

## Chapter One

IF YOU SPEED, it's about three hours on I-80 from Iowa City to Aldoburg. I was barely doing seventy-five, but my steering wheel vibrated in protest. One set of taillights after another vanished into the darkness, leaving me alone with my thoughts and my housemate, Vince. He'd begged me to take the passenger seat, but driving gave me a much-needed feeling of control. I hoped that he could wait a while longer before bombarding me with questions about details.

We'd been in the middle of a huge fight when the phone rang. It was Hortie Riley, my Aunt Zee's best friend, her voice thick with tears. Zee needed me. Glad was dead. Murdered. In back of the radio station that she and Zee had run since 1967. Since I'd been a little girl.

Vince tugged at the seatbelt that strained against his wide girth. He crossed his legs tightly and clasped his hands over his top knee. "How could it be a hate crime?" he asked. "Everybody loved your aunts."

I pressed my glasses into the top of my nose and gave myself a lecture. Vince was my best friend. He had immediately offered to come with me. He too loved Glad. "There was something spray painted above her body." My voice caught. "They spray painted 'dyke' on the back wall of the station." I squeezed the steering wheel. Zee and Glad loved that station almost as much as they loved each other. They'd been roommates in college and a team ever since—in business and in life.

"What was Glad doing in back of the station?" Vince asked.

I didn't want to believe that someone had lured her outside. Someone she knew. "She might have been checking the rain gauge," I said. "Maybe she wanted a smoke."

The smell of cigarette smoke always made me think of Glad. When I was a kid, she read me all sorts of fairy tales—my choice, not hers. I'd sit next to her on the sofa, and she'd offer me books about Johnny Appleseed, Clara Barton, and Abraham Lincoln. "Real people," she'd urge. But I always insisted on a large Brothers Grimm that belonged to my older sister. Glad would finally give in and rest the tome on her lap. Her legs, long as Jack's beanstalk, jutted way beyond the book. I nestled underneath one of her arms, and the smell of cigarette smoke whisked me away to the magical worlds of Thumbelina, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel.

Tears burned my eyes. I blinked them back and focused on the semis streaming past on the other side of the interstate.

Once, I asked Glad if I could grow my own hair as long as Rapunzel's. She simply snorted the way she always did when she thought someone was being ridiculous. I tried to imagine exactly how her snort sounded, and a tear rolled down my cheek.

"Sure you don't want me to drive?" Vince handed me a Kleenex.

"I'm fine."

Vince stroked his goatee. He's seldom at a loss for words, but whenever he is, he rubs his chin. "We don't have to talk about it any more," he said.

"There's nothing else to say. Hortie wasn't very coherent. She needed to get back to Zee." I wondered how my aunt was holding up. What would she do without Glad?

Vince gave me another Kleenex. I blew my nose and scowled at the red numbers on my car's clock. It would be nearly two in the morning before we made it to Zee's. Before I could offer her any comfort at all.

"Remember when I first met your aunts?" Vince asked.

I nodded. We'd both been in a university production of *Romeo and Juliet*. He was Mercutio, and I was the nurse.

“Backstage after the show, Zee was so effusive,” Vince said. “I was the best Mercutio she’d ever seen. So handsome in my costume. She couldn’t believe I was just a freshman. I should have had the lead.” Vince turned up the air conditioning. “But Glad just smiled at me and said, ‘Not bad.’”

“That’s Glad in a nutshell,” I said. “She was hard to get to know.”

“She loved you,” Vince said.

Did she? I thought of her strawberry blond hair glinting in the sun, her arms outstretched, as she waited for me at the bottom of Redwing Park’s biggest slide. There was no question that Glad loved me when I was a kid, but things changed after I moved in with her and Zee my sophomore year of high school.

That year, my mom discovered me kissing Susie Sorenson. Dad remained blissfully oblivious to everything except his precious patients, but Mother resolved to shape me into a happy heterosexual. Unaware of the irony, she asked a nun, her second cousin from Omaha, to talk to me about the pleasures of conjugal love. When that didn’t work, she signed me up for a Mary Kay makeover and a sewing class. Finally, she sent me on a date with her best friend’s nephew, a gangly cross-country star from exotic Des Moines. He talked about how he wanted to be a pediatrician and responded to all my conversational gambits with an over-enthusiastic “No kidding.” After I politely explained that he was cute and sweet but that I liked girls, he tried to unhook my bra. I packed my bags and moved across town to my aunts’ faster than you could say alternative lifestyle.

Zee was thrilled to add me to their household, but raising a teenager was not on Glad’s top-ten list of cherished dreams. Glad seldom joined in our Trivial Pursuit or Monopoly marathons, and she never went shopping or hiking with us. When she and Zee thought I was asleep, they argued about me.

“Do you know you’re doing eighty-five?” Vince interrupted my thoughts.

As I eased my foot off the gas, my headlights flashed on a white semi with bold red and blue letters:

Wal-Mart

We Sell For Less

Always.

The discount giant wanted to open a store on the south edge of Aldoburg, and for the better part of a year, Zee and Glad had been campaigning against it. The last time Zee visited me, we combed my station’s archives for anti Wal-Mart programs even though I gently reminded her that KICI and Iowa City had lost their battle with the store.

I nibbled at a hangnail. “I should call Orchid,” I said.

Vince gave an exaggerated shudder.

Orchid is the kind of lesbian who gives the rest of us a bad name. She hates men and feels superior to everyone who has ever slept with one. She doesn’t trust women who shave their legs, and she believes that line-dancing is patriarchal. She is also my boss and nemesis. I used to dream of becoming the program director at the alternative radio station where I DJ. That dream ended when guess-who got the position.

“She’ll probably be delighted by my absence,” I said. “Now she’ll get to handle the LGBT reading series her own way.” I didn’t like the bitterness in my voice, but it was a relief to fall into the routine of griping about work. “She won’t admit it, but she vetoed my first proposal because she doesn’t want any bisexual or transgender writers. And I know she vetoed my second one because there were too many men.” I passed three cars and turned the air conditioning down.

“She’s trying to take the series away from me,” I said. “Get this. She vetoed my most recent list—which included almost all lesbians—because she doesn’t want any mystery writers. She says that mysteries valorize violence. Give me a break.”

I whipped back into the right lane and sighed. My ranting hadn’t taken my mind off Glad.

THE TEXACO OFF the Deep River exit was so brightly lit you could perform surgery while filling your tank. But fortuitous lighting it was, since I had to search for my backpack before finding it wedged in between Vince’s two monster suitcases. The man doesn’t know the meaning of traveling light. Like nature, he abhors a vacuum. He had filled the floor of my once clutter-free backseat with super-size pumps and stilettos that could have doubled as lethal weapons. They were destined to adorn the cast of *La Cage Aux Folles*, a community theatre production in which Vince was both the star and, as he would say, the “wardrobe consultant.” What would I find the next time he borrowed my car? Fake boobs on the passenger seat?

As I slung my backpack over my shoulder and lifted a nozzle from the pump, Vince stretched his arms above his head and inhaled dramatically. “Ah, fresh country air. What is that fragrance? Eau de Hog Lot?” He always made fun of Iowa. Never mind that he chose to live here instead of his beloved Chicago.

I started the gas and gazed at Vince—black pleated shorts, a purple polo shirt, Birks, and a leather ankle bracelet. His dark, wavy hair was pressed flat because he and the entire cast of *La Cage* had been trying on wigs to see which ones captured the “essence” of their characters.

Said wigs were piled high on our coffee table when I arrived home with my date. My first date, mind you, since Anne left me fourteen months ago, claiming that I was “emotionally unavailable.” My lovely date and I had waited weeks to find a time that worked for us. Then finally, after struggling through awkward small talk over dinner and shoving aside my self-doubt, I promised her a romantic nightcap at my place. Instead, we found a houseful of men in various states of dishabille. Three drag queens rifled through a mound of makeup on the dining room table. A slender man with a triangle tattoo on his shoulder wrestled with a pair of panty hose on the couch. And Vince—who had promised to be in abstentia so I could have the house to myself—fluttered about in a gold evening gown two sizes too small, offering beers to his entourage. My beers. When he saw me, he fussed with his white feather boa and suggested that everyone head to the Alley Cat. His friends took the hint, but, unfortunately, so did my date. She followed a fuchsia evening gown out the door.

The scene that ensued hadn’t been pretty. Then Hortie called.

Murder. How could that be?

I wrenched the nozzle out of my car and headed inside the gas station. Winding my way through a narrow aisle of cookies and crackers, I found the Ladies Room, which reeked of disinfectant. I followed the directions on a cardboard sign and jiggled the toilet handle after I flushed. Pink liquid soap oozed down one side of the sink. I pumped some onto my hands and stared into the mirror. I was still in date attire, but I didn’t like what I saw. My black tank top accentuated my garishly red hair, anemically pale skin, and flat chest. I’d hoped to make an impression, so I’d opted for a real bra instead of a jogging one, but you couldn’t tell. Flat is flat. I’d also swept my unwieldy hair back with a barrette instead of braiding it, hoping that my date would find me classically Romantic or at least quasi-Pre-Raphaelite, but with my hair puffing out at the sides of my neck, I looked like a scrawny Bozo the Clown on estrogen. What had I been thinking?

I emerged from the den of disinfectant, grabbed a Coke, and then headed back to the cookie aisle, where I seized a fun-size package of Chips Ahoy and regular size package of Oreos with Double Stuff. Near the cash register, I snagged some Twizzlers for good measure. As I handed the clerk my credit card, I glanced outside. Vince was washing my windshield.

Wonders never cease. Since he moved in six months ago, not a day has gone by without me asking him to pick up after himself.

Let me set the record straight. I am not a neat freak. Nor am I the sort of person who strives for the *Better Homes and Gardens* look, but I have to draw the line when I find Vince's stack of outdated *TV Guides* teetering on the back of the toilet, which has its seat up yet again. I also take umbrage with the pine shavings that make their way from his guinea pigs' cage onto the floor of every room. And I loathe the Ricky Martin poster that he hung next to my Georgia O'Keeffe in the living room. Try being a thirty-five-year-old lesbian who has to explain Ricky Martin to houseguests. It gets old fast.

AS I PASSED a car and gnawed another Twizzler, Vince punched buttons on his cell phone, seeking a hapless soul to tend his menagerie. On his third try, he began cajoling. The guinea pigs were no trouble at all. Norma Desmond, his favorite cat, was a tad excitable, but all the cats got along beautifully. No, the cats never attacked the guinea pigs. Or the hamsters. Of course, all the cages and litter boxes had just been cleaned.

The hapless soul finally relented, and Vince called his assistant director at the animal shelter to explain he'd be away a few days. Vince had begun volunteering at the shelter his second year of college and had worked his way up to director. I was happy for him and jealous as hell. What would Orchid say when I called?

I polished off the Twizzlers, took a swig of Coke, and asked Vince to open the Chips Ahoy.

"Someone has a sweet tooth," he cooed.

I held out my hand for the cookies and turned on the radio. I surfed the static until a tune came in: Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler," one of Glad's favorites. I shut it off and chomped on a cookie. "You want one?"

"Better not," he said. "I've got to lose weight for the show." Vince always has a reason for losing weight, a new boyfriend or a pair of bargain jeans that were only the eensiest bit too tight. He fancied that his goatee and mustache slenderized his face. When he had to shave them off for *La Cage*, his offstage histrionics about his lack of cheekbones would no doubt rival his onstage performance.

Vince punched in more numbers and cancelled two dates. He called one of them schmookims, and I started to wish that he hadn't come along. I had no one to call but Orchid. Vince always had a date, and he took them out to expensive restaurants even when he still owed me for last month's utilities.

"Jared didn't seem very interested in rescheduling." Vince pouted and folded his arms over his chest.

"Is he the bathroom hog?"

"Not sweet Jared," Vince said. "He's a natural beauty."

"Someone was in there for almost an hour. What was he doing? Cleansing his pores one by one?"

"It's not a sin to take good care of yourself," Vince said.

We rode in blessed silence for a couple of minutes.

“Can I have a cookie after all?” Vince asked.

“It’ll have to be an Oreo,” I said. “The Chips Ahoy are history.”

Vince tore open the package. “You’ve consumed a lot of sugar,” he said, “even for Mara the Metabolic Wonder.” Vince made yet another call, this one to the director of *La Cage*. “Just a few days,” he said. “Word of honor. I’ve got my script with me.” He turned off his cell phone and stared out the window.

“Sounds like George was giving you a hard time.” I often did the lights and sound for the theatre, so I knew how anal-retentive George could be, and I felt touched that Vince had risked his lead role on my behalf. Then I felt guilty for being angry with him and envying his career path and love life.

I passed three semis—all red, white, and blue—all belonging to Wal-Mart. “I’ve seen at least seven or eight of those tonight,” I said.

“They’re everywhere,” Vince quipped.

“They are everywhere,” I said. “They may soon be in Aldoburg.”

Vince twisted an Oreo apart. “Sorry, Mar-Bar. I forgot about your aunts’ campaign.”

A Wal-Mart truck eased up on my right as we went downhill. “I wonder what will happen now.” I reached for an Oreo. “Zee’s up against pretty big odds. Wal-Mart opens a new mega-store every two days.” I didn’t add that Wal-Mart is the world’s largest privately owned business, that its annual revenues exceed the gross domestic products of entire western European nations.

“I dated someone who worked there once,” Vince said. “He despised that horrid blue smock, and he wasn’t too thrilled with his salary either.”

“Glad thinks—” I corrected myself. “Glad thought that Wal-Mart lowered wages and working conditions all over the world.” I sighed and tried to stretch my left leg.

“I bet Aldoburg can stave off Wal-Mart,” Vince said.

I appreciated his attempt to encourage me, but only one Iowa town has ever successfully pressured Wal-Mart to withdraw. The town is much bigger than Aldoburg, and the last time I drove through it, Wal-Mart was entrenched on its northern edge.

I grabbed another cookie, and Vince put the package in the backseat. “You’re going to be sick,” he said, “and I’m going to lose my girlish figure.”

We sped along in silence. I pictured Glad at her computer keyboard, pounding out ads and speeches against the discount devil. She always attacked the keys as if she were furiously playing a Beethoven sonata. “You’re going to break that thing,” Zee would say. Glad would lean back in her swivel chair, arms atop her head, and grin. Zee would sigh, kiss Glad’s forehead, and call her a big lug. But that was just a game. Not a real fight like the kind they had about me.

“Do you think your parents will be with Zee when we get there?” Vince asked.

“Maybe.”

“Didn’t Hortie say?”

“Vince,” I said, “no more questions for now, okay?” But I couldn’t stop the questions spinning through my own mind. Who killed Glad? Would the murderer go after Zee next?