

Chapter One

Halfway through her morning walk on the streets of Stewartville, Mona VanderMolen made her final decision to kill Miss Emily.

She pondered her decision as she stood at the edge of the lawn facing Glenda Simpson's two-story, turn-of-the-century clapboard farmhouse.

What surprised her most was her numbness to the evil of it, even as her vision grew for how she'd carry out her plan. Sure, she'd done things she was ashamed of, things she and her girlfriends had laughed over at college reunions—things that kept her humble with memories of youth and stupidity. And then there were the years Ellen had blackmailed or manipulated her into being a silent accomplice to her rebellion—the times Mona had evaded her mother's questions or pulled her drunk sister through a basement window in the dead of night.

But something intentionally evil, premeditated, and cold? Never in Mona's forty-five years. Nothing like this. Since she'd moved to Stewartville, her public sins had been limited to an embarrassing unwillingness to observe the town's forty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit and running up the highest tab in town for overdue library fines.

Killing Miss Emily would change everything. But then, that was the point of it, wasn't it—to draw a line in the sand, to finally shut

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her up? Something in Miss Emily's skittery eyes told Mona she knew she'd changed and could hear the voices that rang in her head.

Doubt. Fear. Indecision. Guilt.

Killing Miss Emily was the only way out of it, even if it meant that everyone in Stewartville would know.

Mona VanderMolen was a good woman who had gone mad. Three months after she'd come out of her coma, she'd finally cracked.

The town would be stunned with the horror of it, and the sickening shame would separate her from the people she loved most: Elsie, Adam, Harold, Hallie, even Ellen. Mona pushed the thought from her mind.

The fact remained: it had to be done. She stared through the front window of Glenda's house as the chill November wind bit through her black, French terry sweat suit and the lime green parka she'd layered over the top for extra warmth. Her thoughts rolled back to her first glimmering thoughts of murder. They'd drifted into her mind easily, like the russet oak leaves that had wafted downward to Stewartville's lawns and sidewalks in gentle gasps and sputters of breeze as she'd headed west on Maple on her first lap that morning. By the time she'd turned north on Second, then east on Elm and south on Mercantile, the thought had grown to an idea, then to a resolve that hardened with the pain of each laborious step, until on her eighth lap, she found herself poised in front of Glenda Simpson's bay window, holding a driveway paver brick in her right hand.

With one small twinge of pain, Mona's vision had met flesh. The brick's rough edges bit into the hammock of flesh between her thumb and index finger as she adjusted its weight to get a

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better grip. She paused, then hefted it toward her shoulder, her arm trembling slightly as she drew it toward her chest. The weight was heavier than she'd expected, and she shifted her feet, then planted them wide apart for balance until the urge to lean to the right subsided.

Slowly, she closed her eyes and envisioned the throw. An overhand bullet that arched from her hand in a graceful swoop. The brick hurtling through the air and shooting through the pane of glass with perfect precision, raining glass shards into the juniper bushes below as the brick found its mark, leaving a starburst hole.

Then the sound of the thud, of stone meeting skull, and the sight of the body slumping to the living-room floor.

Mona opened her eyes and focused on the ripple of breeze through the juniper bush. If she thought about it another minute, she'd never follow through. It was pure evil, there was no getting around it, but some things in life weren't to be tolerated. Tyranny came with a price, as Miss Emily was about to find out. And insurance would kick in and help with expenses, she was sure.

She raised her eyes and looked through the window at the face that had tormented her day after day.

You're despicable, and I've taken all I'm going to take.

The face stared back silently. Mona could feel a trickle of blood running down the palm of her hand and the grit of the dirt on the tips of her fingers.

"I hate you." She spoke the words out loud.

The face in the window continued to stare. Not even a blink broke the gaze. It was the staring Mona hated most, the fact that, to Miss Emily, the hard, violating gaze meant nothing, just like it meant nothing to the other faces who took in her stubble of auburn hair and the scarred scalp that still showed through. A few

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months ago her hair had fallen thick to well-muscled shoulders on a tall, athletic frame that could heft hay bales with the best of Stewartville's men. But what did that matter now? Anger rose red-hot inside her like spewing lava, and she lifted the brick higher, staggering to regain her balance. But with the motion, her fingers lost their bite against the dirty chunk of concrete. She struggled to recover her grip, and the brick clattered to the sidewalk at her feet with a sonorous thud, landing inches from the raggedy hole where it had originally nested.

Mona blinked as she stood motionless and surveyed the streaks of blood on the palm of her right hand. Then she sighed, bent slowly to one knee, and nestled the brick back into place in the pattern of Glenda's walkway where she'd found it kicked loose, like a half-dozen others.

So here I am, Lord, a pathetic crazy woman wasting Your time, making You knock rocks out of my hand to save me from acts of insanity.

She eased the brick back and forth, working to make the edges lie even with the surrounding walkway.

This sure isn't where I thought I'd be standing three months ago, after Elsie brought me home from the hospital. Of course, You know that. I was supposed to be finished with rehab by now, but Your timetable and mine seem to be a little out of sync. And for some reason, praying and plowing through my agenda don't seem to be working this time, even though they've worked pretty well in the past. I'm tired of all this, okay? I just want to lie down and sleep for a few weeks and wake up again when I'll be able to walk without staggering or read faster than a third grader or push three-syllable words through my brain.

She gave the brick a final smack, then lowered her head to her hands and rested on one knee before she slowly stood and blinked against the spinning. She fought against the swells that rose in

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her stomach and the flash of frustration that coursed through her veins.

Dr. Bailey's warnings about post-craniotomy strokes and transient ischemic attacks, or TIAs, had been a doctor spouting necessary medical protocol when he'd released her from the hospital. The headaches, fatigue, dizziness, and flashes these past few weeks were nothing, and she'd prove it to him if she had to. She'd fought every other hard thing in her life—her father, Stacy's drowning, Hallie's rebellion, her own near death—and she could fight this. She only had to get past her three-month MRI and hope that Dr. Bailey didn't notice she'd already rescheduled it twice.

In the distance, the shriek of an ambulance approached as it headed in the direction of Stewartville Community Hospital's emergency room.

With each bad day, I'm more exhausted and one step closer to losing it, Lord. Part of me wants to give up and crawl off into the dark with the doubt and fear that keep shouting that this is as good as it will ever get. The other part of me is outraged that I can't control even the simplest things about my own body anymore. In five minutes, I swing from faith to depression to anger and then top it all off with a few ladles of guilt because I'm so weak.

And it's no secret to You that I can't walk by this house without fixating on killing Miss Emily because she's the living, breathing embodiment of all the things I hate about myself. She's as broken down and worthless as I'm becoming. Since we both know I'm losing it, what other excuse do I need to want her dead?

The calico with the flickering, crooked tail stared at her through the bay window that separated her from the outside world by a thin pane of glass. Mona had been told the story of Miss Emily soon after she'd moved to town. She was somewhat of a Stewartville

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celebrity, with her lightning-shaped tail, flinching fur, and skittery eyes that never rested anywhere for long unless she was shielded from the world in the protective recess of the bay window. Then, and only then, she would stare. She was one of Glenda Simpson's six well-fed and pampered cats.

Rumor had it that one Saturday Miss Emily had ambled into Glenda's dryer for an afternoon siesta, and Glenda had unknowingly tumbled both the cat and her husband's Carhartts on permanent press for a good fifteen minutes before she'd figured out that the high-pitched shrieking she was hearing wasn't coming from reruns of *Cops* in the next room. Miss Emily had emerged from the Kenmore with a walk that listed permanently to the left, a re-engineered tail, and an aversion to anything remotely resembling the fragrance of Downy.

For the first time, Mona traced the lines of the lopsided tail and noticed the angles of the two breaks. Miss Emily's eyes glared back, and Mona felt a surge of remorse.

"I'm sorry I'm staring. I understand why you must have a deep-seated mistrust of humans. And I'm sorry I was planning your demise in kind of an . . . imaginative way. I was letting my mind play with how good it would feel to just hurl something . . . you know, let it all fly, inflict pain because I'm hurting. We people commit murder in our minds dozens of times a day. I'm not saying it's right, I'm just saying we're more messed up than we like to admit. But I think I at least owe you a peace offering of canned albacore."

Mona tamped the brick with the toe of her tennis shoe as she glanced over her shoulder. The last thing she needed was for someone to see her apologizing to a cat. But no harm done. To the casual passerby, it would have appeared she'd taken a neighborly interest in replacing one of Glenda's loose bricks. Not for

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one moment would anyone ever guess that Mona VanderMolen had contemplated an actual act of violence like pitching a brick through Glenda Simpson's bay window in a random act of feline homicide.

She pulled a tissue from her jacket pocket, dabbed it on her tongue, and wiped the blood from her palm.

And what would Adam think if he realized he was dating a middle-aged wack job whose mind and body were disintegrating like cotton candy in a rainstorm? He was a good man who deserved a healthy, sane woman, not one who believed a cat could read minds and understand apologies.

Mona felt suddenly exhausted. After two months of laps around the same three blocks, she'd finally figured out why she hated Miss Emily so much. After all, she was just a beat-up calico with a busted tail and eyes that looked east and west at the same time. A cat with a mortal fear of household appliances. A cat that through a freak accident had been left to navigate the sea of life without a centerboard that went fully down, steering a little off-center and listing a bit to port.

Miss Emily was a reminder of who she'd become—one of the broken and dazed who listed a bit to port with a body that longed to be what it once had been. She wore her imperfections where everyone could see them, and people pitied her for it.

Mona shoved the blood-stained tissue back into her pocket. It was time to move on.