

CHAPTER 1

Nathan was late. Too many wasted minutes sitting on the bathroom floor watching Carol try to throw up, mostly unsuccessfully, before she finally pushed him out the door, assuring him she was fine, he should go.

By the time he reached the *Weekly Clarion*, his ten o'clock appointment was waiting outside the storefront office, sitting on a bench and fiddling with her phone. Nathan apologized as he unlocked the door and ushered the would-be advertiser in. He had just hung up her coat when the phone rang, and he picked it up, answering automatically with his name.

There was a brief hesitation before the male voice on the other end spoke.

"I have a story for you."

Nathan raised a finger to his guest, indicating he'd just be a minute, and asked for a name and number so he could call back. Unsolicited news in Beacon Junction, Vermont, was never urgent. It usually amounted to someone's promotion, a new business venture, or some high school football heroics.

"No, I can't leave a name," the caller said, his voice deep and guttural, perhaps an attempt at disguise.

"Can you call back later?"

"No, it's important. You'll understand when you hear it."

Nathan frowned. "Just a minute."

He put the line on hold, asked his guest to have a seat, and went into his private office to take the call.

"What's this about?" he asked, pulling a pad to the center of his desk.

"Marsha Bennett. It's about what she did nine years ago. It's why she can't be governor."

Nathan nodded to himself. Election Day was five weeks away and the race was close, with both sides revved up and the campaign getting nasty.

"I'm listening," Nathan said. "What happened nine years ago, and why is it important today?"

"Last week in Rutland," the caller said. "That rape and murder. That was Bennett's fault."

Nathan had read about the crime. The police had already arrested a suspect. Nathan didn't remember Marsha Bennett's name coming into play, although she was the mayor of Rutland, trying to move up to governor.

"I thought you said this happened nine years ago," Nathan said.

"Nine years ago, Bennett let the same guy walk. He's done it before."

"He's killed before?"

"He would have if someone hadn't come by in time to stop it."

Nathan took a second to digest what he was hearing. Bennett had been state's attorney in Rutland nine years ago, in charge of the county's prosecutions.

"What do you mean she let him go?" he asked.

"He was arrested, but she stopped it from going to trial."

"Maybe they didn't have enough evidence."

"They had plenty of evidence. And two good witnesses, until she told them not to testify."

"She told them not to testify?" Nathan asked, not sure he understood.

"She used threats to stop the victim from testifying."

"Really? How did she threaten him?"

"Her. The victim was a teenage girl."

"How do you know all this?"

"I just do," the caller said.

"Were you one of the witnesses?"

A sigh. "Let's just say I know what I'm talking about."

Nathan looked up from his pad and glanced out the large window of his office. His would-be advertiser was sitting at the receptionist's desk, reading last week's issue of the *Clarion*, though she'd undoubtedly read it before. Everyone in town read the *Clarion*.

"You have to give me more. I need to know how you know this," Nathan said.

"That's not important."

"It is to me. Can I have your name?"

"No, I can't do that."

Nathan scratched the back of his head, as though searching for an idea. "I need some way to verify this. I can't write a story based on the word of someone who won't even give me his name."

"So verify it. Check the record. It's all there."

"It's probably not. If they dropped the charges and there was no trial, there won't be much of a record. I'll need a lot more to go on. I need your name, and you need to tell me how you know all of this."

"I can't do that. Look into it. You're a smart guy. You'll figure it out."

Nathan took a breath. He'd handled a lot of crank calls since he'd become editor, but there was something in this guy's voice that seemed legitimate, almost authoritative.

"I'll tell you what," Nathan said. "I'll see what I can find out, but you need to call me back in a couple of days. I may need your help to make sense of it. We'll have to talk again."

The caller hesitated but then said he would.

"Tell me one thing," Nathan said. "Why are you calling me instead of the AP or one of the big newspapers? Why call a small-town weekly that's fifty miles away from Rutland?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. For a second Nathan thought the guy was going to hang up, but then he cleared his throat.

"Because Jonas Hawke is your father."

It took half an hour for Nathan to sell a package of four quarter-page ads to the restaurant owner who'd been waiting for him to get off the phone. In addition to being the editor of the *Clarion*, Nathan was chief reporter, business manager, advertising salesman, and whatever else was needed at the moment. With only a few part-time employees to help, he'd learned to do it all.

As soon as he closed the door behind his new client, he hurried back to his desk, turned to his computer, and began looking for stories on the recent Rutland murder.

It was pretty much as he remembered. The body of twenty-seven-year-old Angela Kelleher had been found in a dumpster behind a rundown strip mall on South Main. She'd been sexually assaulted and stabbed. In less than a day, police had arrested and charged twenty-eight-year-old Garth Egan, a lifelong resident of Rutland. There was no indication that Egan knew the victim, but forensic evidence found at the scene had implicated him.

Nathan googled Garth Egan, but nothing else showed up. He also came up empty on searches at several of the state newspaper sites, both for Egan's name and for sexual assaults in Rutland nine years ago.

He checked the criminal record files but again came up blank. He knew if the charges were dropped, arrest records could be expunged, depending on the crime and whether the

defendant had a good attorney, but chances were that if he looked in the right place, he could track down court records of any arraignment. That might tell him a lot, including the name of the victim and the prosecuting attorney. But he'd need some help in figuring out where to get those. Nathan had never been a crime reporter and didn't have any experience or sources that might help, other than Jonas.

Nathan sighed once, then picked up the phone and called his father to ask if he could come by to pick his brain about something. Jonas said sure, he'd be home all afternoon.

Next, Nathan called Carol to see how she was doing, but she told him she was fine, too busy to talk, she'd see him tonight.

He and Carol had been thrilled when they found out she was pregnant. They'd married late and had been trying for a while without much success. But Nathan's joy and anticipation were now tempered by the fact that Carol was having such a rough time, or what seemed like a rough time to him. She was forty, and he knew there were risks.

And he felt guilty that Carol was the one suffering. She'd taken to announcing the news to their friends by saying, "We're pregnant," which he knew was the politically correct thing to say these days, but he didn't feel the sentiment behind it. The discomfort was all on Carol.

He decided to surprise her with flowers at dinner.



Marsha Bennett was wearing her best smile, looking surprisingly comfortable in black denim jeans, a fern-green button-down shirt, a baseball cap to keep her shoulder-length, blonde-tinted hair in check, and a windbreaker with "Hudson Shoes" stitched across the back. It was less formal than the pantsuits she favored as mayor, but the occasion called for it.

"Hi, I'm Marsha Bennett and I'm running for governor," she said as the men and women on the day shift, eager to be free of the factory, walked briskly to the gate where she was standing. Most just nodded, some took the literature that she and an aide handed out, and a couple even stopped to talk.

"Can I count on your support?" she asked one woman who wore coveralls and a coat too heavy for the sunny fall day. The woman seemed unsure, and Marsha pushed on. "Are you registered to vote? There's still time if you're not."

"I'm registered." Then, hesitantly, "but I'm a Republican."

"That's no problem," Marsha said, leaning in close to make eye contact. Anyone who knew enough to know that Marsha was a Democrat was at least paying some attention to the race. Definitely worth talking to.

"You know," Marsha began, "I want to be the governor of all the people, Republicans and Democrats. We all have the same goals at heart. For example, one of the things that's most important to my campaign is the need to insist on equal pay for equal work. I'm sure you agree with that."

The woman nodded. Her face was wrinkled and drawn, though Marsha guessed they were about the same age, early fifties.

"Women also need more help with child care," Marsha said, "and an end to discrimination based on gender."

"My kids are all grown up."

"Good for you. I bet it hasn't been easy, though. Can I ask your name?"

"Betsy."

"Betsy, do you have grandchildren yet?"

"Yes, I do."

And in a flash Betsy had the pictures out and Marsha was on a roll.

"They're beautiful. Don't you want them to have an equal shot in the workforce when they grow up? I'm sure you want what we all want, a better life for our children than we had."

Betsy smiled but then seemed to realize she had to get moving. "I'll take your brochure," she said. "I'll look it over."

"Thank you for thinking about it. I appreciate it." And with a quick pivot, she moved to the next approaching worker. "Hi, I'm Marsha Bennett and I need your help."

Jonas sat on the porch of the Sunrise, the bed and breakfast he'd called home for the last ten years. Jonas owned the place—though his daughter, Sally, ran it—and he was thinking of turning the deed over to her, as long as she let him keep his corner room on the upper floor. Jonas helped out as much as he could because Sally was almost eight months pregnant. She got more help from Mary Louise, the live-in cook who had also become a family friend, and from a part-time worker who came in every morning to clean the rooms.

The sun was still shining, though it was getting lower in the sky and there was a bit of a breeze. Jonas wore a thick wool sweater, too big for his thin, gangly frame, and he puffed on his pipe, looking forward to his son's visit. Nathan had said he wanted to pick his brain, get some advice. That didn't happen as often as it used to.

He hoped there was nothing wrong with Carol. It had been a surprise when he found out she too was pregnant. All those years without any grandchildren, and now suddenly he was going to have two.

If only Emma were still alive.

He heard the car before he saw it, and within a minute Nathan was climbing the stairs to the porch. He wore a sport jacket and a blue checked shirt, with one of the button-down collar ends undone. His general appearance, as usual, was disheveled—his hair an untamed garden and a day's growth of

stubble on his chin. Jonas wished he'd take more care with the way he looked, but even he knew his son cut a handsome figure.

"Hi, Dad. Aren't you cold out here?"

"No, I'm fine. Is Carol okay? Everything all right?"

"Yes, yes, she's fine. Well, actually, she's miserable. Her morning sickness can't tell what time it is. She has it all day. The doctor says it's just something she's got to put up with for a while."

"Give her a hug for me."

"I will." Nathan took a seat next to Jonas and asked what his father had been up to. They exchanged small-talk. Jonas mentioned his volunteer activities, trying to sound busier than he was. He brushed aside the usual questions about his heart and arthritis, now complicated by torn cartilage in his knee, chalking it up to age. He was generally biding his time until Nathan got to whatever he wanted to talk about.

"The name Garth Egan mean anything to you?" Nathan finally asked.

Jonas wrinkled his brow. "Yes," he said and paused to take a puff on his pipe. "He was my last client. My last case."

"You represented him?" Nathan didn't try to hide the surprise in his voice. "You know he was charged with murder last week—that girl in Rutland?"

"No, I hadn't heard." Jonas looked off, his mind dialing back the years to when he'd known Garth.

"How'd you come to represent him?" Nathan asked. "He doesn't sound like your type of client."

Jonas smiled. "I didn't know I had a type." He put his pipe down. "I did it as a favor. His father is a public defender. At least he was back then. I'd gotten to know him over the years. When he called, I didn't think I could refuse him."

"Was it a murder case?"

"No, nothing like that. I'd have to look up the details, but I think it was assault."

"Sexual assault?"

Jonas squinted, thinking. "As I recall, the girl's brother showed up and saved her from the worst of it. The county charged Garth but then dropped the case. I didn't have to do much, though I do remember talking to the alleged victim and her brother."

"That's allowed when you're defending the guy?"

"If they're willing. Prosecutors hate it, but it's usually the victim's choice."

"Why was the case dropped?"

Jonas shrugged. "Not something they have to share with the defendant or his attorney. Sometimes they do, but not always. Lack of evidence is the usual reason. If they don't think they can win, they don't go to trial. Sometimes they try to bluff to get a plea, but I don't think it even got that far."

"Can you look it up?"

Jonas hesitated. "I'll check my notes, but what I have will mostly be privileged. You say he's been charged with murder?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so interested? How did you know about the earlier case?"

"I got a call. Anonymous. Guy saying last week's murder is all Marsha Bennett's fault because she should have locked him up for the first crime. Was she involved back then?"

Jonas hadn't made the connection. "She was the state's attorney for Rutland County. I dealt with the deputy prosecutor who handled the case, but Bennett was his boss. She certainly would have been involved."

Jonas and Nathan exchanged a look, Nathan trying to keep his excitement in check, Jonas seeing right through it.

"You think she might have been the one to decide to drop the charges?" Nathan asked. "Maybe ordered her deputy not to go forward?"

"Couldn't say. But even if she did, it doesn't mean it was wrong. If they couldn't make the case, there's not much point

in prosecuting. Especially when the defense attorney was such a formidable opponent.” He said it with a smile, but there was plenty of truth in it.

“Still, if you could find out anything.”

Jonas puckered his mouth. “I thought we were just chatting. If you’ve got your reporter hat on, I probably already told you more than I should have.”

“You haven’t told me anything secret, just general information.”

Jonas wasn’t so sure. “I shouldn’t be helping you. Why don’t you ask Marsha Bennett?”

“Too early for that. If it turns out to be anything, I’ll talk to her, but I need to know the facts before I confront her.”

“Confront her? Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself?”

Nathan smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, you’re right. But I need some facts before I even know whether there’s any point in talking to her.”

Jonas considered that, but didn’t say anything.

“You knew her pretty well?” Nathan asked.

“No. Our paths crossed a few times, mostly in court. We weren’t friends, though there was a time when I was close to her husband. Seth was the attorney who handled the papers when we set up the Hargrave Foundation. He was very helpful.”

Jonas’s pipe had gone out, and he reached for his lighter on a nearby table, moving slowly and carefully so as not to put any strain on his back.

“Do you know who’s representing Egan on the murder charge?” Jonas asked when he leaned back again, aware that Nathan was watching him closely.

“No, but I can find out,” Nathan said. “Could you ask around about Egan and the murder? See what the case against him looks like? That’s not privileged.”

Jonas nodded his head slightly. He knew a few people he could call, though he’d do it more out of personal interest and to help prevent Nathan from going down the wrong path, and

not incidentally, to protect the *Clarion*. Nathan might be the one running the newspaper, but Jonas owned it.

"I'm serious about client privilege," Jonas said. "I might be a lot less help than you want. I can't let myself become a source for whatever story you might come up with."

Nathan looked off in the distance and then checked his watch before standing up. "Still, anything you can tell me would help," he said.