

A Lifetime of Vengeance

A McKinney Brothers Novel

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PROLOGUE **1961**

William Hammerick built the vault in the early part of 1961 at the height of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cubans were establishing closer political ties to the Communists in Moscow and fear of nuclear attack permeated the atmosphere of casual conversations all across America. “Duck and cover” was being taught as a defense against the horrors of exposure to radioactivity should a nuclear attack actually occur. The silly sounding public service commercials were played on all three networks. “Duck...and cover...”

Hammerick, third generation orange grower from rural Apopka, Florida didn't buy that “duck and cover” junk. That's why he took matters into his own hands.

It had been nearly sixteen years since the United States dropped “the bomb” on two Japanese cities and the horrifying pictures of the disfigured bodies and the living dead, the results of those attacks, still invaded his mind. He remembered the news accounts which said many people were

vaporized along with everything around them. *They could have ducked and covered all they wanted to and they still would've been turned into little more than radioactive dust. Those were small bombs back then. Now they're big...megatons! They can destroy whole cities. And the radioactive dust will even reach out into the country. If they bomb the defense plant in Orlando, we'd still get the fallout.* He was determined to protect his wife and himself from that fate. That's why William Hammerick had to do something drastic.

In the middle of his orange grove off of Kelley Park Drive, he constructed a twelve foot by twelve foot vault. The vault was buried. Only about a foot of the vault was above ground. It had a six-and-a-half foot high ceiling and was constructed of two inch galvanized steel, welded at the seams. It had a massive door with a padlock and rubber seals to prevent air from getting into the vault. Ventilation ducts ran out of the vault in four directions. Each duct had dampers for securing the air inlets. There was also a pressurized air supply which would bleed air into the vault for about ninety-six hours. He thought that in the event of radioactive fallout, that would be adequate time for the decay of the radioactive dust...at least enough to allow opening of the vents to breathe outside air. He'd read some books about the effects of the bomb and the resulting radioactive cloud. He figured that with natural air movement and the settling out of radioactive particles, the normal air would be fit to breathe in two days and that would give him a two day cushion of compressed air.

In addition to all the mechanics of the design, Mr. Hammerick stocked the vault with enough canned food, dry goods, and water for up to two months. Also included in the plan were two relatively comfortable cots, blankets, pillows, sheets, a portable toilet, other toiletries, extra clothes, and a first aid kit. The vault was some 700 yards off of the main road and only 300 yards from their house which was located in front of the grove. Several huge camphor trees with long flowing Spanish moss stood in front of the house, partially hiding it from the sparse traffic on Kelley Park Drive.

Only a handful of their closest friends knew anything about the vault. The few who did know thought old William Hammerick had lost his mind. “The government would never allow a nuclear war to get started after what we know about the power of these bombs. They’d lose all that power and money. Their lavish lives would be destroyed,” they’d said.

But William Hammerick didn’t take any chances or spare any expense. He built the vault and felt secure knowing that it was there if he and his wife needed it.

1984

When they first looked into buying the grove, they’d noticed the overgrown trail that led to the center of the grove. When the oldest brother asked where the trail led, the real estate agent, Jimmy Pitman, said that it led to an old storage bin that wasn’t used anymore. That got his curiosity up and he wanted to know more about it. Jimmy Pitman

shrugged his shoulders and gave a head motion to follow him. The four made their way down the trail, deep into the grove, pushing through brush, spider webs, and dead bushes. Finally, they came upon an inclined path that went down at about a 30 degree angle to the steel, padlocked door of the vault. Part of the sandy wall alongside the inclined path had collapsed, but they could still access the door with little effort.

The real estate agent turned to the brothers, “There it is. As you can see, it isn’t much to look at. The steel is deteriorated pretty badly. No one’s been in there in years.”

The padlock on the vault’s door was coated with rust and was caked with dirt and old spider webs. A thick coat of rust also covered the visible parts of the heavy door. Indeed, no entry had been made to the vault in many years.

“How big is the storage area inside?” the oldest asked. His younger brothers could see his mind working overtime. They knew that some “brilliant” idea was cooking up there. Jimmy Pitman scratched his head, shrugged his shoulders, raised an eyebrow, shrugged his shoulders again and admitted that he didn’t know. The elder brother looked directly at him and said, “Well let’s find out, shall we?”

With a blank stare and a moment’s hesitation, Jimmy, in his southern drawl said, “Yes sir. I’ll have to call the owner and see if she still has a key. I know that the agency didn’t get one.”

“Then let’s get to it. We’ll wait here if you don’t mind.” It was a statement, not a request for

permission.

“That’ll be fine.” Jimmy turned and trekked off towards the house to try to get the vault key from old Mrs. Hammerick, grumbling as he went, “These hippy punks don’t have two nickels to rub together. Why am I wastin’ my time?”

Jimmy Pitman was very happy with his commission on the sale of the grove to the brothers. Mrs. Gertrude Hammerick was happy to see that the new owners of the property were going to continue the orange grove business. Since her husband’s death two years before, she’d had to depend on the processing company to handle the maintenance of the grove. She was tired of the hassle and, at 72, had no desire to continue her husband’s business. He’d left her a significant fortune and she wanted to move to a cooler climate. She had already bought a new home in Sapphire Valley, North Carolina and another just outside of Wilmington. “After all, it’s only money,” she had told the new grove owners at the closing. Mrs. Hammerick wished the boys good luck and with that, boarded a flight to Asheville, North Carolina, and her new home in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

1986

Mrs. Hammerick was enjoying her new home in North Carolina and the brothers were in business. The grove was producing quite well. The three brothers were splitting a good profit from the grove; twenty-five percent for each one of them and twenty-five percent for their parents. Their new venture into indoor foliage was starting to pay off as

well. Since Apopka, Florida is the indoor foliage capital of the world, their business in that area was a natural. The combination of the grove and the greenhouses earned each brother in excess of \$80,000 per year; a good income by most standards. But that was small potatoes compared to their real business.

The vault was cleaned up, refurbished with a new electric service, an emergency generator, and a septic system. A dehumidifying system was installed to keep the moisture level and the vault deterioration level to a minimum. A new electronic lock system was also installed along with other security measures. Additional landscaping was added to obscure the entry to the vault and the brothers made a new, out of the way path to the vault door.

When the work was complete, the interior of the vault looked like a military command center. The outside looked like nothing at all. An intercom system allowed communication between the vault, the greenhouses, the nursery warehouse, and the main house. The recording system could only be deactivated by use of a five digit code at the vault's entrance. The code was known only to the brothers and was changed on a monthly basis. The only time the recording system was purposely deactivated was at night when the delivery van brought the usual twenty bales of marijuana to the vault for storage or when the dope left the vault, two to five bales at a time. The security measures were expensive, but the brothers were able to split \$250,000.00 on average each month. When you take home over \$80,000.00

in cash each month, not only can you afford the elaborate security, it is essential.

The brothers didn't expect to end up in the illegal drug trade. It developed over a number of years. Pat, the oldest brother, was shorter than most of his classmates at 5'7". He had sandy brown hair that hung over his ears and the start of a thin mustache. His blue eyes were his most striking natural feature. Coupled with his smile, most girls at school thought that he was cute in a safe kind of way.

One feature that he'd acquired while working in a nursery outside of Apopka was a scar just below the left side of his mouth. While hammering a nail into a rafter board on a greenhouse, the hammer missed the head and caused the nail to ricochet into Pat's jaw. The nail stuck about an inch into the skin along his jaw bone. There was no permanent damage, but over the years the scar turned white. Pat had a habit of rubbing the scar with the middle finger of his right hand whenever he was concentrating on an idea or simply daydreaming.

He never tried to play the tough guy like many of his male classmates. At Apopka High School he'd been involved in many extra-curricular activities. He played basketball and baseball and was in the choir. He'd wanted to go on to college and was hoping to get a baseball scholarship, but that never happened. He'd maintained decent grades, A's and B's, throughout his school career. He was well liked and considered a leader among his classmates. He always smiled and joked with

people and made friends easily. He was built well enough because he worked out to keep in shape for baseball season.

During his junior year, he and a few of his teammates met after practice at one of the boy's house. One of the boys pulled out a small bag of grass from his dresser, rolled a joint, and offered it to his friends. Pat was scared to try it at first, but after his friends passed the joint around and none of them went insane, Pat caved in and tried it. Once he got home, he thought to himself *what's the big deal? Nothing happened. I thought that this was supposed to be fun?* He went for weeks without trying it again, but eventually did go back to his teammate's house where they all indulged in the evil weed once again. This time Pat got *the buzz*. The pot-induced laughing went on so long and hard that his voice was hoarse afterwards. That was the beginning for Pat. He started buying the stuff himself. Soon he found that he needed a job to get money to buy it.

It wasn't long before he realized that he could get free stash if he sold small quantities to his friends. Then he introduced his middle brother, Joe, to the joys of smoking grass. Joe was taller than Pat. At 5'11" he was the tallest of the three McKinney brothers. He was a muscular guy with large biceps and a six pack stomach. He worked out a lot and planned to join the Marine Corps ROTC program when he completed high school. He was just a year behind Pat in school. Joe was more intense than Pat. When he worked out, he would block out everything from his mind and concentrate on lifting.

His face would turn red and contorted to the point that anyone watching him would swear he was having a heart attack. But he could adapt to social situations as well. He smiled when conversation was light, but was intense when the topic was serious.

Pat and Joe could pass for twins, though Joe's facial features were harder than Pat's. His jaw was square with a cleft in the middle and his neck was wide where it met his shoulders. Joe had darker, shorter hair than Pat and his eyes were slightly more gray than blue. The girls were attracted to his good looks and confident manner. He was also an excellent student. He paid attention to the details of any situation.

When Joe found out that Pat was smoking grass, he was initially infuriated. Only after Pat talked to him about it several times did he conclude that it wasn't as bad as the authorities were advertising. He finally tried the weed after Pat's repeated attempts to get Joe to try it. Like Pat, the first time was a real letdown. Nothing happened. But eventually he caught the buzz and took up the habit. It took the edge off of his serious manner. Pat felt that was a good thing. He always said that Joe was too serious. Joe didn't agree. He found himself missing details in his papers at school. His grades slipped a bit over time but not significantly. He too got roped into peddling to close friends. Joe was much more secretive about his dealings. He wanted as few people as possible knowing that he was indulging.

Finally, the youngest, Mike, learned what

they were doing and wanted to see what it was like. Mike was carefree, compared to his older brothers. He wasn't a real serious student though he maintained a decent 3.1 grade point average. He was more interested in hanging around with friends and playing Atari, the newest rage in video games. He wanted to learn how to write computer programs so that he could develop video games but he was too busy playing them to learn about creating them. Getting high fit right in with his personality at the time. His hair was nearly to his shoulders even when he was an eighth grader.

Their parents were not pleased back then. They used to ask Mike why he wasn't more like his brothers. He'd just shrug his shoulders and give them the 'I don't know look.' Mike was a pretty big kid at 5'10" and weighed in at 215 pounds. He was strong. He could take either of his brothers at arm wrestling even though Pat and Joe worked out. Mike was tough, too. Pat and Joe used to use Mike as a punching bag. They said it was to toughen him up. By Mike's junior year in high school, they could no longer get away with that. Mike would grab Pat or Joe and get them in a bear hug. He'd make them cry uncle before he released the crushing hold on them.

The brothers were pretty much All-American teens when they were introduced to the world of drugs. They all graduated from smoking casually, to smoking heavily, to having to deal to support their habit. It wasn't an addiction, per se, but it was a bad habit, and a tough one to break. Before Pat graduated from high school, he was

dealing five pounds of the stuff per week. His younger brothers wanted in on the 'business' and soon, it was growing on its own. Before they knew what was happening, they were dealing serious weight. They had little time for social lives and no time for college, baseball, the Marine Corps, or developing video games.

On the up side, they were starting to accumulate some serious cash. By the time Mike had graduated from high school in 1983, the brothers were having a hard time hiding the fact that they were making far more money than their Dad. That's when they realized that they had to make some changes in their lives. They had to find a way to clean their money, make it look like a legitimate business. They'd worked in a family-owned nursery so they knew a little about the nursery business. They also knew that orange groves were big business in central Florida. That's when they bought a medium-sized nursery, the Hammerick grove and the vault.

Chapter 1

October 1988

The vault had been a well-guarded secret for several years. The brothers, Pat, Joe and Mike McKinney, were doing well in their legal and illegal business ventures with no interruption and little cause for any real concern. Most of their business associates were both professional and discreet. But Pat, the oldest brother, was becoming concerned. It had been their policy from the beginning to keep everyone away

from the vault to prevent even the temptation of theft by a business associate. He warned the other two that things were going too well and that they were letting their guard down. He even went so far as to recommend shutting down the operation for about one year and to reevaluate their business associates. Too many people were getting to know about their real business. They each had weapons that they could use to defend themselves and their property, but they all agreed that if they had to use guns, their troubles would only be starting.

Mike, the carefree brother, thought that his big brother's fears were unfounded. He and Joe were confident that business could continue as usual. They even talked about expanding the business. They were so unconcerned that they were taking associates to the nursery warehouse in front of the grove to load bales that they'd sold. Early on, they'd agreed that the vault, the nursery, and the warehouse were off limits for drug transactions. But over time, these rules were loosened and all but forgotten. Now even Pat was doing business in a way that was contrary to their original agreement. The use of the warehouse for loading and unloading bales of grass became commonplace and the vault was a natural location for money exchanges due to its secluded location. He was getting worried despite how smooth operations were going.

Pat, Joe and Mike were also skimming the bales; taking small quantities of grass out of the bales before shipping them to their customers. To compensate for the loss of weight, they would spray the bales with a mist of water or drop in a handful

of sand. A few sprays into each bale added the weight back from the skimmed weed. That seemed to be a fool proof solution until one of their customers found out about the ruse. About this same time, they decided to raise prices for their illegal product. The combination of the watered down grass and raised prices didn't sit well with a few of their customers. Word spread quickly that the McKinneys were cheating. Joe called Pat one evening in mid-October. It was right before Mike's wedding to his girlfriend, Julie. He said that he'd been feeling guilty about their dope business. He recommended that they shut down the business and get out. They'd made a small fortune and had no real need to continue.

Pat told Joe that he'd been feeling the same way. He'd been doing some soul-searching. What he found he didn't like. Pat said that he even thought about talking to a priest but decided against it. He said that he'd rather talk to God directly instead. Pat and Joe made a pact. They were getting out as soon as their current holdings were sold out. That would be a little over a week. When they told Mike, he was angry at first, but Pat explained that he knew a friend that could invest their money. With the nursery and the grove, they'd be set for life. Mike confided that he'd been feeling guilty, too. He agreed that it was as good a time as any to get out. Pat was relieved, but still concerned. They still had a sizable amount of grass to sell. Pat grew more nervous with each passing day.

Pat's concerns escalated when he was confronted by a friend, Brian Purcer. Brian was a

skinny guy, weighing about 140 pounds soaking wet. He had a huge head of frizzy hair. He was the only white kid with an afro that any of his friends had ever seen. He was also an up and coming rock musician who bought the occasional bag of dope from Pat. He wasn't in the dope trade. He was a casual user and a good friend of Pat. He'd just bought some weed from Pat that was so wet from being sprayed down that it wouldn't stay lit. The level headed Brian came unglued and unleashed a serious berating of Pat and his business practices. He told Pat that word on the street was that he and his brothers were going to be taught a lesson about ripping people off. Pat's worst fears were soon realized, and the family business was now in jeopardy.

November 1988

Jamie Watkins, Donnie Lee Lester, Bobby Acquino, and Randy Farley were sitting in the ABC Liquor Lounge on State Route 436, in Apopka, Florida. They were celebrating. They'd just been released from custody at the Orange County jail. Their alleged crime was the rape and murder of a young lady named Julie McKinney. Julie was the new bride of Mike McKinney. They'd been married just over two weeks. The four had allegedly broken into the house of Mike and Julie McKinney and attacked the young woman when she arrived home from grocery shopping. Part of the attack was videotaped by the attackers. The Orange County Sheriff's Department had found that tape but it had disappeared from the evidence room at the Sheriff's Office. Within a few days of the arrests, the case

was dropped. That tape was the only key piece of evidence and it was gone.

The beers were flowing, shots were slammed, and the laughter was loud and rowdy. They'd also forged a new partnership; they'd put the McKinney brothers out of business. They were excited about the prospect of making a ton of money. Their previous suppliers were gone, run out of town. They'd turned-tail and run-scared. The McKinneys dealt strictly in grass. Those days were over. No more limits on who they could talk with and what they could sell.

"I told ya'll them McKinney boys would haul ass outta here!" That was Jamie talking, more like yelling, about how the McKinneys couldn't take the heat. Jamie Watkins was originally from Garland, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. He was a stocky young man. He had a freckled face and light red hair which made him appear younger than his 24 years, but when he talked he sounded anything but youthful. He always wanted to be the center of attention. He did this by talking louder than everyone around him, no matter what the situation. In the ABC Lounge, he was nearly yelling over the music and crowd noise.

"They saw us comin' and decided it was time to get back up north where it's safe for pussies like them. Back to mamma's tit. Hidin' under her skirt. They couldn't stand the southern heat."

Loud laughter sprinkled in as Jamie went on with his monologue about the wimp, Yankee McKinneys. He called them about every name in the book and even made up some new ones. They

were all pretty well polluted. Each joined in Jamie's berating of the brothers. The only one who seemed a bit reserved was Bobby Acquino. He felt miserable about what they'd done but he dared not voice that view in the middle of this drunken party. Bobby lost the only true friend he had when events started to unfold. He was sorry that he didn't have the guts to stop it. He simply went along with the madness.

Bobby was Puerto Rican by birth but his parents moved the family to Florida when he was a young child. Bobby still had the dark olive skin of his ancestry and he had very dark hair and eyes to match. He spoke with a slight Puerto Rican accent that he'd acquired from his parents. He was raised Roman Catholic and still prayed before every meal and before bed each night. He prayed every day that the madness would stop but then he turned around and continued his association with his current friends, this band of thieves.

Donnie Lee and Bobby were best friends now. They seemed to stick together the most out of these four. Donnie Lee was a Florida boy through and through. He was born and raised in the rural south in Zellwood, Florida. His parents worked for Zellwin Farms which grew corn in an area known as the muck farms. He was a big man at 230 pounds and 6'2". He kept his light brown hair shaved close to his head and looked as if he couldn't grow a hair on his face, which kept him looking younger than his age. Donnie Lee, like Bobby, also felt guilty about what happened to Julie McKinney. But he was less concerned about guilt and more concerned

about getting rich. He didn't want to follow in his dad's footsteps on the farms. That was really hard, dirty work and he wanted nothing to do with it.

Donnie Lee was the first to suggest that they should change the arrangement that they had with the McKinneys. He knew that they were skimming dope off of every bale. That was the first string pulled that caused the unraveling of a tightly wound package; an arrangement that was working well for a number of years. It started out small and ended up making them all quite a bit of money. They were willing to overlook the skimming. Then they found out the McKinneys were adding weight by spraying the bales. The moisture added nearly half a pound to each bale and added another \$300 per bale to the McKinneys' already good take. Within days, the close business arrangement fell apart. Friendship was replaced by accusations, anger and hate.

That's when they took matters into their own hands. That's when they raped and beat Mike McKinney's wife of only two weeks and left her for dead. The McKinneys and all of central Florida were stunned. After several weeks, charges were filed against Jamie, Donnie Lee, Bobby and Randy and subsequently dropped. Evidence disappeared. The Sheriff's office said they couldn't make the charge stick with no physical evidence tying the four to the scene.

That was the last straw. The McKinneys left central Florida. Before they left for good, they had a meeting at the vault. They put together a long range plan. It sounded good on paper but who would remember the details over the next seven years?

Then Mike said he couldn't follow through with the plan. He couldn't do it and wouldn't be a party to it. He was defeated before they even had a chance to get started. But Pat and Joe were determined. It would take years, but it was worth the wait. They shook hands, hugged and went their separate ways to prepare.

Back across central Florida, Jamie, Donnie Lee, Bobby, and Randy hoisted more beer to their victory. They thought they'd won the war. They didn't realize that it was just the first battle.