

Chapter One

Mrs. Carol Weaver, rhododendron expert of the Lehigh Garden Club, demon on the tennis court and wife to the late Steel vice president Halsey Weaver, was not the type to slum it on our side of town unless her maid needed a lift home.

So, what was she doing on my West Goepp Street doorstep far from her exclusive Saucon Valley mansion on a sleeting Sunday night? More importantly, where did she find that matching cashmere sweater set and pearls?

But those weren't the only questions I had for her.

"Aren't you supposed to be in prison?" I asked. "Didn't you, like, kill a bunch of people?"

"Not a bunch. One." Carol hugged her bony shoulders. "And I didn't do it. Now, are you going to let me in, Bubbles? Or are you going to call the cops and blow the biggest news story of a lifetime?"

What could I do? It was November, almost Thanksgiving, and it seemed unseasonably cruel to let this murderess—albeit a polite and peppy murderess—freeze to death on my fading green AstroTurf welcome mat. Also, the next morning began my first week of tryouts for an official, full-time, paid-with-benefits staff position at the *News-Times*.

This was not the night to be turning away biggest news stories of a lifetime.

"All right," I said, ushering her inside. "But not for long. You need to leave before the cops find you here."

"I've been discreet," she said, stepping in delicately.

I checked the neighbors and, sure enough, Mrs. Hamel's ruffled white curtains quickly closed. Discreet held no coin on West Goepp.

Carol looked damn good for a fifty-year-old woman who'd spent the last eight months in the State Correctional Institution in Jakeville. I hadn't a clue as to how she had managed to find a pill-free sweater set or keep her roots fresh in the slammer. I wanted to examine her nails, but caught myself. That was a sore point—especially between us.

Like a queen surveying her subjects before bending to the guillotine, Carol maintained a regal, composed air. I don't know if her aim was to calm my jumpy nerves—a cold-blooded murderer in my living room!—but it worked. Temporarily, at least.

She settled into my couch and wrinkled that button nose of hers in disgust, thereby making *me* feel like the criminal. My coffee-table was strewn with potato chip bags and empty A-Treat bottles, along with an ashtray overflowing with G's Basic cigarettes. (G is my daughter Jane's boyfriend. A guy so lazy that he shortened his name to one letter—G—for, as he puts it, "God or Genius, depending.")

I hustled about with a dark green garbage bag, tossing in my trusty black plastic tray of Lean Cuisine lasagna and mumbling about whether I could get her some hot tea, as though tea was something we actually drank in this house.

"Hot water," she replied, shivering.

"You want some?"

"No. I'm in it."

"Oh." I put down the garbage bag and sat on the cleared coffee table. "I guess that's why you're here, say?"

My gaze wandered over to my purse, which held my spiral-bound Reporter's Notebook. It's not every day that a murderer/escapee wanders into the house of a beautician-turned-budding-reporter offering the news story of a lifetime.

"I'm here because I need a real reporter, one who's not too jaded to get at the truth." Carol crossed her legs and straightened her posture. "I've been reading your articles on Henry Metzger, Bubbles, and I have to admit, I've been impressed."

For some reason, this flattered me. Carol used to be married to the head flak at Lehigh Steel, referred to around here as simply, Steel. Weaver was the guy who issued press releases filled with lies about what a progressive company Steel was, how it treated its workers fairly and was constantly pushing for innovative, nonpolluting ways to turn out iron bars.

Funny. Iron bars is what Henry Metzger, the former chairman of Steel, should have been behind all along. His crimes were too numerous to list—though I managed to expose a few in my investigative pieces for the *News-Times*.

"Thank you," I said, shifting on the coffee table and realizing that my skirt was sticking to the residue of spilled A-Treat. "But you broke out of prison to tell me that?"

I broke out of prison because someone's trying to kill me." Carol leaned forward. "You're my last resort."

I was back to being uncomfortable again. "Can't you find other last resorts? Like ones with palm trees and Caribbean addresses, far, far away from my house?" Couldn't she sit in another chair so she wasn't in full view of the street outside?

As if she had read my mind, Carol hopped up and started checking windows and once or twice trying the front door lock. While Carol's back was turned, I made a dash for my handbag. Flipped open the notebook and clicked the pen attached.

"Remember when we first met?" she said, staring out the window. "It was shortly after you caught your husband cheating while you were supposed to be at work. What was that jerk's name?"

"Dan Ritter. Though, uhm, he calls himself Chip. You know, to sound more WASPy when he married Wendy."

"Right." Carol made a clucking noise. "They're all the same, aren't they, these men? They get to a certain age, attain a certain degree of success, wake up one day, turn over in bed and decide that the wife looks like their mother. They get scared and become repulsed. They...."

I cut through the Oprahesque psychoanalysis. "Is that why you killed your husband? Because he was cheating on you?" You can't hide stuff like adultery from beauticians. The House of Beauty had been buzzing about the Weavers' marital woes for weeks before one word of it hit the press.

"I didn't kill Hal. I loved Hal, and even though I'd heard rumors that he was sleeping around, I never saw evidence of that. He still loved me." Carol sucked

in a deep breath. "We had a terrific sex life."

I must have seemed skeptical because Carol added testily, "I'm being honest, can't you tell? I'd think that after holding someone's hands for two hours a month you'd get to know a person, Bubbles."

That was a direct reference to the fact that Carol had been a regular customer of mine at the House of Beauty. She had searched me out because I was the only manicurist in town who still did acrylic nails the old-fashioned way. I didn't drill holes into the natural nails, I filed, and if it was a French manicure you were looking for, never painted on the white. It was applied with a careful streak of dental enamel. The resulting nails were stronger than a bear's canines.

So strong that when Carol soaked the tips in cyanide and then raked them across her husband's back in a sexual, homicidal frenzy, not one nail broke. This was a fact harped on repeatedly by the Lehigh PD's Homicide Division, which was positively clueless when it came to manicures.

I tried to explain that natural nails were actually sharper than Carol's rounded acrylic ones, but the detectives had already formed a theory—that Carol's nails were murder weapons. Murder weapons I had meticulously constructed and buffed with a tasteful pink gloss.

"If you didn't kill your husband, Carol, then who did?"

"How about Henry Metzger?"

"Good luck getting to the bottom of that pit. Henry Metzger is dead. Shot before my very eyes."

"But Henry Metzger may have ordered the hit and a faction at Steel took up his cause."

"What cause?"

"That's the key question, isn't it? That's what you need to find out." She parted my blinds, peeking out and then shutting them tighter. "My husband told me once he knew a secret that could bring down Steel. He must have been right because he was killed by Steel's upper management to keep quiet."

I wrote this down. Carol was making an impassioned claim, but like many members of the state's penal club, she was conveniently glossing over a few illogical details.

"I've heard of Steel's goons breaking the legs of union leaders," I said, "but scratching vice presidents to death? It's . . . it's too feminine."

"That's exactly what Steel wants you to think." She put her hands on her hips. "That's why they took pains to make sure there was cyanide on my nails when the cops arrived that morning. I don't know how those evil SOBs at Steel managed to pull that trick, but let me tell you right now, they can get away with anything they want in this town. Including framing an innocent wife for murder."

"What about your daughter? Can't she help?"

"Kiera is twenty and pregnant. Far too young and immature for motherhood, if you want my opinion. Certainly *she* doesn't. Kiera won't speak to me. Hasn't since the arrest."

The only sounds in the room were of rain beating against the aluminum siding and my pen scratching along the tablet.

"Tonight, after I got out, I stood outside my daughter's house in the rain and stared into her windows, hoping to see some sight of her. Isn't that weird?"

"Not really. My mother does that all the time." I took one last note. "Drives me crazy. She keeps claiming she doesn't want to be a bother. 'It's okay. You don't have to ask me in,' she says. 'I *like* the cold. The rain's *good* for my arthritis.'"

Carol frowned. "This is a bit different, Bubbles. My daughter's due to give birth near Christmas. She'll need her mother there, to help her get some rest and cook her warm dinners. This kid hasn't a clue of how much work motherhood involves."

That last line got me. Whatever I've said about Mama, about her retro sixties fashion trends, penchant for dangerous octogenarians in fake Kmart leather and her ability to embarrass me with her painfully personal comments made to strangers, I will always be grateful to her for the weeks she spent with me after Jane was born. Dan the Man was useless, of course. Passed out at dirty diapers and became nauseous at one whiff of sour milk. Mama had been a godsend.

"I pray every night that I'll be reconciled with Kiera. But that will be impossible if I'm dead. It sounds awful to say, but deep down I'm grateful my cellmate Marta was almost murdered tonight, and not me."

The pen slipped across the tablet as my stomach did a quick somersault. "Your cellmate was almost murdered?"

"That's right."

"And your reaction was to break out of prison and rush right over to my house?" I just wanted to get this straight. "Because this is the kind of fact pattern cops find very interesting when they're booking someone for harboring a fugitive."

"Hear me out." Carol tented her fingers. "Marta stole from a care package I received in the mail yesterday . . . postmarked from Saucon Valley. The package contained Moravian spice cookies with extra cloves just the way I like them. So whoever sent them knows me well."

"Why didn't you eat them?"

"I'm on Atkins. Anti-carb."

Forget anti-carb. Carol should look into becoming anti-dote, what with her toxic history.

"Marta is a born thief. She found the package under my bunk, ripped it open and managed to get through three cookies before she started feeling queasy. I escorted her down to the infirmary and then hid myself in the infirmary laundry and was carted out. I didn't want to wait around for her to die and then be blamed for her death, too."

"So, you don't know if she died?"

"No, I don't. At least I didn't hear anything on the car radio. But do you see why I need you, Bubbles?" Her voice turned urgent and her face was as pale as the white plastic mini blinds behind her. "You have to find who killed my husband and who set me up. You have to find the person who is trying to kill me before . . . before my daughter...." She wiped away tears and coughed to hide the emotion fighting to surface. "I promised myself I wouldn't get

hysterical, but I don't know where else to turn."

However, I was stuck on one word. *Radio*. Where did Carol hear a car radio? And, come to think of it how did she get away . . . and so fast? The State Correctional Institution was stuck in a cornfield out by Jakeville; it wasn't exactly convenient to a regular bus route. Then there was her sweater set and her constant window checking....

My sucker-alert alarm went off. I might be blond and big busted with a Two Guys Community College diploma on my bedroom wall—but I didn't need a degree from fancy Slippery Rock to know when I was being played.

"Who's been helping you?" I tapped my pen against the tablet. "Why do you need me if you have a friend who sprung you from jail?"

Carol's expression turned to shock, then hurt and, finally, indignation.

"Skip it." She threw up her hands. "I thought you'd be different from the other reporters I've written to. I hoped you hadn't turned cynical yet, that you were still the warmhearted girl who used to listen to all my troubles over the manicure table. I see I was very, very wrong."

With a series of quick movements, she unlocked my front door, opened it and slammed it shut, running into the night. I heard a car start up and then pull out. At least I had been right about that—Carol had an accomplice.

Immediately, I was plagued with self-doubt. What an insensitive slug I was. What if Carol were telling the truth? What if she'd been framed by the same folks who were trying to kill her? What if, through no fault of her own, she'd been sentenced to jail, estranged from her own daughter and therefore unable to hold her first grandchild? I knew firsthand how cruel Henry Metzger had been. Who was to say he had been the only creep at Steel?

Nah. I waved that away. What was this, the *Lifetime* channel? Only my mother's nutsy friend Genevieve could swallow a conspiracy theory that complicated, and I bet even she'd have reservations.

Like a lot of socialite criminals, Carol had probably bought her own lie that she was innocent. Who, me? Carol Weaver, former president of the Junior League, a housewife with ironed towels and homemade chicken pot pies, guilty of murder? Surely, there must be some mistake.

So she had escaped and tried to rope me into believing her spin. When it was clear that I'd be skeptical, too, she cut her losses and split, no doubt to try her luck with other reporters.

For an hour I sat on my couch, absently eating potato chips and trying to decide what to do. Mr. Salvo, my immediate boss and night editor at the *News-Times*, was off, this being the second Sunday of doe season.

He was deep in the Pocono woods waiting for an innocent whitetail to step in front of his thirty-ought-six. Deer season is serious business in Pennsylvania. Kids get off school like it's a religious holiday. Elvis could rise from the dead, walk into my kitchen, suck down all my mayonnaise, and I still wouldn't dare call Mr. Salvo at deer camp.

Without Mr. Salvo to contact, I thought of my buddy Mickey Sinkler, a detective down at the Lehigh Police Department. He was off duty tonight and all I got was his home answering machine. Probably at deer camp, too.

I sat with the phone on my lap and read over my notes. They didn't make

sense. I'd never heard of Steel executives getting bumped off. Fired, you bet. Or sent to Williamsport. But not murdered.

I decided to take my inability to reach anyone as a cosmic clue. I needed to sleep on what had happened tonight and hope for a clearer head in the morning.

Before I went to bed, I called Jane at Dan's and listened to her whine about how Dan wouldn't let G stay over at his house, even in the guest room, for fear of infestation from fleas and other vermin.

Then I locked the doors, turned off the lights and laid out my clothes—black stretch skirt, high-heeled lace-up boots and a tasteful tiger-print top—for my first assignment as a tryout—the Lehigh Historical Society's annual breakfast. Classy, say?

Now perfectly prepared for the next morning, I slathered on moisturizer, tweezed a few stray eyebrow hairs, rested my head on the pillow and thought about Steve Stiletto, my Associated Press photojournalist boyfriend. A dead ringer for Mel Gibson before he went wacko. A hunk with a heart.

Despite having been shot in the shoulder one month before, Stiletto was over his mystical "chaste" phase and was healing fast. He was even well enough to drive to New York, where he was finishing plans to oversee a new AP bureau in England at the end of the month. He wanted me to join him there, and I had to admit the offer was tempting.

Misty moors (I didn't really know what a moor was, though it sounded awfully romantic). Stiletto showing me the sexy beaches in the south of France. He was determined to whisk me there so we could spend our first night of intimacy overlooking the Mediterranean surf, with the moon rising and the warm waves lapping outside our window, the two of us in nothing but a tangle of sheets and hot kisses.

Oh, my God. I put my hand to my chest, where a rapid beat thumped. Just the idea of sex with Stiletto drove me crazy with desire. It made my legs ache and my body yearn, like I was about to go mad if I couldn't have it.

So why didn't I run away with him? What was wrong with me?

It wasn't like I was afraid of transatlantic plane travel or eating stuffed sheep stomachs. I didn't fear being homesick or meeting rude French people who might pooh-pooh my Payless collection.

Stiletto told me the other night that he knew why I was keeping him at arm's length . . . and I knew he knew. He knew in the kind of way that made me squirm uncomfortably and think un-Lithuanian/Polish good Catholic girl thoughts about him and his longish brown hair and blue eyes, his six-pack abs and the way he slipped his hand behind my neck to pull me to him to kiss me and that damn chastity vow that had gone on way, way too long and petrified me to a refrozen virgin who didn't know how to blow a....

Christ. I threw the pillow over my head and tried to recall this week's ShopRite triple coupon items. Green Giant canned green beans. Buy one get one free. I was asleep before I even got to cereals.

I awoke at 4 A.M., frightened sick with a sudden realization. Not that if I didn't buy cranberries advertised three packages for a dollar fifty during the holiday season, I'd never get them fresh again the whole year. But that someone was in the house.

They were downstairs.

In my slumbered haze, I'd heard a door close and then footsteps. Slow and heavy. Ever since I'd been attacked late at night in my own bed by one Daniel Brouse, I'd never slept with the baby-like assurance that a woman's house is her Barbie Dream Home. Now, a burst of adrenaline had my mind churning.

Brouse was in prison. Stiletto was in New York. Jane was at Dan's. And G didn't step. He shuffled. Shuffled to the refrigerator, mostly. It definitely wasn't G.

Instinctively I rolled out of bed, assembled the covers over the pillows, grabbed my robe and pushed up my bedroom window that leads to the fire escape. (The same one Brouse had accessed.) Outside was damp and freezing, and I was loath to kneel on the wet, cold, rusted metal as I carefully closed the window shut.

Within seconds the shots rang but. Five of them. *Zip. Zip. Zip. Zip. Zip.* White-yellow sparks fired in the dark and into my pillows with dead-on accuracy. I was so startled, it had happened so fast, that I nearly fell backward to my death.

I hastily scrambled down the fire escape and ran to the front porch. I leaped over the low brick wall that separated our porch from the Hamels' and banged on their door like a madwoman. The rain was falling hard, making it difficult to hear footsteps. I needed the Hamels to open up. I needed them to open the door now.

I thought of running to my car, but he would get me there. I peered into the night, hugging my robe and wishing someone, anyone, was out. Then I heard footsteps inside and was overcome by a wave of relief.

Until I realized the footsteps were inside *my* house. He was trudging down *my* stairs.

He was coming after *me*.

