

Prologue

(to *Before the First Snow* by Walter M. Brasch)

There was nothing distinguished or distinguishing about Bill Drumheller.

Ask ten witnesses to describe him to a police sketch artist, and most will agree he was average. Average height and weight. Average looks. No marks.

Maybe sandy brown hair, cut just about right. Not too short. Not modishly long. No mustache or beard. He may have had hazel eyes. Maybe brown. His brown suit was probably from Sears or Penney's. Shoes could have been from any Wal-Mart. There wasn't even anything about his voice patterns or dialect anyone could remember. Just seemed like everyone else. Not Southern. Not from the Bronx. Not from New England. And, definitely, not from any foreign country.

If anything, they would remember him as helpful. Friendly. Always with a smile and a story. But that's about it.

This afternoon, he was having lunch with Annie Fenstermacher. The first time they met, she didn't want him in her house. Couldn't be too sure who he was, or why he really wanted to meet with her. So, they met on a bench outside the township library. Just to get acquainted. For a few minutes. Just so he could explain why he wanted to meet with her.

The next time, a couple of days later, they met at Nikki's Café. At a table right there near the front window on Market Street. She still wasn't too sure, but she liked him. Liked what he said. That he wanted to build a summer cabin near the river. Near where his grandparents grew up. Wanted to get away from the city. Wanted to enjoy the land and nature. But more than anything, she appreciated that he was a teacher. Teachers are good people, she thought. They care about children. And they have college degrees.

Annie Fenstermacher didn't have a college degree. She did graduate from high school. Third in her class of 56. That was farther than most girls in the area went in the pre-war years. But, she didn't go to college. There was no need to. She was needed on the farm, and that was that. But, most of all, she appreciated that Bill Drumheller was a veteran of the Vietnam War. Not like those hippies who protested it. The ones who raised their voices against the President of the United States. The *President!* The ones who shamed the nation. Her husband, rest his soul, was a veteran of World War II. Infantry. Corporal with Charlie Company, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division. Wounded twice. Came home from Europe with medals and a leg brace.

Yet, almost every day, he worked the 20-acre farm. Early morning when it was dark. Late evening when only the light

from his John Deere 50 tractor showed him the fields. Oats, barley, and field corn in the spring and summer; winter wheat and hay in Fall. Machine and farm maintenance through the winter. Worked the fields and farm almost every day, usually with the help of his three children, almost from the time they were 6 until they moved away to find their own jobs and spouses. They knew farming wasn't in their future; it wasn't in most people's futures. Large corporations were moving in, taking over the operations, changing how things were done, changing the economy, changing a lifestyle and culture that went back more than three centuries. But, Jake Fenstermacher wasn't going to go quietly. For almost 30 years, after a couple of hours in the fields, he showed up at 9 a.m. every Monday through Friday at Liberty Ford, where he worked in the parts department. Precisely at noon, he ate the bag lunch his wife prepared; at 3 p.m. he left for the day. Thirty hours a week, minus the 15 minutes a day for lunch. A dollar an hour above minimum wage and no benefits. Always a dollar an hour above minimum wage. When the minimum wage was 75 cents an hour in 1950, he did quite well; when it slowly rose to \$3.10 an hour by 1980, that dollar an hour bump wasn't so lucrative. No matter what minimum wage was, he always got a dollar above it. With good financial management, he and his wife could pay the bills. Could keep the bank from foreclosing.

But now, even with the land barren, Annie Fenstermacher held onto it, for reasons she no longer understood. Just as her husband and her parents and their parents held onto it. She hoped her children would farm the land, maybe even build houses and find jobs locally. She knew it wouldn't happen, but she hoped.

And now came a stranger. A teacher. And all he wanted was just two acres. Not many. Just enough to build a small vacation home and pond, maybe to grow herbs. Maybe tomatoes. Perhaps plant a truck patch. Half-acre. Maybe even a full acre of something. He didn't know what just yet, but something. Enough he could harvest, put into a pickup truck, and take to market. Certainly not enough to feed a family, but something. For those two acres, he was going to pay her \$2,450 an acre, slightly more than the assessed value. If he paid her too little, he'd be cheating her. If he paid too much, every Realtor and land speculator would not only be trying to figure out what he was doing, but would also artificially inflate all the other land prices, probably bringing others into the area. What Bill Drumbheller didn't want was anything more than normal real estate activity.

For their third meeting, Annie Fenstermacher had invited him into her dining room. She apologized for it being a bit cluttered; it's not always easy for a 73-year-old widow to always be putting things where they once belonged. But she knew what was in the pantry and where the kitchen utensils were, and could fix the finest chicken and dumplings in all of northeastern Pennsylvania. Learned how when she was a child.

Every potluck, every fundraiser, that's what everyone wanted. Not her chicken pot pie or her meatloaf. Not pork and sauerkraut, scalloped potatoes, or applesauce. Chicken and dumplings. The best there ever was. And that's what she was serving for dinner early on this crispy Monday afternoon in February. That afternoon, after dinner—no one discusses business at dinner—Bill Drumheller took a sheaf of papers from his briefcase. More papers than Annie Fenstermacher had seen in quite awhile. But everything was carefully prepared. Neatly typed out. She looked them over. Read almost every word. The polite teacher said nothing about all the time the farm wife was taking. Most people just glanced at the papers, signed them, and took the money. But, Annie Fenstermacher looked at them.

Thought about them. And then agreed it was time to visit the Realtor. Before a notary, Annie Fenstermacher and the Realtor signed the forms; she never noticed that the nice, polite teacher never signed anything. But, she did notice that he was going to pay for the land. Two acres. And so she and he went to the bank. He took \$4,910 from his savings account, and handed it to her. Cash. Not a check. Not a money order or a promissory note. Cash. The kind the government guarantees. She didn't have much in her own savings account; she didn't know how a teacher could have so much in his savings account. Figured he probably saved it over a few years. Maybe got a loan. She looked at the cash, but didn't count it. Bill Drumheller—the teacher and war veteran—was a decent man. An honest man. One who took his only personal day that semester to come all the way to Madison Twp. in Marshfield County to close the deal. Besides, she was just going to put it right back into her own account.

Bill Drumheller drove Annie Fenstermacher to the Courthouse, filed the paperwork, and then drove her back to her home. Hugged her, and then left. It was the hardest he ever worked to get just two acres.

That evening, he put on a pair of work boots, changed into a pair of Levi's and a denim shirt. He was driving out to see a woman in Fisher's Ferry, an hour or so away. She owned 40 acres in Marshfield County, in Jefferson Twp., not far from the two acres he had just bought from Annie Fenstermacher. And *that* land was more than an hour from where she lived. Mostly timberland with a stream running through it, and the Susquehanna River nearby. He knew she didn't farm it. Didn't even live on it. Didn't know what she was doing with it. But he knew she was a musician. Musicians always need money, and he figured it wouldn't be too hard to get her to trade her land for some money. Buy her a nice dinner somewhere. Flash her some "serious consideration money" and make sure she knew she would get the rest in cash. Probably more money than she ever saw at one time. The banks and the Courthouse would be closed. Even if she agreed on the spot to sell her land, he'd have to wait until the next morning to close the deal. He didn't like to do that. It always gave people time to think. And he didn't want them to

think too hard. But, these 40 acres were crucial, and they could be the easiest buy he ever made.

There was just one final thing he had to do. He taped two of his fingers. Just in case this musician asked him to join her for an impromptu jam session. He'd plead he'd like to, but just couldn't. Broke his finger on his right hand just the other day. Not only couldn't he play the guitar for awhile, more important it kept him away from the kiln, and from the clay sculptures he made.

That night, with a Just for Men dye of black in his rumpled hair, Bill Drumheller became Roger Davis.