

PROLOGUE

Pine Rapids, Minnesota (headwater of the Mississippi River)

Roy liked it when Edna sat with him on the veranda, taking turns sipping on their lemonade, their rocking chairs almost touching, wood creaking on wood. It was enough for him, being there, sharing the moment, listening to the crickets and watching the bordering tamaracks fade into the darkening sky.

She wasn't the girl he'd met in high school, lithe and agile, fairy-like, where the slightest breeze might swirl her into the air as though she was an untethered feather. Now tipping the scales at 290 pounds, the nightly docking of her cheeks of burden had become a drawn-out ordeal, filled with huffs and puffs and grunts, and always ending with a long wooden groan as the cherry wood accepted its fate. And as he had done in all the evenings before, Roy looked away as though something had caught his attention. Of course, he knew that she knew, but that didn't matter. The alternative would make her uncomfortable, and he wouldn't have that, not for the world.

He'd never paid much attention to how she'd blossomed over the years. In his eyes, she was still the same girl he'd fallen for so many years ago. He loved everything about her. The way the corner of her mouth raised when she greeted him. Her thoughtful, often infectious laughter that erupted when he told one of his lame jokes, and there were plenty of those. He loved the way she helped others when darkness or depression slipped

under the door. And most of all, he loved being there, comforting her, knowing he made a difference in her life. It was enough and always would be.

The night air was cool and a chill had worked its way into his shoulders. The vest he'd bought at the thrift shop was doing little to keep him warm. Then again, it only cost a couple of bucks, and if truth be told, he did kind of like it, blue made him look younger—at least Edna thought so.

He sniffed the air then turned his head and took a deep, long breath. Smoke from the nearby campground had found its way to the porch, bringing with it images of Italian sausages over an open fire, bratwurst smothered in mustard, sprinkled with sauerkraut and onion, or just plain old wieners sizzling away—didn't matter much, 'cause it smelled so good.

Then, as though it had a strict schedule to keep, the evening breeze picked up its pace; its faint breath chilling his skinny, spotted arms. He glanced over at Edna. She never seemed to notice the cold. In fact, he was pretty sure she liked it, so he kept his mouth shut and was content to sit there at her side.

It was moments like these when he'd take account of his life, adding the good and the bad, hoping the needle would tip in his favor, revealing he was indeed a good man. And yet, regardless of the outcome, he would always find himself wondering what it would've been like, how it would've all turned out, had he not thrown his duffle bag in the back of his brother's pickup that gray, bleak, winter morning. But that was a lifetime ago. He'd done his patriotic duty and there was no going back; and besides, he and Edna had become great friends over the years, and he would not trade that.

"You think it's natural for a boy to spend so much time on his own?" Edna asked.

Roy glanced over at Edna, giving her a questioning look. "He's been here, what? A week? He's gettin' his bearings that's all, most natural thing in the world. A boy's got to learn about his environment and think things through. Normal as cowboy boots and belt buckles if you ask me. Solitude, it be good for the mind."

"I suppose if you say so," Edna said, putting down her lemonade. Then she shook her head. "No Roy, I wish it were true. I wish it was like you said, but he's just not right. He's a troubled boy."

"Now, Edna," Roy said, a worried look on his face. "You're gonna get your blood pressure goin' and that'll do you no good. You know that'd be a fact . . . besides, his daddy should be coming for him soon. So you've got to calm yourself."

"Well, *Roy*," Edna's tone sharpened. "Sometimes, it's just not so easy to do, now is it?" She took a sip of lemonade and dabbed the corners of her eyes with a tissue.

Roy said nothing.

"Oh Roy, it's just, well, I caught him this morning with one of the puppies. Daisy, you know, the runt, the black one, got that dab of white paint on her nose and those ridiculous floppy ears."

Roy smiled. "Sure, I think I know the one."

"Well, this morning, I saw him standing over by the corner of the barn; you know the corner with the rain barrel." Edna sighed. "The thing is, he had something in the barrel, and I could hear it splashing around some. I knew something wasn't right, so I hurried over as best I could, and there was Daisy trying to catch her breath, her little white nose barely out of the water, her eyes big and wide as silver dollars. I guess he must've

heard me coming up from behind, because he turned; and when he did—*well*, he had this grin on his face. . . . I swear to God! If I hadn't shown up—”

“*Edna*, the boy wouldn't do such a thing, he's your grandson for mercy sakes.

What'd make you think such a thing?”

Edna let out a rattled breath and turned to him. “Roy, you know very well, why . . .”

Roy reached over and patted Edna's arm. “Come now old girl; his *momma*, she's been dead for some time now; she's long gone, she's never coming back . . .”

Edna pulled her shawl up around her massive shoulders and sat back. “I suppose you're right, and I know I shouldn't be thinking this way. But it's . . . it's just that, this morning, when I looked into that boy's eyes. Well, and I know it's going to sound crazy.” She sighed again, grabbing hold of Roy's withered arm and gave it a squeeze. “But when I looked into those eyes of his, I swear to God, I could see his *momma* staring back at me.”

CHAPTER 1

*Lancaster County, Minnesota
Present day*

As the sun descended below the treetops, its granular light filtering through the bare bones of the forest, smudges of tawny brown and hues of rusty orange crept across the white-planked siding, shading the board edges to a firebrick red, giving the church porch the color and pallor of a hot oven.

Father Paul knelt in front of the double doors and picked up an eight-foot long two-by-four, straddling it across the brass handles, nudging it this way and that until he was sure a fine balance had been achieved. *Mmm, maybe one more tap . . . Yeah, that'll do it.*

Satisfied, he turned his face to the late day sun, letting the warmth penetrate his eyelids, his world now blood-red and comforting. *Oh, I really must remember this moment. Certain times in one's life must be held close, nurtured, savored for another day—defining moments—moments that make the man.* He looked around and smirked. *Yeah, I'll remember.*

He turned to Alvin Oates, an elder from the brethren, who was flat on his ass, cross-legged, not more than five feet away. *And I hope you'll remember too, my son.*

The cocoon of twilight, the crumbling final moments of the day, and the short walk into darkness and all the possibilities that came with it, brought a level of joy he could never fully explain. It was as though he was an artist, stroking and dabbing at the canvas, the thick oily pigments binding with the cotton fibers, seeping in, forging a tangible connection with the world surrounding him. *Maybe that's it—I'm an artist . . .* He shook his head and smiled. He knew better.

The fragrance of fresh-cut pine rising from the two-by-four caught his attention, bringing with it a sense of calm, wrapping him in a cloak of tranquility and warmth. He looked up. “You do love me, don’t you, Lord?” he whispered, as a tremble trickled up his throat, morphing into a chuckle. “Yes, of course. I know you do.”

He scanned the area one last time, unbuttoning his black overcoat with his gloved hands.

It was a good vantage point. The church sat at the top of a grass-covered knoll, maybe five miles out of town, the grounds encircled by a dense stand of aspen and birch. The only access was by way of a quarter-mile of dirt road, grass grown thick between its tracks, curving its way through the woods before arriving at the mouth of the church parking lot. Three older model sedans, all gray and dull, were parked next to the walkway. At the far end of the lot sat a rusty, light-green, three-quarter ton flatbed with the words *GOD THE REDEEMER* stenciled in brown letters across the driver’s-side door. As Father Paul read the words aloud, a grin cut the corner of his mouth. He could feel God’s presence.

A piano melody accompanied by a small chorus erupted from inside the church, breaking his concentration. They were old voices, soothing voices, the kind he’d listened to as a child, the kind that filled the church every Sunday morning. It made him think of old hymnals, padded kneelers, worn wooden pews—happier times. A smile had almost surfaced when he realized he’d heard the tune before, many times in fact. Yet, for some unfathomable reason, he couldn’t quite place it.

And yet there it was, plain as day, the hymnal splayed before him, the words scrolling across the page; low hanging words, words that he should be able to reach out and grasp.

He pondered the tune, shifting his jaw to one side. He couldn't explain why forgetting the name to a song, or anything else for that matter, was so very annoying. Still, as he watched those illusive little letters prance about at the worn fringes of his mind, smiling at him, taunting him—*well*, they really pissed him off. He knew they shouldn't, but yeah, they did.

A familiar ache was working its way across his back muscles, wrapping around his shoulder blades, making them tight and sorer by the second . . .

It's not that he liked to dilly-dally. *No*, of course not, on the contrary. But he had allowed himself to be diverted from the task at hand, and there was always a price to pay for such a petty indulgence. Still, the nagging voice in his head wouldn't let up, reminding him his once infallible memory was, well . . . not so infallible anymore.

"Enough of this," he muttered under his breath, reaching his gloved hand into the duffle bag next to him and pulling out a yellow cordless drill. He replaced the drill bit with a screwdriver attachment, then squeezed the drill's trigger a couple of times. The sharp whine of the electric motor brought with it a clarity and focus he found exhilarating.

Alvin turned his head toward the sound.

Father Paul nodded. "Time to carry out God's will. Are you ready, my son?"

Alvin's mouth twitched, his eyes shifting back-and-forth, making him look like a confused child.

Father Paul squeezed the trigger once more, satisfying himself it was operating as it should, then drove three four inch screws through the two-by-four and into the right door jamb. Duck-walking across the porch to the other side of the double doors he drove in another set of screws, sealing the door shut. *Unbelievable. It's right there on the tip of my tongue.* He tried humming a few bars, but still nothing would come.

He knew it was not the end of the world—it just bugged him, bugged him a lot. *The name will come—course it will, most likely when I'm in the tub tonight, popping to the surface like a bar of soap. Yes, a good soak will help. Always does.*

He looked at Alvin. *Mmm, maybe he'd know?* He considered the man for a moment, then shook his head. There would be no help there. A true-blue follower, Alvin, but not particularly gifted. Shrugging his shoulders, he resigned himself to the fact that it would just have to wait and turned his attention back to the task at hand. “Rise and shine brother. Time to saddle up.”

Alvin got to his feet. He was a tall man, narrow at the shoulders, long faced, with a big, lopsided smile. The other men all seemed to like Brother Alvin, for he offended no one and no one bothered him.

Father Paul watched with interest as Alvin tried his best to act calm. Absolute obedience was all he'd ever asked of his followers. Sensing the attention, Alvin shifted his eyes away.

Such innocence, Father Paul thought, and made a mental note of how much he loved the man.

While he preferred to work alone, Alvin had been useful in the past, at times even instrumental in a successful outcome. More importantly, he knew Alvin could be trusted. For no one was more dedicated to him and his doctrines than Brother Alvin.

Father Paul cocked his head, sensing an uneasy intensity brewing. “What is it my son, you seem distracted?”

“It’s, it’s just that . . .” Alvin’s voice trailed off and a thin, taut grin parted his lips. “I don’t know, but this being a church and all . . .” He lowered his head and began rubbing the sole of his boot on the porch deck, then looked up. “Father, will God be mad at us?”

Father Paul frowned. “Did not God send us here my son?” The tone of his voice soft and understanding.

Alvin bowed his head again, looking ashamed, his gaze now focused on his fingernails as he picked at the raw, red cuticles.

“Brother Alvin, we are all God’s children. We are here today to do his bidding, so that we may experience his promised miracle.” Then in a paternal tone, he asked, “Are you questioning God’s will, my son?”

“No . . . no, of course not, forgive me Father. It’s just that, sometimes, I don’t know, I just need to hear you tell me.”

“I am here for you Alvin and always will be, you must know that.”

Alvin’s facial muscles relaxed, the skin below his eyes sagging.

“Shall we?” Father Paul asked, a hint of excitement in his voice.

“Yeah, I guess so . . .”

Father Paul reached back into the duffle bag and withdrew two, pump-action 12-gauge shotguns, handing one to Alvin.

Jacking a slug into the chamber, Father Paul jumped down off the front steps and worked his way around to a side window across from the pulpit and peered in. Under his breath, he said, “*Ohhh . . .* but aren’t you a pleasant surprise, Mrs. Hudson. And, you look so very pretty this evening.”

Myrna Hudson was sitting at an upright piano pounding out the hymn, body erect, shoulders drawn back, her gray hair tied in a neat bun. Two men stood next to the piano, both close to her vintage, both wearing faded green-and-yellow checked plaid shirts. They sang at her side, glowing in spirit, comrades in faith.

The song felt so very familiar, and yet he still couldn’t quite place it. And while he knew he should know it, he also knew such matters would have to be delved into at a more appropriate time. A few seconds later, he saw Alvin poke his head up, peering in through a window on the other side of the church, a worried look on his droopy face.

Their eyes met, and Alvin gave a weak thumbs-up signal just as the singing inside the church came to a lull . . .

Father Paul counted down. “Three, two, one,” then raised his shotgun and, with the tip of the barrel, tapped out a single pane of the lattice window.

The old timers stopped, turning their heads in the direction of the breaking glass. Father Paul squeezed off the first shot, and a tremendous boom filled the church, rattling the windowpanes. A split second later, the slug pierced the taller man’s forehead, exiting the back of his skull and spraying out gobs of gray brain matter and a fine, bright red mist.

Alvin fired, catching the other man in the shoulder, swinging him around on his heels as Father Paul planted a single round into the man’s chest, throwing him backwards onto the floor.

Father Paul's heart raced as he shifted his gaze to the piano. He raised an eyebrow and grinned, his voice calm and reassuring as he asked, "*Myrna . . .* are you hiding from me?"

He looked down, and his grin broadened. The hem of her paisley dress was poking out from behind the piano. The thought of her curled up like a small child, as though hidden and somehow invisible, touched him in an unexpected way. Looking over he saw Alvin's big head still framed by the side window, and he waved him off.

Alvin's face seemed to droop more, then his head dropped out of sight and he made his way around to the front of the church to stand guard.

Father Paul withdrew his shotgun from the window and jogged to the back of the church. Climbing a short flight of stairs, he kicked in the side door and walked straight over to the piano. The room smelled odd, like old hymnals and lemon oil, with more than a trace of burnt sulfur. He stopped to study the exposed section of Myrna's dress. Rectangular, maybe six inches in length, it bore a teardrop tapestry of purple and orange on a dark blue background. *Cotton*, he guessed.

"Myrna." His voice was soft and controlled. "Do you remember me? I must say, I remember you."

She didn't respond with words, only a snotty sniffle.

He stared down at the fabric. "Don't be afraid, Mrs. Hudson. Please, come out from behind there. I know the floor must be so terribly uncomfortable. Our bones do hurt us more as we age, don't they? And it is such a *very* hard floor . . . *ohh my . . .*"

Again, Myrna did not reply.

“Mrs. Hudson, I am talking to you.” The timber of his voice strengthened, then a moment later turned almost musical. “*Come out, come out, from wherever you are. Now!* If you don’t mind.”

The sound of Myrna’s breathing grew louder, as did her weeping, until at last she slid out from behind the piano. She was on her knees with one hand held out in front of her face. “I . . . I don’t know you . . .” she whispered, her face wet with tears. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

Myrna looked down at the floor and said nothing, her body bent over, trembling, arms crossed over her chest.

“I know it has been such a long time Mrs. Hudson, but I want you to think. I want you to think way back to the days when life was simple, and all one had to do was believe in the future. Back to those early days when anything was possible. To the days when a young woman was found dead in her lover’s apartment, her throat slit ear to ear.”

Myrna’s body went rigid.

Father Paul ran his tongue along the edge of his front teeth. “You *do* remember Mrs. Hudson. Don’t you?”

She looked up, her eyes widening. “Oh my God, it’s you.”

“Well done, Mrs. Hudson. I knew you’d remember.”

She looked to the ceiling as though asking for help, but there would be no help, no one to come to her rescue, no one to calm her fears. She dropped her gaze to him, hands over her face, her body quivering as she cried.

What an odd thing to do, Father Paul thought. “Really, Mrs. Hudson, whatever is wrong with you? I mean, can’t you feel him? He’s here with us now, watching you, watching me.”

Her crying quieted as she tried to decipher what he’d said, then she started up again, louder than before.

“Oh, Mrs. Hudson, please don’t be that way,” he pleaded, taking a step forward and placing his hand on her head. He flinched as her warm, moist scalp touched his skin. “Now, now, dear, you shouldn’t get yourself all worked up. I know it has been such a long journey for both of us. But now, a new journey begins for you.” With those words, he straightened his back and cleared his throat. “As I stand here before you, Mrs. Hudson, I offer to you my sincere thanks. For your sacrifice is but another stitch that shall bring God’s glorious miracle into focus. Praise be the Lord!”

Myrna’s trembling increased, her body shaking as she tucked her head down, pressing her chin to her chest.

Father Paul stepped around behind her, raised his shotgun in the air, and brought the butt down hard against the back of her head, crushing her skull and severing her spinal cord. She dropped instantly, rolling onto her side, her jaw slack, her body and legs gently twitching. A few seconds later, she stopped moving altogether.

Father Paul put his boot on her shoulder and flipped her onto her back, causing her head to roll sideways. Her eyes, now dull and unfocused, stared off into some distant place she’d never find.

Kneeling down, he withdrew his hunting knife from its sheath and positioned it over her belly. With a steady hand he inserted the tip of the blade into her dress, cutting

the fabric from stomach to chin. In one motion he ripped the fabric back, exposing a lace bra and her pale, powdery flesh that somehow reminded him of bleached white flour. A gold chain hung down the side of her neck, a pendant dangled below her left ear. He pinched the chain with his fingers and brought the pendant closer. *A crucifix, how interesting.*

With his index finger and thumb, he began counting her ribs, starting from just below her collarbone. Satisfied with the location, he repositioned the steel tip of the knife. Pressing down, the blade dimpled her milky skin until a red dot pooled around its razor sharp tip.

CHAPTER 2

Parish Road 9 snaked through the depths of Louisiana bayou country. It wasn't somewhere you'd want engine trouble. Few used it, preferring the straight lanes of Highway 32 that got you where you were going in half the time. But there was something to be said for cruising a backcountry road in an old pickup with the windows down. Josh loved his '63 Chevy Step-Side, even though she'd just died, her passenger-side wheels resting in a patch of sweet clover and alligator weed that all but smothered her hubcaps.

Josh tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and turned to Eddie. "Twice in one month? You'd think I'd learn, wouldn't you boy?" Eddie was riding shotgun, sprawled out on his side, his big head pressed against the passenger door. He half-turned his sad, chocolate lab face toward Josh, his droopy yellow eyes somewhat puzzled by his buddy's words. But since none of them included walk, treat, or ball, it couldn't have been that important. Leaning his head back against the door, he exhaled in a long slow puff, ballooning his slack lower lip, exposing his teeth and pink gums.

Mary had told Josh she was finishing up unloading supplies for Crawlies, then she'd be right out. He looked at his watch and frowned—*she should've made it here by now*.

The last time the oil pump died he'd spent the better part of an afternoon cleaning it and had done a pretty good job, or at least he'd thought so. Mary wasn't so kind, telling him straight out he was wishful thinking and should get a new one. He'd tried to argue the point with her, but she'd hear none of it, finishing off by telling him he was truly full of shit. The part that annoyed him the most was, his best friend was usually right.

It was mid-morning, the Louisiana sun was hot and the truck's cab was beginning to smell like an old canvas tent sprinkled with engine oil. And yet to Josh, it was an agreeable scent, reminding him of long summer days. Of cornfields and high-top black sneakers left untied. Of flies peppered on yellow strips hanging in loose coils from the ceiling of his uncle's gas station. Of heat vapors rising off of the gas pumps, and car tires crunching on the hard packed gravel. Of the sound of the noon train passing in the distance, its steel wheels clacking, the flat metallic notes fading away as it rolled out of sight. Most of all, it reminded him of how good a frosted cola felt in his hand, and how the fizz burned his throat. He looked over at Eddie.

Eddie rolled his eye sideways and saw Josh watching him. A second later, the 115-pound lab was sitting upright, his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth, his crazed eyes saying—*guess what? I got this great idea . . .*

Josh reached over and held Eddie's big head in his hands, kissed his forehead, and then pushed the passenger door open. The big dog squirmed around on the bench seat, his long tail whacking Josh in the face as he jumped out, hightailing it into the bush. Another great adventure had begun.

~ ~ ~

Close to thirty minutes later, Mary finally arrived in her late model Pathfinder, a toolbox in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other. She was short in stature, arguably over five-foot-one, lean, and had the gait of a lumberjack. Her hair was kept short, cut just below her ears, her black, smoky eyes separated by a generous nose.

Josh's sandals were sticking out from under the pickup as she walked up.

“You’re one lucky dipstick, you know that? Arnold says there aren’t too many oil pumps left in the whole state for an old shitbox like yours. Said you should upgrade a few decades, better chance you’ll get what you want, when you need it. He thinks you’re, ah . . .” Her voice took on a sugary sweet tone. “*Challenged*. But, don’t be worrying your massive cranium about it, I set him straight.”

“Yeah, I bet you did.” Josh stopped what he was doing and poked his head out from under the wheel well. “I kinda like things to stay the same. Simpler that way.”

“Sure you do, numbnuts. Could do it too, if you could make the world stand still,” she said, her eyes now brimming with expectation.

Ahh man, here it comes, he thought. He wormed himself from under the truck and got to his feet, trying to rub a kink out of his neck. As he paused to consider what she’d said, a rather large bead of sweat gathered on the tip of his nose.

“Okay Mary. What’s going on?”

She looked up into the sky. “*Nothing*. . . . Nothing at all.”

“Bullshit—nothing,” he said, using his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his nose.

She lowered her gaze and smirked.

“C’mon Mary, spill it.”

She reached into the paper bag and pulled out an oil pump, handing it to him. “*She* called.”

“She?”

“Yeah. ‘She’ called, you know ‘*her*’. The FBI.”

“Ohhh . . .” he said, guilt hitting him hard, wrenching tight in his gut. He knew this day would come, it had to. It’s not like it was something that could be avoided. Still, he had

forced it deep into his subconscious, willing it into submission, convincing himself he could somehow control how the events would unfold. But now, she'd made the call.

It had been a full year since he'd last seen Rachael. He'd done the right thing, or at least that's what he'd been telling himself, waiting until he'd calmed down and sorted things out. *Right . . .* The fact of the matter was, it was all a load of crap. He was in the wrong and he knew it. "So, what'd she say?"

"Well, we talked about the weather, you know, and how it was cold way up there in New York City without you. How she missed the sight of your big butt when the sun hits it just right. And how the dew forms on your lower lip when you're in heat."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, trying not to react, as it would only bring on more.

Mary looked around. "Where's Eddie? I thought he was with you this morning?"

"Out for a run. So, you gonna tell me?"

Mary's eyes grew tired and she took a breath. "She says there's been some action in Lancaster County, Minnesota, outside of Lynchfield. Something ugly went down, I could tell from her voice. Didn't want to tell me about it though. *Need to know* and all that—you know how she is. . . . Said it happened day before yesterday. Wants you to call her."

Josh swallowed hard. "Yeah, okay." He could tell Mary was agitated; the subject of Rachael never sat well with her. "Thanks for bringing me the pump."

Mary's gaze hardened and she replied in an aloof tone, "You're welcome."

After a moment of silence, Josh asked, "Any chance you can you stick around? I might need a hand."

Mary didn't respond, acting as if she might've seen Eddie in the bushes.

Josh continued. "Lancaster County? Your parents were from around there, right?"

Mary looked back at him. “Not far off. About 10 miles east of the county line, a town called Meadow, outside of Lynchfield. Well, not really a town, more like a hamlet. Never did know the difference, still don’t.”

“Huh, I think I remember you telling me about it. So, when exactly did you leave the Meadow?”

“*Leave the Meadow . . . ?* Jesus, Josh, you make me sound like a lost heifer.”

Josh raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, okay. So, when did you step out . . . I mean . . . move on?”

“I got out when I was thirteen. That’s when I went to live with my grandparents in Nevada. Spent my summers in Meadow though.” She thought for a moment before asking, “Why, what’s it to you?” Then her eyes lit up. “*What?* You want me to tag along?”

“What makes you think I’m even interested in getting involved?”

Mary gave him a knowing look. “Because, *she* called you.”