

Chapter One

Ryan Collier awoke in the darkened bedroom to the feel of warm breath hitting his face. He was lying on his side, and even though he tried to look at the clock on the nightstand, something blocked his view.

Then that something licked his face.

“Oh, Sam!” he groaned, rolling over and wiping the slobber off with the back of his hand.

He heard the happy swish of Sam’s tail on the hardwood floor.

“Okay, girl. Just give me a minute,” Ryan said, closing his eyes. Then the alarm clock came to life, telling him it was time to start another day.

Ryan sighed and rolled over to turn off the blaring beeping and switch on the lamp. At six a.m., it was still dark outside and the sun wouldn’t show itself for at least another hour.

Sitting up, Ryan pushed his wavy brown hair out of his eyes. He was in desperate need of a haircut. His wife, Amanda, would have told him he needed a haircut weeks ago, and she would have been right. But she wasn’t here to remind him anymore—she hadn’t been for nearly three years.

A nudge at his other hand told him to hurry and get up. He smiled down at Sam. “Sorry, girl. I’ll feed you in a minute.”

Sam only smiled back.

After hitting the bathroom, Ryan walked downstairs with Sam leading the way. He went down the hall to the back door and unlatched Sam’s doggie door so she could go outside, then he walked to the kitchen and turned on the light. Two orange-striped tabbies sat on the floor by their placemat, patiently awaiting their breakfast.

“Yeah, guys. Give me a second, okay?”

Ryan started the coffeemaker and then turned to feeding the cats and the dog. He scooped canned food into each of their bowls as all three animals looked up at him expectantly. Seeing Sam, he couldn’t help but smile. She was always so happy and had that big silly golden retriever grin on her face.

He put Sam’s bowl down on one side of the tiled floor and set down the two for the cats on their placemat. “There you go, Punkin and Spice.” He no longer felt silly saying the name Punkin out loud, even though he was a grown man of thirty-eight. His wife had named all the animals and he was used to it. Just like he was used to having a female dog named Sam. Five years ago, when they’d gone to pick out a puppy from the litter of golden retrievers, Amanda had her heart set on naming the dog Sam. But it was a female puppy that had picked her, and Amanda fell in love with her instantly. “What about the name Sam?” he’d asked Amanda.

“We’ll call her Samantha. Sam for short,” she’d said.

All these years later, he was still explaining to people why they had a female dog named Sam. It made him smile.

Ryan left the animals to their breakfast and walked from the kitchen through the living room to go upstairs. Passing the oak hutch, he quickly glanced at one of the many framed photos of his

wife he had scattered around the house. Brushing his fingertips softly across her lovely face, he sighed, and then ran upstairs to get ready for work.

Thirty minutes later, Ryan was back downstairs, dressed for work. He never wore a full-fledged suit—just dress pants, a button-down shirt, and a tie—but he always looked professional and handsome. He was a little over six feet tall and he kept in good shape by working out at the company gym several nights a week. He'd found that staying late to work out helped make the nights go faster so he had less time at home to think about being alone. After ten blissful years of marriage to his soulmate, it was difficult to come home to an empty house.

He quickly poured a mug of coffee and made toast, eating it standing at the counter. He could have sat at the large island or at the dining room table in the roomy, airy kitchen, but he chose neither. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd taken the time to sit at the table. What was the point?

The sun was making its way up by the time he gathered his coat, briefcase, and gym bag. He poured another cup of coffee into a to-go mug and snapped the lid tight.

"See you guys tonight," Ryan said aloud to the animals. The cats were already sitting on the window seat in the living room, cleaning themselves. Ryan's last glimpse of Sam was of her sitting at attention in the kitchen, watching him as he walked out the side door to the driveway.

The March air was crisp, and snow still lined the driveway where he'd pushed it aside while shoveling. In Minnesota winters dragged on, even as far south as Minneapolis. He walked to this compact SUV and slipped his things into the passenger seat. Then he stood a moment and stared out at the stillness around him. He liked the early morning in his neighborhood before everyone was fully awake and cars started making their way up and down the quiet street. He lived in an older neighborhood in South Minneapolis, about an eight-minute walk from Lake Harriet. It was a post-WWII neighborhood filled mostly with Craftsman-style homes, postage-stamp front lawns, and towering old oaks and maples lining the streets. Each house had a driveway and a one-stall garage in-between the next house. But Ryan didn't use the garage for his car. His wife's Mustang still sat, unused, inside theirs. He hadn't had the heart yet to either drive it, or sell it.

When he and Amanda began searching for a house, she fell in love with the neighborhood's charm. She hadn't wanted one of the new cookie-cutter style houses being built in the newer suburbs. As an interior decorator, she saw potential in the cottage house immediately. She also loved the thought of living in a neighborhood where so many people had planted roots for generations. It felt like home to her.

Ryan glanced over at the For Sale sign on the neighbor's front yard to the right. The Finleys finally gave in after living in the neighborhood for over forty years and moved to Florida full-time this past winter. They had been wonderful neighbors, kind and friendly, and Ryan missed having them next door. He hoped the house would sell soon for their sake. Hopefully, a nice family or elderly couple would move in.

Ryan slid into his car and pulled out of the driveway and onto the street. Noticing that Ruth Davis's newspaper was on her lawn, he parked in front of her house a moment, retrieved it, and then set it close to her door so she could reach it. She got along fine in her wheelchair, but he figured her morning would be better if the paper was easy to retrieve. He got back into his car and headed for the highway.

Ryan's base office was in a high-rise building in downtown Minneapolis just a short distance from the Nicollet Mall. It wasn't too far of a drive if he didn't get stuck in traffic, but he always gave himself at least a thirty-minute leeway in the morning. He'd go to the office, collect his paperwork, then head off to the first of his two appointments. He was a computer systems

salesman, and he sold large systems to businesses and hospitals. Today, he was meeting with the board of a grocery store chain about a new computer register system, and in the afternoon, he'd be meeting with the president of a bank to discuss their needs. It was going to be a busy day.

Kristen Foster walked through the home with the real estate agent, carefully assessing every nook and cranny. It was nine in the morning, and this was the first house of the day. She'd spent the last two months looking for the perfect home in a quiet-yet-affordable neighborhood. So far, she was really liking this one.

"Do you know much about this neighborhood?" Kristen asked as she studied the living room.

"It's a quiet, older neighborhood," Greg Carlton said. "The Finleys lived here for over forty years and raised their family in this house. They've moved to Florida full-time now. There's a nice elderly lady next door who is in a wheelchair, and an older man, a widower, next door. You can't get much quieter than that."

Kristen liked quiet. Her work was stressful, and she wanted to come home to peaceful surroundings. She walked all around the main floor, and then headed upstairs to where the two bedrooms and a bathroom were. "Everything looks so new in here. They must have remodeled recently."

"Oh, yes, they did. Most of it was done in the past five years. The floors are the original oak, but the tile in both bathrooms is new as are the fixtures. The kitchen is completely updated. Their neighbor was an interior decorator, and she helped them fix it up for when they decided to sell."

Kristen nodded as she pushed a loose strand of auburn hair back behind her ear. She was wearing her scrubs and had her thick hair pulled up because she had to go to work at the hospital at noon. She'd squeezed in this morning's showing because the house and the price had been too good to pass up a look at.

She loved the old Craftsman-style homes. Even though the master bedroom walls slanted on each end, it was large and they had added a walk-in closet and small master bath. The dormer window was charming, and there was a large window facing the little fenced-in backyard. She glanced out that window and could see into the neighbor's backyard, too. A golden retriever was sunning itself on the small lawn. Kristen smiled. She loved dogs. *Gabbie would love a picture of this one.*

Everything about this home was charming and Kristen found herself falling in love with it quickly. Finally! She was tired of living in the cramped apartment she'd moved into after her divorce two years before. She was thirty-two years old and had a good job as a pediatric oncology nurse, so it was time she found a permanent home. She'd just been too busy working nights and weekends to actually hunt for one. Now that her work schedule had changed to a five-day workweek with weekends off, she could start picking up the pieces of her life.

They walked out the kitchen back door that led to the driveway and down to the one-stall garage. There was a row of bushes that separated her driveway from the neighbor's. An opening in the bushes showed that these neighbors had passed through to each other's homes often. They inspected the garage and the backyard. Everything looked good. As they walked back up the driveway to the house, Kristen glanced over and saw the dog squeeze through a doggie door and disappear into the house.

"Well, what do you think?" Greg asked. "Does this one suit your needs?"

Kristen glanced around the kitchen once more. She loved the homey feel of it, the big eating area with the large front windows, and the cozy living room with the brick fireplace. The large, outdoor front porch was an added bonus. She could picture herself sitting in a rocker, watching the sunset in the evening. It was perfect.

“I love it. Let’s put in an offer,” she said, smiling wide.

“Wonderful.” Greg stood at the island and wrote up the paperwork for her to sign. Kristen walked around the house again as she waited. The living room held a built-in hutch, and the big front window had a window seat. It was all so lovely and cozy. She couldn’t wait to sit in front of a fire after a long day at work and relax. And best of all, summers here would be perfect. She liked that it was only a short walk to Lake Harriet, where she could get her exercise walking by the beautiful lake.

“Just sign here,” Greg said as she re-entered the kitchen.

Kristen didn’t even hesitate. She knew that no matter how much she’d have to pay, this was the home for her.