

CHAPTER ONE

Day One: 1730

In the last few minutes of her life, in the fading light of a chilly early-October evening, Circuit Court Judge Erin Mellencamp drove her black Mercedes SUV to the top of the driveway of her family's home in Wisaka, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago. Leaves crunched under the tires and she hummed along to Billy Joel's "She's Always a Woman" playing on satellite radio. The memory of where, and with whom, she had last heard the song made her smile.

She was a blue-eyed blonde, a slender Minnesotan from a family of tall, angular Swedes. Four generations' worth of lawyers. She displayed the gravitas of her heritage in all her behaviors. She'd learned as a child how to carry herself gracefully, speak well and offer reasoned opinions. Only when asked to do so, of course. She exhibited a quiet poise in her courtroom, something picked up unconsciously from watching her father when he had been on the bench, and her grandfather a revered U.S. Supreme Court justice. Her rulings reflected a Lutheran upbringing. She respected the law, disliked disorder and considered herself practical and fair in all things from court cases to family life. Practical, fair and in control. And now, with the lyrics of the Joel song in her head, happier than she had been in a long while.

Most of the time, anyway.

When Erin saw her twenty-year-old daughter waiting in the driveway as she drove up, some of that happiness turned to wariness.

Amanda Mellencamp had inherited her mother's blonde hair but kept her own chopped and layered so that waves of it habitually fell across her eyes. It looked wet and Erin figured she'd just awakened and showered in the past half hour or so. That was her daughter's new routine. Up all night, sometimes out, sometimes in, sleep all day when she didn't have classes. As fall arrived, her habitual tardiness and bad attitude had gotten her fired from a receptionist's job. Erin was giving her two weeks to find work, ahead of the start of the Christmas rush. It was too much to hope that she was headed out to an interview; she wore torn jeans and a white t-shirt advertising a rock band called "Underdrawers" and was without a jacket, hugging herself against the chill. She was

scowling, too, something she did so often nowadays that Erin realized she'd forgotten what her daughter's smile looked like. She missed it.

An argument was about to begin and it was going to be about Duane, Erin predicted. Inwardly she sighed and steeled herself, hoping they could at least get the groceries organized before the yelling started.

She put the Mercedes into park and twisted the wheels, something she had learned to do long ago on their sloped driveway, and realized she was getting ready to face her daughter the way she readied to ascend the bench.

On the days she was to hear attorneys presenting motions, even if she was familiar with the case and had read briefs upon briefs detailing the points of law in question, she always resolved to listen as she had her first year in school. Back when The Law was still mysterious and her perceptions of guilt and innocence all clear-cut, shiny and new. In chambers, as she donned her black robes, she would clear her mind of preconceptions by breathing deeply in for ten seconds, holding for ten seconds, and exhaling for ten seconds. Close her eyes. Open them. Repeat the breathing exercise. Think of something lovely she would soon be doing. Shopping for shoes, perhaps. Taking that trip to Italy she'd always dreamed about. Making love in the rain.

Making love . . . the Joel song playing . . .

She shivered as she met the reflection of her eyes in the SUV's rear-view mirror. Thoughts like that these days, while decidedly still delicious, were more distracting than calming. Especially with a little guilt added for spice.

"What are you all smiley about?"

The acid in her daughter's voice snapped her out of her reverie. All good intentions fled.

"Do you have to start before I even get out of the car? Some day I'd like to hear you just say, 'Hi mom!' Like maybe you're glad I'm home. Is that possible?"

"Yeah, right. Like you even want to be here."

And they were off and running.

"What does that mean?" Erin asked, slipping from behind the wheel and out into the driveway and tugging a sheaf of shoulder-length hair from inside the collar of her Burberry signature plaid overcoat. Just as she did, the timed lights around the exterior of

the garage snapped on. Theirs was the only property on the block that used exterior lighting, installed over the summer as an add-on suggested by the alarm system people. The alarm made her feel secure. The lights gave her the creeps. For someone taught to always downplay her lifestyle, Erin hated the way the lights seemed to proclaim wealth and privilege, not to mention showcase the house and anyone standing near it as though they were on a stage. Even so, it was getting darker earlier. She had to admit it was easier to carry groceries when she could see where she was walking.

Erin loved the shorter days of fall, particularly the smell of burning leaves. She had seen piles of them on fire in a couple of driveways on her way home from the courthouse. Some Lake County communities still allowed the practice, though Wisaka did not. She suddenly wished they could all work together and rake up a big pile at the base of their driveway and set it ablaze. As a family.

“You’re never home!” Amanda accused.

Erin grinned, trying to lighten the mood. Amanda looked so intent and serious. “I’m never home? Look who’s talking, Miss Party Animal. This house could burn down and you’d never know unless you stopped by for food or to do your laundry.”

“Whatever.”

Erin opened the back door, revealing four bags of groceries on the seat. She reached in and grabbed one. “Hey, kiddo, help me with these, would you?”

As she spoke, her eyes drifted past the paper sacks filled with food and she saw curled on the seat a small, stuffed rabbit with one eye missing and a scruff of stuffing showing out the back. Bunny’s Brother had been Amanda’s favorite hug toy throughout her childhood. Much loved and many times washed, then abandoned. Erin had come across him one day a couple of weeks before while cleaning out a basement closet. His baleful one-eyed gaze from atop a box of toys meant for Goodwill tugged memories from her heart and so she had brought him out to the car, intending to find a store somewhere that could sew him up. He was too dear a little creature to discard. A tiny bit of her daughter’s too-fast disappearing childhood.

“I want you to cancel that court order saying Duane can’t be around me.” Amanda demanded. “He’s my boyfriend! He’s been acting like . . . like he’s afraid to even talk to me.”

Erin felt calmer now. “You know that can’t happen and you know why. Your father and I . . .”

“Daddy hasn’t done anything. You’re the one who hates Duane because he’s black. You’re the one who made it so he’ll be arrested if the police catch us together. He’s on probation. You know what will happen if they arrest him. Judges are supposed to be fair!”

Amanda spoke too fast, running her words together. It reminded Erin of some of the new young lawyers who regularly appeared before her. Trying to cram so many words into just a few moments, like it was the last chance they would ever have to make their arguments before their world stopped revolving.

“Honey, that’s exactly the point. He’s on probation for selling drugs. Now keep your voice down. The neighbors don’t want to hear this. C’mon, help me with the groceries. We can sit down in the kitchen like we used to and have a nice talk, okay?”

“No. No. This has to stop now. I called him, Mom. I told him to come over. The *three* of us can sit down and talk. You’ve never even met him. That’s so stupid. I want him here so you can tell us both the real reason you’re keeping us apart.”

The real reason was that Duane Lee was the youngest of three coke-dealing, gang-banger brothers and showed every sign of following his siblings’ successful armed and dangerous entrepreneurship.

Erin sighed and put the bag of groceries back on the seat. It was cool enough the fish and chicken would be okay awhile in the car. She could take a couple of minutes to once again try to defuse this disagreement that had turned into an implacable object between them. She turned to her daughter, who was backlit now by the house lights. An orange glow on the horizon beyond the house was the day’s only remnant and it was fast fading. Leaves rustled on the breeze. She glanced at the dark yard behind her and the street beyond. For the first time since getting home she felt the chill on her bare legs. She wished her husband was home to help her with this. She wished they could all sit in front of the big fireplace in the cozy living room she loved and discuss this. Like a family.

For once, she didn’t want to be the one handing down judgment. She hated seeing the pain in Amanda’s eyes. And the fury. If she was honest with herself, it frightened her

a little, too. As did the boy, Duane Lee. And other things out there that went bump in the night.

She put her hand on the open car door, giving the darkness her back. Summoning a reasonable tone, she spoke quietly.

“You’re going to have to call Duane again and tell him not to come. You know that. The police are making regular patrols through the neighborhood. If they see his car . . . honey just call him, okay?”

“No,” Amanda snapped. “Why don’t you call him. Use this!” She brought her hand from behind her back and thrust an object toward her mother, jabbing it so that Erin had to bring her hands up to keep the cell phone, for that’s what it was, from hitting her in the chest. It clattered to the driveway.

“Hypocrite! Liar!” Amanda hurled the words as weapons, tears falling freely.

“Amanda, what on earth---?”

It couldn’t be *that* phone, could it? She looked down . . .

. . . and without warning, without sensing an approach, she felt like someone had punched her hard, right between the shoulder blades.

Erin Mellencamp tried to turn to see who had been so rude. She found, instead, that she was on her knees, staring at the driveway.

The pain came roaring at her then and, in the last moments of her life she wondered if she was having a heart attack like the one that had claimed her father. She managed to lift her head. Her eyes climbed her daughter’s body in time to see two red splotches appear on Amanda’s white t-shirt.

“Amanda!” she screamed, not knowing if she actually articulated the word or just thought it, but in that instant something red exploded behind her eyes and a darkness even greater than in the yard carried her away. No more house. No more living room she loved.

From the satellite radio still playing in the Mercedes came Coldplay, the lyrics lost on the breeze, but something about living in a beautiful world...