

Prelude



APRIL 27, 1991

Obergrande, New York, at the heart of the Adirondack Park

The streets at the center of the small city in the mountain wilderness were swollen with seemingly endless rain that spring, gushing in torrents every now and then, or sometimes running in thin rivulets through the gutters.

Making it difficult for people to meet on street corners.

Particularly when it was critical that they not be seen meeting together in public.

So on this night, the three people who met did so under the enormous tree atop a hill in the center of town, the towering, centuries-old tree for which the town was named.

Obergrande.

The rain had paused for a few moments, which should have made umbrellas unnecessary. The stoppage should also have been helpful to the meeting participants remaining unnoticed. The enormous tree's branches and leaves, sheeting water with every passing breeze, however, repeatedly baptized the three with unpleasantly cold precipitation, soaking their raincoats and clothes.

As if it were trying to tell them something urgent.

All the secrecy barely mattered; no one else was out in the dark and the heavy fog anyway.

As the three reached the summit of the hill, and the base of the tree, the first person looked around, then back at the second.

"You found someone to do it? You're certain?"

The second person nodded reluctantly.

"And it's done? Is it done already?"

Another nod.

The first and the third exhaled simultaneously, then exchanged a nod as well.

"All right, then," said the first. "Get home safe. Get and stay dry if you can—it'll be your last chance to for a while."

Like drops of mercury beading, then skittering away from a broken thermometer, the three walked quickly down the hillside in separate directions and disappeared into the thickening fog.

None of them having any idea of what they had unleashed.