

Prologue

New Year's Eve
December 31, 1997 7:00 P.M.

The nightmare had returned the previous night, a howling, red-hot inferno consuming everything Nora Hartmann held dear. Carrie's face, young and vulnerable, floating in the midst of it. Dark curls transformed into tendrils of flame. Eyes wide with terror. Pitiful cry keening: *Save me, Mommy*. Even now the remembered dream wrapped talons of fear around Nora's heart. Would she never heal? Would it never be finished?

She carried the tray of hors d'oeuvres into the dining room, arranged it on the table with the others, and drifted over to the front window.

It had been a snowy day, and a few lazy flakes still floated through the halo cast by the front porch light. The last colored lights of the holiday season, charmingly hooded by fresh snow, lent a festive air to the neighborhood. In sharp contrast, the house across the street was an empty hole as dark and silent as death. Night shrouded the realtor's sign at the foot of the drive, but Nora knew it was there, a constant reminder that a way of life she once cherished was gone forever.

She shook her head impatiently. Why, on today of all days, couldn't she let it go?

Perhaps it was the party. Perhaps her preparations were too reminiscent of the summer barbeque that had set her feet on the path that would lead to that fateful night of horror. It had been a beautiful day in June...

Chapter One

Saturday, June 11 5:30 P.M.

Rudy Schmidt adjusted the focus of the binoculars and slowly scanned the house across the street. Although thick foliage screened most of the houses in this hilltop neighborhood, Rudy had discovered that this particular corner of his dining-room window afforded an unobstructed view of the Hartmann house. From there he could see the recessed front door and could monitor anyone coming or going. To the left were the windows into the little den where Nora sat in the evenings to read. The big bay windows to the right accessed the dining room. Behind it lay the kitchen eating area where he often observed her sitting at the kitchen table or moving back and forth in the course of some task. Now he saw nothing. The late-afternoon sun glanced off the windows, making them impenetrable to the binoculars. No matter. Very shortly he'd be reveling in the glow of her real presence.

"Emma!" he called as he put the binoculars back into the drawer of the china cabinet. "Get out here now! It's time to go."

As he walked into the living room, his wife Emma entered from the bedroom wing. She was wearing an outfit he had never seen, a ridiculous one-piece pantsuit in a clinging fabric that revealed every unflattering curve of her body.

"Where did you get *that*?" he demanded.

She pretended not to understand.

"That thing you're wearing. Where did it come from?"

Her cheeks reddened. "Nora and I went shopping last week. It was on sale. This sort of thing is in style right now."

"I don't care. It's not right for you. I'd like you to change."

He thought a flicker of rebellion crossed her face. Then she glanced at her watch and turned back toward the bedroom. Understanding dawned. She had known he wouldn't like the clothes; she had put them on in order to provoke him and delay their departure.

"Never mind," he called after her. "Go ahead and wear the damn thing. Let's just get going."

Another pointed look at her watch. "But it's too early. Nora said six o'clock."

"That's when the others are coming." He spoke with exaggerated emphasis as if talking to a child. "We're going early to help so she'll be ready when they get there."

"But she said she didn't need any help. This is a big step for her, Rudy. A new beginning. She needs to prove she can do it on her own."

"That's psychobabble bullshit. Ed was always in the middle of things when they entertained. She's probably feeling overwhelmed about now."

"Nora never feels overwhelmed."

"Whatever. But she's bound to need some help. Trust me. She'll be glad to see us."

He was holding the front door open. When she continued to hesitate, he exploded, "For God's sake, Emma, come on! Or I'll go without you."

She sighed and came toward him. He locked the front door and followed her down the elevated porch steps. He watched her broad buttocks sway and was filled with revulsion. She seemed to be getting fatter by the day in spite of the new diet he had put her on. She was probably cheating like she always had.

He forced his eyes away, determined not to spoil the evening by dwelling on this woman who had become more a burden than a wife to him. Instead, he would think about the hours ahead when he would be able to drink in Nora's beauty and grace first-hand. He stepped off the bottom stair and walked eagerly down the sloping gravel drive and across the narrow street separating their houses.

Nora's front lawn was freshly cut and trimmed. He had told her he would mow it for her that very morning, but the little rascal had risen with the birds and done the job herself. He couldn't seem to make her understand that doing things for her was not an imposition; it was the way things were supposed to be. Ed was gone, and now it was his responsibility to take care of her.

Of course, responsibility was a two-way street. In exchange for the carefree security he could give her, he expected her to surrender herself to him without reservation. He'd been patient until now because he knew she needed time to get over Ed. Tonight's party proved she was ready to move on. The torch had finally passed.

They were nearing her front door. Rudy's heart raced, and his whole body tingled. Within seconds, she would be opening the door and welcoming them in. His darling Nora.

Chapter Two

Saturday, June 11 5:40 P.M.

Nora Hartmann had showered and was about to blow-dry her hair when the doorbell rang.

“He wouldn’t,” she muttered.

She threw on her robe and padded barefoot to the front door. The leaded-glass window revealed the Schmidts standing outside.

Impossible man!

When she opened the door, he grinned engagingly and spread his arms wide. “Here we are as promised. Ready, willing, and able.”

For a moment she was tempted to send them home again. She had made it amply clear she didn’t want or need any help tonight. “This time you’re the guest and I’m the hostess. After all you two have done for me, it’s payback time.”

“What’s this payback crap?” Rudy had countered. “You’re like family to us. People don’t count chits in families. We’re always here for you, Nora.”

“I know. And I’ve depended on that for over a year. But now it’s time for me to start doing more things for myself. I’m adjusting to being alone—”

“Never alone, Nora. Don’t ever think you’re alone.”

“The point is, I’m capable of handling a simple summer barbeque on my own.”

“You’ll need someone to flip the burgers. And tend bar.”

“That’s covered. I’ve made a rum punch.”

“Punch? That won’t satisfy the guys.”

“Then they’re free to help themselves.” She allowed her impatience to creep into her voice. “I appreciate the offer, Rudy. But believe me, everything is under control.”

“We’ll still come over a little early just in case—”

“No, Rudy. Please. Just come and enjoy. Six o’clock. Okay?”

Yet here he was, an acutely embarrassed Emma in tow. Looking at her friend’s pink cheeks and downcast eyes, Nora hadn’t the heart to turn them away. She swung the door wider and stepped aside.

Rudy gave a complacent smile as he came in. His eyes swept up and down her body, making her uncomfortably conscious of her nakedness beneath the robe. She took another step back.

He said, “You run along and finish making yourself beautiful. We’ll take care of things out here.”

Emma avoided Nora’s eyes and headed straight for the kitchen, her voice trailing, “I’ll just see what I can do...”

Nora escaped to the bedroom.

Rudy was becoming a huge problem, and she wasn’t sure what to do about it. It was a tricky situation. The two families had been intimately connected for years. Rudy and Ed, Nora’s late husband, had grown up in the same neighborhood here in the far northwest Chicago suburbs. They had been fraternity brothers at the university, had pursued the complementary professions of civil engineering and architecture, and had eventually formed a business partnership that had continued right up to the moment of Ed’s sudden death from a heart attack fifteen months before.

Rudy and Emma had been pillars of strength for Nora in the months that followed. Numb, bewildered, aching with loneliness, she had welcomed their sympathy and attention. Hardly a day had passed that one or the other hadn't phoned or stopped by. At a time when she wanted only to hide, they had dragged her out every weekend to movies, plays, the symphony, or just for a bite to eat. They had invited her across the street to play cards or watch a video. Through it all, Rudy had been a paragon of propriety.

Nora wasn't sure whether the change had come as suddenly as it seemed, or whether the signs were there all along and she was too self-absorbed to see them. Regardless, an incident three weeks before had jolted her into new awareness. She and the Schmidts were playing cards in their living room when she excused herself to use the bathroom. On coming out, she found Rudy blocking her exit in the unlit hallway. He was little more than a looming shadow, but the taut intensity of his posture sent internal alarm bells ringing. He continued to stand there, his eery silence broken only by hoarse breaths that fanned her hair and raised gooseflesh on her arms.

In a voice she hardly recognized as her own, "What are you doing, Rudy?"

He stood there for a moment longer, then relaxed, chuckled, and stepped aside. "Doing? Answering nature's call, same as you. You'd better go check on Emma and make sure she's not cheating on us. I'll be right there."

Shaken, Nora returned to the card table and an unsuspecting Emma. Even though Rudy's behavior was exemplary for the remainder of the evening, she had taken the incident as a warning. She must find a way to wean herself from the Schmidts.

She would miss the companionship. Equally important, she would miss the understanding and ready ears that had helped her deal with the second most painful aspect of her life, her daughter Carrie.

At the time of her father's death, Carrie had been a month shy of her fourteenth birthday and about to graduate from eighth grade. Having recently shed her braces and most of her baby fat, she was gaining confidence and beginning to show signs of real beauty. She had a small group of close friends and was thoroughly immersed in the joy and pathos of early adolescence. Everything changed after Ed's death.

At first, Carrie clung to her mother, and their mutual suffering drew them close. However, as Nora returned to the demands of running her small shop and started spending time with her adult friends, Carrie began to turn inward. By the time Nora surfaced from her own pain enough to notice, her daughter was deeply depressed. She had gained weight and become slovenly in her personal hygiene, and her days were spent eating, sleeping, and watching television.

Nora had hoped she would snap out of it when she started high school. Instead, things got worse. Her former friends grew tired of Carrie's disinterest and stopped trying to include her in their activities. Her grades, which had always been superior, plummeted. Truly frightened, Nora tried to intervene. She limited television viewing, banned sweets and snacks from the house, and set up schedules that were impossible to enforce. Her efforts produced nothing but arguments and accusations that became more shrill and unpleasant by the day. Desperate for a little peace and with another long summer looming, Nora had asked her brother Bill, who lived in Montana, if he and his wife Beth would take Carrie for a month or two.

The arrangements had been made without Carrie's knowledge. The girl's disbelief, outrage, and finally despair were painful to remember even now, two days after Nora had put her on the plane. With her gone, Nora reveled in the comparative calm of the house. At the same time, she struggled with the guilty suspicion that she had let her daughter down.

She finished dressing and began applying her make-up. Despite her bravado with the Schmidts, she was somewhat nervous about this evening's party. She and Ed had entertained quite frequently in the old days, and she had fallen back into the routine of preparations without much difficulty. Now that the time had actually come, uncertainty crept in. Was she doing the right thing by attempting to maintain relationships they had had as a married couple?

In the months after Ed's death, she had become acutely aware of the paired-up nature of her world. Everywhere she went, she noticed people functioning as couples. In the grocery store, at the mall, in the movie theater, along Main Street – everyone seemed to have someone. She knew it was just the paranoia of loneliness. She also knew that rushing out to find another man to fill the void wasn't the answer. She would never be truly healed until she could find contentment in the circumstances she'd been dealt. Later...well, she would just have to see what happened.

She took a last look in the mirror. She knew she was too thin. It was ironic. Whereas Carrie had become a foodaholic, Nora's appetite had all but disappeared. Tonight she was wearing a new skirt and top that actually fit, and she thought the fabric's soft, loose folds hid her body's current angularity rather well. Nevertheless, her cheek bones were still starkly prominent, and the dark pouches under her eyes testified to her continuing inability to sleep well.

"Not exactly the Merry Widow," she murmured wryly, "but you'll have to do."

The doorbell rang, and she heard Rudy's voice boom in gracious, host-like welcome. She cringed and hurried out of the bedroom.

Chapter Three

Saturday, June 11 8:30 P.M.

Rudy drained his glass, placed it on the wood slats beneath the chaise lounge, and leaned back, legs crossed, hands behind his head. His gaze swept lazily across the deck. The food had been cleared away, drinks had been freshened, and people had drifted into small, desultory conversational groups. It was that defining moment when a party either gelled and was a success, or withered and died. Tonight it was the former, and he took more than a little credit for it.

Nora could not fail to have noticed how he had worked the group, anticipating needs, bridging conversational gaps, putting people at their ease. Meanwhile, she had floated gracefully among her guests, the perfect hostess. They were a flawless team.

At present she was conversing with Emma and an older couple named Lois and Sam Kautz. Why Nora had invited them was a mystery to him. For starters, Lois worked for Nora in her shop, and Rudy had never believed in socializing with employees. Then there was the matter of their appearance – both of them short and round and gray-haired like a couple of aging Bobbsey Twins whose K-Mart-style clothes suggested they had fallen on hard times. Sam had calloused hands and traces of grease embedded around his fingernails. When compared with the other guests, who were members of their broader social group and veterans of many neighborhood parties, these two were misfits.

Nora was being her usual gracious self, however, and they appeared to be quite at ease. Sam said something Rudy couldn't catch, and Nora threw back her head and laughed. God, it was good to see her happy again. He was sure it had everything to do with Carrie's departure for Montana. He was glad he had encouraged the decision.

Capitalizing on his momentary obscurity in this shadowy corner of the deck, he allowed his gaze to linger on her. The last rays of the dying sun turned her honey-hued hair to gold. Some of their acquaintances thought she had lost too much weight, but Rudy didn't agree. She was certainly thinner than he'd ever seen her, but he thought the change brought out her delicate bone structure to advantage. Her face was like a fine sculpture lit by large, luminous eyes the color of amethyst. Her smile, her voice, her carriage – everything about her marked her as one set apart, and his heart nearly burst with pride, for he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was destined to possess her.

Lois was talking now, and something about Nora's expression alerted him. He strained to listen.

"...such a nice man. And so lonely. Just like you, dear. So I thought it would be nice if the two of you could meet."

Sam chuckled. "Watch out, Nora. Lois likes to play the matchmaker. Once she hones in on you, you're dead meat."

Rudy was on his feet and across the deck in an instant. He gave the old man a comradely pat on the back. "What's this about dead meat? I thought we'd already eaten our fill of that tonight."

"Lois has wonderful news," Emma told him. Her eyes shone with excitement. "The Kautz's have a new neighbor who's a widower, and he wants to meet Nora. Lois has invited them both for dinner on Wednesday night."

“Hey, do I detect a railroad job here?” said Rudy. “Since when is Nora looking for a man? She just buried one a few months ago.”

Lois looked embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to push her. I just thought...”

“It’s a nice idea,” said Nora, “and I’d love to come.”

Rudy couldn’t believe his ears. She was actually agreeing to a blind date. In his wildest imagination, he hadn’t anticipated this.

Something inside warned him to tread carefully. He affected nonchalance. “Tell us about this dude. Nora’s like family to us, and we can’t have her taking up with just anybody. Who is he?”

“His name is Jack Logan,” said Lois. “He’s a teacher. His wife died about the same time as Ed, only I think she died of cancer. He moved into the townhouse next to ours last weekend, so I took him over a plate of cookies. We got to talking, one thing led to another, and I ended up telling him about Nora. He seemed interested, so I invited him to come for supper on Wednesday. I told him I’d see if Nora wanted to come, too.”

“And Nora does,” she said. “What time?”

“We’ll need to freshen up after work. Say six-thirty?”

“Six-thirty it is.”

The sound of the ringing telephone drifted out to them, and Nora excused herself. Rudy watched her hurry into the house.

He needed a stiff drink. It would take time to digest what he had just heard. Meanwhile, he had to get a grip on himself so the others wouldn’t see how shaken he was.

He entered through the double doors into the kitchen in time to hear Nora say, “Carrie, darling!”

Chapter Four

Saturday, June 11 8:50 P.M.

Nora reached the phone just as the answering machine kicked in. She switched it off and picked up the handset.

“Mom?”

The voice was very small and tentative.

“Carrie, darling!”

Silence.

“Carrie? Are you all right?”

“No.” She began to cry.

Her wrenching sobs filled Nora with terror. “Carrie, tell me what’s happened. Sh-h, darling. Please. Talk to me. Where are you?”

Nora fought for control as her mind reeled through all the horrible possibilities. Time seemed to be caught in the suspended beat of her heart.

“Carrie! Please! *Where are you?*”

“In – in my – room,” she hiccuped. “They – they said I could call.”

“Of course you can call. Precious, what’s wrong?”

She heard a series of snuffles. Then, “I – I just want to come home.”

“Oh, Carrie. Did something happen?”

“No. I just – I just miss you. Please, Mom. I promise I’ll be good. Just let me come home.”

Nora closed her eyes and leaned against the wall. Did Carrie believe she had been banished as a punishment from which she could escape if she were good enough? The thought sickened her.

She knew it was important how she responded. “Sweetheart, I miss you, too. But you know you and I haven’t been getting along very well lately. It isn’t your fault, and it isn’t my fault. We just need a little space, and that’s why I sent you to Uncle Bill’s.”

“But it’s so far away. I’m lonesome!”

“It’s only been two days. That’s hardly a fair test.”

There was another silence.

Nora said, “Tell me what you did today.”

After a short pause, “We all went horseback riding. Then we came back home and made ice cream.”

“That sounds like fun. Didn’t you like it?”

“It was okay. It’s just...” She struggled to put her feelings into words. “Mom, I just don’t fit in here.”

“What do you mean? They include you in things, don’t they?”

“That’s not it. They’re all really nice to me. But — they’re so happy, so normal. And — and —” Her voice thickened again. “— and my dad is dead! I feel like I’m on a totally different planet!”

Nora had a flash of understanding. How many times in the past year had she felt isolated and lonely in the midst of a crowd? Even among people who loved and cared for her.

“I know what you mean, baby. You and I are learning to live without someone we loved, and it’s hard to see other people’s lives going along as if nothing had happened. But isolating ourselves isn’t the answer. Being with people can help us heal. Especially people who love us. Like Uncle Bill and Aunt Beth.”

“I suppose.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“I’ll tell you what. Give it two weeks. Then if you still want to come home, I’ll make the arrangements. Does that sound fair?”

“I guess so.”

“I’ll call you every day. And you can call me anytime you want to. But you have to keep up your end of the bargain and at least try to enjoy yourself. Is it a deal?”

Another hesitation. At last she said, “Okay. Two weeks.”

“Good. Now let me talk to Uncle Bill for a minute.”

Nora heard the receiver clatter onto something hard, then retreating footsteps. She imagined Carrie crossing the large guest bedroom and passing through the pine-walled hallway into the vaulted, stone-and-timbered living room of her brother’s sprawling log ranch house. Although he had a busy medical practice in the town of Bozeman, he lived on a forested acreage in the foothills north of town. With a barnful of horses and plenty of room to roam, the place was a teenaged girl’s dream. Or so Nora had convinced herself before sending Carrie there.

It had not been an easy decision. She knew Carrie felt abandoned in the wake of her father’s death, and Nora did not want to exacerbate those feelings by making it seem as if she were pushing Carrie away. On the other hand, she was afraid their relationship was deteriorating to the point where serious, long-lasting harm might ensue if the destructive cycle weren’t broken. Bill was a doctor, and his wife Beth was a clinical social worker. Surely they were better equipped to deal with Carrie right now than Nora, who felt emotionally bruised to the point of collapse. A few weeks of peace would make all the difference, she was sure. She would have a chance to regroup, and Carrie...

Perhaps Beth could get her to open up and talk about her feelings. In the early months, Nora had sent Carrie to a therapist, but the girl’s reaction had been so hostile, so completely uncooperative that the therapist herself had suggested it would be better to wait until Carrie was ready to admit she needed help. Nora had waited, hoping and praying for some change. Instead, Carrie’s sullen, stony silences had become more and more impenetrable. In fact, the ten-minute conversation just finished, conducted from a distance of almost two thousand miles, had contained more real communication than any they had had since the early weeks after Ed’s death.

“Sis?”

Her brother’s voice broke into her thoughts. They made small talk until they heard the click of Carrie hanging up. Then Bill said, “I’m sorry you had to deal with this tonight. But she was pretty distraught, and Beth thought we should let her call.”

“Don’t apologize,” said Nora. “I always want to be accessible to her. Maybe it was a mistake to send her at all.”

“Don’t even think it. She’s fine. Truly she is. She enjoyed the ride this afternoon. She and the kids were horsing around.” He chuckled. “No pun intended.”

“Is she getting along all right with them?”

“They’re doing great. The four of them play video games by the hour.”

That, at least, was a relief. One of Carrie’s many objections to the trip had involved the ages of her young cousins.

“They’re just babies, Mom,” she had complained. “It’ll be like a summer-long babysitting job.”

Bill’s two older children from his previous marriage lived with their mother. The current crop included a nine-year-old daughter and twin boys who were seven. Nora had been shocked when her brother ended his twelve-year marriage to his beautiful, glamorous wife Janet. Although admittedly a little stand-offish, Janet had belonged to all the right clubs and charity boards and had seemed to be the quintessential doctor’s wife. Yet Bill had walked away without a backward glance, surrendering their elegant home in town and a generous living allowance while contenting himself with a modest apartment, where he had lived until he met Beth.

Earthy, warm, funny, Beth was Janet’s complete opposite. She had charmed Nora and Ed in five minutes flat when they met her shortly after she and Bill were married. The two families had visited back and forth frequently ever since, and Nora had come to love Beth like a sister. Now her wisdom and quiet strength seemed like the perfect medicine for Nora’s troubled daughter.

“I asked Carrie to give it a fair chance for two weeks,” she continued. “I’ll call every day so she can vent if she needs to. And then...” She sighed. “Well, we’ll just have to see. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll bring her home. I will at least have had that time to get my head together and figure out a way to cope.”

They said their goodbyes, and Nora returned the handset to its cradle. She turned and saw Rudy leaning against the kitchen doorjamb, watching her.

“Little munchkin giving you fits?” he said, using the term of endearment he had coined for Carrie when she was little more than a toddler. He pushed away from the wall and came toward her. “Hang tough, Nora. You made the right decision. Just watching you tonight proves it. You’re like your old self again.”

He came to within a foot of where she was standing, but she couldn’t back up because her hips were already pressed against the kitchen counter top. Using her voice to establish distance between them, she snapped,

“Oh, right. As long as I’m having a good time, why should I care that my daughter feels betrayed and rejected? No skin off my nose, right? Let her suffer. She’ll get over it.”

To her horror, she realized her tone had lost its bite and begun to quiver. Worse, her eyes brimmed with sudden tears. It was all the invitation Rudy needed. Before she could step aside, he reached out and pulled her into his arms.