had never taught before, and I was actually getting into it. I wasn't smarter than a fifth-grader yet, but I was getting there.

"Nonsense, Mike. You don't think I know you have your lessons planned at least two weeks ahead? You need to give in to it, Mike. I know you don't like being here on a farm, but face facts. You are. Besides, you haven't even given it a chance. When in Rome, you have to do as the Romans do."

"I would if we were in Rome, Mary Catherine," I said. "The Romans have pizza."

"No excuses. Now, you can warm up the cars or wake the kids. Your choice."

"The cars, I guess," I mumbled as she turned to head back inside. "If I have to."

"You have to," my iron-willed nanny said, pointing toward the shed at the side of the house as she creaked open the screen door.

## Chapter 4

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TWENTY MINUTES LATER, WE were rolling up the road toward our landlord's farm.

Seamus, Brian, Eddie, and the twins took our new Jeep, while Mary Catherine and I piled the rest of the kids into the vintage station wagon that Cody insisted on loaning us. Cody's awesome wagon was an old Pontiac Tempest muscle car that reminded me of my childhood in the seventies, when seat belts were optional, the cigarette lighter was for firing up Marlboro reds, and even station wagons could haul it off the line.

I was truly impressed with Mary Catherine when I saw all the teens up and about so early. The kids were even talking and joking with each other instead of fighting. Which was saying something, since no one had eaten breakfast yet.

“What’s up with everybody? They seem excited,” I said to Mary Catherine as we rolled up the half mile of dirt road for Cody’s farm. “Seamus hasn’t even insulted me once. What gives?”

“They don’t *seem* excited. They *are* excited,” Mary Catherine said. “They love this, Mike. So will you. Watch.”

Cody was already outside his huge modern barn. He was waiting for us by his old green Ford tractor. Behind the tractor was a hay-bale-littered trailer that the kids immediately started piling into after we parked.

“Howdy, Mike. I see you decided to join us this morning,” Cody said, smiling as he shook my hand.

I liked Cody. His son was the special agent in charge at the FBI’s Chicago office, so he knew and respected our whole situation with Perrine. He had actually offered his secluded ranch as a witness protection sanctuary a few times before. We really couldn’t have asked for someone better to hide us and watch our backs than the friendly former marine sergeant and decorated Vietnam vet.

“We can always use another cowpoke in the gang, isn’t that right, kids?” Cody said, squaring his Colorado Rockies baseball cap. “But, of course,

we'll have to see how you do. We like to take on hands on a day-by-day basis around these here parts. How does that suit you?"

"Sounds fair, Aaron," I said, as everyone laughed at Daddy. "I'll try not to let you down."

"Enough yappin' to the greenhorn, Cody," Seamus said, smacking the hood of the old tractor. "Time to saddle 'em up and move 'em out."

We all piled into the trailer, along with Cody's three black-and-white border collies. I watched as my kids and the super-friendly dogs couldn't get enough of each other. Mary Catherine was right. The kids really couldn't have been happier as we rolled out over the fields, bouncing around like a bunch of jumping beans.

We saw the cattle ten minutes later. There were about sixty head of them, milling along an irrigation ditch.

"See, Dad? Those over there are cows," my seven-year-old son, Trent, said, showing me the ropes as Cody opened the cattle gate. "They're girl cattle, big but actually kind of nice. You can control 'em. Also, see that wire running along the other end of the field? That's electric, Dad. Don't touch it. It's for keeping the cows in."

I smiled at Trent's contagious energy. Back in

New York, at this hour, he would have been—where? Stuck in class? And yet here, he was outside, learning about the world and loving every minute of it.

As Cody got us going again, Trent suddenly pointed to a pen we'd passed that had a couple of truly enormous red-and-white bulls in it. They looked like oil tanks with fur.

"Those guys there are bulls, Dad. Boy cows. They're, um . . . what did you call the bulls, Mr. Cody?" Trent called up to the farmer.

"Orn-ry," Cody called back.

"Exactly. Bulls are orn-ry, Dad. Real mean-like. You gotta stay away from them. You can't even be in the same field as them. Once they see you come over the fence, you have to get back over it real quick, before they come runnin' like crazy to mow you down!"

"Why do I think this information comes from personal experience, Trent?" I asked.

"Eddie's the one who does it the most, Dad," Trent whispered confidentially. "Ricky, too. I just did it once. Cross my heart."

The trailer stopped. Cody climbed down from the tractor. The border collies, whose names were Flopsy, Mopsy, and Desiree, immediately

jumped over the rim of the trailer as Cody whistled.

“Check this out, Dad,” my eldest son, Brian, said, putting his arm over my shoulder.

“Yeah,” said Jane, as the dogs made a beeline for the cattle. “Step back and watch. This is the coolest.”

My kids weren’t kidding. The cattle turned to watch as the three dogs ran in a straight line along the opposite side of the large field. Before the cows knew what was happening, the collies had followed the field’s perimeter and were behind them, with an occasional bark or nip at their hooves to urge them along.

Cody, approaching the side of the slowly driven herd, whistled occasionally to his dogs as they weaved back and forth behind the none-too-happy-looking cows. In minutes, the cows were trotting past the tractor and trailer, jogging through the gate into the lane we had just come up, on their way to the milking barn.

“How did you teach them to do that?” I said, staring at the dogs in awe as Cody came back to the tractor.

“It’s not me,” Cody said, petting the happy, energetic dogs. “It’s in their blood. Border collies are the best herding dogs in the world, Mike. They

never stop moving and circling; plus, they always look the cattle in the eye to show them who's boss."

As it turned out, I wasn't done being shocked that morning. Back at the milking barn, Mary Catherine blew me away as she guided the bawling cows into the separate stalls like a farm-girl traffic cop. Then she put on a smock and gloves and hopped down into the sunken gutter between the stalls and started hooking up the cows to the milking equipment. She worked the octopuslike snarl of tubes and pumps like a pro, attaching things to their proper . . . attachments. It was beyond incredible.

"Hey, Mike," Mary Catherine said, stepping up into the stall, holding a bucket. "Thirsty?" she asked, showing me some milk fresh from the cow.

I leaped back as I almost blew chow. Unlike the cold, white stuff we picked up in cartons from the cooler at the 7-Eleven, this had steam coming off it and was yellow and chunky.

"Come on, Mike. I know you're thirsty," Mary Catherine said, smiling, as she sensed my discomfort. She waved the bucket menacingly at me. "Straight up or on the rocks?"

"How about pasteurized and homogenized?" I said, backing away.

James Patterson

“EAT LESS CHICKEN!” Chrissy suddenly yelled to everyone as a clucking chicken landed on the windowsill of the barn.

“And drink less milk,” I said to Mary Catherine.