

KILLER
RESOLUTIONS

A NOVELLA

KILLER
RESOLUTIONS

A NOVELLA

Elizabeth McKenna

Killer Resolutions is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. Please do not participate in piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights.

Copyright © 2019 by Elizabeth McKenna

Published in the United States of America

ISBN-13: 978-0-578-57325-0 (print)

First Edition

Designed by Lorie DeWorken, Mind the Margins, www.mindthemargins.com

Special thanks to
Agatha Christie's And Then There Were None (2015)
starring Aidan Turner in a low-slung towel.
It made me want to write again.

|

DANI

New Year's Eve, five years ago, near the University of Minnesota

DANI wiped the vomit from Crystal's doll-like face and waited for Molly to hit thirty.

Straddling her friend's limp body on the apartment's bedroom floor, Molly compressed her chest with stiff arms. "Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Go!"

Dani pinched Crystal's nose and blew into her mouth twice. The revolting aroma of regurgitated white zinfandel and pepperoni pizza made her stomach churn. Unable to quell her nausea, she added the contents of her dinner to the room.

|

“Dammit, Dani, throw up later. I need your help.” A line of sweat stained the back of Molly’s coral mini-dress, her bosom threatening to spill from the scooped bodice as her body moved to the beat of her rhythmic counting. At the beginning of the evening, Dani had envied how the vibrant color of the dress had popped against Molly’s dark honey skin. Now, coral would be linked forever to this terrible moment.

“I’m back.” She rubbed her mouth on her sleeve, leaving a line of bile across the royal blue velvet fabric.

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Go!”

Dani breathed into Crystal’s mouth, watching the chest of her brother’s girlfriend rise and fall. She refused to think about how cold the skin felt under her fingertips. She wanted to ask Molly, the pre-med student, how long a person could go without working lungs and heart, but she knew the answer would release the panic straining to break free and worsen the horror playing out in her brother’s bedroom.

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Go!”

From the doorway, Nate held up his cell phone. “The dispatcher wants to know if there is any change.”

Molly put two fingers to Crystal’s neck and then shook her head.

Dani bent over and blew twice. She used a clean corner of her blouse to dry her tears from Crystal’s cheeks.

Nate spoke into the phone, listened, and then reported, “The paramedics should be here any minute.”

As if on cue, distant sirens mixed with the sound of fireworks, car horns, and drunk revelers from the street below.

Dani checked the clock on the night table. The bright red numbers read 12:20 a.m. Twenty minutes ago, she had been on the

KILLER RESOLUTIONS

receiving end of a tongue-tangling New Year's Eve kiss from Nate. Then they had checked on Crystal, and the nightmare had begun.

She gave up on being calm and let her panic take over. Sobbing, she asked, "Is she dead?"



DANI

DANI'S fingers tightened on her cell phone as she listened to her brother's pleading voice.

"Come on. You have to go," Rob said. "It'll be fun. The lodge is in northern Wisconsin, and we have it from Friday to Sunday. There'll be tons of snow, and the place has a huge fireplace we can toast the New Year by. Maybe we can even spend a day cross-country skiing."

She bit her lip and stared out the kitchen window. In the distance, the Red Line train rumbled toward her on tracks that nearly sideswiped her apartment building. Her eyes traced the swirling bits of trash kicked up by its wake.

KILLER RESOLUTIONS

“We haven’t seen each other in ages,” he continued. “I know it’s a long drive from Chicago, but I’ll make it worth your while. I promise.”

She leaned her head against the windowpane, made cold by the Midwest winter. Her breath steamed the glass, and her fingers absently traced a pattern in the condensation. “OK. I think I can swing it and come up Friday. I have some vacation time I need to burn before the end of the year.”

“Great!” The triumph in his voice had her picturing him fist-pumping the air. “There’s just one more thing.”

She swallowed a groan and waited.

“Remember Nate? From college?”

The memory of a drunken, passionate kiss at the stroke of midnight morphed into frantic shouting and the wail of an ambulance siren. Guilt rendered Dani mute. She nodded into the phone.

“Are you still there?”

She cleared her throat. “Yes, sorry. Of course, I remember Nate. Why?”

“He’s flying into Chicago from Germany that Friday morning. You can pick him up and drive to the lodge together.”

“He’s coming from Germany to celebrate New Year’s Eve with you?”

Her brother let out a loud laugh. “No, goofball, the timing just happened to work out. But it’s great because now you won’t have to drive six hours by yourself.”

“Yeah, great.” She made a half-hearted attempt to hide her lack of enthusiasm.

“Vinnie and Molly are coming too, and I can’t wait for you to meet Brittany.”

The phone slipped from her hand. She caught it in the crook

of her elbow and brought it to her ear. “What? Who’s Brittany?”

“My girlfriend.” A few beats of silence filled the air. “Maybe she’ll be more after New Year’s Eve.”

“Oh, Robbie.” Tears filled her eyes, and the buildings outside her window blurred. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted to be sure first.”

“What’s she like? What does she do for a living? Does she like dogs or cats?” Excitement over the news sent her pacing the length of the small apartment.

Another boisterous laugh boxed her ear and filled her with joy. “Enough already. You’ll have to make the trip and find out for yourself. I’ll text you the address of the lodge and Nate’s flight information.”

“I’m so happy for you.” She wanted to say more, but the physical and emotional distance over the past five years held her back. “You deserve the best.”

“Then you’d better bring the best champagne you can afford because we’re going to bring in the New Year right.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you soon.”

“Can’t wait. And remember, bring all your snow gear. You still have some, right?”

“Yeah, of course. Chicago might not get as much snow as Minneapolis, but we do still have winter. I just hope my snow pants fit.” Her voice trailed off as she examined her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

“I’m sure they’re fine. Hey, listen, I gotta go. I promised Brittany we’d watch a movie tonight, and it’s getting late.”

“No problem. Remember to text me.”

“Will do.”

She ended the call and pressed the phone to her chest. There

KILLER RESOLUTIONS

had been only a handful of calls and even fewer visits between them since that fateful New Year's Eve five years ago. Maybe this future fiancée would be the catalyst that dissolved their estrangement. She hoped so. Rob was the only family she had left.

After rummaging through the freezer for her emergency ice cream, she nestled under a blanket on the couch and dug into the quart of mint chocolate chip. Her thoughts returned to her brother and the friends they had shared in college. Molly and Vinnie still sent her a Christmas card, but Nate had disappeared soon after graduation.

She thumbed her phone and opened the photos folder. It didn't take long to get back to her college days at the University of Minnesota. Somewhere along the way, she had lost interest in recording every moment of her life. A few more scrolls and she found the picture of the six of them shivering in their fancy clothes in front of Marco's Trattoria. The women sported cardboard and tinsel New Year's Eve tiaras, and the men wore plastic, tropical-colored leis. It was still early in the night, but their loose smiles suggested several drinks had already been consumed.

She zoomed in, moving from one face to another. Her lips pouted, and her hand brushed her bare neck when she saw her long blonde hair. After law school, she had decided short hair would be more professional, so she had her curls cut into a chin-length bob. When she stopped on Nate's face, her heart hitched. Instead of looking at the camera, as the others were, they were grinning at each other. Their friendship had eased into a romance and then quickly died a death of pain and guilt. She scooped another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth and shut her eyes against the tears.



NATE

New Year's Eve, five years ago, near the University of Minnesota

WRAPPED together like a pair of snakes on his bed, Nate gently kissed Dani. He loved how she tasted and deepened the kiss to get more. It was five minutes before midnight, and he had already met his New Year's resolution. His roommate's sister had always been off-limits, but the friendship that had developed between them the past few years begged for more—and he was tired of fighting it.

When he broke the kiss, her slender fingers stroked his cheek, and she whispered, “I don't think I have your full attention.

KILLER RESOLUTIONS

Am I boring you?”

He rested his forehead against hers and chuckled. “Hell, no. Just thinking about Rob.”

“What, you want a threesome? Sorry. Not going to happen. I was never good at sharing with my big brother.” Her lips found his jaw and nibbled a path to his ear.

He squirmed as her tongue tickled a sensitive spot. “You know what I mean. I want him to be OK with this. With us.”

Her head fell back, and her blonde waves brushed against his arm. Her sapphire blue eyes widened. “This isn’t a one-night stand?”

He brushed his mouth against her lips and then dug deep for willpower. “No, Dani. And tonight, it isn’t going any further than kissing.”

She shifted against him, her dark lashes shuttering her eyes. “Um. Why?”

He kissed the corner of her mouth. “You know why. We’re drunk.”

She sat up and gestured to the array of lit candles scattered about the room. “You did all of this just to kiss me?”

“Trust me. I want to do more, but when I make love to you, there’ll be no excuses and no regrets.”

“OK. But I hope it’s soon.”

The popping of fireworks and the honking of car horns exploded on the street outside the apartment building. Nate checked the bedside clock. “Happy New Year, Bug.”

She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him up. Against his mouth, she said, “I hate that name.” Her family had given her the nickname long ago when it seemed she would be forever petite. A growth spurt her senior year of high school brought

her up to average height, but, thanks to her older brother, “Bug” followed her to college.

A mischievous grin slid across his face before his expression switched to one of solemn obedience. “I’ll never call you it again. I promise.”

Her stony eyes disclosed how little she believed him, but they resumed kissing until Dani shoved him away. “We should cool off and check on Crystal. We don’t want Rob to be mad at us for disobeying orders *and* making out.”

He blew out a heavy sigh and nodded. “I’m sure Vinnie and Molly are already going at it, so we’ll have to be the responsible ones.”

They crossed the empty living room and opened Rob’s bedroom door.