

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, 6 a.m.

Seventy-two hours till Emily's birthday

Emily Thompson exploded off her back porch, ready to sweat. Buried in overtime the past three weeks as flu knocked down more and more of her colleagues, she'd shoved her daily run to the back burner. That was stupid, she knew—six miles every morning provided the clear head she needed for her job. Keeps my thighs in check, too! But when she was under the gun she tended to replace sensibility with the Four Horsemen—caffeine, sugar, fat and sitting around. She'd vowed last night to rectify the situation, so here she was, running fast under the French vanilla sky heralding dawn.

Her war whoops panicked spring's first robins into flight as she sailed down her steep backyard hill toward the DuPage River. Like an Olympic hurdler she cleared the drainage ditch—exactly twenty-nine strides from her porch—and the long, low stack of seasoned firewood—forty-two strides—enjoying the burn in her knotted calves. The dank smell from the river sparked her adrenaline, and she reveled in the sensation of flight as Canada geese flapped so low she could

practically rub their ivory bellies. She plunged into the narrow dirt path through the trees and tall weeds at the hill's bottom and emerged a minute later at the Naperville Riverwalk, the red-brick walking trail that edged the DuPage like eyeliner—

“Aw! Man! I can't believe it,” Emily grumbled as warm liquid splashed on her legs. She glanced at the sky and waggled her finger. “Hey! You can't give me one day without mud puddles?”

Apparently not. If the fresh-from-the-box Nikes had been black or even navy it would have been months before she crudded them up. But no, they only came in white. Sigh. She untied the left shoe, stripped the sock, wrung it like a dishrag . . . then wondered why there was a puddle in the first place. It hadn't rained since March 1. Today was April 28. In the Chicago area, spring without rain was so unheard-of the TV anchors were already chanting, “Dust Bowl! Dust Bowl!” Puzzled, she looked closer at the sock.

The wet spots were pink.

She dropped her eyes to the puddle.

It was red.

Her pulse quickened. She knelt, sniffed. A coppery scent of old pennies. She dipped two fingers, rubbed them together. Thick. Slippery.

Blood.

“What on earth is going on?” Emily whispered. She shook her chestnut hair off her face and listened.

Rippling from the river. Gnats buzzing her ears. Faint crashing in the underbrush. Raccoon? Beaver? No, heavier, a deer perhaps. Honks from distant cars, ducks quacking, doves mourning, squirrels scampering, geese flapping. Then even those hushed, leaving no sound but her breathing.

She stood, spun around. Nothing amiss. In front of her flowed the DuPage, the hip-deep river that divided the city of Naperville north and south. To her left was downtown. To her right, wooded parkland. Across the river, houses and more

park. Behind her, atop the north river crest, the two-story log home her husband Jack built as his wedding present to her. The back of their home looked down on the river. The front faced Jackson Avenue, which started at their driveway, paralleled the river to downtown and dead-ended at Washington Street, the main north-south arterial of Chicago's biggest suburb.

She turned back to the river to see a V of geese landing on the whitecaps at the precise angle Mother Nature spent millions of years perfecting. She shook her head. Except for the blood, there was nothing wrong with this picture—

Whoa.

Twenty feet ahead. At the edge of the maroon paver bricks.

Two lumps.

Before they'd looked like matted leaves. Now they didn't. She walked toward them, stomach lurching. There weren't two lumps, she realized, but three. One big, the others smaller. They had no color but radiated an emotional intensity so fierce they couldn't be anything but—

“Dead babies!” Emily gasped. She clawed her nine-millimeter Glock from under her Ramones T-shirt, front sight wobbling from the adrenaline tsunami slamming her body. She crept toward the lumps, trying to look everywhere at once. If the perp's watching he can kill you too, she reminded herself. Keep your head moving and your trigger finger cocked—

She dropped her arms and rolled her eyes, glad nobody could see her flush of embarrassment. The lumps weren't human after all.

The big one was a goose. The little ones, ducks. So freshly dead they steamed.

“Dummy,” Emily chastised herself as her heart sank back into her chest.

“They're animals!” She tried to recall the recent memo on Riverwalk predators. There were foxes. Owls. Coyotes. Dogs wandering around off-leash. The occasional bobcat, forced onto human turf because subdivisions stole its natural habitat. Any of them could have killed these birds.

She picked up a winter-burned pine branch and turned over the first bird to see

if she could guess the predator from the bite pattern. She stared, flipped the others. “The heads are gone,” she breathed. Lopped cleanly at the base of each graceful neck. With a knife. An ax. A machete, possibly, or . . . hedge clippers? Could a human have done this instead of an animal?

“No way,” she said, dismissing the notion. “Nobody brings a Lawn Boy to the Riverwalk. A coyote killed these geese, plain and simple.”

Correction, Princess, the familiar voice of her husband whispered in her head. One goose, two ducks!

“Oh, Jack,” she murmured back. “Why did you have to leave me?”

She started running.

She rounded the curve near the old limestone quarry that served as Naperville’s municipal beach, her bloodstained Nikes pounding cadence. Several minutes later she dipped under the Main Street bridge, where her footslaps echoed hollowly off the concrete.

She closed her eyes and imagined being at this spot two centuries ago, when a thunderous flood ripped the guts out of the spanking-new town. She smiled. Her husband Jack Child, a local history buff, was forever taking her on the grand tour of Naperville’s ghosts. “Here lies the Pre-Emption House,” he’d cry as they quick-marched through downtown. “Oldest tavern west of the Alleghenies! Where Abe Lincoln guzzled beer and Grover Cleveland snored away the night!” He’d wave at the far north end of Main Street. “Yonder lies the Stenger Brewery, built 1848, bulldozed 1956! Its underground cooling tunnels are still there today, buried deep underground!”

Just like Jack . . .

God! Where is all this melancholy reminiscence coming from? “Stupid birds,” she hissed. “It’s your fault.” She left the Riverwalk and sprinted south along Washington Street. Next stop Naperville Cemetery, the halfway point of her Jack-to-Jack Fun Run. For ten years she’d made this trip from the house that Jack built to where he now made his eternal rest, and she hadn’t yet found a reason to

stop.

“Hi, baby,” she wheezed as she pulled up to his grave. The lawn was shaggy here and there, the grass finally unknotting itself from long winter hibernation. “How are you today?” She leaned against the chilly stone and told her husband about the birds, the coyotes, the blood puddle—

She flinched at the shrill noise emanating from her belly. Straightening, she unclipped the departmental pager from the gunbelt that girdled her hips.

555-7428. 911.

Captain Hercules Branch, the Naperville Police Department’s chief of detectives. “911” meant “call back immediately.” But the Fun Run was the only place she didn’t carry a cellphone. She hated interruptions when talking to Jack. The cemetery office didn’t open till nine, and she was south of the business district. Let’s see, who’s awake this early?

Exactly 622 strides later—she always counted when she ran, a good practice for estimating distances at traffic accidents—Emily flashed her badge at the emergency-room receptionist at Edward Hospital. “Police officer,” she panted. “Just got paged. Use your phone?”

“Sure!” the receptionist said. “Anything for our boys in . . . well, gals in blue, too! This way.”

A minute later Emily was alone, having politely shooed her escort. She punched in Branch’s number. Mid third ring she heard a series of clicks, then a silky male voice.

“Where are you?”

“Edward Hospital,” Emily said. “Closest phone to the cemetery. What’s up?”

“You familiar with Vermont Cemetery? On the Southwest Side?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Come join me.”

“Now?” Emily frowned. Driving there and back guaranteed being late for work. She wanted that as much as a root canal. Chief of Police Kendall Cross hated her

enough as it was. He was always nitpicking and criticizing, constantly demanding she “shape up or ship out.” Even a second’s tardiness would rekindle his animosity. “Branch, I don’t have enough time before—”

“I already spoke to the chief,” Branch interrupted. “He knows you’re gonna be late and he’s not gonna give you any grief.”

None? This must be important! She hastily calculated her time. “I’ll run home, shower and drive right over,” she said. “Figure an hour.”

“Twenty minutes,” Branch said. “And forget the shower. With what’s going on here, it’s better you stay smelly.”

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