

Chapter One

The Escape

The scent of sawdust, diesel fuel, and rich, dark earth was the perfume of a Saturday afternoon. To Lucas Maine, it was the smell of peace. For twenty years, Hanson's Farm and Tractor had been his sanctuary, a cathedral of sturdy, practical things where a man could lose himself for a few hours. Sunlight, fractured by the dusty upper panes of the barn-high windows, lanced down in hazy columns, illuminating aisles crammed with everything from gleaming bags of fertilizer to towering stacks of raw lumber that stretched out into the five-acre backlot.

He was in the middle of a familiar, friendly argument with old man Hemlock over the merits of a new corn seed blend. Hemlock, a farmer whose face was a roadmap of seventy years under the Colorado sun, spat a stream of tobacco juice into an empty coffee can he carried for just that purpose.

"I'm tellin' ya, Lucas, that new hybrid ain't worth the extra cost. The yield's the same, and the stalks are weaker. A good stiff wind comes through in August, and you'll have a field of broken knees."

Lucas leaned against a pallet of feed bags, a genuine smile on his face. He loved these conversations. They were real, grounded in the earth. "The science says otherwise, Bill. Better drought resistance. You won't have to irrigate as much."

"Science," Hemlock grumbled, though his eyes twinkled. "Your wife Jolene puttin' those ideas in your head? All that nurse talk about 'evidence-based practice'?"

"She might've mentioned it," Lucas admitted with a chuckle. Jolene was a cardiac nurse at Mercy Medical, a woman who dealt in facts and heartbeats. She was the anchor that kept his world steady. "She worries about you old-timers working yourselves into the ground. Says I need to make sure you're staying hydrated."

"Tell that wonderful woman of yours to worry about you. Last I checked, you're fifty-two, not twenty-two. Your boys keepin' you busy?"

"Jacob's got his own life up in Traverse City, and Joseph's acing his college classes down at State. It's a quiet house these days," Lucas said, a familiar, bittersweet ache settling in his chest. The quiet was what he'd always wanted, what he'd fought for, but sometimes it felt too quiet. It gave a man too much time to think.

"Yeah, I remember those days," Hemlock said, picking a piece of lint off his flannel shirt. "One minute you're teaching 'em how to tie their shoes, the next they're gone and the house is clean. You'll get used to it. Say, you heading to the potluck at the church tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Jolene's making her seven-layer dip. I think half the town shows up just for that." Lucas picked up a bag of fertilizer, his eyes scanning the chemical composition out of habit. He wasn't a farmer, but he liked to know how things worked. It was a remnant of another life, the need to understand every component of a system, to know its strengths and its weaknesses.

It was then that a faint, distant sound pricked at the edge of his hearing. A high, thin wail, so out of place in the Saturday afternoon calm that his head came up automatically. He scanned the parking lot through the front window. A volunteer fire truck, maybe. Or a state trooper pulling someone over on the main road a mile away. He dismissed it. Here, in the heart of farm country, the only emergencies were usually weather-related or agricultural.

He turned back to Hemlock, but the old farmer was looking past him now, his brow furrowed, his good mood evaporating. The wail wasn't fading; it was multiplying. It was a rising, frantic chorus of sirens, growing louder, closer, converging on their position with an impossible speed. Other customers in the store were stopping now, their conversations faltering as they turned toward the sound.

"What in tarnation...?" Hemlock muttered, taking a step toward the door.

Lucas didn't answer. He set the fertilizer bag down, his movements suddenly deliberate and economical. The casual slump was gone from his shoulders. Every muscle in his body went on alert. He walked towards the front of the store, his pace measured, his eyes scanning, assessing. Through the large, grimy plate-glass window, he saw it.

The world outside had exploded into a chaotic ballet of flashing red and blue lights. It wasn't just a state trooper. It was a phalanx. Black-and-white county sheriff's cruisers skidded to a halt, tires smoking, blocking the entrance and exit to the parking lot. Dark green government SUVs, the kind with reinforced bumpers and tinted windows, surged in behind them, disgorging men in heavy tactical vests, their bodies bristling with gear. They moved with a fluid, disciplined purpose that was chillingly familiar.

Lucas felt a cold wave of recognition wash over him, so powerful it almost buckled his knees. This wasn't a drug bust. This wasn't a local emergency. This was a coordinated, multi-agency operation. This was a hunt.

And after twenty years of peace, the prey was him.

He didn't waste a single, precious second on denial or shock. The quiet life he had so carefully built was a fragile shell, and it had just been shattered. His heart, which had been beating at the calm, steady rhythm of a Saturday afternoon, was suddenly a trapped bird hammering against the cage of his ribs. His training, dormant for two decades, roared to life, overriding the man who joked about corn seed and seven-layer dip.

Asset compromised. Protocol alpha. Evade and escape.

He checked to his left through a side window. More police cars were swarming the side entrance, cutting off that route. They were establishing a perimeter. He had seconds. In a single, fluid motion that belied his fifty-two years, he dropped into a prone position behind a low, wide display of rock salt bags. The rough, dusty concrete floor scraped against his cheek, the taste of grit flooding his mouth. He heard shouts from the front of the store, the terrified gasps of the other customers as the first officers burst through the main doors.

"Police! Everybody down! Hands where I can see them!"

He ripped the worn baseball cap from his head and shoved it, along with his canvas work coat, deep behind the pallet of salt bags. They knew his face, but a change in silhouette and clothing could buy him precious time. He began to belly-crawl, his elbows and knees protesting the unfamiliar movement. *The mind is willing*, he thought, a grim humor flashing through him, *but the body is fifty-two*. The muscles in his shoulders screamed, unused to this kind of strain. He ignored the burning protest, the scraping of his skin on the rough floor. He just moved, keeping low, using the long, dark aisles of farm equipment as cover.

The familiar layout of the old barn, etched into his memory from countless Saturdays, was now a tactical grid of cover and concealment.

He could hear them inside the store now, moving with methodical speed. The thunder of heavy boots on the wooden floorboards, the sharp, clipped commands. “Clear left! Go, go! Check behind the counter!” He heard Hemlock’s distinctive, gravelly voice, raised not in anger but in pure, bewildered outrage.

Lucas reached the unmarked wooden door that led to the service corridor and the basement steps. He risked a glance back down the aisle. An officer in full tactical gear was working his way down the parallel aisle, a shotgun held at the ready, his movements smooth and practiced. Lucas slid through the door, pulling it shut behind him without letting it make a sound. The corridor was dark and smelled of damp earth and motor oil. He didn’t hesitate, slithering down the steep, rickety wooden steps into the cavernous, dimly lit basement.

The air was cool and musty, a tomb-like silence compared to the chaos above. He was hidden, but he wasn’t safe. He was trapped. He needed a new identity. His eyes, already adjusted to the gloom, scanned the cluttered space—old shelving units, discarded engine parts, forgotten tools. And then he saw it. Hanging on a hook by the furnace was a grimy, lime-green safety vest and a dusty hard hat. On a nearby workbench sat a clipboard thick with laminated work orders. It was a desperate, flimsy lifeline, but it was the only one he had.