

Chapter 1

Fired!

Hal Stratton caught himself holding his breath as he pulled his antique Chevy pickup into the parking lot of Western Realty. The company he'd started seven years earlier. His baby.

Looking at the August sun over Denver's Rocky Mountains, he guessed it was 6:45 p.m. He looked at his wristwatch to see how close he'd come to the actual time. A little game he played. Spot on this time.

He was early—just as he liked. He took a couple of deep breaths, willing himself to relax and gather his thoughts. It was crucial to be his sharpest this evening for the most important board meeting since he'd created the land development company.

The friends Hal had brought into the business trusted his instincts and supported the deals he'd made as managing partner. Their small investments had grown impressively as he built Western Realty into a \$60-million company. However, purchasing the McFee Ranch a few months earlier had caused considerable friction. The partners disagreed with the decision, because he had taken money out of the business when revenues were dropping. They had even gone as far as to seek another partner, one with deep pockets and business acumen.

Hal looked into his rearview mirror and smoothed his short brown hair. He almost wished he hadn't as he saw the concern in his hazel eyes and frown line between his straight brows. The look startled him and he shook his head, trying to recapture his natural optimism and confidence. He took another deep breath and slid his six-foot, solid frame out of his 1950 red pickup.

"Darn that Charlie White."

The partners had been excited when White came into the business back in June in a land for stock trade. Hal had reluctantly agreed, knowing that White's abrasive temperament would alter the balance on the board.

He'd been right. From the start, he and Charlie White were on the opposite side of every issue.

In his lucky blue-gray "closer" suit, Hal walked briskly into the lobby of his company offices. The décor, a dark brown leather couch, large upholstered chairs, coffee table, and a tall cherry wood reception desk, conveyed excellence and professionalism. The original paintings by up-and-coming Western artists made the space distinctive. Not only a good investment, they symbolized what Western Realty was all about.

"Hi, Janine," Hal said, greeting his long-time office manager and executive assistant with a

warm smile. Her engaging personality, intelligence, and efficiency made her indispensable. “Time for the tribe to gather. Anyone here yet?”

Always an ally in the past, Janine Markham attempted a pleasant smile but Hal noticed how her eyes skittered away from him and her hands fumbled aimlessly with a stack of papers. “All of them.” She tipped her head toward the conference room. “They’re already here.”

“I didn’t think I was late.” He checked his wristwatch against the clock on the wall.

“You’re not. They’re early.” She raised an eyebrow. “They came a half-hour ago.”

Hal nervously adjusted his gray silk tie. “Really? Who arranged that?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t asked to set it up.” She stood, agenda in hand, ready to follow him into the room. “Watch your back, okay?”

The board members were in a huddle when Hal and Janine walked in. They quickly broke apart, like schoolchildren caught doing something wrong.

“I see the meeting’s already started,” Hal said with forced heartiness. “What did I miss?”

The response was telling. Patricia Harmon, tall and striking with shoulder-length chestnut hair, shifted nervously from one foot to the other. Keith Mickelson, broad and bald, tugged at his tight sports jacket and muttered a greeting. Larry Greenwald, one of Hal’s best friends, straightened up to his slender 6’2” height and, avoiding eye contact, shook his head.

Only Charlie White held Hal’s gaze, looking every bit the influential man he was. In his mid-sixties, he still had a full head of gray hair. His eyes were piercing and his mouth bore a slightly sardonic turn. His imposing physique was emphasized by an impeccably tailored, custom-made suit.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Charlie announced, taking a seat at the dark cherry conference table.

Hal sat at his usual spot at the head of the table and opened the meeting. Janine handed each board member a copy of the agenda. Charlie quickly tossed it aside. “Let’s not beat around the bush, Stratton,” Charlie said, slapping both hands down on the table. “It’s time for straight talk. Since these fine folks—” he gestured toward the other board members “—aren’t willing to bring up the predicament you’ve gotten us into, I will.”

“Bear with me,” Hal said briskly. He knew Charlie White was pitting the board against his decisions and Hal needed to set him straight. He leaned forward, his elbows on the table, his hands folded before him. “As we go over the agenda, I’m sure all of your concerns will be addressed—”

“Stratton,” Charlie interrupted, “you’ve steered this company into a huge mess. We’re losing money hand over fist. I want to know why ... and what you’re doing about it.”

Hal kept his voice businesslike despite the verbal assault, and reached for the handouts he’d so carefully prepared. “That’s at the top of my agenda. I know the numbers haven’t looked good lately,” he continued, “but I’ve put together some information I think you will all find encouraging. I’ve also come up with some steps we can take to keep the company going until revenues pick up.”

“We need to do something drastic before we all lose our shirts,” Charlie declared, ignoring Hal’s comments. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

“Now, wait a minute,” Hal said, bristling his gut reaction. Western Realty had acquired many desirable properties under his leadership—shopping centers, office buildings, apartment complexes, a warehouse, and several parcels of vacant land. “We’re not in danger of that, and you know it.”

“*You* may not think so,” Charlie cut in, “but the rest of us aren’t so sure.” He turned and

thrust a finger toward Keith Mickelson. “Tell Hal what you told me.”

Startled, Keith looked from Charlie to Hal, then back to Charlie. He stammered. “I, uh ... you’ve made some questionable deals lately, Hal. They’re draining our resources. I know there’s always risk in this sort of business, but ... um ... I have to wonder if we’d be in a better position now if the board as a whole had been more involved.” Keith cleared his throat nervously. “Or if we had different leadership.”

“What?” Hal clasped his hands tightly together as heat flooded his face. He hadn’t expected to be attacked by an old friend. Certainly not so personally. He forced himself to speak calmly. “Listen. I know we’ve got some cash-flow problems at the moment, but it’s temporary and due to some excellent long-term holdings, properties our competitors would love to own, I might add. And that’s the price we pay for *future* revenues. Standing firm is our best course of action.” Hal held up a hand, forestalling any comment. “I know you guys want to see steady returns on your investments. I don’t blame you.” He sat straight up in his chair. “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about how to get out of this situation. Let me tell you what I’ve come up with.”

“It’s what you were thinking three months ago that’s killing us, Stratton.” Charlie White shook his head as he stared at Hal. “I’m not up for any more of your ideas.”

Hal grimaced and locked onto Charlie’s eyes. “The McFee Ranch was a great buy. You should know that. It’ll take some time, but that purchase alone will make us *all* wealthy. I’ve got the numbers to—”

“Speaking of numbers,” Patricia Harmon interrupted, “what does the occupancy rate in our apartments need to be so we break even, on average?”

“About eighty-five percent,” Hal responded, still glowering at Charlie. “You know that as well as I do.”

“Where are we currently?” she added.

Hal broke Charlie’s gaze. “Come on, Patricia. Sixty-five percent.”

“Right.” She nodded slowly, her mouth turned down grimly. “I agree with Charlie. We need to take action now.”

“If you’d just—”

Charlie clasped the side arms of his chair and leaned over the table combatively. “There’s a deeper issue here that we’re all avoiding. How did we get so many holdings in the southwest part of the city in the first place? That’s what *I* want to know.”

“We picked them up at a good price,” Hal began.

Charlie sneered. “Really? And now we know why. With sixty-five percent occupancy, I have to wonder if you did adequate market research before plunking down our money.”

Hal rose to his feet. “Now, wait a minute. No one could have predicted the Computrex layoffs and the effect they would have on the occupancy rates of those units. Not you, me, anyone. I didn’t build this company into what it is today by making bad decisions. In fact, up to this moment, no one has questioned my judgment. I’ve gotten us through challenging times before ... and I will do it again. Most of you know that.”

Hal glanced around the table, hoping that one of his long-time colleagues would speak up on his behalf. No one, except Charlie White, met his eyes. Not Keith, his golfing buddy who had lauded his every move—until Charlie’s arrival. Not Patricia, a single parent who had asked Hal to be godfather to her adopted son. Not Larry, a friend going back to high school whom Hal had rescued from a dead-end job to become a partner in Western.

Hal’s chest tightened. He was on the wrong end of a power struggle, and not one of his friends was stepping into the fray. No one was willing to take on Charlie White. He sat back

down wondering what—if anything—he could do to salvage the meeting. “What’s going on here?” he asked. “I need to know.”

“That should be obvious,” Charlie said, gesturing like a conductor holding the last note of a symphony. “Your leadership is in serious question. You’ve made bad decisions, Stratton. And you’ve incurred considerable debt by purchasing the McFee property.” Charlie paused dramatically. “I’ve checked with our controller. There’ve been some irregularities that have contributed to this shortfall.”

“What?” Hal jumped back to his feet, blood pounding in his head.

“You keep *saying* the company is in good shape,” Charlie scoffed, “but something’s not right.” He shook a mocking finger at Hal. “I’m looking into the company’s finances over the last five years.” He leaned back hard against his chair. “Looking for assurance that you haven’t gone south with some of our money, Stratton.”

Hal staggered backward, taking the attack on his integrity like a blow to the chest. It was one thing to be accused of poor management. But outright dishonesty? That was outrageous! Absurd! He turned to his friends. “Larry, do you agree with this? Patricia? Keith?”

Only Janine looked him in the eye, her expression as devastated as he felt.

Hal noticed that he was trembling. “You can’t believe I would do something dishonest. You know me better than that!” He bowed his head and raised both hands above his head. The words came slowly. “If you believe I’ve done *anything* improper or illegal, conduct an audit. You won’t find a thing. I guarantee it.”

The silence in the room was deafening.

“One more thing, if I no longer have the support of the people in this room, I will resign as president and managing partner of this company, effective immediately.” Hal thought he saw alarm in Larry Greenwald’s eyes. “I mean it,” he insisted.

Keith spoke haltingly. “Are you, uh, asking us to take that vote *tonight*?”

“I am. Absolutely.” Hal nodded, gaining confidence. Okay, sure, some mistakes had been made—but these charges were wildly unjustified. Would his friends allow this new kid on the block to sell him down the river? Or would they step up and put Charlie in his place? In fact, Hal *welcomed* the vote.

Charlie White stood. “How many of you would like Hal Stratton removed as President and managing partner of Western Realty?”

At first only Charlie raised his hand. Hal held his breath. Then Patricia raised hers. Then Keith. Then, after a long moment, Larry.

Hal shook his head, glaring at his partners. “So that’s the way it is.” His voice was low but intense. “Never mind that I put the deals together that made you all rich. Never mind that I put in seventy hours a week—while you all went on vacations. Never mind that I sacrificed *my* paycheck during the lean times.” He looked around the table scornfully.

Seething, he gathered his materials and put them in his briefcase. “Thank you for your time. I’ll leave you to your meeting.” He turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

Hal was in the parking lot when Janine caught up to him and took his arm. “Hal! You can’t just leave. You didn’t do this. You have to fight.”

He pulled away from her. “They voted me out. There’s nothing I can do,” he said bitterly.

“But—”

“Call my wife, will you?” He softened his tone. “Tell her what’s happened and not to expect me until she sees me.”

“Shouldn’t you tell her yourself?”

“Janine, please—just call her.”

Numb with disbelief, Hal Stratton walked away from the Western Reality building to his pickup. In an instant, his career over, stripped away by a single vote.

The sun was low, suffusing the sky over the mountains with golden light. He climbed in and began driving on autopilot, no awareness of the traffic around him, no thought of where he was going.

He had *not* mishandled the funds.

So why do I feel guilty?

Had he inadvertently done something that could be seen as malfeasance or, worse, criminal? He ferreted out memories of business transactions. What was Charlie White talking about?

He was breaking the speed limit. He didn’t care. What was the point? He jammed his foot down hard on the accelerator. He could put an end to this by simply ramming at high speed into a cement bridge abutment. How simple it would be.

He had no idea where he was going until he saw the mountains up ahead. He drove on. Without caring where the road would take him, he left the freeway, making random turns onto smaller roads.

A memory from his boyhood suddenly accosted him. He was 14 years old and on a deer hunt. The sky was overcast and there was not a hint of sun. Hal, his father, and brother set up camp in the usual spot. The surroundings were familiar, except there was a foot and a half of new-fallen snow on the ground. And a little snow changes everything.

Hal, who always loved to be alone out of doors, left camp by himself to search for deer in a steep and rugged canyon. He lost track of time. When he started to get hungry and tired, he decided to head back. But which way? The shadows were lengthening and the temperature was dropping. He spent an hour crisscrossing his own tracks, then felt a desperation that bordered on panic. He was lost.

Hal drove on tonight, gripped by the same desperation. The road narrowed, blacktop to dirt, then ended deep in a canyon. The sun had set, and the canyon was deep in shadow. He got out of the pickup and watched the patterns of light changing, twilight into moonless night. The blackest night he could recall. Devoid of hope.

With a suddenness, something broke inside. He gasped as the pain of his loss flooded his awareness and he let out an animal cry of anguish. It echoed back at him as he sank to his knees in despair.