

CHAPTER 1--AUGUST 1995

The gas-station office smelled of mold and oil and the spray-painted windows blocked the midday sun. Ike Caudine was leaning forward in a lawn chair, giving his standard pitch to a man behind a metal desk.

Pacing is everything, remember to drop your tone and nod slightly, he said to himself, and then imagined grabbing the oversized screwdriver off the corner of the desk and jamming it into the man's eye. He pictured the man screaming and trying to grab the shank as Ike leapt around the desk, pushing the screwdriver until the man's head hit against the peg-board wall and then pounding on the end of the handle with the base of his palm until the rusted metal was buried, and the side of his hand touched the man's eyebrow.

"Remember, with an ADCO billboard you have exposure 365 days a year," Ike said, and glanced up at the tire iron on the wall behind the man's head. "Now, you do remember where the two billboards are, don't you?" He paused. "Remember? They are about two and four miles down 37, right?"

Ike waited for a response, but the man continued to look straight ahead at the box on the table. Ike could feel the blood swelling in his neck and a dribble of sweat starting on his forehead. He continued with his presentation and laid out the pricing for the two signs and said, "So what do you think, both signs for a year or do you want to get in on that two-year deal?"

The man glanced up, "I have to ask my wife," he said, and went back to staring at the box on his desk.

You son of a bitch, Ike thought. He sat for a moment and watched the man stare at the box and then lifted his tall, heavy frame from the lawn chair; towering over the man, he faced the man's thick semi-circle of greasy black hair, with the long strands folded over the top, spreading thin, over a scalp that shined even in the dim room. Ike extended his hand.

The man raised his glance for a second, gave a quick, limp, dead-fish handshake, and jerked his head back to looking at the box. A few hairs of the comb-over shifted forward.

Ike turned and walked out. Suddenly feeling suffocated by his suit in the warm office, he glanced at a pile of chains on the table as he pushed open the door and stepped out into the blinding sun. *Fucking Connecticut*, he thought, *I should have stayed in Vermont*. The pumps were bright in the sun with a large woman in a tank top shoving a hose into her mini-van.

As he drove his battered K-Car back to Old Greenwich, he pictured the whiteboard back at the office and how, one by one, Adam had erased all of the lost sales for the week as they had unraveled, and now this one would be erased too, just like his hopes of getting a real apartment. It was his second week in a row without a hit, and he had just wasted his entire Saturday morning. Now, he was stuck for an hour, driving in a car with no AC.

The vinyl seats were hard and hot against his wool suit-pants, but the ride went quickly until he found himself stopped in the beach traffic a couple of miles from Doc Ramsey's rooming house. He lit his last Marlboro. It made him feel even sicker, but he kept smoking it anyway as he watched the heat waves rising from the hood of the car.

"That son of a bitch, I should have asked him for gas money," he muttered as he strained to see around a black Chevy Tahoe with a knot of bikes crammed onto its hitch rack. A couple of them were kids' bikes. One was pink with word *princess* on the side. Its streamers moved slightly as the SUV inched up. One was a small BMX bike with its frame painted flat black. The bikes reminded Ike of the many trips to the mountains his family took when he was a child in Wyoming. He thought about the sales call. *What am I doing?* he asked himself. His brother's words at Christmas: *Your whole life was a waste of mom and dad's time--* played in his head as they had for months. He took another drag. Only two blocks kept him from the air-conditioning and coolness of his room at Doc Ramsey's.

Ten minutes later, he finally turned down Shore Acre Road and, as always, looked at the first house on the right, where Wendy Jones used to live. A rusted dumpster sat in the driveway, and workers with long-handled tools were prying the asphalt roofing off over the garage. He watched them climbing around as he glided down the street. He guessed that Wendy and her family had moved away two or three years earlier. Ike thought about how he and Wendy used to sit in the small gazebo near the tangled mass of hedges and bushes on the right side of the property. Now the gazebo was gone and the entire yard was flat and even with a perfect lawn and a white vinyl fence.

He wondered when it was exactly that Wendy had left. He regretted not keeping in touch with her while he was away and often played the same thoughts over and over in his head of the day when he found out that she was gone and how he couldn't find out how to reach her, how he tried to call and the number was disconnected, and how when he knocked on the door, a family of large people with red hair were living there. He imagined how if he had only written or called, he could see her again. Then, he would start thinking about seeing her again, and when he got to the point where they were holding hands on a bench somewhere or some such thing, he would pull himself out of the scenario by telling himself that she was too normal. The process had been getting shorter. This time he cut right to the end. *She was so perfect with her big degree from Notre Dame. We're both better off,* he said to himself. He turned up the gravel driveway and approached Doc Ramsey's house with its weatherworn cedar shingles that were dark in the sun.

Blocking the aluminum storm door open with his hip, he unlocked the deadbolt and entered. The air-conditioning hit him, instantly chilling the layer of sweat on his face. He saw Fritz with his feet up on the coffee table and a Budweiser resting on the arm of the chair; he wore an old pair of gym shorts and an unbuttoned baseball shirt. *He just quits his job and sits here drinking Goddamn beer,* Ike thought. *Why can't he at least be out?*

"Asshole," Ike said, and then sat down and took a cigarette from the pack on the table. The cool Naugahyde chair felt good against his sweaty pants.

"Hey, I'm just sitting here," Fritz said, and adjusted his loose shirt.

"As always."

"How's ADCO? How's life on the road?"

"Freaking brutal...Man, is it hot out there. I was dying."

"It's 1995, you really should have a car with AC," Fritz said smiling, and took a long chug from the red and white can. "Want a beer?"

"In a minute...I just need to sit for a minute." Ike untucked his shirt and sat with his legs apart, relieved that the morning was over.

"So, does Adam miss me?"

"Why would he?" Ike took a drag off the cigarette and looked straight ahead at the wall clock that Fritz had picked up at the thrift shop the month before. It was a pewter dish with crossed racquets and said Connecticut Junior Open Tennis Championship in black letters. The hands always read 4:20.

"I was the best."

"You couldn't sell pardons at a fucking prison," Ike said.

"I was the king."

"Yeah, sure you were...Just shut up with your bullshit for a minute, would you." Ike put his head back and closed his eyes. "I have to clear that donut boy out of my brain."

"Donut boy? Who Adam?"

"No, on the call?"

"What's a donut boy?" Fritz put his feet on the floor and moved his beer to the oval coffee table.

"This freaking guy," Ike said with his head still back and his eyes still closed, "wasted my whole fucking morning."

"Why donuts? Does he sell donuts? Do you have any?"

Ike could feel Fritz staring at him as a dog would when it knows that you have food. He was wishing that he hadn't thrown him *donut boy*. "No," he said. "Just let me cool off for a minute, jeeze."

"Come on, why donut boy?"

"Later." Ike thought about the imaginary murder and how good it felt.

"Come on, I've been sitting here for hours."

"OK, OK." Ike sat forward and put out his cigarette.

Fritz sat with his elbows on his knees.

"I drive an hour to talk to this guy, right? When I call for the appointment, this guy's all like, I'm mister big with my gas stations, and I advertise all the time. He actually says, I'm glad you called, and I've been thinking about doing a billboard. Yeah, yeah, and maybe some direct mail...He's making all like he's ready to buy, perfect, right?" Ike nodded and looked Fritz in the eye while waiting for a response to his last *right*.

Fritz nodded.

"Well, I go all the way up there. He's got this gas station and I'm pitching him, and he's just sitting there...staring at this box of donuts."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said; he was staring...at donuts. He had this box of donuts on his desk, and the whole time I'm talking, he's doing nothing but staring them. I'm selling my ass off, and he's like hypnotized or something by this fucking box of donuts. I couldn't believe it."

Fritz Laughed. "So then what?"

"Well he's just sitting there staring at those fucking donuts. It was ridiculous. I mean, I drive an hour. Oh yeah, and a phone, there was a phone he stared at too. I can see looking at a phone. It would ring, and he would stare at it, but just until someone answered it."

"That makes sense."

"But most of the time, I'm talking and he's just staring at this box of donuts."

"What kind."

"What do you mean what kind?"

"What kind of donuts?"

"What difference does it make, what kind?"

"Come on, what kind?"

"Well, they were the kind from the grocery store. Freihofer, I think. You know, the usual kind."

"Interesting."

"Yeah...I see your point...I mean, at least if they were from like Dunkin' Donuts or something, I could see, but Freihofer, come on! They're OK, but nothing special, nothing special." Ike's voice trailed off, his face lost its energy. He looked up at the ceiling. He knew the brand because his mother bought them when he was young, and he remembered how she would call him to the kitchen, and he would see them on the counter, and they would have one together, just the two of them. *Your whole life was a waste of mom and dad's time*, played in his head. Ike slowly reached out and pulled another cigarette from the pack on the table, but didn't light it, just stared at it in his hand.

Fritz sat for a moment and took another long sip of beer and sat there for another moment. "Exactly," he finally said.

"What?"

"Exactly, if they were from Dunkin' Donuts, it would make sense."

Ike sat forward, lit the Marlboro, and threw the plastic lighter on the table.

"Anyway, I go through the whole presentation, and he's just staring at this fucking box of donuts."

"Did he eat them?"

"No, no." Ike laughed through his nose. "He didn't eat them or anything...He didn't offer me one...He didn't eat one...He just stared at the box, at the front of the box. I swear, it was like he was in a trance. He was in a fucking donut trance, that motherfucker."

"So...what'd you do?" Fritz smiled with his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open.

"I gave my pitch. I just gave the pitch, like it was practice or something."

"Practice?"

"Yeah, because he didn't ask any questions or object or tell me to go fuck myself, or anything, and when I was finished I tried to get some eye contact...I'm looking like this." Ike moved his head around, pretending to try and get Fritz's attention. "I almost snapped my fingers at him...and the guy just looks up for a second and says, I have to ask my wife, and then looks back at his donuts. I couldn't believe it. That was like the only thing this guy says the whole time. After all that, all I got out of him was I have to ask my fucking wife."

Fritz laughed, tilting his head back, appearing to relish the story, probably more than he actually did. "That's rough," he said. "Then what?"

"I just turned around and left."

"You just left?"

"Yeah, what else could I do?"

"You could have asked for a donut."

Ike laughed and got ashes on his pants. Rubbing them off, he said, "But I didn't want to piss him off."

"Why not? Oh wait, let me guess."

"In case the wife says yes," they said in unison.

"I mean, you never know," Ike said.

"I would have done the same." Fritz sat back and took a long pull off of his cigarette. "Anyway, as for me, I had coffee until about one-thirty. This is my first beer of the day." Fritz grabbed the can off the table and held it up. A wet ring remained on the laminate next to a picture book of Italy.

Lazy ass motherfucker, Ike said to himself.

Fritz glanced away from Ike, letting his eyes momentarily rest on the blank screen of the TV. "I have something to run by you," he said.

"What is it?" Ike said. *Let me guess, you need to borrow money*, he thought. He took a sniff of himself, looked at the blur of ashes on his pants, and looked toward the silent TV and then at the remote on the coffee table.

Fritz sat up straight. Pressing his hands together, he touched his index fingers to his upper lip. He then interlocked his fingers and then placed his hands neatly in his lap. "Well, my unemployment is about to run out," he said in the calm tone that he used on sales calls.

"Yeah, so?" Ike said. "What does that have to do with me? I'm not the government." He wanted to take off his pants and lie on the couch. He looked at the remote again.

"I realize that, but it might affect you indirectly," Fritz said.

"I can't imagine how," Ike said. "I'm not giving you any money." Ike noticed that Fritz appeared to be ignoring his comment and was maintaining a professional posture. He expected a load of bullshit.

Fritz, with his hands still in his lap, leaned slightly forward. "Let me ask you this: what do you know about the internet?"

"The internet, I don't know, nothing really...just from the TV ads. There's that one with *Start Me Up*, you know, the Stones tune. I guess that company...Microsoft or America on the line or something has a big computer or something that your computer talks to somehow, and there's information on it or something, I guess. They must have put the library on it. Really I don't know. I've been in Vermont."

"You can send mail on it. I know that," Fritz said.

"I heard something about that, but what keeps them from reading it?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you send your mail to them, right, for them to send out, what keeps them from reading it?"

"I have no idea how it works," Fritz said. "Maybe you type it in and then they type it out and put it in an envelope?"

"What the fuck good is that? That makes no sense," Ike said.

"Maybe you save on stamps. I don't know. I've never actually seen it. I've never actually used a computer," Fritz said.

"Me neither. I don't send any letters anyway."

"Yeah, I don't know, but people are totally into it. Some guys are making a ton of money, like crazy money." Fritz was shaking his head.

"Really?"

"Yeah, you know my cousin Jamie? She's totally into it," Fritz said.

"Isn't she like in high school or something?"

"She's three years younger than us; she's twenty-two."

"Wow, twenty-two." Ike barely remembered anything about her, just that she was the only family of Fritz's that he had ever actually seen.

"She says that investors are lining up."

"For what,"

"The internet."

"I don't understand." Ike had no concept, but he had never seen Fritz so excited about anything.

"She says they advertise on it; she says in ten years, there won't be any stores." Fritz finished his beer and twisted the can into the shape of an hour glass, then put his palms on the top and bottom and crushed it flat.

"How can that be?"

"I don't know, but she said that investors are lining up, and companies are paying out the ass to be on it. But the internet is just the hook."

Here it comes, Ike thought.

"Jamie says that she can use a computer program to make a magazine. You remember how at Davis Advertising, they had that big layout department. Well, she can do it all, easily, on the computer." Fritz put out the cigarette that was burning in the ash tray.

"How is that possible?"

"She's like a genius or something. She showed me something she did. It was perfect. She says she has a computer she can use. So, we get her to do a mock up."

"Then what?"

"She knows this guy. This guy has all kinds of financing. Now, he's a business broker. I was telling you; they are lining up for the internet."

"I don't get it; a mock up of what, and how do we get to own the internet to sell it?"

"We get on the internet."

"I don't get it."

"We make a mock up of the magazine."

"What magazine?"

"I'm getting to that."

"Then we put a business plan together. Jamie handles the internet end. We go talk to this business broker, money man. Jamie says it's a slam dunk. She was talking about the new economy and all this shit. It doesn't even have to be a good plan or show any profits. She said it just has to sound good to them."

"That's weird." Ike looked down at the tobacco stains on Fritz's fingers.

"I know, they seem like suckers, but they're making tons of money somehow...Anyway, she knows all the buzzwords...like network effect."

"Like a TV network?"

"No, well sort of, she said it has something to do with the way they do it; the value is not in the earnings, but people on the internet looking at something, I guess."

"How can it not be earnings?" Ike looked at the clock and smiled a little about how it always said 4:20.

"It's the new economy. It's a whole new thing."

"I don't get it. What do I do?" he asked. "What would you need me for?"

"Check this out." Fritz now had both feet on the floor and leaned towards Ike. "Forget the internet. I don't know anything about it. The whole thing is the magazine. We just get the internet guys to get it going. Jamie said they would go for it because of cross-platform synergy or some shit."

"Cross what?"

"Cross-platform synergy: she said it's when they use one thing to boost the other."

"Like that car company that started making bicycles?"

"Yeah, like business from one drives business to the other."

"Like a stripper bar with a whorehouse?"

"Yes exactly...that's actually pretty good. We would be the stripper bar; the internet is the whorehouse...I like it." Fritz squinted and looked across the room while touching his upper lip with his forefinger.

"Or are we the whorehouse?"

"Hmmm," Fritz rubbed his lip. "Yes, the whorehouse does make the money, I guess," Fritz said.

"But anyway, what do you need me for?"

"What we do is we get people to advertise their own houses for a small fee and cut out the real estate agent. We put pictures in. We get it printed cheap. We give it away. We just take money for the ads...It's beautiful. What I need is for you to sell ads with me."

"But I've seen something like that."

"No, no." Fritz shook his head. "I know what you're talking about. Those are run by brokers. This is *For Sale by Owner*, no brokers...I started thinking about this a while ago. Jamie told me about what she could do last year before all this internet talk, but she was away at school." He looked down at his open hands that he shook twice as if to focus Ike's attention, "Cutting out the broker is just hook number one. We also sell ads to house-related businesses. We can do that. We can hit all kinds. I made a list of about fifty types. It's just selling ads to businesses. We know how to do that, don't we?"

Ike nodded. *That's really all I know how to do*, he thought.

"That's the real money for us, to put in our pockets. We can hit everyone from Sears to the landscaper down the street. It's all homeowners looking at this thing, people who are either looking for houses or people who want to see what the guy down the street is getting for his place. And who knows how much we'll get from the financiers, maybe we'll get fat salaries."

"Yet another hook."

"And then there's the big shiny new hook."

"The internet," they both said.

"Who knows how much extra we can charge," Fritz said.

"It sounds good, real good, beautiful...As long as I'm not selling those fucking billboards." Ike paused and thought about the whiteboard at the office and looked at

Fritz. He didn't really trust him. He looked at how his head was too small for his body. *What difference does it make?* he thought. *Shitty sales jobs are all over the place.* "And those fucking mailers," he said. "I don't give a shit...I can't take it anymore...I just can't look at another fucking donut boy."

Fritz laughed quickly from one side of his mouth at donut boy, and then became gravely serious. "I hear you," he said.

"I'm telling you, I can't take it. The donut boy was too much."

"Look at me; I'm done with that shit...look at me; I'd rather starve," Fritz said, shaking his head.

"I swear to God, when I was driving back, if someone would've put a gun to my head, I woulda just laughed," Ike said. "And this place, this place. How long can I live in a fucking rooming house?"

"Listen," Fritz said. "I have one solid shot at something left in me. I have one more shot left, and I don't want to waste it talking to idiots in gas stations for pennies."

"I know."

"Come on, this could be it. I just feel it; this could be our ticket; this could be it, our sliced bread...Man, in a couple of years, we'll be chasing across country in Ferraris and coming home to fat mansions and skinny bitches," Fritz said. "So what do you say, are you in?"

"I'm with you bro, I'm with you. Lead on Macduff."

Fritz looked contented and sat back. "We can go see Jamie's computer tomorrow. She'll lay on the technical stuff and explain the whole internet thing. I don't really understand it, but she says it's nationwide, so selling houses is good on it."

"Whatever you say man, I'm sold. I like it...This could get us back into Greenwich."

"We are in Greenwich."

"You know what I mean," Ike said.

"Yup."

"Just look at us; it's 1995 and we're going high-tech."

"Maybe you could get a car with air conditioning."

"Very funny."

"You ready for a beer?"