

Unedited Version

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Sneak Preview!!

Chapter 1

All I wanted in life was a good man and a million bucks. With my lucky penny I rubbed off a lottery ticket, hoping to reach one of those goals. I tossed the losing numbers in the trash, sipped my skinny latte, and turned on the desktop. Halfway down my Inbox, this jumped out at me.

I stabbed her to death last night. The life flowed from her body and her flesh turned yellow. Oh, the sheer pleasure of it. It's the first time I've killed anyone, BUT IT WON'T BE THE LAST.

I blinked twice and reread the message. Good grief, what a way to start the week.

“Mornin’, Jenna,” said Starr, tossing her purse on the desk adjacent to mine.

“Look at this,” I said.

Starr peered at the screen. Her large blue eyes widened as the words registered.

“What do you make of it?”

“Not much, considering where we work. Probably just a message from some sick weirdo. What’s *fi* mean?” she said, referring to the return address—
anonymousemail.me.fi

“I’ve no idea. It was probably meant for Dr. B--”

My words were cut short when another e-mail flashed on the screen.

The smell of blood really turned me on. I had no idea it would excite me like this.

Can't wait to do it again.

Silence

Starr asked, "What are you gonna do with them?"

"Given a choice I'd flush them down the proverbial commode, but I guess I'm gonna show them to Dr. B, and then I'm gonna hit that delete button and hope I never see anything like this again."

"Good plan. I'm sure Dr. B will know what to do."

Starr's short dishwater-blond hair stuck up like a Mohawk on the back of her head as if she'd just woken up. She took out her compact to straighten her mop-top.

"The appointment charts are on the file ledge," I said, stretching high over Starr's head and adding one more folder to the stack in front of her.

I squeezed behind Starr's desk to open the blinds and let in a beam of sunlight in the hopes of giving a smidgen of life to the pitiful philodendron that drooped next to the file cabinet in our tight quarters.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a bit of a row this morning. Steve can be such a louse."

Yeah, right, more like a class A-number-one jerk if you ask me.

"God, it's hot already. My face is redder than my Cousin Wallie's ripest tomato. This has gotta be the worst August yet." She dabbed some powder on her nose and let out a long sigh.

"Come on, surely you're used to summers like this."

She snapped her compact shut. "Nobody gets used to this. When it got this hot

down home, Mama used to strip us naked and plop us in a tub of icy water smack dab on the front lawn, facing the main street in Americus. Once I swear we spent the whole darn summer in that tub.” She sighed. “I’m sweating clean through my undies already and it’s not even nine o’clock.”

“I’ll find you a tub if you like.”

Another anonymous e-mail binged onto my screen. Starr flew to my desk to take a look.

I thought killing her would make me feel better. The little jitters inside me didn’t go away, they grew worse. I’m more excited than ever. I guess that’s what people mean when they talk about runner’s highs and all that kind of stuff. I don’t get a high running; I get a high killing. Ha!

I cleared my throat. “Do you think this might be some sort of virus?”

“Could be, but you’d better talk to our friendly shrink about it as soon as he gets in.”

Starr returned to her desk and commenced digging around inside her purse.

“Changing the subject, sweet pea, you should wear a bright red lipstick. Something like this *Sizzling Flame*.” She smoothed a smear of gloss across her shiny red mouth. “With your dark skin and those green eyes, red would suit you like a hog to sunshine.”

I shut down my computer, not wanting to see another one of those ugly messages and began sorting through the mountain of insurance forms covering my desk. “I’ve never worn much lipstick.”

“That’s what I’m saying, honey. I’m not believing how little your mama taught

you. Put on a little of this and some blush on your cheeks. For real, you gotta think about these things. You're young now, but in two years you'll face the big 3-0."

"Hey, thanks for the news bulletin and by the way, I'm not the one with a birthday. Yours is this weekend."

"Touché," she said with a grin.

I took the tube of lipstick she offered and smeared some across my lips. One glance in the mirror made me shudder. I looked like a circus clown who'd eaten too much cherry pie.

"So who's on for this morning?" She picked through the files. Her long fingernails matched her sizzling red lips. "Oh boy, Mrs. Lehman is coming. She's a real trip. I wonder who she'll think she is today."

I rubbed off the lipstick. "After last week when she was an angel working on behalf of God, maybe by now she's been promoted to the Virgin Mary."

"Jenna, you shouldn't joke about those things," Dr. Bingham's deep voice boomed behind me. "Only last week Mrs. Lehman told me she was exhausted. It's not easy being an angel."

Starr giggled. "I'd never know."

"Your first appointment is in ten minutes, Dr. B." I trotted down the hall after him with the day's folders in hand. "But, I need to talk to you about something first."

"Mr. Porter is usually late," Starr hollered after us. "I sure hope he doesn't bring his wife again this week. Last time she flat out drove me crazy with all her chatter. She ran her mouth the entire time y'all were in session. No wonder that poor man needs a psychiatrist."

I kept pace behind Dr. Bingham's long strides. When he reached his desk, he lifted a pipe and loaded it with tobacco.

"Better not light that if Mrs. Porter comes. She had a fit the last time you smoked while her husband was with you."

He shrugged and lit it anyway. Puff, puff, puff. "I'll put it out before he comes. So, what's up?"

I handed Dr. Bingham the files for the day and a pile of insurance forms. He put the folders on the corner of his desk, scrawled his name on the insurance forms, and puffed on his pipe, never looking up.

"We got a couple of creepy e-mails this morning. Not the usual stuff, you know, love letters or nasty words for the shrink who couldn't pull off a miracle cure. These were different." I settled across from him, smoothed out the wrinkles in my skirt, and watched his face.

His thick dark hair flopped in his eyes, making him look more like twenty-three instead of forty-three. "Oh?"

"They talked about murder. It's probably a patient trying to get attention or something, but I think you should take a look. We might need to alert the authorities."

"These things are rather common, aren't they? I mean, cyber viruses and such."

"Well, yeah, and that's a possibility, but I've never heard of a virus quite like this."

"What did the e-mails say exactly?"

I shifted in my seat, not wanting to repeat the gruesome words. "Stuff about killing someone and wanting to kill someone else. How 'bout I forward them to you so

you can take a look.”

He nodded. “Okay, but it’s probably just a prank of some kind.” Puff, puff, puff.

“So, how’s school?” asked my boss.

“Pretty busy right now with lots of reading and two papers due by the end of the week. I’ve been knee deep in research about the criminal mind.”

“Could be that’s why you’re a bit jumpy about those e-mails. You probably need to get away from the books awhile.”

I laughed. “Not much chance when you’re a doctoral student.”

“I thought you had a couple of suitors.”

Suitors?

“Are you still dating Tim?”

I looked away and cleared my throat, hating the way he asked these personal questions, but recognizing, he just couldn’t help himself. “Timothy,” I corrected. “He doesn’t like to be called Tim. And Frank. I’ve been going out with the two of them for about six months.”

“Can’t make up your mind?”

Dr. Bingham’s buzzer interrupted us.

Starr’s deep Southern voice said, “Your first appointment has arrived. Better put out the pipe and tell Jenna to get her tail out here. He brought you-know-who with him.”

When I rebooted my computer, another message flashed on the screen. I took a deep fortifying breath before opening it.

She fought me, but I managed to slit her throat. My knife went in as smooth as butter. So neat and cool.

My God. This has to be a patient trying to push our buttons. *Or maybe someone crying for help*, I could almost hear my psych professor say. Whatever. I wasn't the least bit interested in the gory details.

"That surely is a pretty red shirt," Mrs. Porter said. She stood at the reception window, opting not to sit quietly in the waiting room. "It goes good with your black hair."

"Thanks. My mother gave it to me last year." I typed, *Why are you sending these messages to Dr. Niles Bingham's office?* Then I forwarded the e-mails to Dr. B and prayed he'd have time to look at them between patients.

"You don't come from these parts, do you?" Mrs. Porter continued.

Usually I dreaded these conversations with Mrs. Porter, but today her chatter kept my mind off the disturbing e-mails.

"I could tell you weren't from these parts," she went on as if I wasn't there.

Ping went my Inbox. *Message undeliverable*. Darn. I should have known. I opened the undeliverable response. Among all the garbled words, letters and numbers was the word *Finland*.

"You hadn't done that, have you, honey?"

I looked up from the computer. "Hadn't done what?" I'd completely lost track of what Mrs. Porter was rattling on about.

"Had surgery to look prettier."

"Good heavens, no. If I could afford it, though, I'd let them make me a new nose, real small and dainty like Starr's." I wrinkled up my nose.

Finland? Who in the world could be e-mailing us from Finland? I clicked on our registry to do a quick nationality search for our current patients.

“Your snout is fine, my dear, Miss Scali,” Starr said, emerging from the copy room with a stack of insurance forms. “My Steve already pants like a horny hound whenever he sees you.” She let out a trickle of giggles.

Mrs. Porter shot me a toothy grin. “My babies put lots of weight on me. You wait, deary. You’ll be round like the rest of us after you have a few younguns.”

Younguns? I shuddered at the thought.

Mrs. Porter droned on while I continued to watch my computer screen. *No results for Finland.*

When my telephone rang, I grabbed it, grateful to get away from Mrs. Porter and messages from Finland and back to more mundane things, like arguing with an insurance provider.

Ten minutes later Dr. B shot out of his office with briefcase in hand. “You’ll need reschedule today’s patients,” he said, heading for the door. “I’ve got an emergency at the hospital, a potential suicide attempt.”

I raced after him. “Did you have a chance to look at those e-mails?”

“No time, Jenna. I’ll have to get back to you later.”

Starr and I spent the rest of the day reshuffling appointments and before I knew what hit me, it was 2:30 p.m. and almost time to leave for a meeting with my major professor. I checked the computer for more creepy messages and found none. Relieved, I gathered up my books.

“If Dr. B calls about those e-mails, text me right away.”

She saluted. “Sure thing, hon-bun. Have you deleted the others yet? I sure hope that nut doesn’t torment me this afternoon.”

“I haven’t deleted them, but I answered one, just to see what might happen. Unfortunately it bounced.”

“If you ask me, it’s some bored kid wanting to stir up a little trouble.” Starr shrugged as if we were discussing the latest sale at Macy’s.

“What if he--or she, for that matter--really murdered someone?”

“What can we do about it?” She handed me half a Hershey bar.

I broke off a piece of chocolate--Starr’s cure for everything. “I could go to the police. They’d track down the server. By the way, when it bounced, I found out *fi* stands for Finland.”

Starr perked up. “My lord! A person from Finland e-mailed us?”

“I’d have to find out more about sending anonymous messages, but right now it looks like it.”

“This is too wild. I’ve heard of people writing e-books online. Maybe you got tangled up with some writer. Gosh, maybe even Stephen King.”

I laughed at Starr’s zany imagination.

“By the way, Jen, I finished that V.I. Warshawski mystery you gave me.”

“I’ll bring you another one. I’ve read them all.”

She finished munching on the chocolate before saying, “Listen, honey, whatever is going on, you need to keep your little self out of it. People get in heaps of trouble for sticking their noses where they shouldn’t.”

“Starr, these messages came to us.”

“Yeah, by accident maybe. My mama used to tell me, ‘Starr if it ain’t none of your business, it ain’t none of your business.’ Keep out of this, Jenna.”

I tossed my backpack over my shoulder. *Keep out of this, Jenna.* How many times had I heard those words and done just the opposite?