

# Chapter One

*N*nineteen eighty three was going to be a good year—a superlative year.

At least, that was what Joel Brackenwhite had been telling himself only this morning. After years of grinding it out with interminable studies and nothing projects, he had done it: he was assured a key position with Brackenwhite and Associates, one of the most prestigious architectural firms in the country.

Skeptical people, naturally, would assume he was there because of his last name, but nothing could be further from the truth. His father was a hard man—and hardest of all with his own son. Joel would never inherit a position, not from *him*. William Brackenwhite was not the sort of man to give anything away except to merit, and family required the most merit of all.

It had been that way from the beginning. The founder of Brackenwhite and Associates had received nothing from his own father, and had made his own way by dint of hard work

and a crazy gift for seeing solutions where others saw only problems.

William Brackenwhite expected as much from others. Although he had embodied the rags to riches cliché long before Joel was born, the senior Brackenwhite took nothing for granted, and gave even less. True, he paid dearly for Joel's education at Vancouver's most exclusive private school, and the family fortune was among the largest represented there. But his son had less ready money than any of his classmates. Indeed, he had none at all until he finally figured out that it was going to require work.

Joel had to admit that at the beginning—through the first nine or ten years of grade school—he was an indifferent student at best.

It was not that he was addicted to television, or sleeping in, or many of the other things that young boys were given to in the 1970s.

He loved *books*.

He loved the sounds of the words in his head and as they rolled off his tongue. He loved the smell of the paper and the sundry kinds of ink. He liked the texture of old embossed clothbound hardcovers and the smoothness of perfectbound paperbacks. And he was awed by the serene majestic silence of the libraries that housed the beloved books.

Books were one thing, however; book *work* was another. Joel read for hours on end, but nothing that was assigned. The library was the church where he worshipped rather than the monastery where he studied.

In those early years, Joel applied himself to his studies about as well as he did to everything else other than books, which is

to say, not at all. He got away with that for a long time, because he actually was exceptionally bright.

But eventually even brilliance requires application, and by the middle of high school, Joel realized that he had some ground to make up. And to his credit, he did. He was a proud young man, and not without ambition.

He hadn't always seen himself following in his father's footsteps. But resentment over not getting spoiled the way his peers did eventually lost the power of clouding *all* of his judgment. The truth was that he *liked* Brackenwhite and Associates. It was not merely the appeal of the company's track record of conceptual design innovation. Unique among its peers, the firm blazed a trail in on-site involvement, so that the builders could never be confused about architectural intention. Although some general contractors did not appreciate their hands being held quite so tightly, it was a welcome reassurance to heavily-invested clients.

And then, of course, the firm had *prestige*. Joel was especially fond of that. Recipients of international awards, sought out by the powerful and wealthy, Brackenwhite and Associates represented a dream firm for ambitious architects, and Joel had become very ambitious.

Besides, however much Joel may have privately disagreed with his father, he thought like him. Of course, he would never confess to owning his father's way of looking at the world, but he shared the mental capacities and inclinations that had made William a rich man. Joel too seemed predestined to be an architect, chosen by his gifts and his loves.

In truth, over the course of time, he too came to think that success and privilege should be tied to merit.

And now, at twenty-five, the younger man had finally emerged from the shadows. The successes of both his coursework and the initial petty jobs had been impressive, and conversations with his father in recent weeks had assured him that he had arrived. He was a confirmed prodigy and had become an entrenched company man. The grand project in his sights was a lock: the magnificent Queen Elizabeth Performing Arts House to be built in the provincial capital. It would be the perfect feather in the cap to launch a prestigious career.

That was Joel's world this morning, a sunny morning that dawned with promise and expectation.

This morning, before the quarterly assignment meeting, when his father sat across from him, the great oak desk an unfathomable distance between them.

This morning, when things went south.

Or north, actually.

"What I have for you for this coming year, Joel, is the Owl River Band Complex."

Joel felt blindsided, and a pit started to form in the bottom of his gut. A "Band Complex" sounded something like a Performing Arts House, so that maybe wasn't so bad. But it wouldn't be the Queen Elizabeth. And he had never heard of Owl River.

"Um . . . what about the Queen Elizabeth?"

His father gave an almost imperceptible wave of his hand. "That's coming. I've got my best people working on that, and you'll be in on it too, next year. Maybe even by November. But I need you for Owl River first."

Joel felt his hands turning a bit cold, clutching the arms of his chair. "You know I had some of the best ideas that got

approved for the QE concept.”

“Yes, you did. And we’re incorporating them. That was really good work. You’re turning into a fine architect, and you have an understanding of what works, not just in concept, but in real life. That is a rare gift.”

Despite the praise, Joel’s throat was tightening. It was clear that his father would not be conceding any ground.

“I wasn’t originally designating you for Owl River, but Warren isn’t going to be available for at least seven or eight months. The Norse project ran way past, which wasn’t his fault, but that’s how it is when government money goes to plebiscite.”

William Brackenwhite sighed. “Anyway, at this stage of the QE project, you’re not really needed here. You’ve given us something to run with, and when you get back you’ll be able to hit the ground running. Porter is more than capable of setting things off in the right direction.”

Joel swallowed hard. Porter. No, he was not in Porter’s league yet, not in his father’s eyes. Carl Porter had served with Brackenwhite and Associates for over eleven years, was dependable, hard working, and visionary in his own way. Even if, in Joel’s opinion, the quality of his work was a bit uneven.

“So where is this . . . erm, performing arts center?”

“Performing arts center?”

Uh-oh. “What did you call this project again?”

“Owl River Band Complex . . . oh, wait, now I get your confusion. No, not *that* kind of band. It’s an *Indian* band. The project is for the Owl River Indian Reserve.”

Joel’s stomach was on the floor, along with his jaw. Swallowing was now quite out of the question.

“I guess this is maybe a bit . . . *unforeseen*, Joel, but it’s actually a very exciting project. Owl River was given a new settlement with Indian Affairs, and a lot of money opened up for them to do something that would really enrich their community.” His father stopped short. “Enrich them *culturally*, I mean.”

“Mm.” Joel felt like his world was crashing around him. Or at least, his *year*. Of one thing he was certain: he would not like Owl River. He was a cultured city boy, and *very white*. Joel Bracken*extremely*white, that was him.

For that matter, Joel was convinced the assignment would do nothing toward his career advancement, either. He was pretty sure he had never encountered a top-flight architect who was showing reserve projects in his portfolio.

And meanwhile, while Joel was rotting away in God-knows-where, other people would be working on the Queen Elizabeth Performing Arts House. Doing something culturally relevant, artistically satisfying, and rewarding to their careers.

Doing *his* work, dammit.

Joel’s mind raced for an exit. He didn’t *need* to work for Brackenwhite and Associates. He had the grades to land something else. . . .

*Don’t kid yourself, dope. This is what you’ve been working toward for at least eight or nine years. Don’t settle for a job. You’re not gonna be able to stroll into anything else nearly so prestigious and happening and just set up shop.*

No, he would have to grit his teeth and throw away a year, desperately hoping that he still had a foothold with the QE project when his time was up. At the very least, there would be other great projects with the firm. He couldn’t overreact

and throw everything away.

There was no choice but to swallow the poison.

So he asked reluctantly, “Exactly where is Owl River?” Joel wasn’t a praying man, but at this moment he was praying that at least he would land partly on his feet. Maybe the reserve would be close to a major center, someplace where urbane, cultured people like him could enjoy the arts and entertainment scene. And catch a classy restaurant with real French wine on occasion.

His father nodded toward the project map that dominated the north wall. “Northern Alberta. It’s the red pin just over by Lesser Slave Lake.”

Joel stared blankly. It was even worse than he thought. *God, let me wake up. This has to be a nightmare.*

His father moved over to the map with the easy, assured strides so familiar to his son. He made a sweeping motion from Edmonton northward. “It’s a bit remote, but there’s good access. You can get there from Edmonton in less than four hours in good driving conditions.”

“Hotels?”

“Hell, no. Owl River isn’t on any sort of through route. Could never sustain a hotel.” Then, anticipating the next question: “The surrounding towns are too far away to stay off-reserve. A good ninety miles of gravel each way. The Chief is a friend of mine. He is arranging suitable accommodations for you locally.”

Joel had never seen a reserve, so he wasn’t sure what *suitable* meant. He was rather afraid to make further inquiry on that front.

Instead, he asked, “So . . . when do I start?” with the sense

of dread known only by those who have just been hit by a series of body blows.

For the first time, his father looked just the slightest bit uncomfortable.

“Sorry, Joel, I really would have liked to give you better lead time on this. Although the truth is that your situation makes you the best choice for short-notice jobs,” alluding to the fact that his son was essentially unattached. Joel almost cursed himself for being so devoted to his work that he and his girlfriend had parted ways eighteen months ago. “It’s all about the Norse job blindsiding us at least three times, but I won’t go into all that now.”

He stopped a moment, cleared his throat, and returned to his desk.

“I need you to be there next Monday. Everything fell into place quickly for them, and Chief Francis is eager to get things started, because . . . well, the summers are pretty short there, so they want to have good progress while things are nice.”

What Joel could not have known, and his father left un stated, was that there was an election upcoming in 1984, and Chief Francis, facing a serious contender for his job, wanted this project prospering to help sell himself for one more term.

“Don’t worry about your apartment here. This project will give you a nice bonus—call it ‘remote living pay,’ if you will—and of course, as always, all your expenses there will be covered. If you can live on moose meat”—here Joel almost swore he saw his father wink—“maybe you can sock most of that expense money away.”

*Moose meat? Is there a camera in here?*

It wasn’t like his father to mock him (*berate* him, sure; *mock*



him, no), but scarcely anything his father had said seemed to carry the aura of verisimilitude.

Suddenly a troubled look momentarily clouded the elder Brackenwhite's face, but Joel could see him perceptibly mute it.

"You are in good health," William said in a detached tone. "When you are in Owl River, you have to treat it like you are on an extended hunting trip in the wilderness. You will not have immediate access to medical facilities. So be careful. Be sure to keep your first aid kit fully stocked and available." He was not an emotionally expressive man, and never one to be overprotective toward Joel. His bent was to allow his son to experience the hard knocks. It was how you learned to be self-sufficient.

He moved on quickly. "You're a bit behind," he continued, "as you haven't been involved in this project from the ground up. It's mostly been Warren's domain, so he'll have to take a day, maybe a couple, to go over some things with you. Of course you won't see him out there at all. Greg is from the general area. He can get you up to speed on northern Alberta in general, and he'll also be in and out for the times you need one of our guys."

*Greg* was Greg Shellow, a bit of an anomaly in a firm of ambitious overachievers. Tall, lanky, and despite being generally competent and not unintelligent, he was occasionally reminiscent of a country bumpkin.

And so it was Greg who sat across the table from Joel on this, the first evening in his unwelcome new reality. They were positioned on the patio of a small Vancouver bar, enjoying the late April air. It was Joel's haunt—Greg himself was

not generally given to anything so bohemian.

The small talk had been *very* small. Aside from place of employment, the pair had nothing in common, Joel thought. Greg himself liked to say, "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy." And by *liked to say*, that means, at every available opportunity. Including tonight. In between attempting to sing snatches of Ronnie Milsap over the strains of the bar's more refined musical fare. "There's a stranger in my house, someone I can't see. . . ." *Sung by a blind man. Hah. I get it.*

Nothing at all in common.

Just as well. To the matter at hand.

"Owl River, hey?" Here Greg took a posture in relation to Joel to which neither was accustomed. He knew things that the prodigy and heir did not. Likely as not, some of the stuff he knew may even have been true.

Greg began to yank the chain. "Good place to find a squaw. You don't know many Indians, do you?" The tone was smug rather than accusing.

Actually, Joel didn't know *any* Indians. There were a couple of familiar drunken faces he regularly encountered in Chinatown—if one may speak of passing by on the other side of the sidewalk as an "encounter."

Joel wasn't sure if he should mention them.

Instead, he asked, "Have you been to Owl River?"

"Long time ago. Worked the rigs when I first got out of high school. There was a service rig pretty close to the reserve. Pretty much the ugliest place I've ever been."

"Mm." Joel didn't really like where this was going, but that was just how his day had been, and most likely, how his entire

year was about to be.

“Owl River is just your typical reserve. Bunch of lazy stupid men and fat ugly women living off the government.”

Joel never claimed to be the most enlightened of souls championing racial reconciliation, but inside, even he winced a little.

“Did your Dad tell you the details about the contracting arrangement?”

“No, not really. I’m supposed to go over a bunch of stuff with Warren tomorrow.”

Greg leaned forward. “In my opinion, you’ll never finish this job. No, don’t get me wrong—I know it won’t be *your* fault. You may be a hotshot, but you’re pretty good, and you’re determined too.

“But here’s the deal: the Indian band wants almost everything contracted out to locals.” He tilted his head back, stuck out his chin, and looked at Joel in a manner apparently intended to be ominous. “How do you think *that’s* going to work?”

Joel looked down and shrugged indifferently, but he felt otherwise. *This job could be a tar baby.*

“Actually, I’m pretty surprised your Daddy is letting you go there. I mean, I know he doesn’t really baby you, but still. . . . An Indian reserve isn’t really the safest place for a rich white boy.”

That was something that Joel hadn’t considered. Actually, his head had been spinning too fast all day for him to have considered much beyond self-pity. He raised his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Most of them Indians aren’t going to be all that happy to see you, is my bet. They don’t like whites on the reserves. Did

you hear about what happened on one of those reserves a few years ago?"

The question was vague, but it was pretty safe to say that Joel hadn't heard, anyway.

"Someone shot up the trailer where the RCMP constable was living. Wanna know who did it? The chief's son!"

Joel pursed his lips. "This was at Owl River?"

"Naw, one of the neighbouring reserves. Not that it matters—they're all the same. Anyway, the RCMP left and never came back. The reserves in the north are pretty much lawless."

And so it went on. Greg had nothing good to say about Indians, although he did have fond memories of Alberta. By drinking copiously, Joel was able to stomach another thirty minutes of his talk before he said good night.

It really didn't seem to matter much, anyway. Any way he sliced it, he was up the creek. Or the river, as the case may be.

Nineteen eighty three was not going to be a good year.