

PROLOGUE

The night began with a teenage dare. She followed reluctantly as he led her by the hand to the shadow of the Black Angel.

A full moon gave them less privacy than she would have liked. Her back now against the horizontal concrete slab, she waited for him to lay his body across hers. Her lips prayed for the encounter to be quick because out of the corner of her eye a raven watched them intently from atop a gravestone.

Unlike most cemetery angels, whose heads and wings lift upward toward heaven, this statue's face and wings bent downward over the grave it guarded—as if pointing straight to hell. And while angel sculptures are traditionally a golden bronze or white marble, this one's hue was black. Besides the figure's sinister posture and color, its stony eyes seemed to stare into hers as if issuing a personal condemnation.

Her feeling of doom was so strong, the girl struggled to move away. But he held her down, pushed her dress up to her waist, and there, at the hem of the Black Angel, they sinned.

The writer paused over the keyboard and reread the scene. Then with a smile, added sensory and sensual details about places the boy was hard and the girl was soft, and how their throaty moans were the only sound of life amid the dark tombstones. A final tweak when the female character closed her eyes tight to shut out the angel's glare completed the carnal passage.

CHAPTER 1

Waitresses were easy to research. For the price of lunch or coffee he gathered most of the information he needed.

First, he'd stall in the doorway of the restaurant skimming the menu. Then he might walk past the tables to the bathroom. Or maybe even pretend he recognized someone sitting on the other side of the room. All were opportunities to scan for a promising target—preferably a blonde—and note which section of the room she was serving.

Once he was seated, the rest came effortlessly. Often she wore a name tag. And if not, her name usually appeared on the bill. So no introduction was necessary. Her job was to be nice to customers. Even those she might give a cold shoulder to under different circumstances. Flirty charm meant the difference between twenty percent of the tab or being stiffed.

He could pretend they were new friends and practice making sociable conversation. Sometimes he even imagined they were married and she was preparing a home-cooked dinner for him after a long day at work. And he always paid in cash, so there was no check or credit card to trace back to him.

While she fetched water or restocked the bread basket, he recorded details in a small notebook to further the illusion his

meal was business-related. Name. Physical description. And most important, how he was treated. If he detected scorn, he circled that entry with a red pen. That was his code for which ones needed to learn respect. He chose the color red deliberately.

Once, he stared so intensely at his server that she dropped silverware and backed away clumsily into another diner. He had meant his attention as a compliment. But instead of being flattered, she pointed him out to a coworker and even from across the room he could see her lips mutter “pervert.”

He wrote down the affront. Then circled her name in red.

When she finished her shift, he was waiting in the parking lot to see which vehicle she drove. Women were always cautious going to their cars, and security cameras were mounted everywhere. He knew better than to approach her during that short trek. Home was where they felt safest, and there, it was simple to catch them off guard and out of sight of witnesses.

Patience was paramount.

He knew better than to follow her directly home, because the last thing he needed was a suspicious cop and a police report with his name and vehicle information on file. He stayed on her bumper only long enough to get her license plate number. Later, he popped her address from public records and watched to become familiar with her work schedule. It was important that she be dressed in the role.

To be assured of privacy, he also needed to learn the routine of her household. Whether she lived alone, with a roommate, or had a family. The journey to the end took weeks.

He also hungered for permission. But that blessing now came easily.

So one day when the garage door opened for her car, he followed inside . . . crouching low and close to the side of the building. When he cornered her, he was disappointed that she had no

idea who he was, how he had picked her, or why he was wearing gloves and a hairnet.

“Say it,” he told her.

But she was confused and didn’t know what he was talking about. All she could mumble were a few shaky words that sounded like “please” and “don’t hurt me.”

But he’d heard similar stammers before. “Say it,” he threatened her with a club held high.

She covered her head and sobbed, her shoulders quivering. She couldn’t seem to hold eye contact with him. That wouldn’t have changed anything, but he relished the fog in their eyes.

“Say it,” he insisted, “say ‘pervert.’” He smashed his weapon against the garbage can, denting the lid.

Finally, she raised her face and repeated the word.

Then he brought the club down. And when she was dead, he arranged her body just perfect and added his special touch. Turning her from devil to angel.

He was their salvation.

He never visited the same restaurant twice. He never cruised places in the town where he lived. He didn’t mind driving long distances because he enjoyed the feeling of control behind the wheel. And on the special nights, he parked about a half mile away, carrying his tools in a backpack. After all, he had plenty of time.

He also had a formula that worked. But it soon grew unsatisfying.

So he broke the pattern. Ditched his distant waitress mania, instead focusing on a closer, more deserving target: Kate.

It was hard to admit to himself, because it meant acknowledging he’d made mistakes, but he’d come to realize he hadn’t played fair with the first ones. Those women had deserved to know why he had come. Initially, he had worried that such a warning might alter the outcome, but he also savored the idea of them brooding over who or what or when or where.

Kate's transgression was plotted, not fleeting; so she had plenty of warning about his displeasure.

But the risk of discovery was worth the expression in her eyes as the club came down.

He would kill to see that look again.

CHAPTER 2

Until Kate Warner's homicide, it had been a slow news day in Minneapolis.

In the first hours after her body was discovered, media coverage was fairly predictable. Television live trucks and camera crews with tripods camped out along the street because the neighborhood where Kate had lived and died was previously regarded as safe and quiet—the Minnesota ideal of above-average income and below-average crime.

So when her neighbors learned she had been murdered in her own home, Kate's death became more interesting to them than her life had ever been.

My name is Riley Spartz. I'm a television reporter for Channel 3. Normally I'd describe myself as an investigative reporter, but those glorious days of long-term special projects are diminishing in the news business. While the word "investigation" still has promotional value, newsrooms simply don't have the budget for the real thing anymore. Now journalists are under orders to turn breaking news into "instant" investigations, hoping the public won't discern any real difference.

"Keep back, everyone."

A uniformed officer motioned to the curious to stay some distance from the crime scene tape. The yellow-and-black plastic

ribbon was the only splash of color across the dried-up yard. If there were any spatters of blood, they blended invisibly into the grass—brown due to the summer watering ban.

The policeman then directed a terse “No comment” at me and the rest of the media. I made a note of his ID pin, “Stanley,” but didn’t press him further, because as a street cop, rather than a homicide detective, he probably understood little about what had happened inside the brick-and-stucco rambler. He might have secured the scene, but the homicide team would have quickly assigned him to the busy work of crowd control.

A large crowd hadn’t gathered—that typically only happens with brutal crime in public places like parks or malls. Most of these onlookers were pretending not to look.

One man walked his dog up and down the block. A woman kept checking her mailbox. Another pushed a young child on a swing in her front yard even though the toddler made noises about wanting to go inside. And more folks than usual strolled past, feigning appreciation for the hot August weather.

But their eyes were all riveted on the homicide house.

I whispered to my cameraman to casually shoot video of all spectators, because sometimes the killer likes to watch the ensuing commotion. Occasionally the killer even volunteers to be interviewed for television newscasts. Researchers have no solid explanation for it, but know that for some psychopaths, the aftermath is even more rewarding than the actual deed.

“Why Kate?” one woman asked, looking with anguish into my photographer’s camera. Her delivery smooth, as if she’d practiced in a mirror. “Who would want to kill her?”

Both legitimate questions—posed as a perfect sound bite that would definitely make air—but two separate queries that might never be fully answered. Such is the reality of violent death. “How” is much easier to explain than “why” or “who,” and the medical examiner would likely release the “how” answer within a day or two.

Often, but not always, when a woman is slain in her own home, the murderer is someone she knows. From a career of covering crime, I knew the police would be looking for signs of forced entry, robbery, and sexual assault as a means of determining motive and focusing their investigation.

Two men were nailing a piece of fresh plywood over the front picture window when we arrived; while their actions resembled hurricane preparation often seen along the coasts, here in the Midwest they suggested a break-in. Though why an intruder wouldn't opt for a backyard entry seemed puzzling.

I knocked at the door of the two-story stucco directly across the street from Kate's place. No one answered, and I was about to shrug off the house as empty when I caught a glimpse of someone at an upstairs window. Most of the neighbors had been neighborly, likely hoping to hear whatever information I had without waiting to watch it on TV. This inhabitant was coy.

A woman a few doors down thought Kate had a boyfriend, but didn't think the relationship was particularly serious because she'd never introduced them. Once the police got wind of him, I knew they'd be pursuing the idea of a domestic squabble turned savage.

I glanced at a snapshot of Kate that a friend of hers had given me with the promise I'd return it later. I could have simply had my cameraman videotape the photo on her doorstep, but then other media might have landed the same shot. This way, I'd be the only reporter with this particular picture.

Kate's appearance was ordinary. Her hair brown. Her smile pleasant. No clues there. I weighed what details I had learned about the victim during the last couple of hours and saw no overt reason for anyone to want her dead. The script was practically writing itself. I made notes.

Kate didn't dress to attract trouble.

"Very modestly attired," said an elderly woman who cherished the deceased because she drove her to doctor appointments.

Kate sang lead in the church choir.

“A voice like an angel,” said a man who regularly attended the same Sunday service.

If Kate had money, she didn't flaunt it.

“Frugal,” said a woman in Kate's book club. “She preferred waiting for the paperback.”

They confirmed that Kate worked at home as a medical transcriptionist, so it wasn't as if she upset retail customers or annoyed office colleagues. She didn't even have a dangerous commute.

Hers was a common case of *Girl Next Door Gets Murdered*. We all want to believe if someone dies violently, they must have done something to deserve it. That makes the rest of us feel safer. But a career of watching body bags being loaded in the back of medical examiner vans has taught me that nice people are sometimes killed for no good reason.

While it's not something we tout, the media appreciates a good murder, particularly if the motive contains some mystery—a disputed inheritance or a covert celebrity lover can bring an audience to a broadcast in numbers that robbery or rape can't.

If a case isn't solved right away, that can be okay as long as there are fascinating follow-ups and indications it will eventually end in an arrest. Cold cases frustrate families, police, and the public.

And, to be honest, we newshounds also want endings to our stories. You can argue that we don't care whether it's a happy ending or a sad ending, just as long as it ends. And that might be a fair assessment; we can't cover the same victims year after year without craving closure ourselves.

Our interest isn't just professional. Even we have a personal need to know what happened to the missing, whether it be eleven-year-old Jacob Wetterling, abducted two decades ago on a rural Minnesota road, or Iowa TV anchor Jodi Huisentruit, van-

ishing fifteen years ago on her way to work. Instead we settle for anniversary stories reliving the crimes.

So that night on Channel 3, I told viewers everything I could substantiate about Kate Warner's death. No sense in holding back a juicy fact for later, because you're only likely to get beat by your competition and reamed by your boss.

Right then, none of the other newsies in town seemed to have an inside track on the murder investigation, so I was sitting fine journalistically because it wasn't clear yet whether this homicide would have staying power with the media and the public. That status of a victim becoming a household name is awarded to only a handful of the more than ten thousand Americans murdered each year.

I didn't know yet that Kate had led a secret life, and that her secret did not die with her.