

CHAPTER I



The small commuter plane balanced in midair, the engine noise and the floor vibrating beneath Rachel Brandeis's feet the only evidence it moved at all.

She peered out the window again, to see if the view had changed. It hadn't. They inched along above the forbidding landscape, where the morning sunlight mixed with the smog, creating a featureless, ocher sea, less like the earth, she thought, than some alien, gaseous planet.

Going into internal exile, her favorite uncle Myron had called it when he heard about her sudden offer of a full-time reporting job in Jackson, Iowa.

She leaned back and closed her eyes. The mystery novel she'd been attempting to read lay on her thigh, her index finger the bookmark. She talked silently to herself, forming a callus of words around her anxiety. The plane began its descent, the male flight attendant picking up cups and peanut wrappers. There already? Events tumbled one after another.

Less than a month ago, Jackson, Iowa, had meant nothing to her, just another name she'd heard from time to time, another Midwestern burg, less a place than a symbol of a place, America reduced to the lowest common denominator. No matter, she'd sent off her résumé to the *Jackson Tribune* upon learning of the opening, and a sampling of her work, too. For years, she'd been firing off her résumés and clips in all directions. Who wanted to be an AP stringer in Albany forever? This time—suddenly, inexplicably—an offer had come.

The plane banked and she turned back to the window, looking straight down, the ocher sea parting beneath her to reveal a city.

She picked out what little she could, a golden glint that would be a courthouse or some other government building, a grid of

streets, and a river, the famous Mississippi. Like a braid unraveling, it wound southward, losing itself in the mist. Tear-shaped islands resembled boats in the stream, seeming almost to move with the current. Along the city's waterfront, the harbors and shoreline had been machined to straightedges. She was too high to make out the topographical relief, but she could see where, like waves, the pattern of downtown streets broke upon bluffs behind the city center.

The plane righted itself, the scene disappeared, and her internal organs shifted, a reminder of her anxiety. She leaned back, closed her eyes, and waited.



The cab ride from the airport both alleviated her anxiety and left her vaguely dissatisfied. She had expected Iowa to be a tableland of sod houses and women in poke bonnets and cornfields stretching off into eternity. Okay, maybe not literally, but some vision of the heart of the heart of the country, at least, some evidence of her internal exile. What she found instead were long loping hills, small farmsteads, woodlands and rock outcrops, then motels and auto supply stores and the other detritus of modern urban approaches. She could have been entering Albany.

She didn't talk to the cabbie. Words would have gotten in the way of seeing. They descended between rock cuts, down toward the floodplain where downtown Jackson stepped off beneath the line of bluffs, losing itself in the soiled air. The bluffs themselves, perhaps two hundred feet high, resembled a junior version of the Hudson River Palisades.

As they drove through the streets, the place became more and more familiar, just another Rust-Belt city, but too small to be Albany, really, more like Troy, she decided. In one way, however, it differed from both.

Rachel had been curious about national press coverage of Jackson, and so she had looked up recent stories, or tried to at least. Not much ever happened in Jackson, according to the rest of the world. She found one piece of some interest: Several months earlier a busload of black tourists on their way from somewhere to somewhere else had stopped there briefly, but not briefly enough for a gang of local toughs. The ensuing fight—or scuffle, the reporter covering the incident couldn't seem to decide which—ended with

one injury and two arrests, and the resulting wire service story merited a few inches at the bottom of the national page of the *Albany Times Union*; Rachel could find no follow-up.

But now, as she entered Jackson for the first time, she had her follow-up. Jackson, Iowa, a city of sixty thousand, contained no blacks. If they did exist, they were at the moment otherwise engaged, for every motorist and every pedestrian she passed was unequivocally white. No Asians, either, or Indians—American or otherwise—or anybody else of color. She had come, she thought ironically, to the real America.

She took a room at a downtown hotel, deposited her luggage, freshened up, put on an outfit a little more formal than her traveling clothes, and then, filled with nervous energy, went directly to the paper.



Leonard Sawyer, the *Tribune's* owner and publisher, was eighty-two. As happened to some, he had been reduced in old age, too much of him already gone for Rachel to get much of a reading. Even his voice had a threadbare quality, tinny, without resonance. He wore clothing with many pockets and drove a red Jeep, the vehicle as worn and minimal as its owner.

Sawyer had, immediately upon Rachel's arrival in his office, announced that he would show her the city, and so for an hour they drove around, although it turned out that as a tour guide he left a good deal to be desired. He seemed only interested in the waterfront, and even there he pointed out each landmark with a backward flip of the hand, as if simultaneously dismissing it.

They passed along the city's floodwall and levees, the straight-edges she had seen from the plane. To the landward side stood commercial establishments: a tank farm, a grain terminal, a lumberyard, and others. On a Sunday afternoon, not many people were about, but those few she did see, as before, were all as white as white could be.

"Are there no blacks in Jackson?"

"Got a few. About three hundred."

Rachel did the calculation. Less than one percent of the city's population, then—in fact, way less. "Why not more?"

Sawyer laughed, a single bark. "Simple. Civil rights movement

never got here. Everybody knows who Martin Luther King is, but you ask them about, say, Rosa Parks, you're pretty much beyond their depth." He nodded in agreement with himself.

By that standard, Rachel thought, there were lots of towns in America still waiting for the civil rights movement. She didn't know what she felt about being in such a place. Not unhappy, she supposed. A place with stories waiting to be written.

"What has the paper done?" she asked.

"About the blacks? Something happens, we run a piece."

"Still—" she started to say, but the publisher cut her off, impatiently whisking the word away with another flip of his hand.

"Forget about that. I got something else for you to do."

"What?"

"We'll get to it. Keep your britches on."

They passed a brewery. They passed a power-generating plant, alongside which piles of coal smoked in the heat.

At the north side of town, they crossed a small bridge onto an island in the river. The road led along a causeway to a second, larger bridge, which the signs overhead informed her would take them across to Wisconsin. But Sawyer wasn't going to Wisconsin. He turned off the causeway, down a steep ramp onto the south side of the island, and drove along a gravel road until they reached the far shore and a vessel that Rachel recognized at once as a dredge, a tiny version of the similar craft she had seen at work along the waterfront in Albany.

He parked.

"Got to see a fellow," he told her. When she started to get out, he stopped her. "Best you wait here. Pretty dirty out there." Rachel said she didn't mind, but he merely repeated, "Best you wait." An order, then.

She watched him pick his way along the catwalk laid on top of the discharge pipe. Something of danger was suggested by his age and the narrowness of the gangway, although he moved nimbly enough.

After he had disappeared, she climbed out of the Jeep and walked along the road, away from the racket. For the first time, she could inspect the Mississippi up close.

It lay shriveled by the drought, hardly broader than the Hudson and totally lacking the presence required of such a legendary waterway. Like tiny ice floes, scuffed-up patches of light crept along

in the current. Hundreds of miles to the south, the Missouri would enter and even farther along, the Ohio. Then the legend began, she supposed.

She broke off a tall stem and, as she walked along, idly switched the wild grasses growing beside the road. Slowly, tentatively, the rushing sensation of the last few days began to ease. She was there. She had begun.

After a while, she turned and started back. The causeway formed a massive dam-like structure across the island. Along the top of it a few cars were passing, going to and from the bridge to Wisconsin.

As she slowly returned, she glanced from time to time toward the deckhouse on the dredge and wondered about events unseen. The craft turned one way, then the other, sweeping out a slow, smooth arc as it worked. Despite this graceful movement, however, the thing itself was a contraption, holes rusted through its superstructure and arthritic machine noises accompanied by a variety of eerie screeching sounds. At the stern, a necklace of water sprayed from an elbow in the discharge line. The line passed over several rickety-looking pontoons and up onto the shore, finally disappearing behind the causeway.

She had returned about halfway when Sawyer showed himself again, whatever business he'd had concluded, and began the trip back down the catwalk. Rachel quickened her step toward the Jeep.

"What was that all about?" she asked as they started up again.

"Not important," he told her.

Okay, she thought.

The causeway loomed above them and then disappeared as they passed under it, emerging on the northern side of the island, where the vista opened once more, a landscape of sand dunes and plateaus. They turned and drove beside the discharge pipe. In the distance, she could see lappets of fluid spilling from its end and a bulldozer mounting up the sand hills as it pushed the slurry-like dredge material before it, water streaming from its treads.

"What's all this?" she asked.

Sawyer had parked again, pulling next to a couple of cars in a turnout.

"Used to be the city dump, good while ago." The dust kicked up by the Jeep drifted slowly back over them. "Now they're raising

the site, got to make it match the floodwall. Going to build a dog track.”

“They?”

“The city.”

As the dust settled around them, she could see two men standing on one of the platforms of sand.

Sawyer got out again, and because he didn't stop her this time, Rachel followed.

They climbed toward the two men, the sand giving way beneath Rachel's shoes. From the brilliant surface, heat ballooned up, and pinpricks of light flashed all around her.

“Come for the ceremony, have you, Len?” one of the men asked as they neared, a natty, official-looking fellow who seemed surprised at the publisher's sudden appearance.

“Nope. Checking my operation,” Sawyer told him.

“Ah.” The fellow nodded, as a man might who, after a moment of doubt, had had his low opinion of the world reaffirmed. “Still a lot of downtime.”

“You'll get your sand.”

Rachel, naturally, didn't understand exactly what this was all about, except that it obviously had something to do with Sawyer's visit to the dredge. Apparently the newspaper publisher dabbled in dredging on the side. Of course, newspaper work and dredging went together like hand and glove.

“I hope you've got somebody coming out to take a picture at least,” the talking man said.

“I expect,” Sawyer replied.

The talker wore crisp trousers the color of wheat and a dress shirt with barely visible vertical stripes. A camera hung around his neck, a Pentax single reflex. He was an old man, and as often happened to redheads, his hair had faded to an apricot color. His full features seemed to have been worn to pleasantness, as if by a lifetime of smoothing things over.

As the exchange progressed, he had been regarding Rachel from the corner of his eye and finally, since Sawyer showed no sign of making an introduction, took matters into his own hands. “And who might this be?” he asked.

He nodded as Rachel introduced herself, his focus on her both mild and precise.

“And you are?” she asked.

“Mark O’Banion, work for the city.” He came over to shake her hand, a generous gesture, she thought, nothing that he had to do.

“Miss Brandeis is my new investigative reporter,” Sawyer informed O’Banion in a kind of bragging voice.

At these unexpected words, Rachel started, her hand tensing slightly as she withdrew it from O’Banion’s gentle grasp.

Investigative reporter? In her résumé, she’d listed investigative work among her various aspirations—she had no shortage of aspirations—but that would be later, another town, another paper. On the *Jackson Tribune*, she’d start out on general assignment stuff or, if she got really lucky, be given a beat. So she’d assumed.

To cover her momentary confusion, she made an effort to sound offhand as she said, “I understand you’re going to build a dog track, Mr. O’Banion.”

He at once held up his hands in a deprecating fashion. “I just pay the bills. Here’s the fellow doing the hard part.” He indicated his companion, who had removed himself from the conversation but now, apparently taking his cue from O’Banion, came forward, a pained expression on his face, and repeated the ritual of introduction.

“Jack Kelley.”

“Jack’s the construction manager for the project,” O’Banion explained.

Kelley gripped Rachel’s hand firmly, briefly, then retreated and resumed his pose of patient noninvolvement.

A brief silence descended on the little group, until Rachel asked, “Isn’t this a rather odd time to be starting, this late in the year?”

“So it’s been said,” O’Banion admitted casually. “I’m not especially worried. Mr. Kelley here is famous for bringing in jobs on time, isn’t that right, Jack?”

The praise might or might not have been ironic, but Kelley didn’t react to it either way.

“What’s the deadline?” Rachel asked.

“June fifteenth...” O’Banion stopped and stared at her intently. “New York City? Is that it? Is that what I’m hearing?” It took her a few moments to realize he referred to her accent.

“I grew up in Westchester, north of the city,” she told him.

He nodded. “Ah, yes...I thought I heard New York.” Then,

with a sly smile, he added, "Maybe a little north of the city, now that you mention it."

Sawyer, who had not been taking part in this phase of the conversation, said abruptly, "Got to be going," and started off without another word.

"We'll have to talk one day," Mark O'Banion suggested to Rachel. He nodded, half to her, half in the direction of the retreating figure, as if to acknowledge the difficulty of having such a boss as Leonard Sawyer. Rachel said good-bye quickly and hurried after the publisher.

"Investigative reporter, Mr. Sawyer? Is that why you hired me?" she asked as soon as they were back in the Jeep.

"Yup."

"Investigating what?"

"You'll see."

A minute later, they were driving back along the road, retracing their route.

She tried another tack, asking the follow-up question that she hadn't had time to put to O'Banion.

"Building a dog track in the middle of winter? Why?"

"State passed a pari-mutuel law a while back. City's trying to build first, beat everybody else."

Rachel wet her lips with her tongue, then rooted around in her shoulder bag for a ChapStick. She could feel the moisture on her face cooling in the breeze. She touched her cheek, gritty with sand.

Her sense of headlong rush had returned. They weren't going very fast, twenty-five or thirty, but the road was rough and Sawyer drove intensely, almost ferociously. His clipped responses and willful, self-absorbed manner had really begun to annoy Rachel.

"So," she said, "you're providing the sand for the project? Pardon me, but isn't that a little unusual for a newspaper publisher?"

"I'm chairman of the dock board."

"Dock board?"

"Been chairman thirty-five years. We run things down here on the waterfront." He jerked his chin up, a single sharp pointing movement. "There!"

She turned and peered through the haze. They were crossing back over the small bridge connecting the island and mainland. In the distance, the smoky blue bluffs formed a rampart

hemming in the bay of land on which the city had been built. "There!" Sawyer repeated, now pointing with his hand. She shifted her gaze.

For a moment, rather than seeing, she was aware of a slight uneasiness. Then her eyes adjusted, and she made out the great welter of buildings lying before her. In the haze, no details were visible, just a central massif and profusion of outbuildings like faulted geological strata. In front of the Jeep, a truck had slowed and begun to turn into one of the gates of the huge facility.

"What is it?"

"The Jackson Packing Company."

"A slaughterhouse?"

"Hogs. Used to do cattle. Sheep, too. In fact, just about anything you could kill and cut up and sell. One time the largest single operation of its kind in the world, bigger than anything in Chicago, bigger than anyplace."

As they passed the truck, Rachel could make out the pinkish flanks of animals pressed against slots in its side, and beyond the truck a long driveway lined by rows of single-story structures.

Sawyer slowed but did not stop.

"That, miss," he said, as they glided by the plant, "is why I hired you." Unable to fix her eye on anything for more than a few moments, Rachel was left with only the impression of enormous size and complexity.

"You want me to do a piece?" she asked uneasily.

"Said you were interested in business." True, she had, indeed, put that on her résumé, along with her desire to do investigative work. The business of America being business, she dreamed of specializing in such journalism, but like the other, it was something for one day, not today. She'd included such wish-list stuff merely to show that she was a serious person.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked, chary but imagining Sawyer must be thinking about some fairly routine feature-type articles.

"Don't know," he said. "That's for you to find out."

"You must have some idea."

"Something's going on at the Pack, don't know what. Company's in trouble, been in trouble for a long time. Just keeps getting worse. Now something's going on. I want to know what it is."

"Why me? You must have other reporters."

“Had people on it. Getting nowhere fast. Decided we needed somebody doing it full-time.”

“Full-time?”

“Yup.” He turned and glared at her, hunched and gnome-like behind the steering wheel.

“But why me?” she asked again.

“Liked your clips. Liked your ambition. Anyway, I figure a woman’s got to be better than a man if she thinks she can make it in this racket.”

“Pfft,” Rachel said before she could catch herself. This ringing endorsement for women everywhere was not what she wanted to hear just at that moment. “Frankly, Mr. Sawyer, this sounds like the kind of thing that would require a team of reporters.” A team of reporters with a helluva lot more experience than she had.

“Don’t have a team. Got you. Don’t have to take the job if you don’t want to.”

That was right, she didn’t, but when a genie pops up and offers you your heart’s desire...

Rachel reminded herself that she didn’t believe in genies.

“I figured,” Sawyer added, “being as how your father is Morris Brandeis...I got that right, don’t I? You are his daughter?”

“That’s right.” This wasn’t something she wanted to hear, either.

“Saw the name on your application. Did a little research. That’s how I found out. Figured any kid of Morris Brandeis wouldn’t mind a little rough going.”

This was just wonderful. She was hired because she was a woman and Morris Brandeis’s daughter. Affirmative action at work.

“I’m not anything like my father, Mr. Sawyer.” The old man continued to look straight ahead, but she could see the smile of disbelief. “I’m not,” she repeated, but all he did was dip his head to one side. We’ll see, the gesture said.

“So what’s it to be?” he asked.

She probably should reject the offer. It had no basis in reality. She wasn’t her father’s daughter, whatever Sawyer might imagine, and she lacked the requisite experience. “I still don’t get it. What’s so important about the company that you’d hire someone just to work on that one story?”

“Two thousand jobs, that’s what. This ain’t your New York City. Two thousand jobs mean something here.”

In other circumstances, such an answer might have been convincing, but not here. It wasn't even close.

"Privately owned. Family named Peterson," Sawyer went on. "Never tell anybody anything. But I can feel it. Something's going on. I want you to find out what."

"I see," she said.

They had been zigzagging through the city streets, Rachel in her excitement and irritation paying no attention, but now she recognized the newspaper building. Her sense of hurtling pell-mell into the unknown had not abated one iota, but the possibilities here—admittedly from any reasonable perspective totally *meshugge*—were beginning to get the upper hand.

"You say the firm is closely held, Mr. Sawyer?"

"That's right."

"They're hard places to research." Closely held companies weren't required to do filings with the SEC. They had lids notoriously difficult to pry off. Or impossible.

"Need somebody good," Sawyer said. "Are you that person, miss?"

She had a vision of herself as this tiny figure in the corner of a huge Chinese painting, the rest of the canvas filled with the oriental complexity of the Jackson Packing Company. It didn't make sense. If Sawyer was so hot to unmask the place, then why not hire an experienced reporter? One answer suggested itself at once: money. A real reporter would cost real money. She stared carefully at the outline of the old man, trying to decipher something, anything, from its sparseness. If only he didn't seem the spitting image of some buccaneering newspaperman straight out of the nineteenth century—aggressive, partisan, unprincipled, barely literate. A little bit like her father, in fact, except for the barely literate part. The pockets festooning his clothing were like so many small caches where he could hide away little bits of this or that. She thought about the dredge. A contraption. She glanced at the ancient Jeep. Another contraption. Probably the *Jackson Tribune* was a contraption, too.

But finally, she realized, it made no difference. This gift horse might have a mouth full of bad teeth, but so what?

Another thought occurred to her. She wasn't exactly crazy about the idea of hog slaughtering. She thought about all the horror stories she'd heard about packinghouses. She thought about *The*

Jungle. She even thought about her kosher grandmothers and what they'd say if they ever found out. But once again, so what?

"Well, Mr. Sawyer," she told the tense, staring specter beside her, "whatever you think, there's very little of my father in me. But if, beyond that, it's a woman you're after, it might as well be me."

And in this way, with this nervous and doubtful affirmation, her new life began.

CHAPTER 2



Mark O'Banion had only a short time to finish his conversation with Jack Kelley before the ceremony began.

As they had watched Len Sawyer and the young woman moving away, Mark mused, "I wonder what he's up to. Not the Len Sawyer I know, squiring around one of his recruits like that."

"She certainly didn't waste any time before she started in with her reporter's questions," Jack responded.

Mark had always gotten along with reporters, but he'd noted their strange semi-blindness, as if they could only see light of certain wavelengths.

"I suppose," he half agreed. "You best get used to it." The dog track project was going to attract a lot of attention, and not just because of the winter construction schedule.

They continued talking, mostly Jack going over technical matters concerned with the project's start-up, while Mark, who enjoyed people, even fancied himself something of an ethologist in the human zoo, let his thoughts return to the young reporter. Given her name, a Jew no doubt. She had a different look about her from the recent run of *Tribune* reporters. A jump-right-in look. Not particularly pretty. Handsome, perhaps. Or striking. He sought the right word. She possessed interesting features, a thick, ebony mane flowing straight back from her low forehead, a purposeful mouth and dark expressive eyes, eyes not recessed in shadow but right on the surface of her full face, with which she took him in boldly.

In the distance, from behind the causeway, vehicles began to materialize, the ceremonial participants finally arriving.

Yes, Mark thought, *that* was the word—expressive. Miss Brandeis surely wasn't pretty or particularly handsome but most definitely expressive. Full of words. A woman, perhaps, with whom to have a care.

Jack had stopped speaking and looked toward the approaching cars. In profile, his features betrayed a certain sadness, a trace at the corners of eye and mouth, but as he turned back to continue talking, the sadness disappeared.

Rachel Brandeis had asked the obvious question. Building a track in the middle of winter? What *were* they thinking?

Too late now. Mark had noted the collective mind-set, which had taken possession of the others involved in the project, confidence the order of the day. As for himself, well, he was prepared to be confident, too, although he wasn't a man to kid himself in the privacy of his own thoughts. And what about Jack? He was the man responsible for pulling this thing off. What did he think, in the privacy of *his* own thoughts?

And so, Mark said casually, "I'd still feel a lot more comfortable if we'd found a private developer."

"Jackson's not big enough."

"Yup. Be a terrific stretch for any of the locals."

Jack squatted down and picked up a handful of sand, letting it run through his fingers, leaving behind a shell fragment, which he inspected and then tossed away. He waited several more beats before canting his head back to look up at Mark, squinting against the glare. "You'll have your track."

The silence before he spoke seemed to contain his reservations.

Jack Kelley was a decent fellow. Another man would have introduced all the mitigating circumstances into evidence—an accelerated job, the kind of facility none of them had ever built before, winter coming—but once the decision had been made, Jack had never mentioned these complications again. He didn't now, either.

Nevertheless, the sense of the man's sadness remained, so perhaps his private reservations were even stronger than his silence seemed to suggest. Anyway, the difficulty had been broached, and some sort of understanding established, or reestablished—a moment of shared reflection before it all began.

Red ribbons tied to the tops of the surveyor's stakes hung limply in the humid air. Tomorrow, gravel access roads would be laid across the sand, a construction trailer hauled onto the site, temporary utility connections made.

Mark felt the heat of the sand rising through the soles of his loafers, which reminded him of himself, his own needs. His own

sadness, for that matter. Sixty-three wasn't supposed to be such an advanced age anymore, but it felt old enough to him. Had he been king, he would have had a statue of himself erected down in Washington Square—something nice, tasteful—and then abdicated.

He'd have to settle for this more prosaic monument, a dog track—a gaming facility, although he didn't gamble himself, in fact, didn't even approve of gambling.

He watched the other ceremonial participants approaching and thought that probably he did want to be king, all right, but less for the power of the position than the sense of entitlement he supposed kings possessed as part of their birthright. How delightful it would have been to live for a day, even just a day, freed from all the double and triple meanings in things, the elaborate summations of the bad and the good into something that was neither.

The ceremonial gold shovels had arrived. The mayor, too, looking fairly presentable for a change. The *Tribune* photographer Len Sawyer had promised came forward laden with his equipment.

Seeing this person, with his burden in the heat, Mark suddenly realized that nobody there represented the dogsbodies charged with actually building the track, and so he reserved a small place in his consciousness for the poor drudges who would earn their bread on this particular job, less by the sweat of their brows than the frostbite of their fingertips.

The officers of the racing association formed a phalanx as they advanced toward Mark. He noted that they just naturally assumed that where he stood had been designated as the official ground-breaking spot. He also noted the sense of satisfaction he felt that this should be so. Pride.

Yes, it would have been so much nicer to be king.

“Well,” he said finally to Jack, who had remained silent, “shall we get this over with?”