



Excerpt from

The Hunting Ground

(Deuce Mora Series No. 2)

By Jean Heller

CHAPTER 1

A mid-winter thaw in Chicago had transformed the Dan Ryan Woods nature trails into sucking bogs of wintry sludge. Any misstep could yank off a boot and morph a casual stroll into a frigid mud bath. But the sun was out, the temperature had mounted a frenzied climb into the upper-forties, and the day dictated some quality time outdoors.

I had no inkling that a simple woodland walk would hurl me into a personal and professional train-wreck.

Mark Hearst and I stepped around the worst of the muck—large soupy, brown puddles fringed with sparkling beards of ice. Our progress was slow, but we didn't care. We were out to get some exercise on a nice Saturday in January and let Mark's Irish setter, Murphy, run off the cobwebs of winter.

Watery sunlight filtered through barren trees down to the floor of the sprawling forest preserve deep on Chicago's South Side. The trees cast long shadows to the north, elongated silhouettes in haphazard formations falling across the snow crust. The branches looked like the scrawny outstretched arms of old men, ending in impossibly twisted arthritic twig-fingers.

Tree shadows—long and sharply defined—were among the sights I cherished most about winter. Had I chosen to be a painter instead of a writer, this was the sort of scene I would put to canvas. Perhaps I would try it some day.

The sun's meager heat barely penetrated our layered clothing. But the dark bark of the trees absorbed the scant warmth and radiated it back into the surrounding air. It created circles of snowmelt that girdled the base of each trunk as though the ground had sunk away with perfect symmetry.



Mark and I held hands and listened for the occasional crashing of Murphy's large body as he careened through underbrush chasing squirrels he would never catch. The fun was in the hunt.

The Dan Ryan Woods were named for an early Chicago Democratic Machine politician who died in 1923 after serving as the president of the Cook County Board—and little else. But this inner-city parkland paradise, with ball fields and soccer fields at the north end and wilderness over the rest of its expanse, was a treasure in a part of the city most people associated with gangs and violence. It was an oasis of peace and quiet and a wonderful way to hike off stress.

An assortment of wintering birds—cardinals, nuthatches, chickadees, downy woodpeckers, even a flock of cedar waxwings feeding on thawing wild berries—went about the business of survival as if we weren't there. It was too early for the onset of their nest-building instincts. Their only concerns this day were finding sufficient food and shelter.

Not to mention adult bird beverages.

The berries wolfed down by the waxwings had been fermenting on their trees all winter, and more than a few of the birds displayed highly erratic flying behavior.

"Somebody should have carded them before letting them in here," Mark said.

I grimaced. "I hope they don't get hurt."

Mark circled me with his right arm and hugged me to his side. We fit together perfectly. He said, "You want to round 'em up and take 'em home until they sober up? Make 'em teeny, tiny cups of black coffee and give 'em a place to sleep it off?"

He looked down at me and grinned. "Deuce Mora, famous newspaper columnist, notorious lover of fur and feathers."

In my own defense I replied, "Friends don't let friends fly drunk."

"They'll be fine," Mark assured me. "They've been doing this since the species evolved. I don't see little waxwing bodies all over the ground."

We moved on and saw three coyotes, a species that had spread its range into Chicago in recent years. A red fox paused briefly to scout what we were doing, then evaporated back into the cover of the woods.

"Are they any danger to Murphy?" I asked.



“None,” he said. “Murphy’s bigger than the wild things. Last year he met up with a coyote down here. One throaty growl from the pup and the coyote amscrayed.”

I inhaled a deep breath of the cold air.

“Smell that?” I asked him. “Rotting leaves and wood smoke. The outdoors.”

“When I smell wood smoke,” he said, “it’s usually in combination with toxic fumes, noxious gases, and chemical discharges from burning buildings. Wood smoke lost its charm for me a long time ago.”

Mark was an arson investigator for the State of Illinois, a man I met the previous fall while working on a story for my newspaper, the *Chicago Journal*. What was supposed to be a feature turned into a horrific confluence of crimes spanning six decades. The reporting nearly got me fired. And killed. That I still had a job and my life was due in part to Mark.

“Don’t be a buzz kill,” I said, acting the gentle scold. “Think fireplaces, and wood stoves, and romantic camp fires.”

He was about to answer when he was stopped by the exuberance of a large red dog that hurtled from the woods, leaping as if his feathered coat could help him fly. Murphy, layered in mud and snow, skidded to a halt with what looked like a small tree branch balanced in his jaws. In the unlikely event that we hadn’t noticed him, he trotted over, tail wagging with excitement, heated breath wreathing his big, square head. He set his treasure in front of us.

I stooped to pick it up and throw it for him so he could play fetch.

“Don’t touch it,” Mark said with an edge in his voice.

As I looked up to ask why, Murphy ducked his head and moved toward the object, probably to nose it closer so we’d get the idea he wanted to play.

“Murphy, no!” Mark commanded. “Leave it.”

The dog backed off and cocked his head in befuddlement.

I stood and stared at Mark, who was transfixed. Now it was his turn to crouch for a closer look.

“He just wants us to throw it for him, Mark,” I said. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s not a stick,” he said. “It’s a bone. And I’m pretty sure it’s human.”

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