

PART I

Chapter 1

Rick Forrester turned at the staircase in the front hall of his house and began climbing to the second floor, thinking to present his wife with a plan; really a counter-plan. He didn't like what was going on. When he reached the landing he looked through the open door of the master bedroom, watching her as she folded a pair of knee-length socks into a satchel on their bed. She had on bluejeans and a cherry turtleneck shirt, big gold loops at her ears. Shoulder-length rich brown hair. The hint of a smile, as of intimacies past or anticipated—somehow Rick didn't think with him—played on her lips.

Startled, she glanced up. "You frightened me! I thought you were hunting."

"I want to talk to you, Chloe," he said, going into the room. The flap on the pocket of his field jacket, askew, revealed shotgun shells held snugly in elasticized loops.

"Evan will be here any minute. Please, I'm packing."

"Make him wait."

Her eyes rose to the slanted part of the ceiling. The upper level of their old house was directly under the rafters. "Why are you doing this; why are you suddenly so concerned, so worried? I work with Evan every week, sometimes twice a week, here in Appleton."

In truth, he didn't like that she saw him at all. "Going away with someone is different," he said.

"Rick, this is my first time leading a group, or co-leading one. You should be proud of me."

"I am, but if I were going away with a single, attractive woman, a colleague, you'd be OK with it, I suppose." He paused for a moment. "I have a plan," he said, "hear me out. Stover Falls is only thirty-five miles from here. Go in two cars. At the end of your evening session, you'll be able to drive home. We'll have an early breakfast with the kids and you'll get back in plenty of time to start your day."

"That's ludicrous," she said. "I'm staying in Stover Falls."

"In a quaint old inn."

"For the tenth time, we have separate rooms!"

"As if that means anything. I want you coming home at night."

“You don’t own me, Rick. Now, leave me alone. Take Waldo into the woods, go shoot something!”

He stood there, remembering the night seventeen years ago—seeing a strikingly beautiful woman across the room at a party in Greenwich Village. High-bridged nose, lustrous dark hair—a wild, gypsy look. He made his way to her side, introduced himself. Rick Forrester, ex-navy officer recently home after a tour of duty in the Far East. He was at Columbia working on his doctorate. She was Chloe Cika, graduate of Long Island City High, secretary, of Turkish-Greek-Albanian extraction. Minuscule red flecks in the irises of her deep brown eyes. Rick, smitten, crazy to see her again. A man in a glittering suit coming toward her with drinks. Rick: “May I call you?” Chloe: “In the Queens directory under Raheed Cika. C-I-K-A.”

Turning away from her in their bedroom, Rick went downstairs, passing the kitchen and going out to a rear deck that overlooked his backyard and, where the yard ended, a forty-foot grassy embankment—the eastern limit of the great Appleton floodplain. Fields, woods, wetlands stretched for three miles to a line of low, craggy mountains. At the foot of the embankment an oxbow lake shone in the afternoon October sun. Rick picked up the twenty-gauge Beretta he’d left on the deck and took a set of open steps down to the yard.

His brown and white springer spaniel was inside a chain-link pen, panting in anticipation. “She didn’t buy it, Waldo,” Rick said, walking over. “She called it ludicrous.”

“Rrruff!”

“My sentiments exactly.”

In a big yellow field on the far side of the oxbow, shotgun resting in the crook of his arm—no way for a self-respecting hunter of game birds to carry his gun afield—Rick trudged along; clearly today he wasn’t hunting. He had spared himself the agony of waiting for Evan Kendrix to come for Chloe and swoop her away in his sports car. Right about now they were probably popping along on country roads to Stover Falls on the New York/Massachusetts border, where they would be directing a weekend therapy workshop at the Bernard Institute and staying at the Stover Falls Inn. In separate rooms. Five months ago Chloe had taken off her wedding ring and Rick hadn’t seen it since. He respected her espousal of the women’s movement—with a single proviso: it was knocking hell out of his marriage.

With his dog, Rick entered a stand of hardwoods, then of scrubby cedars. A rabbit squirted away from a pile of brush and Waldo thought to give chase, checked himself, as if remembering he was an English springer spaniel, not a beagle. They moved on. The leaves were in full color and Rick tried to relax, to take pleasure in his favorite pastime, his favorite season; but he wasn't relaxing, he was badly preoccupied. With shadows settling across the floodplain, he whistled Waldo in and they started for home, the falling sun and Mount Chodokee, jewel of the Shagg Range, now at Rick's back.

“RrrmmMMM!”

A thunderous beating of wings, grouse swerving, gun to Rick's shoulder. *Boom!* Other barrel. *Boom!* Waldo waiting for a “fetch.” Didn't get one. Nothing to fetch.

Rick broke his gun. The expended shells ejected automatically and he didn't reload. Tramping on, he kicked at a dead branch that reminded him of a divining rod. A gray squirrel jumped from a big hickory to a pine, scurried into the high branches. He no longer hunted grays. Chloe and the kids had given his squirrel dishes a couple of tries when they lived in Woodbridge five years ago, hadn't liked them—really hadn't liked the idea of eating squirrel.

He emerged from the woods. Three hundred yards away, across the yellow field, his house stood atop the embankment: white with black shutters, brick chimneys at either end of a steeply gabled roof. Originally the parsonage of the town's Reformed ministers, built in the early decades of the 19th century. About to start across the field, Rick had a sudden scare. The upstairs eyebrow windows were a fiery red. Was his house going up in flames?

No, sun's reflection. He sighed, shook his head. When they reached the oxbow, Waldo jumped right in. Rick walked along the edge until he came to his “stepping stones,” little islands of matted weeds, and made his first leap, seven leaps all told (if you didn't slip and fall in). The springer, waiting for him at the foot of the embankment, gave himself a hard shake. They went up a series of steps made of embedded railroad ties that Rick had built his first year in the house. When they reached the top, Rick gave the dog praise, pulled gently on his fluffy ears, and enclosed him in his chain-link pen.

A smaller building, a combination shed and garage, sat near the house. Rick pulled at the sliding door of the shed and flipped on the fluorescent lights above his workbench. A pair of fishing waders hung on the wall, also a fisherman's vest and a wicker creel. A tangle of rusty steel traps dangled

from a spike. He hadn't trapped muskrats since his early teens but had never thrown his traps out, to Chloe's annoyance. By her way of interpreting it, he didn't want to let go of his boyhood.

At his workbench, about to clean his Beretta, Rick heard the sound of tires crunching driveway stones. Sometimes cars pulled in, then backed out and drove the other way on Elting Street. But after the crunching came the firm clunk of a closing door. He leaned the shotgun against the steep staircase leading to a loft and peered out. A dark-gray Porsche with MD plates was parked in the driveway, and striding toward the house was Evan Kendrix.

Rick felt numb with the shock of it; he hadn't escaped the agony at all.

Spotting him in the shed doorway, the psychiatrist said in a cheerful voice, "Rick, what a nice surprise! We're running late, obviously. Chloe said you were hunting."

"I was." A voice in his head saying: Here's your chance. Do something.

"Any luck?" Kendrix said. "But that's a fishing term, isn't it? How about 'any quarry?'"

"No quarry," Rick said, a sharp uptick in his heart.

Kendrix, six feet tall and powerfully built, was wearing rust-colored corduroys tucked into a pair of leather boots with a buckle at the instep, and a lined Levi jacket, unbuttoned. He had thick sandy hair that would humble any comb, and diamond-sharp hazel eyes that didn't so much look as dissect. He spotted the gun leaning against the loft steps. "Out of curiosity, Rick, what are the advantages of a shotgun with over-under barrels like yours, compared to side-by-side?"

"No advantage. It's personal preference."

"I've never hunted," Kendrix said, "but I can't think of anything more atavistically freighted than hunting, can you?"

Possibly killing someone, Rick thought.

Just then the back door to the house opened and Chloe came out. Kendrix made for the deck, taking the steps two at a time, leaving Rick in the shed like a yardman tending to the tools. He gave Chloe an embrace, within the bounds of propriety, then reached for her satchel, and they started down, Chloe first. Over her cherry turtleneck she had on a black leather jacket.

Rick couldn't remember when, in recent years, she had looked so radiant. Halfway down the steps, she spotted him—not someone she wanted to see. But she collected herself and reminded Rick of the meals she'd prepared: pot roast tonight, Italian sauce for tomorrow. Andrew was still at the Locust Tree, the nearby golf course, and Lisa would be "needing a ride to the high school at eight o'clock for her co-rec, and don't forget to pick her up at ten."

“OK.”

“Have a nice weekend with the kids,” Chloe said. “See you Sunday.”

“Take care, Rick,” Kendrix said.

He escorted her to the Porsche. She opened the passenger-side door and got in. In no time they were speeding away.

Back in the shed, Rick set the Beretta on his workbench, his eyes tightly shut, angry at himself, disappointed. He blew out a breath, then ran a coaster-sized cotton patch, dampened with Hoppe’s solvent, through the barrels, inserted dummy shells in both chambers and pulled the trigger twice—click, click—to relieve the pressure on the firing springs, and put the shotgun inside a birch cabinet. At the sound of familiar footfalls, he turned. His twelve-year-old son was walking to the shed, his hands and face filthy, lips blue, pants wet to the thighs. A bulging laundry sack was slung over his shoulder.

“Hi, Dad.” He was staggering under the load. The sack hit the shed floor with a thud. “I stopped counting at a hundred. Got most in the pond on the eighth hole, also in the woods on one and nine.”

Strictly speaking, balls found on a golf course belonged to the owner or the pro, depending on their arrangement. But Rick wasn’t in a mood to reprimand his son and wouldn’t have in any case. Hawking balls was as old as the game itself; it was like shooting gray squirrels on someone else’s land or fishing posted water. As a kid growing up, here in Ulmer County, he’d done it all.

“That’s quite a haul,” he said.

The boy sneezed, dragged the sleeve of his shirt under his nose. “I’m set for next year.”

“Great. I want you to go inside and take a long, hot shower.”

“OK. Mom still here?”

“She just left,” Rick said.

Chapter 2

Rick stood at the window in his office looking across Bliss Avenue to the college parking lot, idly observing the cars. When he arrived on campus two hours ago, he had counted five. Now there were close to fifty. With the weekend drawing to a close, it was time to get serious again at Appleton State.