

Norwegian Woods - Chapter 1

The protesters marched back and forth in a ragged line. Dwarfed by the imposing forest-green City Hall building, they carried rain streaked cardboard signs that bobbed up and down beneath the grey sky. Cars whooshed by, splashing slices of dirty water against their trousers, skirts, boots, and shoes. Some of the protesters huddled around a tin drum that belched smoke above a spluttering orange flame. Their palms smelled of coffee and their fingers were sprinkled with damp donut sugar. Police dressed in black rain slickers closely guarded a four-foot metal barricade that pinned the protestors between the road and city hall square.

A frumpy woman wearing a shapeless grey raincoat leaned her sign upside down against her leg. The sign read “Stop Norwegian Woods.” A young man in his thirties stood beside her. Their pants were wet and streaked with mud up to their knees. Holding a Tim’s cup to his lips, Gary Stanton took a sip of coffee. He wore trim black leather gloves and a lined London Fog coat over a three-piece tailored suit, as if he were attending a fancy dinner. Carol Lumley drank her coffee in big gulps, liquid trickling down her meaty chin and spilling onto the concrete.

“We’re wasting our time, Gary,” said Carol. “Do you really think Olausson and the politicians will take any notice of us? We’re just a bunch of powerless cranks to them. There’s no way those bastards are going to give up millions of dollars in profits and taxes to protect the wildlife. And they won’t give a damn if our water is polluted unless people start dying instead of fish. We should be doing something really drastic to get their attention, not waddling around like a bunch of geese.”

“Carol, we’ve been through this before. I agree with you, but we need to get James and the other members on board.”

“Aaaagh,” exclaimed Carol, exasperated. Suddenly a burly, disheveled, young man who had been heckling the marchers took a run at Carol and caught her hard against the shoulder. She fell heavily to the ground as the human missile disappeared around a corner.

“Asshole!” she screamed, and struggled to a semi-sitting position.

With some effort, Gary pulled Carol up using both arms. Two policemen standing just a few metres away smiled politely and looked away.

“Nice of those policemen to chase him,” Carol said sarcastically. She shook her fist at the cops and seemed about to say something more, but Gary tightened his grip on her arm.

“Just ignore it, Carol – he’s just a stupid kid trying to get his kicks,” he said calmly.

“Easy for you to say. It’s not your ass on the ground. You’re not the fat lady,” growled Carol. She brushed at her coat, picked up her sign, and rejoined the march. “I bet Olausson’s getting his way too, just like that kid,” she said in disgust.

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Wilf Olausson, owner of Olausson and Son Builders Inc., stood in front of his plush burgundy chair in City Hall’s council chambers. Broad-shouldered with closely cropped blond hair and steely grey eyes, he oozed purpose and power as he concluded his address to the city councillors.

“The Romney Ridge Ecological club has produced a barely understandable, misguided, and inconclusive environmental study that is an impediment to much-needed housing and tax revenues. Our proposed Phase 3 development, known as Norwegian Woods, is on a plot of wetlands between Summers Corners and Rainbow Hills and is no different ecologically than the Phase 2 land we are currently developing nearby.

The land is clearly outside the green belt and within one of the four zones for residential development, and we purchased it with the clear understanding that we could build new homes as long as we followed regulations.

“It’s time to stop studying and start building instead of listening to these elitists who have nothing better to do then stick their noses into other people’s business!”

His statement completed, Wilf resumed his seat, leaned back, folded his arms across his chest, and surveyed the meeting participants.

James Seymour, president of the Romney Ridge Club, rose from his seat in the gallery above the chambers. “Even if you think the results are inconclusive, our scientific study surely raises enough concerns to cast doubt on the wisdom of building homes on this part of the moraine!” he shouted. He was a wiry, fit-looking man in his early 60s with neatly kept silver-grey hair. He wore a perfectly tailored slate-grey two-piece suit and peered out at the world through small hazel eyes behind a pair of silver-rimmed granny glasses. His immaculate

appearance and confident demeanour gave him the appearance of belonging to the league of developers rather than the president of the club that opposed them.

The meeting chairman, Greg Andersen, looked disdainfully up at James from his seat on the chamber floor. “You’ve already had a chance to make your presentation, Mr. Seymour, and your viewpoint is already well known even if no one can understand the study,” he shouted back. “We will only invite gallery participation if we feel there is good reason.” The chairman then paused and surveyed the faces of the mayor and the councillors at the large horseshoe shaped table. “Do we have any questions for Mr. Olausson?”

“Can you give us concrete examples of why you think the Romney Ridge study is inconclusive, Mr. Olausson?” asked Jane Gooding, the councillor for Ward 8.

“Ms. Gooding, the very readable supplementary report my company distributed to your office last week explains all that. Clearly, the birds and fish living in the wetlands will not be affected by the homes we will build. We will not excavate any land near aquifers that are considered to be environmentally sensitive according to the provincial government’s ‘Smart Growth’ assessment of 2001,” answered Wilf.

Before anyone on the meeting floor could react, James launched to his feet once more. “Citing a flawed government assessment does not make things better,” he shouted. “Norwegian Woods is just too close to the green belt for it not to cause harm. Fish are already being poisoned in the nearby Romney Creek as we speak, and a precious wildlife haven will surely disappear in the next ten years if the building doesn’t stop!” The veins in James’s neck bulged as he hurled the words downward.

“One more outburst and you’ll be removed, Mr. Seymour. Please sit down,” warned the chairman. James sat down, but made a point of doing so slowly and deliberately.

“Mr. Chairman, may I address Mr. Seymour’s claims?” asked Wilf calmly.

“It’s not necessary, Mr. Olausson, but if you wish please go ahead,” answered the chairman.

“The Romney Ridge Ecology Club is a small group of lazy, selfish elitists who call themselves environmentalists,” Wilf continued. “They are mainly interested in going bird watching and hiking without having to travel too far away from their stately homes in the established parts of town. They care nothing for the thousands of people clamouring to live in

decent housing. Their study is deliberately technical and confusing and, as I've already said, inconclusive. Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing," he said.

"Mr. Olausson, explain again how Phase 3 will not affect the fish and wildlife in the green belt," said John Stokes, who represented the ward adjacent to Romney Ridge.

"Certainly, we are planning a gated condominium community," explained Wilf. "The homes will look like New York brownstones, very in-vogue these days. Since they will be gated and managed by us, we will limit the types of environmental abuses individual owners might otherwise do to their property. For example, we will provide a gardening service that will fertilize lawns organically, eliminating inorganic nitrogen that can get into the river as runoff. We are also planning to build a community car wash that will use phosphate-free biodegradable water-based cleaners, and properly treat pollutants rather than risk residents washing their cars in the street where the soap, cleaners, oil, grease, and gasoline residue can run into the storm water system."

"But Mr. Olausson, aren't brownstones an inner-city concept? Do you really think homeowners in what we must call the suburbs want this kind of community?" This question came from Stanley Grimsby, who represented the wealthiest ward in the city.

"We have done our marketing surveys. There is a decidedly large sector who favours this idea. It becomes more affordable for them and we increase the tax base by increasing the density," answered Wilf.

"I am concerned that this kind of development will devalue the homes of nearby areas," said Grimsby

"Please Mr. Grimsby, I remind you that I live in your constituency. I'm not worried about the resale value of my home diminishing because of homes built ten kilometres away. Please look more carefully at the figures I gave you."

"Gentleman, ladies, let's wrap this up," said the chairman, clapping his hands together briskly. "Be reminded that Mr. Olausson's company has completed Phase One and Phase Two, which have yielded great economic benefit in terms of employment, increased retail business activity, and tax revenues. Weigh this carefully against the potential loss of wildlife diversity. Let's take it to a vote now."

James felt his muscles tense. Council members usually voted by pushing a button on a computer touch screen in front of them. The final tally and each councillor's vote appeared on an

electronic board above the chairman's head. James expected it to be close and was most curious to see if those he expected to support him actually did so. Most curious indeed...

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Outside City Hall, a man and a woman watched the protesters from under the shelter of an overhang that ran along the outside of City Hall Square. Bob Smith was of medium height and stocky with a square, clean-shaven face. He was hatless and his hair was soaking wet. He wore a thin blue nylon jacket, and carried a plastic shopping bag in his right hand. Something heavy inside the bag made it visibly sag. Paula Wright was tall, curvaceous, and undeniably striking, but up close her skin was somewhat mottled and tough, signs of a less than privileged life. Wearing sneakers and clad in a threadbare dingy pink coat that fell to her knees, she was, like Bob, thoroughly soaked and chilled to the bone.

"Bob, this is silly. How much longer do we need to wait here in the rain?" she asked.

"Hang in there," said Bob.

"I've heard that before, Bob," said Paula.

"This will be worth it. You'll see."

"Don't you think we should say something to the protesters? Let them know what you're planning?"

"Why should I seek permission? These developers are destroying the environment and the protesters are a bunch of pansies."

"What about the green belt, Bob?"

"The green belt is a ruse. Developers are a greedy bunch. They can talk about alleviating the housing problem and reducing unemployment, but the bottom line is they're only interested in making money. They deserve a lot worse than my small token of defiance," said Bob, gripping his bag more tightly. "And anyway, local governments like this one keep on finding or creating loopholes that favour the developers," he finished.

Paula glared at him. "How many fights, how many years?"

"This is the last one. I promise."

"You said if it didn't work out last time, you'd stop. Do you really think the Clayoquot Sound protests worked out for us?" asked Paula. She was referring to the protests of 1993 when

Bob was arrested and ultimately jailed for six months for his part in organizing blockades of logging roads in Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia.

“That was different and we got enough public attention to force changes later,” said Bob.

“It’s always different with you,” replied Paula tartly.

“This is important. This land needs to be protected and we can help do it.”

“Maybe it’s not so bad, Bob,” Paula said, more gently. “People need homes, too. They need jobs. You and I need jobs too. We’re not kids out of school anymore. Maybe we can’t save every piece of land.”

“We must try. It’s our future,” said Bob emphatically.

“My feet are soaked,” said Paula.

“It won’t be long now,” said Bob. “It looks like the crowd is moving.”

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Stanton had spotted a line of black stretch limousines driving towards the back doors of City Hall. “Follow me,” he yelled at the protesters.

The soggy group began to move, almost as one, around the side of the building. Six limousines sat idling in the street now, with engines running and their chauffeurs waiting outside holding umbrellas. A police cordon had already been set up around the area surrounding the back doors to ensure a safe distance between the departing dignitaries and the rain-sodden rabble.

The doors opened, and the first person out was James Seymour. He raised his eyes sadly and walked into the crowd, shoulders stooped. Gary approached him; their eyes met.

“How close was it?” asked Gary.

“It was twelve in favour, ten opposed.” Seymour turned to the crowd. “They approved Phase 3!” he shouted. A loud groan followed. The doors swung open again and the mayor and deputy mayor stepped out and walked towards their limos, escorted by two police officers.

“Here they come,” yelled a man in a grey trench coat who had kept his eyes firmly locked on the building.

The protesters turned to face the men. They waved their signs up and down and shouted at the city officials across the expanse between them.

“Sellout!” screeched one protester.

“Money-grubbers!” yelled Carol.

Stanton stood defeated and helpless. He had not spoken a word since James had announced the result. He did not jostle with the crowd against the cordon to get closer to the officials.

The mayor and deputy mayor climbed into their cars. Their police escorts returned to the double doors, and a couple of councillors and the meeting chairman followed next. As the councillors entered their limos, three more police cars arrived and a television van pulled up not far behind them. The TV crew popped quickly out onto the street, unfolding umbrellas and pulling up their collars against the rain. A young, slender female reporter, Nellie Young, and a cameraman pushed toward Grant Grey, the council chairman, while a second cameraman turned his lens towards the crowd.

Young shoved her microphone in the chairman’s face. “Mr. Grey, what was the result?” she asked. Her tone was sharp and urgent, like the crack of a whip.

“Miss Young,” said Grey, smiling broadly. “We voted in the best interests of the people of Romney Ridge and the region. It’s a green light for the new development.”

“Were you expecting a scene like this?” asked Young.

“You know these people! Most of them have nothing better to do with their time. Their concerns about the safety of drinking water and wildlife preservation are merely a smoke screen for their own self interests.”

“Asshole!” screamed Carol, leaning into the camera shot.

“Could you tell us how close the vote was?” asked the reporter, deftly blocking her.

“Twelve in favour and ten against, which is enough,” said Grey. He smiled once more and then walked to his limo and got in without incident. The protesters continued to catcall and wave their signs as more limos arrived and another small group of councillors and businessmen emerged from the building. The police cordon made it easy for the politicians and businessmen to access their vehicles, and although the protesters made noise, they made no concerted attempts to push past the police.

After Chairman Grey departed, the reporter found a space away from the crowd and faced the camera. “This is Nellie Young at City Hall. I’ve just spoken with Chairman Grey, who has

confirmed that regional councillors have just given the Norwegian Woods development a green light. However, the provincial government must give the final approval. This development has been marked by environmental and social protest. And as can be seen from the angry mob behind me, the protest is turning ugly. The police have had their hands full trying to keep this mob at bay.”

As she spoke, the second cameraman focused his attention on the doors where Wilf Olausson and his business associate, Raj Singh, were expected to emerge. Suddenly, a shrill whistle blast pierced through the hubbub. The protesters, police, and media all turned their faces reflexively towards the sound. Bob Smith stood at the edge of the crowd, whistle in mouth, stretched out on his toes with his right arm pointed like a bloodhound. Lowering his arm, he charged past a policeman and bolted towards the doors. A misshapen plastic bag swung at his side as he dodged and weaved. He pivoted in a half circle, and now, running backwards, he motioned with his free arm for the protesters to follow. A policeman rushed him from behind and dived at him for the tackle, but Bob shifted deftly to his left, pivoted again, and left the policeman sprawling on the ground. Like a startled herd of cattle, the protesters finally reacted. En masse, they overwhelmed the police cordon and stampeded behind the madman with Carol and Gary in the lead.

Raj and Wilf exited City Hall now, accompanied by two stocky bodyguards holding umbrellas. They walked gingerly down the six slippery concrete steps towards their limo and then quickened their stride when they saw Bob and the onrushing protesters bearing down on them. Bob angled for the limo with a policeman hot in pursuit, but just as the policeman was about to reach him, Stanton snapped out of his daze and darted in front to block the officer’s path. This gave Bob just enough time to pull a large rotting steelhead trout from the plastic bag and hurl it at Olausson and Singh. The fish bounced off Olausson’s right knee and its rotten guts splattered the pants of the two executives.

“This is what your subdivision will bring, except it won’t be one—it’ll be hundreds!” yelled Bob, before a bodyguard grabbed him and yanked his arms behind his back.

At first, Wilf stared in disbelief at the madman as if he was from another planet. Then, calmly and without any outward show of emotion, he wiped the fish guts off his pants, turned to Raj and said derisively, “Where do these nut-cases come from?”

Bob glared at Wilf, but Wilf was no longer looking at him. Instead, he was scowling at the police, who, in his estimation, had arrived too late. “Officers, please take this man away,” he said in disgust.

Bob offered no resistance as the bodyguard handed him over to the police, who shuffled him off to a squad car. Wilf and Raj proceeded to their car as the protesters’ insults continued to rain down on them. As they drove away from the scene, Wilf glanced back at the man in cuffs, and then shifted his gaze to the other side of the squad card where a striking woman in a faded pink coat was standing alone and looking forlorn. Their eyes met only briefly.