



CHAPTER 1

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2017

Carl Kessler was only a shadow in the moonlight as he parted from a tree and slipped through open wrought iron gates on Cass Street, once the preferred address of lumber barons in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The gates to the mansion hadn't been closed in fifty years. The fragrance of roses hung in the cool night air as the shadow blended into the overgrown shrubbery along the drive. He reappeared moments later at the rear of the house.

A credit card in the crease between the door and jamb gained entry. His night-vision goggles, held in front of his eyes by a headset, resembled a small pair of binoculars. In the dark house, the goggles turned the moonlight streaming through the windows into green-tinged day. He worked his way through the dining room and parlor to the library. The library door was locked, as it had been the last time he was in the house. Picking it was child's play.

A coin, the 1804 draped Liberty Bust silver dollar owned by the Kessler cousins, had disappeared between 1900 and 1905. It was worth a fortune today. He guessed that the coin, or information on it, would be in the library or in furniture in use in the master bedroom when the coin disappeared. Drawn curtains blocked the moonlight in the library. He set the night-vision goggles aside and pulled a flashlight from his backpack to search the room. It took two hours to skim through the

contents of the desk and an antique wooden filing cabinet. As Carl sorted through a four-generation collection of receipts, invoices, report cards, and letters, he was careful to leave everything as he found it in the desk. By the time he'd finished with the filing cabinet, his patience was exhausted. He threw papers over his shoulder. He pawed books off shelves, flipped through them, tossed them on the floor and checked for hidden cubbyholes behind the shelves. He didn't even find a mention of his quarry.

Next was the master bedroom. He liked to use the goggles and a starlight illuminator when people were around. The sticklike illuminator gave off only as much light as a starry night. With his goggles, he saw everything. They saw nothing. The old lady wouldn't be a problem if she left him alone. He'd cut the phone lines when he entered the house.

The parquet floor creaked as he walked to the grand staircase. The squeaks and groans grew louder as he climbed the stairs and tiptoed down the musty second-floor hallway toward the master bedroom. Traces of lilac perfume reminded him of his grandmother as he approached the door at the end of the hall.

His grandmother had been a shrew. She'd despised him, and he hated her.

A bedroom door opened, and antique electric wall sconces blazed to life. The safety shut-off on his goggles saved his vision. He flipped the goggles up and out of the way. A thin woman with wispy gray hair stood in the open doorway clutching a threadbare blue robe to her bony chest. Thick glasses in tortoiseshell frames magnified her startled eyes.

"Who . . . who are you?" she demanded.

"What does it look like, lady? I'm a thief. Go back to bed. I'll be gone in a few minutes."

Maybe she'd had it with the indignities of growing old, or

perhaps rage at a lifetime of losses overcame fear. She screamed and rushed him, snatched at his goggles and ski mask. Both came off.

“You! You’re one of the workmen—”

Her nails were sharp. The bones of her wrist crunched as he grabbed her. Carl pulled her to the stairway, planted one foot, swung her out over the stairs, and let her go. She landed on her back halfway down the staircase, somersaulted onto her head, and landed in a crumpled pile at the foot of the stairs, arms and legs akimbo.

The angle of her neck indicated she was dead. He returned to her bedroom and closed the green velvet drapes. The renter in the old carriage house might be suspicious if he saw lights on at 3:00 a.m.

He ignored the double bed and two dressers. The straight lines and blond wood screamed post-World War II. What he sought would most likely be found in older furniture, something in use around 1900. The other two bedrooms contained more post-war furniture. A door at the end of the hallway opened on the stairway to the attic. The attic air was still broiling from the hot day. He used his light stick to clear spiderwebs from his path as he wended his way around steamer trunks, old floor lamps, dust-covered furniture, and bat droppings. Near the far wall he found what he was looking for: pieces of a dismantled four-poster bed, an ornate dresser with a mirror, and an armoire, all laden with dust-covered spiderwebs.

The dresser drawers were empty. The first two drawers of the armoire held men’s clothes so old and moth-eaten they ripped when he pulled them out. Tucked in a thin drawer behind sets of cufflinks was a packet of letters. Another collection of worthless papers? He almost tossed them in frustration but forced himself to read a few.

The first letter he tore open, postmarked 1901, recounted the funeral of a New York Kessler, Carl's great-great-grandfather. His pulse quickened near the end of the second letter, addressed to Joseph Kessler, postmarked 1903. That was around the time the coin disappeared.

"As we agreed," the letter read, "I'll hold the 1804 draped Liberty Bust silver dollar for now. I've entrusted it to my secretary."

His secretary? Who the hell was that? He picked up the envelope and examined the return address. It took only a minute to decipher the script, as the handwriting was clear: "Oscar Kessler, 470 Mound Ave, Rockburg, Wis." Confused, he stuffed the envelope into his backpack. He had a secretary's family to track in Podunk.