

# The Rain Sparrow

## Excerpt

### Chapter 1

*Present Day. Honey Ridge, Tennessee*

Brody hated Fridays.

He knew what would happen if he went home. So he didn't. He hung out at the library until it closed, and then, wishing he had money for a hamburger, wandered down to his spot on Magnolia Creek. It was a pretty good hike, a couple of miles out of town past the Griffin sister's peach orchard and through a hundred yards of tangled weeds, but at eleven, he was up for it. He could have run that far and not been out of breath.

When the night surrounded him and clouds gathered in the inky sky, he once more contemplated going home. He was hungry, but food wasn't always worth the trouble. He wasn't afraid of the dark or of being alone deep in the country. Home was a whole lot scarier.

Stretched out on the cool earth with his hands stacked behind his head, he listened to the peaceful night sounds, the sawing rhythm of katydids that sometimes grew so loud he felt like they were inside him, and the splash of bullfrogs diving from the nearby bank.

A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. It was probably somewhere far off, clean over in the mountains. He wouldn't worry about that. He didn't mind a little rain. If he had to, he could high-tail it past the inn to the abandoned grist mill, even though the place was kind of spooky.

The mill was probably haunted. That's what his buddy, Spence said. The last time they'd gone there to explore, Spence had heard something and freaked out, so Brody would rather not go to the mill unless he had to.

Would the old man be passed out by now? Or would he be waiting with clenched fist and a hankering to take out his hatred of life on the good-for-nothing son of the good-for-less woman who'd left them both so long ago the boy had forgotten her. Mostly. Somehow it was Brody's fault that his mother had left, and the old man never let him forget it, though he never gave a reason. Brody was pretty much clueless about his absentee mother. His angry father he understood, but thoughts of his mother left him lonely and nursing a guilt he didn't understand. He must have done something really bad to make her up and leave that way.

A mosquito buzzed somewhere in the humid darkness. He

listened close while the pest came in for a landing, waited until the sound stopped, and then he swatted. A few bug bites was better than the alternative.

He didn't like killing anything, even bugs, but as the old man would say, "It's a dog eat dog world. Eat the dog before he eats you."

Something about that didn't sound right to Brody, but what did he know? That's what the old man always said. A punk kid like Brody didn't know nothing.

He sighed at the moon and closed his eyes.

Better catch some zzzs and wait a while longer. The old man was a bull, and once enraged, he had blood in his eye. Clint Thomson was seldom anything but enraged on payday, especially when it came to his good for nothing son.

## Chapter 2

It was a dark and stormy night, a cliché Hayden Winters dearly loved. These broody, moody nights of lightning and thunder and violent wind fueled his imagination like no other. A man intent on committing murder...

The storm had moved in around midnight, interrupting his original plans to sleep. He could never sleep on a night like this. Didn't want to, especially here in a house filled with memories and secrets.

Everyone, he believed, has a secret, and the south was filled with them. That's why he'd come.

Hayden had a secret, too, a psychological canker worm. One that was eating a raw, black hole in his soul. Not that he'd ever let anyone see inside to know that much about him. To the world, Hayden Winters was a winner, a success, a man who brushed problems away with a charming smile and a ready quip. He was a man invited to the best parties he seldom attended and who gave rare, but coveted interviews. A man with a charmed life.

But on these dark, moody, broody nights the demons danced around the edges of his fertile mind. He wondered at his sanity, and knew it was only by a merciful God that he was strong of constitution and could keep the demons in their rightful place. Most of the time.

So he killed people. Dozens of them. Books littered with bodies fed some perverse need in the populace and kept his bank account fat and happy.

In the elegant rented bedroom-the Mulberry Room-lit only by the glow of his laptop, Hayden rose, went to the windows to watch and listen as rain lashed the sides of Peach Orchard Inn with its silver-on-black fingers clawing to get in.

The view outside was far different than it had been upon his arrival earlier today. An Australian shepherd, graying

around the edges, had drowsed on the long and glorious antebellum veranda. Hayden had immediately envisioned himself at the wicker furniture, feet up on the railing with a glass of Julia Presley's almost-famous peach tea and his imagination in flight.

The two-story columned mansion had shone in the sun, glowing in its whiteness with dark trimmed shutters, flowers spilling everywhere and thick vines twining like great green arms around the oak trees. He'd driven down the winding lane of massive magnolias right into an antebellum past, far from the distractions and manic pace of the modern world.

Peach Orchard Inn, a simple name for a magnificent house, restored he would bet, to better than its former glory. His assistant, who knew him better than most, though not well, had discovered the inn while on vacation and suggested he write the next bestseller here. Exhausted by the city bustle and another romance gone sour, he'd jumped at the idea. His ex should have taken him at his word. He'd told her from the beginning that he was neither husband nor father material. The reasons for this aversion he'd kept to himself, more for her protection than his. She didn't know that, though, and had been hurt.

He hated hurting people. Other than in his books. And the latest episode drove him deeper into himself. A man like him ought not to need other people.

He could work here, rest here, research small town secrets for the next thriller. There were plenty of interesting places to commit murder—an attic, a cellar, a carriage house, creeks and woods, and the nearby small town of Honey Ridge.

Across the road, a single light glowed like a beacon in the storm. The source was the abandoned, dilapidated grist mill that had once been part of this farm. He knew this because he was ferociously curious and knowing was his business. Abandoned buildings provided perfect places to get away with murder. Yes, he'd be suitably inspired here among the hills and hollows of southern Tennessee.

A blue-fire javelin of lightning, fierce as a bolt straight from the hand of Zeus slit the night like a fiery blade. Gorgeous stuff.

Hayden stretched, rolled his neck, considered a walk in the violence.

He'd be up most of the night during a wild thunderstorm of this magnitude. He could feel the yet unformed story brewing in his blood, a bubbling cauldron of energy and creativity.

Coffee, and plenty of it, was a must. He wasn't a Red Bull kind of guy. Something about it seemed addictive to him and if there was anything he feared greater than losing his only useful resource—his fertile mind—it was addiction. Addictions came, he

knew, in many forms.

Leaving the laptop curser to blink a blind eye, he let himself out of the luxurious Mulberry Room and made his way down shadowy stairs carpeted in blood red, his hand on the smooth wooden banister, taking care on the creaky third step he'd noticed earlier. No self-respecting author of murder and mayhem missed a creaky step.

Lightning illuminated the curved staircase and thunder rumbled like a thousand kettle drums. The house stood steady, quiet even, as if it had weathered too much to be bothered by a thunderstorm. There were stories here. He could feel them.

Hayden's Scots-Irish blood heard the dance of his ancestors in the thunder, saw wave-tossed fishing vessels on storm gray seas and imagined a woman standing on the shore, hand to her forehead watching while in the misty shadows lurked the equally watchful predator, biding his time.

Hayden tucked away the image for future reference. The new book was to explore the dark undercurrents hidden behind the welcoming smiles and sweet tea of a small town in the rural south, not the storm-tossed coasts of Ireland.

At the base of the stairs, he crossed the foyer through to an area the proprietress had termed the front parlor, a room of time past with a marble fireplace enclosure and Victorian décor, and into the much more modern kitchen. He fumbled for a light switch, mildly concerned about waking the sister-owners who resided somewhere on the first floor, but dismissed the concern in favor of coffee.

A quick survey of the brown granite countertops revealed no coffee maker. He cursed himself for not remembering to ask about essential coffee equipment in his rented room, of which there was none. Here, in the large copper and cream kitchen, the coffee machine could be anywhere. He had no luck locating it but found a teabag caddie, a discovery that made him snarl.

While he pondered the usefulness of lemon zinger tea, his cell phone buzzed against his hip. He winced at the sudden racket, though if the thunder didn't wake the house, a ringtone shouldn't. Still, out of consideration and being the new guest in the place, he slapped the phone silent. He'd intended to dump the device in the bottom of his suitcase and forget it for a few days, but out of habit, he'd stuck the phone in his back pocket.

"A pity," he grumbled. "And stupid."

He knew who the caller was. The only person who ever called him in the dead of night. She'd been the one who taught him never to sleep too soundly.

"Hello, Dora Lee."

He heard her quivery intake of breath and braced himself for the histrionics or cursing. One or the other was inevitable.

When she didn't respond, a tingle of worry made him ask a regrettable question. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right, though a lot you care. I'm sick. You know I'm sick and you don't help me. How am I supposed to get my medicine?"

Hayden closed his eyes and leaned against the hard counter edge. He could imagine her there in the cluttered trailer among unwashed dishes and fast food containers filled with dry, half-eaten meals, hair wild and eyes wilder, hands shaking in desperation. "What did you do with the last money?"

"You think that's enough? You think I can pay rent and buy food and keep the lights on with that?"

His sigh was heavy. "Is the electricity off again?"

"Been off. I had to have my medication. What good is lights if a body hurts too bad to open her eyes."

"Dora Lee, I won't send money for any more pills." God knew, he'd contributed to her addiction too long already with the ever raw hope that she'd change, a hope that even now burned with a flickering flame. "You're killing yourself. I'll come to Kentucky, get you into a clinic—"

The scream in his ear was louder than the thunder. "Shut up! Shut up, you hear me? You ungrateful scum. I should have drowned you when I had the chance for all the good you've done me. Keep your filthy money."

The line went dead in his ear.

Weariness of the last few months pressed in. His stir of creative energy seeped out like life's blood on the kitchen tile.

He should never have given her his cell phone number, but the desperate little boy inside him still yearned to make things better with his embittered, addicted nightmare of a mother. Even when he was small, before the dark and deadly underbelly of a coal mine had killed his gentle father, Dora Lee had popped illegally gotten pills for imaginary headaches and hated her only child. And he still didn't know why.

His mother had no idea the same hated son was now Hayden Winters, successful novelist. It was a secret he would never share with her. Could never share. The ramifications were too deep and disturbing to consider.

Long ago, he'd changed his name and recreated his past in an effort to become something besides the dirtiest little boy in the worst part of Appalachia. Suave, confident Hayden Winters was as fictitious as the novels he wrote. Dora Lee wouldn't have cared anyway. All she cared was that he sent money.

For her unconcerned ignorance, Hayden would ever be grateful to the God who'd rescued him from the mines and Dora Lee Briggs. If the press got hold of his mother, Hayden could

kiss his tightly controlled privacy goodbye. She'd have a trashy reality show so fast he'd have to live on the moon to live down his childhood. The tabloids would love her.

He was glad she couldn't read, though as a needy boy, hoping to please his mother, he'd offered to teach her. For his offer, she'd battered him with the book until the binding loosened and the pages ripped, raging that she wasn't as stupid as he thought.

At least a couple of times a year, he made the trek to see her, again out of some psychological wound that needed to be fed. Each time, he'd leave behind another piece of himself along with a parting gift that she would trade, in addition to her monthly draw, for Oxycontin or whatever pills she could get that would take her away from reality for a while.

Dora Lee Briggs was his ugly secret. One of them, anyway.

With the wound in his soul open and throbbing, Hayden stuck a cup of water in the microwave. Lemon zinger would have to do.

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Carrie Riley tiptoed down the stairs, shivering in her bare feet and lightweight pajamas. Storms made her nervous. *Really* nervous. She couldn't sleep. Couldn't begin to sleep with all that fierce wind whipping the trees and thunder making her jump out of her skin. How anyone else could sleep boggled her well-ordered mind.

She didn't know where she was going, considering the late hour, but since the family parlor housed the inn's only downstairs television to check the weather, she'd head there. What if a tornado was coming? Didn't anyone in this house think about that?

Carrie hated storms. Absolutely hated them. Even in infancy, according to her mother, Carrie had screamed like a banshee, inconsolable, at the first thunderclap. She didn't scream anymore, but she did quake and shake and long for someone to hold her.

Penlight aimed at the floor, she gripped the banister and made her way down. The third step squeaked. She stopped, winced, and then went on. She was such a wimp. Such a mouse.

A sleep-over was a silly thing for grown women to do but yesterday in the light of day, before the storm, time spent with sisters and friends had sounded like the perfect respite. She and her two sisters, lifelong friends of the inn's sister-owners, Valery Carter and Julia Presley, had decided on a weekend retreat to reconnect and have some fun. Julia was making a fresh effort to reclaim old friends and move forward after the terrible abduction of her son six years ago, and Carrie was delighted to be part of that.

They'd had a great time, exchanged stories and giggled over

a bit too much sangria as they painted toenails and discussed Julia's engagement to Eli Donovan of the Knoxville Donovans and urged her to have a big, blow-out-all-the-stops wedding right here at Peach Orchard Inn.

Now, the others were snoozing like fossil rocks while she trembled in fear over the storm and nursed the teeniest headache. Wine had a tendency to do that to plain old Carrie of the boring life who rarely drank anything stronger than a single shot espresso. She couldn't even tolerate a double. Wimp.

At the bottom of the steps, she noticed a light in the kitchen. Curious and eager for human companionship, Carrie hurried on shaky knees across the cool wood floors, but skittered to a stop in the arched doorway when she spotted him. For the person in the kitchen was definitely a him. A lean, rangy, masculine him.

He obviously had not yet been to bed. Still in casually expensive jeans she recognized only by the label on the back pocket holding a cell phone and a navy, long-sleeved pullover with the sleeves pushed back, he was turned away from her lifting a teabag in and out of a China cup. His wide shoulders, like his forearms were muscled, his hands long and strong looking as if he worked outside for a living. But not in those jeans. Or that haircut.

He wore a rich man's haircut. She knew this because her sister, Nikki, was the most fashion conscience woman in Honey Ridge. Boutique owner Nikki knew fashion, knew haircuts, knew high-end anything, unlike Carrie, who couldn't tell Gucci from a gunny sack and basically didn't care. The man's brown, straight hair was casually shoved off his forehead in a loose, sexy muss that probably cost a bazillion dollars to maintain.

Carrie couldn't decide whether to speak or wait until he noticed her. In her case, that might be another fifty years. Men did not notice Carrie Riley. Not unless they wanted to check out a book.

The loudest clap of thunder ever heard, at least to Carrie, rocked the countryside. The house trembled. Lightning followed on its tail, a blinding explosion of light and sound that crackled the air.

Carrie jumped, fists raised, and squeaked.

The spoon clattered against the counter. The man stilled and then slowly turned his head. He was good looking, darn it. Romantic looking, like one of the poets she read incessantly with a deep longing for that kind of love to find its way to her house. Now, she'd be a bumbling, stuttering mess for more reasons than the storm.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." She crossed her arms tightly over her chest.

A very nice, full-lipped mouth curved. Eyes the color of fog and smoke and mystery watched her. "You squeaked."

*Like a mouse. Stupid. Stupid.*

"Storms scare me. I thought I'd better check the weather."

"It's raining."

Carrie rolled her eyes, almost smiled, though she was still too shivery. "What if there's a tornado?"

He shook his head. "Not going to happen."

Something about the easy way he rejected the idea of a tornado soothed her. Maybe he was a meteorologist.

Carrie took a few steps into the kitchen. She didn't know this man, but she could always scream if he tried something, though not a soul in this house would hear her over the storm.

Comforting thought.

Want some—" He saluted her with one of Julia's delicate white cups and a wry arch of eyebrow, sipped and made a face. "-lemon zinger tea?"

At times like this she wished she was as outgoing as Nikki or gorgeous like Bailey, or even a little wild and easy with men like Valery. But she was none of those things. She was just plain Carrie, the librarian, wishing she could say something snappy and clever.

"If you don't like lemon zinger, pick a different kind." *Very snappy and clever.* No wonder she was past thirty and still single.

"I wanted caffeine," he said with a shrug.

"You won't get it from lemon zinger. Make coffee."

"I would if I knew where the machine was."

She lifted a finger. "That I can help you with."

He dropped his head back. "Praise the saints and Maxwell House."

Bare feet soundless on the cool tile flooring, Carrie moved to a pantry and removed one of Julia's sterling silver French press urns. "We'll have to grind the beans. Julia's a bit of a coffee snob."

"Won't the noise disturb the others?"

Thunder rattled the house. Carrie tilted her head toward the dark, rain-drenched window. "Will it matter?"

"Point taken. You're a lifesaver. What's your name?"

"Carrie Riley." She kept her hands busy and her eyes on the work. The fact that she was ever-so-slightly aware of the stranger with the poet's face in a womanly kind of way gave her a funny tingle. She seldom tingled, and she didn't flirt. She was no good at that kind of thing. Just ask her sisters.

"Yours?"

"Hayden Winters."

"Nice to meet you, Hayden." She held up a canister of

coffee beans. "Bold?"

"I can be."

She laughed, shocked to think this handsome man might actually be flirting a little. Even if she wasn't. "Bold, it is."

As she'd predicted, the storm noise covered the grinding sound and in fewer than ten minutes, the silver pot's lever was pressed and the coffee was poured. The dark, bold aroma filled the kitchen, a pleasing warmth against the rain induced chill.

Hayden Winters offered her the first cup, a courteous gesture that made her like him, and then sipped his. "You know your way around a bold roast."

"Former Starbucks barista who loves coffee."

"A kindred spirit. I live on the stuff, especially when I'm working, which I should be doing."

She didn't want him to leave. Not because he was hot-which he was-but because she didn't want to be alone in the storm, and no one else was up. "You work at night?"

"Stormy nights are my favorite."

Which, in her book, meant he was a little off-center. "What do you do?"

He studied her for a moment and, with his expression a peculiar mix of amusement and malevolence, said quietly, matter-of-factly, "I kill people."