

Chapter 1

“Rat-a-tat-tat!”

“Rat-a-tat-tat!”

I rolled over, only half awake, and hoped that the woodpecker would go someplace else.

“Rat-a-tat-tat!”

I slammed my hand down on top of the alarm clock just in case that was the cause of the disturbance.

“Rat-a-tat-tat!”

I propped myself up on one elbow and glared at the clock through bleary eyes. It said seven-thirty. I always allowed myself another hour’s sleep, so it couldn’t be the alarm.

“Rat-a-tat-tat!”

Finally it registered with me that someone was knocking on my front door. Moving slowly, as if my body might shatter like expensive crystal, I slowly placed my feet flat on the floor then slid them carefully into slippers. On my way past the foot of the bed, I grabbed my silk robe and pulled it on. As I headed down the hall, there was another machine gun like rapping on the door. I peered through the sidelight and saw that a trailer with a backhoe had pulled into the driveway. I briefly thought how fortunate I was to have a doublewide driveway, so the trailer wasn’t blocking my car.

I opened the door halfway. On the small porch stood a man whose waist seemed to start in the middle of his chest and extend to his knees, all of it covered in a red T-shirt that threatened to burst at any moment like an overfilled balloon.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“We’re here to dig,” he announced.

“Dig what?”

“Didn’t Bud tell you?”

I assumed he was talking about my landlord, Bud MacDonald, but I couldn’t bring to mind any mention of digging.

“We’re here to dig the foundation for the garage.”

Slowly it came to me: Bud had vaguely mentioned something about having a garage build the last time we talked. Actually he had mentioned it in the context of saying, “If you’re going to keep living here, you’ll owe me an extra fifty a month for the garage.” But he hadn’t been specific about when the construction was going to begin, and he certainly hadn’t made it clear that it would be within two days of our conversation.

“Go right ahead, I guess,” I said.

“We’ve already got the owner’s permission.”

Then why are you bothering me, I thought. He gave me a slow once-over, making me aware that my robe and nightgown stopped well above the knee. When his eyes finally met mine, I glared hard enough that he shuffled backwards a step.

“Anything else?” I snapped.

The guy shook his head and quickly motioned to a smaller man on the trailer who started unchaining the backhoe. Giving me a final nod, he slowly left the porch.

Deciding that there would be no chance of getting back to sleep with all the noise about to begin outside, I made my bed and got dressed, just to play it safe in case there

was another knock on the door. I went down the short hall into the kitchen and dumped some cornflakes into a bowl. Then I switched on the small television on the counter and started up the coffee maker.

So my rent was likely to go up. Too bad. I liked the house, a bungalow with mission style touches such as a stained glass window in the hallway and original built-in shelves in the dining room. Aside from keeping those elements, the interior had been completely modernized by Bud. So I had the beauty of the old along with the efficiency of the new. I had lived here for only about six months and felt like I was just starting to settle in. I didn't want to move, but an extra fifty dollars a month added up. Although I had to admit, a garage would be handy during the long Massachusetts winters.

The throaty roar of a large engine started up outside the kitchen window, sounding as if it were in the same room with me. I turned up the volume on the television. On the screen Brian Croaker appeared, reporting the weather.

My cup stopped halfway to my lips. Why is Brian doing the weather n a Tuesday? I wondered. Brian was the weekend guy. He was older, semi-retired, and only worked during the week when either Travis Lambert or myself, the two full-time meteorologists, was out sick. Where was Travis? Surely, he was too concerned about his rating to take a day off without good reason. Even when he'd had a bad cold two months ago, he had dragged himself in, managing to look semi-presentable for his five-minute spot.

I felt a moment of pleasure at the thought of Travis being truly sick then told myself that I wasn't being a nice person. But it was hard for me to be nice when it came to Travis. As the senior meteorologist at WAQB, he never let me forget my junior status,

frequently warning me that if I continued to get more fan mail than he did, I'd soon find myself looking for another job. I wasn't sure what he could do, but there was something sneaky and under-handed about Travis that led me to suspect the worst. Anyway, what could I do about fan mail. Personally I couldn't have cared less if I never heard from a fan, but this was the kind of thing Travis obsessed about. I knew he checked daily to see who was receiving the most hits on our personal blogs. Lately I had been beating him two-to-one. I wished it were the opposite because I knew that having Travis as an enemy wasn't a good thing.

The thought of Travis had begun turning the cornflakes and coffee into a toxic sludge in the pit of my stomach when there was another chatter of machine gun fire against my front door. I climbed to my feet and headed down the hall, wondering what further problems the early morning could bring.

I opened the door. The big man stood on the porch, staring at me stoney-faced.

"There's something you have to see," he said.

He turned and walked off the porch. I remained in the doorway, certain that there was nothing this guy could show me that was so essential to my well-being that I had to trot outside before breakfast. He must have sensed that I wasn't obediently following behind, because his ponderous body swung back to face me.

"You *really* do want to see this."

Reluctantly I followed him as he lumbered around the side of the house.

Fortunately, since all I had on was a sweater and jeans, the April morning was fairly warm, but I could feel my sandaled feet getting wet and cold from the heavy dew that made the grass sparkle. The small man sat on top of the backhoe, staring in front of him

at the beginnings of a hole in the ground. He quickly leapt off the equipment and ran towards me.

“You’ve got to see this,” he said, enthused at having an audience.

The more people kept saying that, the more I doubted that it was true. I clearly remembered Bobbie Miller, who later became a veterinarian, telling me exactly the same thing when I was eight then showing me the largest dead rat I’d ever seen. Some things stay with you.

The two men walked ahead of me to the trench that they had started to dig not ten feet from my kitchen wall. They both stopped and stood at the edge of the shallow hole looking down. I joined them and took a quick glance. I already suspected what I was going to see. There are only a couple of surprising things you find when digging. One of them is buried treasure, and I didn’t think that these guys would have told me if they found that. The body was face down in the dirt, which somehow, for a crazy moment, made the whole thing seem worse. I caught my breath then glanced away, trying to absorb what I had seen.

“The ground was a little sunken, and somebody hadn’t tried real hard to put the grass back. So I knew there must have been digging here recently,” the little guy said.

“But I never expected to find a body.” He grinned at his good fortune.

I nodded. I found that focusing precisely on what I was being told made me calmer.

“What’s that?” the big guy asked. He grabbed a branch and reached into the hole, turning over a dirty object near the body’s head.

“Too bad, he was a fan,” the big man said, as we all recognized the muddy Red Sox logo on the cap.

“Why don’t we roll him over and see if we know him?” the little guy suggested.

“I think we should wait . . .” I began. But I may as well have been whistling Mozart, as the little guy jumped into the shallow hole to follow his own suggestion.

The body rolled over and the eyes opened to stare at the sky.

“Don’t know him,” the big guy said.

“Neither do I,” his little friend added.

“I do,” I said slowly, looking into the dead eyes of Travis Lambert.