

# ONE

Murray

January 29, 1977

Henry Molnar and Murray Applebaum shared a secret so strong and powerful that neither ever dared to consider revealing the truth it contained. That is, until Henry received the medical reports from his doctors. After weeks of being unable to find relief from the stiffness and discomfort in his back and side, Henry finally listened to his wife and went to see a doctor. What had seemed like minor aches and pains were not minor at all. He had the big “C” and it had metastasized throughout his body. Ten weeks to three months and he’d be gone.

Henry had been the type of businessman who routinely worked as if he were twenty years younger than his fifty-four years. He’d push himself always to be the first to arrive and the last to leave Molnar Enterprises, six days a week and frequently on Sundays. That’s what a chairman of the board and president did, he’d told Murray. He had to set an example, but the truth was he loved every minute of it.

Murray, a successful attorney, had been about the same type of workaholic as his friend though he paid much more attention to his physique. Then his wife passed away and left him alone and childless. Other than Henry, Murray’s only friend lived in a bottle of Chivas Regal.

The two men were listening to Mahler’s Third, as the evening sunlight drifted through the windows of the Molnar mansion’s library. They drank Henry’s good scotch and smoked his Cuban cigars. To hear his friend’s weak voice, Murray pulled his chair up closer to him nearly touching. They said little yet understood each other as only old friends could.

Murray lifted his glass in a toast.

“To Phillipe-André Desforges. It’s his birthday, you know.”

They clinked their glasses and drank.

Henry shook his head ruefully and took a breath to speak. Murray leaned forward to listen.

“What a jerk I’ve been. The way I’ve treated him. Never sent him even a card.”

He paused and took another breath. Deeper this time. His voice seemed to soften more.

“Never called. Not even a simple pick up the phone to say, ‘Hello, how are you?’ No communication whatever. Twenty-six friggin’ years.”

Henry dropped his chin to his chest and closed his eyes.

Henry had always been the strong one, the man with the iron will. Rarely with any doubt. Never any second-guessing. But he did know how to listen. Henry hadn’t become the wealthiest man in Parkerton by accident.

“It was all part of the deal. Best way to keep a secret,” Murray said.

Henry looked up with a sadness in his eyes.

“I wanted to protect everyone,” he said. “You know, good intentions and all that. Gotta do something big for him before it’s too late.”

Murray leaned back in his chair and sipped his scotch. Henry puffed his cigar and coughed into his handkerchief.

“I’m tired,” he said.

The horrid disease had changed Murray’s friend. He was smaller than he’d been. Walking was difficult. He frequently lost his train of thought. Now remorse seemed to be overtaking him. It wasn’t right.

“I need more Chivas,” Murray said.

“You know where it’s at.”

Murray rose from his chair, poured himself another double over a single cube of ice, and said, “Let’s turn some lights on. I’m getting depressed.”

“Maybe it’s the Mahler.”

Murray returned to his chair, drank.

“What’s left undone can’t be changed,” he said.

“I could try.”

“But then there’d be no more secret.”

Henry shook his head. His eyes lit up like a new idea had arrived.

“Something big,” he said.

The room became silent as the Mahler ended, the two men sitting knee to knee.

“Stay for dinner?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

Murray helped Henry to his feet and walked beside him as he hobbled down the hall, leaning heavily on his walker.

At the kitchen doorway, they stopped to find Joan pouring over the latest copy of *Architectural Digest*, only the top of her coiffured head and the tips of her manicured nails visible from behind the magazine.

She looked up, wrinkling her nose.

“You guys stink. Go out to the terrace, right now. Murray, I hope Henry’s invited you to stay for dinner. Little Hank’s birthday. He’s two years old already. Jason and Laura promised Chinese from Yang’s, and Stacey and her girls are coming, too. No Ted, of course.”

Murray nodded. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Great,” she said. “Now scram.”

Henry and Murray couldn’t possibly scam. Step by difficult step, Murray guided his friend out to the terrace where, shivering in the cold, they relit their cigars.

“It would have been a shame to not finish these Cohibas,” Murray said.

Henry puffed his cigar as he supported himself on his walker with one shaky hand.

The doorbell sounded, followed immediately by Joan’s sing-song voice.

“They’re here. Dinner is served.”

The men extinguished their cigars, maneuvered into the house and followed Joan to the dining room. Even though it was a family affair, the table had been set formally.

Large brown paper bags with green Chinese-style lettering, served as a centerpiece, filled with enough food for twice as many people. That was Jason—going overboard on those rare occasions when Henry let him provide.

A few months had passed since Murray last saw Stacey’s girls, Jessie and Bethie, six and four. Cute. Gonna be knockouts when they grow up. This dinner would be a well needed diversion. Lately everything had been about Henry being sick. Certainly tonight would be different. Good for everyone.

Henry shuffled up beside his seat at the head of the table, a look of grandfatherly satisfaction on his face.

“We’re all here,” he said as his voice cracked with his happiness. Without the least warning, he cursed, grabbing his back with both hands. The walker slipped away from him as he crashed into the dining table and fell to the floor. A small trickle of blood ran from his head.

As if on cue, Hank howled and the girls screamed at the commotion. Joan hurried to help Murray who was struggling to lift Henry up.

“Take him to the bedroom,” she said into the air. “Put him on the bed.”

Another attack. Another emergency trip to the hospital. Henry surely couldn’t take many more of these. Murray knew he couldn’t either.

Murray thought he’d go with Henry to Parkerton General, but Joan told everyone to stay at the mansion. No sense in overcrowding the waiting room. Over the objections of her children, she drove herself alone to the hospital. Just behind Jason and Hank, Murray tagged along outside to watch the flashing lights of the ambulance disappear down the mansion’s driveway.

“Bye, bye, Papa,” Hank said.

By the time they returned to the dining room, Juanita had mopped up the mess and reset the table. The little girls were already eating egg rolls.

“I don’t think I can eat anything right now,” Jason said.

“We have to eat something. Anyhow, Hank has to be fed or he’ll be terrible later,” Laura said.

“I’m not hungry either,” Stacey said.

Murray stared at the egg roll he’d put on his plate. He slid it over, pushed it to the side. Too bad the family had to go through all of this. He’d known the kids since they’d been born. Watched them grow, Jason and Stacey. They were as different as two siblings could be; he careful and considerate, she wild and carefree. And of course, the secret one in Montreal.

Murray excused himself from the table, returned down the hall to his friend’s library and finished his drink. Poured another. He knew that this illness had been wearisome for the family, but Murray feared more for Henry’s death. What might follow, could be much worse. Murray looked around the library and sighed. For now, he could do no more than raise his glass and toast the empty room filled with memories.