

# CHAPTER ONE

Fay Thorsen sat on the log bench at the top of the cliff and tried not to think about ghosts.

The sky was September blue, the hardened blue that came with cold mornings and warm afternoons. Wisps of clouds traveled high and fast, heading south. Soon the swans would follow, beating their powerful wings, gliding just below the top of the cliff. Their haunting cries would fade like dreams in the night as they followed the river to warmth.

Closing her eyes, Fay tilted her face upward. The sun was still warm, though every day it grew colder and more distant.

The Yukon River thundered below, but she was too far from the edge of the cliff to see the water. She opened her eyes and turned her head slightly, and there was the river in the distance, a shimmering ribbon of glory twisting between palisades of earth and rock.

Without moving her head, she shifted her gaze to the trees at the top of the cliff. Yes, there he was. Sawyer Leduc, standing in her woods, looking as young as the last time she had seen him thirty-four years ago, before he disappeared.

And at the other end of Fay's bench, as insubstantial as the ghost in the trees, sat James—husband, friend and punishment—dead now for three long months, but looking as he had all those years ago, when they were all young, and life was so complicated.

Fay breathed deeply of the scent of sweet clover carried on the wind.

She might as well appreciate the last of the fall before she lost her mind entirely.

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Laura stepped out of the condo elevator, pulling the tote bag behind her. She loved the new suitcase. Its hard handle slid into a special compartment when not in use and she could sling the bag over her shoulder if she didn't have far to walk. Or she could pull out the straps hidden in different compartments and—*voilà*—she had a backpack. The perfect suitcase for a reporter whose next story might take her to Afghanistan, Rome or Saskatoon.

The tote bag followed effortlessly, its inline wheels soundless on the marble floor, the airline ticket snug in its outer compartment.

Was September in Paris anything like September in Montreal?

It didn't matter. She would take Paris any way it came. She would start her days with a *café au lait* and a *pain au chocolat* at a picturesque Left Bank café. Then she would shop.

She glanced down at her light slacks, cotton sweater and loafers. Good for travelling, but definitely lacking in glamour. Not to worry. With the bonus she would get from the magazine for this latest story, she'd be able to afford a little French outfit or two.

Laura pulled the suitcase to the back entrance of the building and paused at the glass door, looking around the parking lot. It was only eight o'clock on a glorious Sunday morning. She was alone.

She dug through her handbag for the remote control. Her old Honda Civic hardly warranted an automatic starter, but she'd had enough of running out to start the car at minus twenty-five only to run back inside while it warmed up. It hadn't been easy convincing her editor to have one installed in her car. It was another reporter's tool, she had told Adam, just like a BlackBerry or a recorder. After five years of covering the seamier side of politics in Eastern Europe—not to mention getting caught in the odd civil war—she figured she deserved a perk, her recent promotion to head office notwithstanding. Adam finally gave in when she threatened to take cabs to meet her informants.

The toy was still new enough to give her a rush whenever she watched the Honda shudder to life, even with no icicles in sight.

With a sheepish glance around the empty parking lot, she pulled out the remote, pointed it at the car—parked three rows down on the far side of the lot—and pressed the start button.

She pushed open the door only to stop in shock as her car exploded in a blast that shattered windows and battered her eardrums.

Then a wave of hot air shoved the glass door closed and she stumbled back, tripped over the tote bag and landed painfully on hip and elbow.

A ball of black smoke appeared above the Honda as flames licked at the green metal paint. The car doors hung crazily off their hinges and the echo of the blast rang in her ears.

*That was a bomb, she thought. A bomb just blew up my car.*

“Shit.” She bit her tongue. “Shit, shit, shit.”

She stared at the remote control in her hand and controlled an impulse to fling it away from her. Finally, she stuffed it in her bag and pulled herself up. Through the heat haze of the burning car, she saw a couple of hesitant figures across the street from the parking lot. In another minute, they would pluck up enough courage to investigate.

Through the ringing in her ears, she heard faint screams coming from inside the building.

She hobbled down the mirrored hallway to the lobby, pulling the tote behind her. As she passed through the first set of entrance doors, a discreet ding announced the arrival of the elevator in the hallway behind her. She went out the front door and onto the walkway. At the sidewalk, she turned right and kept going. She didn't look back.

Five hours and three hundred and fifty miles later, she was sitting in a steamy Toronto diner, drinking bad coffee and considering her options.

She decided that her first instinct—to get out of town, fast—had been wise. She hadn't planned on going to Toronto; it happened to be the destination of the next bus leaving the Greyhound depot.

The ticket waiting in her luggage beckoned, but she ignored it. Too many people knew she was going to Paris on holiday.

So, where to go instead? Out of the country was out of the question. She might be a good reporter, but she didn't know enough about airlines to be sure she wouldn't be followed. The airport was the first place they would look.

They. Laura closed her eyes. Not they. *Him*.  
Oh God.

She ran a finger around the sweaty waistband of her slacks, just to reassure herself that the pouch containing the flash drive was still there. She'd left one with the article on it on Adam's desk yesterday, but this one also contained the names of her contacts and sources. All Adam had to do was run the article.

*Run the article, Adam, she prayed. Run it, and I'll be safe.*

Once the article ran—under her byline—there would be no point to her death. In fact, her death would turn the law's thoughtful eye on Johnny Tucker. Oh no, once that article ran, Johnny T. would want her hale and hearty. But if he could prevent the article from appearing...and if she were to disappear...

She reached for her cup and spilled half of it before she managed to control her trembling.

"Here, sweetie," said the waitress, giving her an appraising look as she whisked the cup away. As if by magic, a clean cup appeared, filled with hot coffee. It smelled no better than the last one. "That one was cold anyway. Why don't you have a bite to eat? Make you feel better."

Laura looked into the woman's curious, lined eyes.

"Do you have a phone?"

The waitress blinked. Then she seemed to retreat into herself. "Sure, honey. There's a pay phone by the cash register." She finished wiping the counter and turned away. Her name tag said Annette.

"Thanks," said Laura. She went to the pay phone and placed a toll call to Adam at the magazine. Her cell phone was tucked in her desk back in Montreal because she wouldn't have been able to use it in Paris, but that was

probably just as well now. She worried a cell phone would be too easy to trace.

As the coin dropped into the box, the level of tension in her stomach tightened a notch. It was just possible that Adam had betrayed her. He answered at the first ring.

“Adam Rhys,” came his familiar, gruff voice, so at odds with his boyish looks.

“Adam, it’s me,” she said softly. The pay phone was on the wall next to the cash register, and Annette loitered nearby.

“Jesus, Laura!” said Adam, his voice breaking over her name. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said. The genuine concern in his voice flooded her with relief. Someone had betrayed her, but it wasn’t Adam. He couldn’t feign that level of relief. “Next time I see you, remind me to buy you a scotch for putting in that remote starter.”

Adam laughed shakily. “Make it two, for scaring the crap out of me. Where are you?”

Laura hesitated. Her thinking was still muddled, but she knew enough to realize secrecy was her best defense right now. “The less you know, boss man, the better,” she said, trying for flippancy. It fell flat. “Adam—do you know what happened?”

“The police are saying it was a bomb. Jesus, Laura. Why the hell didn’t you stay away from the story?”

Laura sighed. That was like asking the moth why it didn’t stay away from the flame. Adam had turned down the story idea when she first proposed it. If she had listened, she wouldn’t be standing on the sticky floor of a diner, miles from Paris, minus one car.

She would have rested her head against the wall, but it was scribbled over with phone numbers and was dotted with splatters of what looked like dried ketchup.

“Laura, where are you?” asked Adam again. “The cops are looking for you.”

“I can’t tell you, Adam. For your sake as much as mine.”

“But you need help!”

“Then print the story in the next issue.” *Montreal Magazine* was a biweekly. The next edition was due out in a little over a week. She could stay hidden that long.

There was a long silence at the other end of the line. Finally he sighed. “Do we have an exclusive? Did you send it anywhere else?”

Laura’s eyebrows rose. “Should I be insulted that you even asked?”

Adam laughed without mirth. “You were almost blown up by a bomb but you’re worried about your honor?”

Laura smiled. “I wouldn’t do that to you, boss. You have the exclusive.” She paused. “But if it’s not in the next issue, I’m sending it to the *Globe and Mail*.”

“I understand, kiddo. Just be careful, okay?”

“I’ll be in touch when I can. And Adam? You watch out, too.”

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Adam closed his cell phone and clenched it in his fist. He hadn’t recognized the number—if he had, he wouldn’t have answered it.

Across the table, Johnny Tucker put down his Montreal smoked meat sandwich and took a sip from his

glass of Molson. Johnny always ate local. Today he had picked Schwartz's Deli instead of his favorite diner, the Paradiso. Not for him, the chain restaurants. He bought his groceries locally, too, usually at the Atwater Market, around the corner from his condo on Crescent. The only time he bought outside Montreal, or even outside Canada for that matter, was when he had to. Even then, he stuck to North America.

A patriotic crime lord, was Johnny Tucker.

"So...she checked in." Johnny patted his mouth with the oversized paper napkin. He was a wiry man with thin hair, thin lips and long grooves bracketing his mouth. He wore a light blue short-sleeved dress shirt with a tie. With his black metal-rimmed glasses and gray hair clipped short, he could have been an accountant or a businessman out for lunch with a colleague.

Except that it was Sunday, and they weren't colleagues. Not really.

The restaurant was almost full with the late lunchtime crowd. The conversations all around them formed an effective privacy barrier. And if that wasn't enough, they sat at Johnny's usual table in the back, by the swinging doors of the kitchen, where the clatter added to their privacy.

Adam had no doubt that Johnny's bodyguards were somewhere among the diners. When he'd walked in he thought he'd spotted Barney Hicklin's blond ponytail, but the man's face was turned away and he couldn't be sure.

Probably it wasn't Hicklin. Johnny reserved Hicklin for his dirty work. Johnny refused to walk around with thugs, as he called them. Except for Hicklin, his bodyguards were nondescript but lethal. "A big bodyguard just attracts attention," he had once told Adam.

Adam looked down at his untouched sandwich. Acid roiled in his stomach at the thought of eating.

“Did you bring it?” asked Johnny Tucker casually.

Adam nodded and fished inside his jean pocket for the flash drive Laura had left on his desk in an envelope along with a note.

*Adam, she had written, I'm sorry I lied to you, but this was too good a story to pass up. It's all there: dates, names, scanned manifests, pictures... It's a hell of a good story. Pulitzer stuff. Just publish it in the next edition and we'll both be famous.*

*I know you want to yell at me right now, but you'll have to wait until I'm back from Paris. I'm not bringing my cell phone—different systems over there.*

*Better start writing that acceptance speech!*

—L.

He'd warned her away from the story as firmly as he could. And she'd promised she'd stay away. *Promised*. But as soon as he started reading the article, he knew he was in trouble.

If that article appeared in *Montreal Magazine*—hell, if it appeared *anywhere*—Johnny Tucker would be finished.

He'd *had* to tell Johnny about Laura's article. He'd had no choice.

He handed the flash drive to Johnny. “A bomb, Johnny?” he asked softly. “You tried to kill her?”

Johnny slipped the flash drive into his breast pocket and took another bite of the oversized sandwich. He chewed methodically, his jaw muscles bunching and releasing, all the while staring at Adam. Pale blue eyes, Adam realized. In all the years he'd known Johnny Tucker, he'd never noticed that before.

“A bit of an overreaction,” agreed Johnny after a swallow of beer. His tongue fished around his teeth, extracting bits of meat.

Adam almost rolled his eyes but didn't. He'd known Johnny since he was a reporter on the Port beat. Johnny had been his source on a lot of the illegal activities that were taking place there. It was only after Johnny was named Director of Customs at the Montreal Port Authority that Adam looked back and realized he had helped Johnny get rid of all his rivals. By then, it was too late. Johnny Tucker had become a powerful figure in the Montreal underworld.

And Adam was responsible for getting him there.

In his more honest moments, he acknowledged that he'd gained a lot from their relationship. He'd made editor at the magazine on the basis of stories he'd filed about the Port—stories he'd been fed by Johnny Tucker.

So when he heard something that would affect Johnny—as when his sources told him the cops had planned a sting operation at the Port—well, it only seemed fair that he warn Johnny.

Especially when Johnny's gratitude came in the form of unmarked bills. The money had been a godsend, helping him pay for his mother to go to the States for expensive experimental cancer treatment and then place her in the very best care facility in Montreal. It had taken three years for the cancer to finally take her.

He brought himself back to the present. “The problem is that the cops have been asking me questions.”

“What kind of questions?” asked Johnny around another mouthful of meat.

What kind of questions? What the hell did he *think* they were asking? “Does Laura have any enemies? Would

anyone have any reason to want her dead? What story was she working on? You know.” He was very careful to keep his tone respectful.

Too many disrespectful people had disappeared around Johnny Tucker lately. It was a new development. Adam had never known Johnny to resort to violence before. Maybe he wasn’t very good at it, judging by the car bomb.

“Hmm.” Johnny finally pushed his plate away. In the past few years, he’d developed a little paunch. He was forty-nine, but he looked closer to sixty-three.

*Must be the stress of the job*, thought Adam.

“Where is she?” asked Johnny quietly.

*Careful*, Adam warned himself. He looked at Johnny. “I don’t know. She refused to tell me.”

A waiter stopped at their table and swept up Johnny’s plate and cutlery and, at Adam’s nod, his untouched food. As soon as he was out of earshot, Johnny leaned forward.

“You need to find her, Adam.”

Adam felt himself flushing hot. The words tumbled out of him before he could hold them back. “Why? So you can finish the job you started?”

Johnny’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You like this girl?”

Adam struggled for composure, clamping his damp hands on his knees beneath the table. “Yes, I like her, Johnny. I’ve worked with her for a lot of years.”

Johnny sat back in his chair and studied Adam. Finally he raised his glass and drank the last of the beer before setting it down.

“All right, Adam. Because of our long friendship, I’ll give you a chance to save her.” He leaned forward and set his elbows on the tablecloth. “You find her. Talk to her.

Get her to come back here so *I* can talk to her. If you can both convince me she'll keep her mouth shut, she'll be safe." He took a deep breath. "But if she won't, I may have to do something you'll both regret."

The blood drained from Adam's face, leaving him suddenly cold—whether with fear, or anger, he couldn't tell. "Are you threatening me, Johnny?"

Johnny Tucker looked genuinely hurt. "I don't have to threaten you, Adam. You're smart enough to realize that if I go down, you go down. You have to keep her quiet, for both our sakes. Find her, Adam. We're running out of time."