

CHAPTER 2

It was March. Holly's article had been published one month earlier. She arrived home from the supermarket at eleven in the morning after dropping the kids at school and having coffee with Mindy.

The day was clear and sunny. It was chilly. She wore a suede vest and jeans, boots and a long chenille scarf. Her hair was down and her cheeks were pink from the breeze. The trees began to show signs of life, buds just showing their faces. The daffodils and crocus were in bloom, the tulips tall and straight for a week already. The grass was just beginning to turn green again.

The chill was gone from the air and the breeze was out of the south instead of from the northwest.

Holly loved this time of the year. She found that she smiled more as the days lengthened. The kids could play outside again and when they came in, their cheeks were rosy, filled with sunshine. She found it utterly contagious. She'd bet there was less crime this time of year.

Maybe she'd do an article about it and research it herself. Now there was an idea. Those thoughts filled her mind as she turned her Honda onto her street. Three police cars were at the

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corner house, way past Holly's house. Twirling lights and a dozen people milling around in small groups.

What is this? She ticked off possibilities. None were good. Three police cars meant disaster. Thank God it wasn't at her house. What horrible thoughts! She bit her lip in a burst of guilt that reprimanded her silent prayer for safety and wellbeing.

An image of fire engines and a burned out shell of a house and a dead Stella stung at her heart, the vision clearly dreaded and very possible. Did she unplug the coffee maker? Did she leave the dishwasher on?

No. They weren't at her house. Not this time. *Poi, poi, poi.* She knocked wood but the only wood in sight were grocery bags. She knocked on the dashboard instead. She wondered what it was, what it could possibly be on her quiet street where nothing ever happened, where tranquility was only marred by an occasional burglary or domestic spat between the neighborhood kids.

She pulled into the drive but instead of pulling around to the back of the house she stopped short near the front porch and turned off the engine. She got out of the car and saw her neighbor directly across the street. Holly crossed the street and walked up to the woman.

"Hi, Holly."

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"Hi, Mona, what's going on?"

"Not sure yet but it looks like Mr. Colletti. The ambulance left about three minutes ago and he was covered."

"Completely?" Holly asked.

Mona Udall shook her head, affirmative. Her permed blond curls moved with the breeze and her blue eyes were filled with not only a sordid curiosity but also with a thankful disruption to her laundry routine.

"The sheet was covered with blood."

A man at the far corner of the street, outside the Colletti house noticed the women and walked toward them. He had to walk past six houses to get to them.

Mona and Holly watched him approach and realized that he was interested in their presence on the street. They looked at each other with a quick and serious look of concern.

"Morning. My name is Detective Richard Gardner, from the Lower Merion Township Police Department." He held out his badge and identification for the women to see. As he replaced it into his back pocket, he continued. "Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Not at all," Holly offered. "Holly Towler." She extended her hand and Richard Gardner shook it with little preamble.

"No, I don't mind," Mona agreed. "Mona Udall. U-d-a-l-l."

Richard Gardner wrote the name in a small book. He was over

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six feet, built strong and large, roughly the size of a small refrigerator. He wore an overcoat but under it his suit was visible and the quality of it suggested that he had good taste but not a huge wallet. It was off the rack, maybe Macy's. He wore good shoes and his appearance was neat. His dark hair was full and wavy, his nails clean.

He didn't smell of cigar smoke as Holly might have imagined as he was the first detective she'd ever met. Perhaps, she kidded herself; she expected ketchup stains and a beer belly? Too many television shows to be sure.

"Thanks. Did either of you hear anything or see anyone today that was out of the ordinary?"

"What happened?" Holly asked.

"Your neighbor was stabbed, killed."

Holly and Mona caught their breath and winced.

"My God, who would do something like that!" Holly said.

"Oh my God! How awful!" Mona uttered.

"Is his wife okay?" Holly asked.

"She's resting. Her sister is with her."

"Mam," he looked at Mona. "You've been watching for a while. How did you know that it was Mr. Colletti, and not Mrs. Colletti?"

"I saw Mrs. Colletti hold the door open and I just assumed. I'm sorry. Was that wrong?"

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"No. That's fine. Did you see anything or anyone?"

Mona thought for a few seconds, her eyes a negative blank.

"How about you, Mam?" Richard Gardner turned his attention to Holly.

Holly noticed that the Cherry Blossom tree bloomed sometime in the last day or so on Mona's lawn. It was fragrant and beautiful, such a tremendous contrast to the horrid visions she conjured of poor Mr. Colletti, stabbed and bleeding on the living room carpet while Mrs. Colletti stood over him and screamed, threw her body over his in desperation and anguish.

"No, I haven't been home. When I left this morning to drive the kids to school, we drove right past their house. I don't think I saw anything wrong at all. I remember seeing the house, but," Holly shrugged her shoulders, "I just got home now and came to see what happened. Poor Mrs. Colletti. What happened? Poor Mr. Colletti!"

"You know, three or four days ago I noticed a car." Mona said to Richard Gardner. "It was parked around the corner at the side of the Colletti house. I'd seen it a few times because I sometimes don't leave for work until noon."

Holly and Richard looked at Mona. He took out a notebook and jotted notes.

"Would it be all right if we went into a house to talk about this?" Richard Gardner asked.

"Well, my house is a mess," Mona said. "I have two loads of laundry all over the living room," she shrugged.

"That's okay, come across the street to my house," Holly offered.

They entered Holly's house from the front door and she led them to the living room. She opened two lights and indicated the sofa and chair. The patterns were complicated and complex. Soft plaids and floral textures, woven fabrics and beaded shades, candles and chenille throws; two of them. Abstract oils and

"Can I get you something?" she invited.

"Coffee would be great." Richard said as he looked around.

"No problem. Why don't you come into the kitchen so we can talk while it's brewing?"

Richard made mental notes of Holly and her surroundings as she led the way past the Ethan Allen living room and the Jon's Contemporary Dining room. He noticed because it was way above his budget. That plus, this was a murder investigation. The first clue was always the most important clue. Percentages bore that out. The first clue brought him to this person, to this house. The first piece of the puzzle landed in his lap not an hour after his arrival at the scene. Perhaps, he thought, this was the right place to start. Right here, right in this room. He looked around.

The colors were all cream and blue, soothing and richly

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textured. Watercolors and oils on the walls; not prints. The knick-knacks were porcelain and ceramic, not plastic or Lucite.

These things he noticed. He also noticed that Mona pretended not to notice that he noticed.

"Fine." Richard followed. He took in the home, the atmosphere, the colors and hues of Holly's life on Hunter Green Lane. He noticed how the sun filtered through the drapes and how it reflected off the prisms in the dining room chandelier that left rainbows on the wallpapered walls. He knew the wallpaper was moiré, perhaps not real silk, but certainly not K-Mart or Hechinger's do-it-yourself. He absorbed the smell of morning coffee, greeted Stella with the enthusiasm of a dog lover. He took note of the titles on shelves of the massive bookcase that was opposite the fireplace in the living room. He noticed that it was used often; the blackened screen a wealth of clues about her life. He imagined her as she might lounge on the sofa before a crawling fire, curled up with a new book around an old log. It was a peaceful vision for a change.

For a change. He sighed. It was refreshing. When he entered a stranger's home it was, more often than not, under the worst circumstances. Certainly a rare occasion for him to be considered a guest. Although, he reminded himself, he really wasn't a guest this time either. Close enough.

Most of all, what Richard noticed was that the woman whose

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name was Holly lived a very nice quiet life on the surface, one that he could only hope for, one that he might never attain. He watched her.

Richard Gardner had not chosen so wisely and had a one bedroom apartment and child support payments to make to show for it.

She moved about easily. She rinsed a pot, got a filter, retrieved coffee, milk, sugar, spoons and cups, all in swift and smooth motions. Automatic and uncomplicated. She didn't hide, was comfortable and open. She was informal and pleasant. She was attractive and unassuming. She was much more beautiful up close. With hair done up, makeup and the right occasion she'd be a knockout. Her husband, he thought, was a lucky man. The women chatted as friends would; small talk. Richard nodded and smiled, took it all in while the coffee brewed. Say nothing yet and let them do the talking. It served him well, always had.

He saw pictures done by young artists attached to the refrigerator with magnets. He counted three names, three kids. Lucky lady, he thought. Nice lady, nice house, nice kids, nice dog, nice life.

He turned his appraisal to the other woman, the neighbor, this Mona Udall. She prattled on and on about nothing at all with nervous energy and excitement at her presence in some intrigue that she was found to be grotesquely part of in some

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way. How annoying, this misplacement of excitement, he thought to himself. She was more keyed up at being questioned than she was horrified at the actual crime itself. Ditzzy broad, he decided.

But not the other one. She was, he searched for the right word, classy. He noticed her eyes, always evaluated the character of a stranger by their eyes. Hers were honest eyes, expressive and soulful yet not overly emotional nor unintelligent. She didn't wear a lot of makeup.

Holly looked at him as she placed the mugs on the table, saw his appraisal and knew it was professional. She didn't avert her gaze but instead met his eyes and left it at that. Doing his job, she thought, assessing the situation. It piqued her instinct and imagination.

When they were seated around the table, Holly watch the detective look around the room, at the drawings on the refrigerator, at the pictures of the family near the phone and at the two women that he was with, at Holly. He took it all in, didn't miss a thing and made no bones about looking around. Were he standing, Holly fully expected that he might have picked up a photograph here, a mug there, just to assess Holly's home and life. She found it curious and not really intrusive but more, an outlet for a curious mind. Holly did a quick scan to see how her house measured up. She thought it was cluttered maybe, a little

unorganized, not exactly Good Housekeeping or Martha Stewart but oh well.

"About the car?" He looked at Mona. He glanced at Holly and nodded.

"Yes," Mona began. "Well, like I said, it was parked around the side. I remember thinking that they must have gotten a new car. A nice one, too. And then I remember that I was thinking that maybe Mr. Colletti was doing pretty well for himself and I thought that he retired. I thought well good for him, he was treating himself to a new car."

"What kind of car was it?"

"A Jaguar, the big one." Mona nodded her head. She was sure.

"What color was it?"

"Black, no grey, well... dark." She scratched her head.

Holly brought coffee, spoons, sugar and milk. She poured and handed cups around. She faced them from across the table and listened, watched.

"How long had the car been there, do you know?" Richard asked.

There was a knock at the door. Stella barked and ran. Holly went to the door and let two uniforms enter. Holly led them to the kitchen and offered coffee and cups. They thanked her and accepted. They each had nametags and notebooks. They were both

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young men, both polite. One white, one black.

Richard Gardner continued. "You were saying?"

"I'm not sure now," Mona said. "Sometimes it was there and sometimes it was not. I didn't pay too much attention to it. I just remember that it was there."

"Can you estimate? Two days? A week?"

"No, more than that. More like months, maybe four or five months."

"Really?" Holly said. "That's strange. I don't remember seeing it." Holly tilted her head.

"You didn't see it?" Richard turned full attention to Holly.

She shook her head and thought back to the times that she had driven to that corner. "No, I don't remember seeing it when I drive the kids to school in the morning. Strange."

"Yes it is." Richard turned back to Mona.

"Mam, I didn't get your first name?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Mona Udall. Holly Towler." She nodded toward Holly.

"Mona, did you see this car every day?"

"No, just sometimes. Like I said, sometimes I go to work at noon. I work at the Springfield Mall and when I'm on the late shift, I don't leave until then. When I work the mornings, I leave at eight-thirty."

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"And would the car be there at that time?"

Mona thought, rubbed her chin. "Huh. You know, I'm not sure because in the morning, sometimes I go to Montgomery Avenue out the other way so I can avoid the traffic. No, I don't think I can say. In the afternoon, I go past the Colletti's house because the traffic isn't as bad at that time. So, I don't think that I would be able to say whether or not the car would be there in the morning."

"I don't think it was," Holly added. "I go that way to take the kids to school at eight-fifteen and I don't remember seeing it. The two uniforms stood by the counter and sipped coffee."

"Okay, let me get this straight," Richard said. "The dark Jaguar comes after the morning. It's been seen more than once, maybe for many weeks or months. You assumed that it belonged to the Colletti's."

An officer interrupted.

"They only had the one car, the Buick. I spoke with the wife before the sister got there. It was parked in the garage like normal."

"Then the Jaguar probably didn't belong to them. Maybe," Richard said. He scratched his head. "Mona, did you ever see anyone in the car?"

Mona thought. She covered her mouth with her hand, her elbow on the table. She looked down at the table, at the sugar

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bowl. "Shoot. I don't know. I don't think that I did." Her eyes lit up. "But, I remember once, the engine was running."

"How do you know?"

"It was cold. My windows were mostly covered with snow. I remember that day. Smoke coming from the tailpipe."

"What do you remember?" Richard poised his pen.

The officers looked at each other.

Holly refilled cups.

Richard wrote in his tablet.

"It was around inventory," Mona said. "I was late. It had snowed the night before. Remember the six inches we got?"

They nodded, groaned.

"That was at the end of, January maybe?" Holly asked.

"Yeah. Inventory. I had to be in early and I was late because I had to shovel a path and clean off the car. I only cleared a patch of the window and so I couldn't see everything. The defroster hadn't yet melted the rest but I didn't have time to wait for it so I drove off anyway."

"What did you see?"

Holly came and pulled up a tall step stool to the table, sat down and fixed her coffee.

The phone rang. Holly ignored it.

The police officers looked at her expectantly.

"They'll call back." She shrugged her shoulders.

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"Please answer it. It could be for one of us."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course!" Holly wondered how they could have managed that so quickly, so effectively, all in six minutes. She jumped up, knocked over the stool and answered the ringing phone. They had hung up. She held the receiver in her hand as she looked to the men at the table.

Richard nodded. "It's all right. Don't worry about it."

Holly hung up, righted the stool, sat down, and they again looked at Mona.

"Go on, please."

"Where was I? Oh, right. I drove off. I went past their house and stopped at the corner because I was turning left. It was parked to the right, of course. I couldn't see too clearly but I saw the exhaust coming from the back of the car. That's how I knew that the engine was running. I remember thinking that they were warming it up."

"Was anyone in the car?"

"I don't know. My side window was wet from snow. I couldn't see too clearly." She looked past the men, remembering what she saw. "There might have been. I remember seeing a shape in the car. Yes, there might have been someone in it!"

"Do you remember what the shape looked like? Was it Mr. or Mrs. Colletti?"

"I can't say. I don't know. I think that my feeling is that

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it was a man, not a woman."

"Good! Did you see him? Anything at all?"

Mona shook her head. "No. I turned the corner. It was only for a split second. You know how sometimes you see things from your car, they only seem like a fleeting second and then it's gone? Well, that's what it was like. I just drove off."

Richard nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"No, not really. That's it."

"Mrs. Towler? How about you?"

Holly thought back to all of the times that she had seen the Colletti's. "No, I don't know that I even knew them very well at all. We hardly spoke to them. We hardly saw them. They're at that end of the street, I'm down here. My husband saw them on Halloween when he took the kids around."

"You never took the kids around?"

"No, I gave out candy. Peter, my husband, he took the kids. The kids love having their dad take them around, as if maybe it means more or something that he does that part of it. Don't know. Just works that way for us."

"Ok, go on."

"Well, other than that, I never did more than say hello or wave to them and vice versa. Who would do such a despicable thing? You hear about that kind of thing but never see it so close! That poor man!"

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"What about the car, Mrs. Towler?"

"I don't know anything about it. I'm sorry. Do you think that it means anything?"

The officers looked at each other. Richard Gardner looked at his notes. "It's hard to say. If it didn't belong to the Colletti's, which looks likely, then it might. Unless it can be identified, it won't help us much. Is there anything else that you can think of that might shed some light on this?"

They shook their heads and then the men rose.

"Thank you for your help and time. Oh, one more question."

The women looked up.

"Is there anyone on the street who was close to the Colletti's?"

Mona answered. "Well they lived here long before I moved here and the house that we're in used to belong to the Peterson's. They were very close to the Colletti's."

Richard looked at Holly for confirmation.

"I don't know anything about them. We bought the house eleven years ago. I have no idea where they moved. My next door neighbor is an original owner. Maybe they might be able to help you."

Mona offered, "The Chamberlain's. They're nice people. They keep to themselves. I hardly ever see them. If anyone knows anything that's going on on the block, it would be their

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housekeeper, Josephina. She's been working there since I'm here and that's fourteen years."

"Thank you both, and you, Mrs. Towler, for the coffee. If there's anything more, here's my number. Please feel free to call me."

He handed his card to Holly. She looked at it and placed it inside her phone book on the counter, next to the table.

She led them to the door, saw them out, closed the door, went back to the kitchen and sat down again. Mona and Holly looked at each other for a long moment.

"Do you believe this? Someone killed Mr. Colletti!"

"No, Mona, I do not believe this! How awful! Here, right here, on my own street! He was stabbed!"

"I wonder why! I can't imagine why anyone would want to do that!"

"Was that car really there? I never saw it! How could a car be parked for months and I never saw it?"

"I don't know. It was there, though, I would swear it. You really never saw it?"

"No! I never saw a Jaguar parked there! Maybe I did and I just didn't know it, you know? Maybe it just never registered. I don't know. The guy around the corner has a Mercedes with a flat tire that's been there since I don't know when and sometimes there's a van on the next block down, but it's not the sort of

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thing that I care about. It's not important to me what the heck cars are parked on the street so I don't pay attention to it, I guess. But at the same time, that's not the kind of thing that you miss. It's not as if everyone here drives exotic cars. They're nice, but I never saw a Jaguar. I don't get it!"

"Me neither. Oh well, I guess that we'll find out more soon enough. I'll tell you one thing. I'm glad I have an alarm. I think I'll keep the kids inside for awhile."

"Yeah, me too. You know, you don't think about that sort of thing around here. I never worry. Our kids play together all the time, sometimes out front, sometimes out back." Holly sighed.

"From now on, I think we should watch the kids go back and forth. I'll call you when Michael and Patrick run home, so you can come out or watch from the door."

"Good idea. I'll do the same. Well, you always do anyway, with Erin being so small."

"They're all still so small. My God, how could this happen right here?"

They shook their heads, worry in their eyes, and pity, thinking about Mr. Colletti.

"Are you gonna tell the kids?" Mona asked as she sipped the last of her coffee.

"I don't think so. God, Carly will have nightmares for a year. Shawn still thinks that the wet bandits from Home Alone

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are going to get him. He practices making traps all the time."

"You're right," Mona said. "They might find out anyway. But I think I won't tell Walter until after the boys are in bed."

Holly rose. She collected cups and spoons, took them to the sink.

Mona rose and walked up to Holly at the sink. "Some fun on Hunter Green Lane today, Baby, I'll tell you! I have to go. I'll keep you posted."

"Yeah, me too. I can't get over that car. Four months and I never saw it."

"Maybe longer. That's the time that I remember. Who knows how long it really was there?"

Holly walked her to the door with Stella loping behind. "I wonder whose car it is?" They looked at each other.

"Maybe he was into someone for some money. Maybe he gambled or something." Mona's voice trailed and faded but her eyes were big.

Holly thought that Mona's eyes were filled with speculation and anticipation that this would keep her busy for weeks, maybe months. Seemed Mona liked the drama. At poor Mr. Colletti's expense.

"Or something. Who knows? I didn't know them. If I saw Mrs. Colletti at the market, I'm not sure that I would have known that it was her."

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They shrugged.

"Oh well, see you later."

"Okay, bye."

Holly closed the door and looked at Stella.

"See any strange cars lately, Stella?"

The dog tilted her head to the side and wagged her tail.

Holly looked into her eyes and felt a shiver. It looked like the dog was not questioning her, but answering.

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"If only you could talk Stell, if only you could talk."

Holly turned back to the door, looked out of the curtain, the same one that she had looked out of a thousand times. She bolted the door.

When Richard Gardner and the two officers left Holly's house they turned to walk back up the street to the cars at the corner. "Keep tabs on this block," Richard instructed. "I want a check on the car. Ask all the neighbors if anyone else remembers seeing it. It's the best lead we have right now. Hit them at dinner when everyone is home or just after. Ask to talk to the kids. They notice stuff more than adults, or at least different stuff. They're too busy most of the time. What do you think of the other one, Towler? Can someone really not notice a car that's been there for months?"

"It's the timing. It's not there when she goes that way. That means that the car comes later in the day, maybe on purpose."

"For what? To visit? To watch? To wait?" One of the officers asked.

"Any of them or maybe all of them. The question is who?" Richard answered.

"And why?"

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"Right. Get an unmarked to come by in the mornings at around 8:10 and again at around 11:30. Cover both. And make sure that they switch cars. I have a feeling that Mona woman will spot it right away."

"Not Towler, though. She doesn't see much."

"Weird."

"I'll say. This guy Colletti looks as clean as a whistle."

"What've you got on him?" Richard asked.

The taller officer with the name O'Malley answered. "Not much! Father of three sons. All grown. Two live out of state. Seven grandchildren. One brother. Married for forty some years, veteran. He's retired. He owned four shoe stores. One in, let me see," The officer pulled out his notes. "One was in Germantown, one in Mount Airy, one in the Northeast and one in Ardmore. That's it. He sold the stores six years ago and since then he played golf twice a week, took a two week vacation to Florida twice a year and joined the pinnochle circuit."

"Not much to go on, huh?" Richard mused. "Someone wanted him dead, though. There must be more somewhere. What about the wife? Got anything on her?"

The shorter officer with the nametag Palmer replied. "Nothing yet. She was too upset to talk. The sister didn't say much. She was too upset, too. Two old ladies. Who knows? She probably sings in the church choir. Blue hair set."

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"Right."

They got to the cars.

"Keep me posted. Find out everything you can."

"Right. See you at the station."