

Chapter 1

Wednesday, December 12

It's sixty-eight degrees inside the car. The core-heated air smells of pine freshener and coffee. Outside, a winter sky the color of lead blends with the gray snow-slush roads, morphing the landscape into a blurry daguerreotype day. The radio is set to AM. An announcer squawks about a history-making 57-yard Hail Mary. The game took place last Sunday. The show is a replay, its urgency offensively fake, a mystery already solved, shelved, and forgotten.

The killer stabs the radio button and cruises past the woman's house for the second time in an hour. It isn't difficult to blend in, even in a rural area. Silver sedans are a dime a dozen, especially borrowed older models with a rouge of rust rimming the wheel housing.

The woman is removing snow from her sidewalk. A quick pass reveals her wide-mouthed shovel digging deep into the drifts and coming up loaded. Her shoulders are strong, her concentration absolute. She tosses the snow to the side, and her mutt tries to catch it before it lands. They've been at it for at least ten minutes, and the dog is now more snow than animal. Shovel. Toss. Catch. Shovel. Toss. Catch.

The killer isn't worried about the dog. Animals are easy to subdue, if a person is quick. The woman wouldn't put up much of a fight, either, despite a toned upper body. Fear is always an effective paralyzing agent.

Although her ski cap is tucked low, the killer knows that underneath she's a brunette, just like the rest. She likes travelling and has been to Italy once. She loves a good debate, Ben &

Jerry's Chunky Monkey is her guilty pleasure, and she tends toward the sarcastic side, though she doesn't mean anything by it. Also, she lives alone. The last point, the killer uncovered by walking past her house and twice, rifling through her mail while she was at work. The rest was revealed in her online dating profile.

“Quiet,” the killer snaps. “I know she shouldn't have put all that out there. A woman who advertises shouldn't be surprised when a buyer shows up, right?”

The only response is the hum of the heater. The 12-inch plastic doll strapped in the passenger seat has nothing to add. She sits in her perfect Jackie O dress suit, her immaculate brown hair pulled back into a bun. Her face poses a frustrating half-smile, always. The killer turns the radio back on.

Chapter 2

Friday, December 14

The elf grinned at me from my fossil of a Zenith TV, a row of bow-legged appliances dancing behind him. Flashing lights crawled across the bottom of the screen. The soundtrack featured a helium-voiced singer belting out “Deck the Halls” at a hyper, frenetic speed.

“Did you know there are only ten shopping days until Christmas?” the elf asked. His eyes begged me to say no.

“Yes,” I told the TV, “and did you know that every time a television set is turned off, an elf dies?” I clicked the power button on my remote and showed my back to the tube. I didn’t hate Christmas. In fact, you’ll find no bigger fan of twinkle lights, old-fashioned peppermint candy, and picture cards featuring families in matching sweaters and forced smiles. It was the Christmas *advertising* that rubbed me raw every year, starting before Halloween and ending only when every American was corpulent with credit card debt and buyer’s remorse. That’s why I only turned on the TV this time of year to quick check the weather report. If that made me a Grinch, so be it.

I stretched and glanced around the double-wide I’d called home since last spring. I was trailer-sitting for Sunny, a friend who had fled to Alaska the previous March to fish salmon with a monobrowed Lothario. She had planned to return late summer but when the time came, she couldn’t leave Dean or the great white north. That left me to hold down the fort in Battle Lake, a gorgeous jewel of a town where I’d had the unfortunate luck to discover a corpse each month

since May. The people were nice, though—the live ones—and in an odd way, I was beginning to feel like I'd finally found a home. Sure, it was a prefabricated doublewide trailer, and there were no ethnic restaurants within 30 miles unless you counted the gas station that sold fried rice and eggrolls in a shiny buffet warmer near the live bait, but on the whole, Battle Lake and I were growing comfortable with one another.

I sipped my jasmine tea and regarded Luna, the German Shepherd mix that came with the trailer. She was one of my favorite things about living here, but sometimes I wished she wasn't so smart. I needed to speak with her about a touchy subject, and I wasn't sure the best way to approach it. I finally decided to come at it from the side.

"I forgot to pick up eggs and toast again last night." I trailed my finger along the countertop and watched her out of the corner of my eyes.

She cocked her head.

"And you know breakfast is the most important meal of the day..."

She whined at me. She knew exactly where I was going with this.

"You're wrong," I protested, setting my tea down. God, she made me feel defensive sometimes. "I really forgot to buy groceries."

She looked away, sadly. She would not be party to my addiction.

I turned to my calico kitty, Tiger Pop. "You understand, don't you?"

He lay in a patch of winter sunlight, not even bothering to flick his tail. I studied him for a good minute before deciding he was ignoring me with approval. That was all the encouragement I needed. I yanked a winter coat on over my pajama t-shirt and slipped my bare feet into boots before pulling open my front door.

The double-wide was perched within throwing distance of Whiskey Lake and on 100 acres of oak forests and undulating hills. All I had to do was step outside to be afforded one of the most gorgeous views in the entire county. I paused to suck in a deep, cauterizing breath. It was one of those beautiful December mornings where the air feels so clean it scrubs your lungs. It was bracing but felt temperate after Minnesota's bitterest cold November in decades. The wind licked at but did not slice my bare knees. Glittering diamonds of light sparkled off the rolling sea of snow drifts that was my massive front yard, leading down to the shores of Whiskey Lake.

I crunched down the steps and over the path I'd recently shoveled toward my beloved Toyota Corolla. The two of us had been together for nearly a decade and except for a bunk thermostat that I'd had replaced last month, she'd never let me down.

In this part of the country, people didn't lock their cars at night, and I knew a handful of neighbors who didn't even bother locking their houses. I was a house locker—lived in the Cities too long for anything else—but there was nothing in my car worth stealing. Well, almost nothing. I flipped open the trunk and reached for the Folgers can tucked in the far corner. I peeled off the lid: two fat candles, a box of matches, a flashlight, a Leatherman, a survival blanket the size and consistency of a sheet of tin foil that I hoped had magical properties, and a single Nut Goodie. The contents of this can were all that stood between me and a hypothermic starvation death in the event that my car went into the ditch and disappeared under a towering snowdrift on some lonely country road.

Wait, only *one* Nut Goodie? I scrabbled around the bottom of the can. I'd stuffed in a half dozen of the candy bars when I'd first created the winter survival kit three weeks ago. How could there only be one left? I dumped the contents into the trunk sifted through them, but there was no changing the facts: only a single Nut Goodie remained.

The Minnesota original candy bar was my crack, my cigarettes, my chocolate ecstasy all rolled together. As big as the palm of your hand, it's a delight of chocolate and nuts wrapped around a maple candy center and encased year-round in a manic Christmas package of red, white, and green. I refused to keep them in the house because I couldn't stop eating them once I started. I'd hoped the inner reaches of my car would serve as a demilitarized zone. I'd been fooling only myself.

I glanced guiltily at the house. Maybe Luna was right. Possibly, I wasn't doing myself any favors with the Nut Goodie breakfasts. The thing is, the candy is my heroin, and I'm weak. I held the Nut Goodie in my hand, confronted with a *Sophie's Choice* moment: immediate gratification or long-term survival? My knees and fingers were growing stiff with the cold, but I couldn't decide. On the one hand, I was already heavy on saliva imagining the frozen chocolate melting in my mouth into a warm pool of happy. On the other, some sane part of me knew I shouldn't snarf down *all* the food in the emergency kit. Then I remembered: I had granola bars in the house! They could be my survival food. Why hadn't I thought of that before? I pocketed the candy, repackaged the coffee can and popped the lid back on, and charged toward the house before my skin froze off.

Luna forgave me my weakness, greeting me at the front door with an energetic wag like I'd been gone for a week. I patted her head, doffed my boots and coat, and planted myself at the kitchen counter to enjoy my chocolate breakfast and read yesterday's mail. I'd come in too late last night to sort it, after putting in extra hours at the library as well as finishing up a front page article for the *Battle Lake Recall*, the local newspaper where I freelanced. Both jobs had toppled into my lap after I'd moved here from the Twin Cities, the library job as a result of a murder in

May and the reporting gig due to my having a bachelor's degree in English and subsequently, low income expectations.

The top letter was a plea that I become a contributing member of Minnesota Public Radio. For the millionth time, I promised myself I'd do that. Soon. I hated feeling like a public radio parasite, but money was tight for those of us in the bottom of the food chain, even when working two jobs. Using a side tooth, I pried off a chunk of hard-frozen Nut Goodie and continued sorting. Next on the pile was a holiday card from Peyton McCormick and her mom, Leylanda. Peyton, a precocious eight-year-old, was one of my favorite attendees at the library's children's reading hour every Monday. She'd been abducted from her home last June. The entire town had pulled together to find her, and when she was finally rescued—shaken but unharmed, thank all that is good—she became a local celebrity. Her gap-toothed smile dominated the photograph card, and a tongue-lolling golden lab wearing a Santa hat reclined between her and her mom. I showed the photo to Luna.

“Think we should do something like this next year?”

She licked my still-cold knee.

I made room on the fridge for the card and sifted through the rest of the mail: phone bill, Victoria's Secret catalog, and a card rimmed with red and white-striped candy canes, promising me a free box of the peppermint treat if I signed up for a one-year subscription to *Healthy Holidays*. I tossed it. Seemed like a mixed message, and besides, I could already feel the Nut Goodie knocking out a wall in my stomach to add on. I also trashed the catalog, wrote a check for and stamped the telephone bill, and got ready for work.

Freshly-showered and brushed, I offered Luna one last chance to paint the snow, made sure both animals had clean water, snagged some granola bars to restock my car kit, and headed to town, a smile on my face.

Otter Tail County hadn't had fresh snow since Wednesday, so the roads were clear. I'd arrive an hour early to the library so that I'd have time to finish the book ordering that I'd begun last night. Come to think of it, I still had a delivery to catalog. I was high on the thoughts of all the organizing I'd accomplish when I pulled onto the Battle Lake main drag and spotted the mob outside the police station.

I slowed the Toyota to a crawl and hand-cranked the window. The odors of car exhaust and winter air washed in. The crowd of twenty or so was dressed for the weather, mostly female, and appeared abuzz about something. I recognized a friend I hadn't seen in a while. "Gina!"

She caught sight of me and made her way to my car, no mean feat given the size of the crowd shoving against the heft of her curves. She was a nurse, and like most healthcare professionals in this county, she was built like a refrigerator. That's what the city folk called irony. Sunny had been best friends with Gina before taking off to Alaska with her Bert-browed man. It had felt natural for me to step into the friendship. Gina was raunchy, funny, and outspoken, three qualities I admire. Me, I talk big in my own head, but I rarely walked the walk.

"Mira! Did you get one too?" Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were rosy, and white puffs of air accented her words.

"One what?"

"This." She held up her mittened hand. It clutched a candy cane-rimmed card promising her twelve free candy canes if she signed up for a year of *Healthy Holidays*.

"Yeah. I tossed it into the trash this morning. What of it?"

She raised her eyebrows so high they disappeared under the edge of her knit cap. “Cripes. I know you live in a trailer, but is it under a rock? Haven’t you heard about the Candy Cane Killer?”

“Sure,” I lied. “Candy. It’s a killer.”

“Gack.” She reached in to slap my forehead. The woolen mitten cushioned the blow. “I’m not talking about candy. I’m talking about the Candy Cane *Killer*, the serial killer who only murders in December and only kills brown-haired ladies about your height and weight? He started killing two years ago in Chicago. Last year he targeted central Wisconsin. They think he’s in Minnesota this year. A couple days ago seven women in White Plains got his calling card—a single candy cane—and yesterday, one of them was murdered.”

White Plains was a little over an hour directly southwest of Paynesville, my hometown. I’d attended track meets there. “Okay, but that’s not an actual candy cane.” I pointed at her card. “It’s an advertisement for a magazine.”

“You think you know more than the police? They want to speak with everyone who got one of these.” She shook the card for emphasis, and it made a rippling noise in the wind. “If you have one, you better go get it. Now. You have time before the library opens.”

She forced her way back into the crowd, and I rolled up my window and motored away. I had three things on my mind: 1) Yes, I often did think I knew more than the police, at least the local chief of police, Gary Wohnt. 2) I’d scented hysteria brewing in that crowd, a faint sulfur smell that takes only a single match to ignite, and 3) I didn’t want to be the dumb lady in the horror movie who ignored everyone’s warnings. Unsure what to do about one and two but confident that I didn’t want to be caught stupid, I pointed the car toward home. I’d snag the card,

show it to one of the officers at the police station, and still have time to open the library before ten.

I pulled into my driveway on automatic, parked the car, and hurried to the house. I was so deep in thought that I'd yanked open the outer glass door and walked halfway through the interior steel door before I realized it had been unlocked. Had I been in such a hurry this morning that I hadn't closed it tightly? That would be a first. I examined the door knob. The inner circle that I turned to lock it was pointing sideways, meaning the door had been closed but not locked. I glanced around the living room. Everything seemed in place, except for one thing. No dog had greeted me.

"Luna!" She met everyone at the door, tail wagging, no exceptions. My eyes swept the kitchen, the open door to my left leading to the master bedroom, and the hallway to the right leading to a bathroom, office, and spare bedroom. No movement.

The outer glass door was weighted and self closed, meaning that even if I had accidentally left the interior door unlocked, there was no way Luna could exit the house unless someone had opened the outer door for her, and she wasn't inside unless she was too hurt to move. I suddenly felt hollow.

"Luna?" This time it was a whisper.