

Chapter 1

The raucous hails of the onlookers at the parade filled my ears as the float ambled down the icy street. Decked out in ornaments, trees, snowmen, and even a Santa Claus; the Candle Shoppe made quite a display in the city's Christmas Parade. Mr. Stilton had decided that he wanted a float in the parade for advertisement. We had spent the last month working on it. I hoped all of our hours of sweat paid off.

Tammy jumped up and down excitedly waving and cheering at the crowds. Her fervor did little to warm my frozen hands. I breathed on them some, but it seemed to make them colder, instead of warmer.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted Tammy, rocking the float with her enthusiasm.

Jackie and I glanced at each other with knowing looks.

"Shouldn't you be a bit more excited?" she asked.

It's not that I don't like Christmas. It's usually one of my favorite holidays. But standing out in the cold on a moving trailer overloaded with stuff is not my idea of a good time. "I am cheerful, but my hands and lips are frozen." I waved at the crowd. "How much longer is this thing?"

"Not long," answered Jackie. "Oh, look! There's a little kid there dressed like Rudolph."

I smiled at the cute little tyke.

"What's with you?" asked Jackie, "You've been gloomy lately."

I had been a bit melancholy lately. I didn't know why. I had managed to pass my classes when the semester ended. I should be happy. Truth be told, I was bored. I wanted another mystery, or something worthwhile to do. I never realized that I depended on ghosts showing up unannounced to spice up my life and give it meaning. It—

A flicker of movement in the upstairs window of a two story building caught my attention. I looked up watching the window intently. Through the open shade, a man with his back to me had his hands around a woman's throat. Her hands waved wildly as she tried to get away, but he mysterious man held her firm.

"Jackie!" I shouted, "A woman is being murdered!"

I leapt off the float, dashing into the building and stomped up the stairs.

"Mel!" Jackie chased after me. Even Tammy followed.

When I reached the top, I looked around like a Wildman, trying to figure out which door to use. I finally settled on the nearest one to my right. Open. The door banged against the wall as I burst in. Empty. I ran to the window, verifying that I had entered the correct apartment. It was the right one, but where was the body?

"Mel?" Jackie and Tammy entered the room.

I shoved open the other doors to the adjoining rooms. All of them empty. No body. No furniture. No sign of life. Clamping my head in my hands, I searched wildly for the woman I saw being choked and the man who had committed the deed.

"Mel," said Jackie, "what is going on?"

"She was here. I saw her a moment ago. She was here!"

"Who?" demanded Jackie.

"I don't know! But I saw a woman being choked."

"Mel, is everything okay?" asked Tammy, concerned about my mental well-being. "I think the cold must have been getting to you."

"But I know she was here! I know it!" I paced the room in agitation. What had just happened? I dashed out of the room and back outside.

"Mel, where are you going?" demanded Jackie as she chased after me.

"To the cops," I yelled back at her. Someone had to know that I saw a woman get murdered, body or no body.

Despite the cold, and the distance from the parade to the police station, I ran the entire way with both Jackie and Tammy close behind. I burst through the front, glass doors and charged the front desk. "Where's Detective Shorts?" I demanded.

"In his office," replied the man there. "May I tell him who is calling?"

Ignoring his question, I raced over to the directory, noting where his office was. Nixing the elevator, I careened into the stairwell and hiked the stairs two steps at a time.

"Mel!"

Jackie's voice echoed in the stone interior as she and Tammy both followed me. I ignored their pleas. Someone had to be told quickly before the murderer got away with it. Though, I had no idea how I'd explain the missing body. Reaching the fourth floor, I whipped the door open, my feet slapping the linoleum as I charged for the detective's office. It wasn't too far ahead.

I halted in the doorway, glad to see Detective Shorts for the first time in my life.

"There's been a murder," I said, breathless.

"Murder?" he looked up at me from his paperwork. "Where?"

Still panting, I answered, "Down near the parade. Main Street. 238."

The wheels of his chair squeaked as he pushed it back, standing up. "Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

"Mel," gasped Jackie as she and Tammy both appeared in the doorway.

Detective Shorts held up his hand.

"We were at the parade on one of the floats, passing that abandoned shop with the apartments above it."

"I know the place," said Detective Shorts. "Continue."

"I happened to glance up at the front window and there was a woman there with a man choking her. We have to go there right away."

"Hold on," Detective Shorts cautioned me. "What did the woman look like?"

I thought a moment. Everything had happened so fast, "Brown hair. Dark skin. I didn't get a good look at her face."

"And the murderer?"

"He had his back to me and wore a long, black trench coat with the collar up."

"Mel, there was no one there," said Jackie. "That apartment was empty."

"Empty? You went up there?" said Detective Shorts, with a note of disappointment.

I hung my head. "Yes, I had to do something."

"Geez, Mel, you were like a wild woman," Tammy made her presence known. "You went charging in there like a maniac."

I glowered at Tammy. I didn't think I had acted like a maniac.

"So you girls went with her?" asked Detective Shorts of Jackie and Tammy.

They nodded their heads.

"And the apartment was empty?"

“Totally!” blurted out Tammy. “It was so bare that not even mice were there. No furniture. No dust.”

Rubbing his chin, Detective Shorts looked at me as though I had played the cruelest joke imaginable. He didn’t believe me. And worse, Jackie didn’t seem to believe me either. I didn’t care about Tammy’s thoughts.

“Don’t any of you believe me?” I looked at each of them and their mixed expressions. “I’m not making this up. I saw a woman being choked to death.”

“Then where’s the body?” asked Jackie.

“Alright, enough,” said Detective Shorts. “Show me where it happened. I can at least have a look.”

We piled into his old car. He pulled out onto the street, taking all of the back roads to get to the abandoned shop. My stomach swayed the way a boat does on water with each of the bumps the car hit. Good thing it was cold. By the time we reached the abandoned shop with the apartments above it, the parade had ended. Only remnants of it remained as people cleaned up debris.

Detective Shorts held the door to the entrance open for us as we headed inside and up the creaky stairs. I opened the apartment, “See? I know something happened here.”

Detective Shorts perused the place, taking in every detail. He searched every corner, every nook and cranny. His nose wrinkled as he wandered into the kitchenette and opened the cabinets. I watched in bated anticipation as he wandered into the adjoining room, checking the closet and the bathroom. My nerves prevented me from being able to stand still. Detective Shorts peeked out the bedroom window. A thump reverberated as he opened up the window, leaning out to look down at the ally below and then up at the roof.

“Well, Miss Summers, there doesn’t seem to be anything here to indicate a murder took place,” he said as he came back to the main room.

“But I know what I saw.”

“I don’t doubt that. But isn’t there the slightest possibility that you might have imagined it? The excitement of the parade can play tricks on a person’s mind.”

“Why do you guys keep looking at me like I’m crazy?” I shouted at them.

“Maybe because there is nothing here,” said Jackie as delicately as she could. “Face it, Mel, this place is literally empty. There is nothing in here.”

“Maybe the killer carted the body away,” said Tammy with too much excitement. I had no idea if her outburst was a poor attempt at patronizing me.

“Well, there is a fire escape out the bedroom window,” said Detective Shorts, “but to carry a body down those steps would be difficult and dangerous with all of the ice. However, it does adjoin to the window of the apartment next door.”

“What’s going on in here?” demanded a hoarse voice.

We all turned. A man with hair all over his body, a beer gut, and gray tank top that only covered the top half of his belly stood there. His livid face told me he did not appreciate our intrusion.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Detective Shorts, pulling out his badge, “I am Detective Shorts.”

The man’s greasy fingers took the badge, eyeing it with distrust. “A detective, huh? You’ve no business being here.”

“On the contrary, I do, for the moment. One of these girls claims to have witnessed a crime take place here, which opens the door for me to investigate.”

“A crime, eh? What crime?”

“Murder,” I said aloud.

The man scoffed at my notion. “I didn’t hear nothing.”

"You live around here?" asked the detective.

"Yeah. I live next door. I'm the landlord. This apartment's been empty for two months."

"And the last tenant, was it a friendly parting?" asked Detective Shorts.

"I didn't kick him out if that's what you mean. Nah, he got a job down south some where's."

"Hey, what's this?" Tammy knelt down and picked up a shiny object the size of her fingernail.

"It looks like an earring. Five dollars from Claire's. Cheap imitation jewelry, but looks real enough."

My ears perked up. I had no idea she knew anything about jewelry.

"I'll take that," said Detective Shorts, pulling out a handkerchief and wrapping the earring in it.

"Hey, you can't take that," said the landlord.

"Do you wish to lay claim to it?"

"No. Go on take it. And get out of here all of you."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "What about the murder?"

"Where's the body little missy?" said the smug landlord.

"Sorry to intrude," Detective Shorts steered us all out of the room.

"But..."

"Miss Summers, I know you believe that you saw a woman get killed here, but the fact is, we have no body and no signs of a struggle. How did you get in here anyway?"

"The door wasn't locked," I replied.

Detective Shorts ushered us outside and parted company. "Go home. And forget about what happened here."

"Night you guys," said Tammy. "It's been fun."

Fun is not how I'd describe it.

Jackie and I trudged down the walk amongst the few stragglers at the parade as they packed up their chairs and blankets.

"Let's go to the diner on the corner here," suggested Jackie. "I hear they have wonderful soup."

Considering my foul mood and frozen hands, I relented. "Sure."

The door jingled as Jackie opened it for the both of us. The soup menu lay on a poster board near the cash register. Jackie's lips formed a straight line as she considered her options. The sign had seven different soups listed. The usual varieties consisted of Chicken Noodle, Minestrone, and Vegetable. More exotic kinds were Tahiti Surprise, Lobster Fest, Chili's Galore, and the Shit Maker, with the word "popular" next to it. I had reservations about that particular one. It didn't sound appetizing.

The guy ahead of us ordered two of them. I scrunched my nose. Someone would be spending a lot of time in the bathroom.

"What do you want?" asked Jackie.

"Whatever you have."

"What'll it be for you lovely ladies?" asked the older gentleman behind the counter.

"What is your Shit Maker?" asked Jackie.

"Guaranteed to clean out your insides," chuckled the man. "Made with every bean and spice imaginable to mankind."

"I think we'll just take two orders of your Tahiti Surprise," said Jackie.

"Anything to drink?" asked the guy behind the counter.

"Two waters," replied Jackie.

"\$7.50."

"No, I got it." Jackie pulled out her wallet, waving the bills in my hand away.

"Here ya ladies go," the guy handed us a tray with two gigantic bowls of soup.

Jackie took the tray and guided us to a somewhat secluded place in the packed diner. On a cold evening like this, no wonder everyone wanted soup.

"Well, eat up," she said in a cheery voice, placing my soup in front of me.

The Tahiti Surprise was surprisingly good with chunks of pineapple and mango in it, along with bamboo shoots, basil and rosemary. It had a sweet and tangy taste. I added it to my list of favorite things to eat.

"You need to cheer up," commented Jackie as she dived into her soup.

"I am cheery," I protested.

"No, you're not. You've been down in the dumps lately."

"I have not." My statement sounded false, even to me.

"You haven't, huh?" Jackie's eyes bore into mine. "You mope around at home. At work you seem to be just going through the motions. You and Greg aren't having trouble are you?"

"No, it's not that. I just..."

"Just what," prompted Jackie when my voice had trailed off.

"I feel useless. After those girls left, I haven't seen hide or hair of someone who needs my help."

"You mean a ghost who needs you? Mel, I don't believe it. You're addicted to solving crimes."

"I am not."

"Yeah, you are," continued Jackie. "I think I just figured it out. The only time you seem alive is when you're catching bad guys. It's like an adrenaline rush for you."

"It is not." A part of me knew that she was right. The only time I felt useful was when I got involved in some mystery.

"Is that why you thought you saw a woman being murdered?"

"SHHH," I hissed. "Keep your voice down. I didn't think I saw it. I know I did."

"Then why didn't we find anything?"

"I wish I knew." I glanced up as I noticed a guy sitting a few tables away from us turn back around suddenly. Had he been listening? I sloughed it off as just my imagination.

"Mel, I know you feel important when you are getting involved in cases that the police wish you'd stay out of; but you are important to the rest of us, even when you're vegetating on the couch. You don't have to save the world to be important."

"Thanks, Jackie."

"So everything between you and Greg is fine? No juicy gossip?"

"Jackie."

"Okay. Okay. I'll let it drop. I really need to get a boyfriend."

Lately, Jackie had been feeling a bit left out in the romance department. I felt for her. "You'll find one someday."

"Thanks. I like the 'someday' part you threw in there."

I thought I noticed the same man listening. He whipped around the moment I glanced at him. Come on, Mel, not everyone is a suspect.

Our spoons clinked on the bottom of the ceramic bowls as we scraped the last drops of our soup into our mouths. Finished, we dropped our bowls off at the counter like the sign had asked and went back out to brave the cold once more. It felt as though it had gotten colder.