

SPRING FLOATS IN THE AIR,  
BUT TREACHERY CREEPS ON THE DOWNDRAFT.

# KILLING SPRING



ANITA  
KLUMPERS



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## *Dedication*

To all my sisters, by blood or by the Blood. You are  
dearly loved.

# CHAPTER 1

Spring, 2012, was unseasonably warm in the Upper Midwest. Claudia Alexander sat alone in a coffee shop in Portia and closed her laptop. Her fingers lingered on the stack of bridal magazines. Then, she resolutely dug a thick book from her backpack. *The Great Gather* by M.M. Miller. Her fiancé, Ezra Prosper, had read it as a teen, he told her. She would love it, he said. Turning the yellowed pages and squinting at the fine print, Claudia wondered at what manner of man she was marrying.

At least he was, she assured herself, a man of impeccable timing. Claudia's sister had given birth in eastern Iowa two days before Ezra's limnology conference was scheduled to begin in Dubuque. Claudia had taken advantage of the opportunity to introduce her newly acquired fiancé to her family, adore on the perfections of her niece, Jane Alexandra, and land on the doorstep of Portia. The small city in northwest Illinois sat close enough to the Mississippi River to be perched on her bluffs but with easy access to expanses of rich, freshly tilled farmland that rolled away from the town.

Along with the other conference-attendees, Ezra was staying at the hotel in Dubuque, but

wholeheartedly approved of Claudia's desire to cross the Mississippi and spend time in Portia. She'd visited briefly for work. This time was pure pleasure. Her version of pleasure, however, needed to wait until she fulfilled her promise to begin the book.

Its sheer number of pages was impressive. Mr. Miller had done his homework. Marcus Augustus Gather, a fugitive slave who distinguished himself in the Civil War, had lived in Portia only a few years, after slipping away from his drunken master and making his way up the river to take refuge in Portia. Every minute of that journey must be recorded in this book. Claudia dutifully read the entire foreword and the introduction, noting with pleasure that Marcus Gather died at the age of 101. He must have spent many of those years writing his journals, a prize Mr. Miller had stumbled upon at an estate sale soon after World War II. She skimmed the first chapter titled "Spring, 1860," and noted that seven more chapters stood between spring of 1860 and spring, 1861. At least twenty chapters followed until—she peeked ahead to the end—the teen had joined the United States Colored Troops, performed valiant deeds, and eventually settled in Indiana.

A few self-disciplinary seconds were given to the first paragraph of the first chapter before Claudia slid a monogrammed bookmark between pages and closed the book. She set it near her coffee cup—at hand if the spirit moved—and from a zippered pocket in the backpack, reached for a small flat box. The brand-new charm she'd affixed to an old bracelet caught on the

zipper pull.

Claudia's careful extraction attempt wasn't careful enough. The link pried open, and the emancipated charm dropped to the table with a merry clink. Claudia snatched it before it rolled to the floor. The charm was a gift from her days-old niece, engraved with the words "World's Greatest Aunt" and was, outside of her engagement ring, her most precious piece of jewelry.

After wrapping the charm in a monogrammed, silk handkerchief, she set the bundle on top of *The Great Gather*. From the flat box she removed another book, this one bright blue. A yellow plastic flower in the center beamed down at the words *Claudia's Thoughts* embossed on the bottom, followed by the date, 1997.

The diary was a gift from her grandmother for Claudia's thirteenth birthday. She had been moving slowly from the I-hate-all-boys phase through I-hate-all-boys-except-him and on to there-sure-are-a-lot-of-cute-boys stage. The diary chronicled them all. She hadn't been able to look at it for years. It hurt too badly. She touched the scar puckering the side of her face. Her fiancé told her it was almost swallowed up by her dimple when she smiled, but he was just as happy with it when her face was in repose. The scar was part of her, Ezra said. He had never known her without it.

Claudia, for several years, had divided her life into 'pre-scar' and 'post-scar.' Before the scar, she had been almost laughably average. Pretty, like so many girls in her orbit. Athletic, bright, reserved but still confident.

After the scar, she had retreated. She'd become quieter, more scholarly, retaining old friends, but making no new ones.

She opened the diary to a section marked by a ticket stub. "Father of the Bride" had been showing at a classic movie revival weekend. She and her friends entered the theater as ninth grade girls leaping from one boy-crush to the next. They'd emerged as fully developed wedding planners. Claudia had committed those plans to the diary and now, for the first time in almost a decade, found herself ready to reminisce. She turned to "Wedding Thoughts" and spent a glorious several moments reveling in her teen dreams of wedding perfection.

The small book reminded her that she'd wavered between wanting a wedding dress like Elizabeth Taylor's in the movie, or Princess Diana's, or The Princess Bride's, complete with buttercups for bouquets.

The next page was filled with her ideas for "Something Old." Use Mom's hat from her wedding? Gram's veil? Attach Gram's veil to Mom's hat? Under *Important Notes* she had printed, in all caps, DISPOSABLE CAMERAS AT TABLES!

Claudia grinned. Even during her most vivid plans for wedding, attendants, and food, the groom never had a face. And there was never any room for his opinion.

Movement at the window made her look up. Someone stood on the sidewalk peering in the plate glass window. She couldn't make out a face, but it

wasn't Ezra. Too bulky. He was at his conference anyway.

A moment later, the shadow crossed the threshold of the open door. Its elderly owner followed. He hesitated, gazing first into the dark back of the shop, then lighting on Claudia. He turned and walked to her table. She looked up with an automatic smile that tightened slightly when he pulled out the chair across from her and sat down.

"Nice day."

Claudia agreed it was indeed a nice day, and shut her diary with a suppressed sigh.

"Portia is a great town, isn't it." Not a question, but a statement of fact that Claudia couldn't deny. "You from here?"

"No, just visiting. My fiancé—"

"Great town. I walk around it every day, even when it rains. My son drops me off. Picks me up again. I live with him now, you know. On one of the hills outside town. There are about a hundred hills outside of town."

Claudia could well believe it. The hills loomed over the main street like anxious parents.

"Mississippi River's only a few miles west of here. Know that?" Without waiting for an affirmation, he continued. "Iowa's on the other side. Not got much use for Iowa." He frowned toward the west, pondered a moment, and then shook his large head as if unable to come up with a use for Iowa.

"Wisconsin's north. Not bad. You ever been?"

"Coincidentally," she told him, slipping the diary

back into its box with another private sigh, "I went there last month."

Claudia had assumed this would be a one-sided conversation, and that the gentleman suffered from some indignity to the brain that robbed memory and purpose from too many old people. But her companion appeared to be interested.

"February? Up there for winter sports?"

Claudia thought about her wild snowmobile ride and smiled. "In a way. I'd never been so far north before. It was right on Lake Superior."

He nodded, but took control of the conversation again. "Lake Michigan's east. Chicago. You like Chicago?"

"Coincidentally," she said again, unable to keep from grinning, "I live in one of the north suburbs."

He watched her, chin up slightly, eyes narrowed just a bit. She saw intelligence and full presence of mind. And something else. Slyness? Whatever it was, he wasn't about to let her story sidetrack his own. He rested heavy forearms on the table.

"I grew up in Cicero. You know it." He had discovered, Claudia had a feeling, the best method to keep someone else from contributing to a conversation: Tell her what she knows, don't ask her. "Born with a growth over my eye. Ugly. Terrible thing. Can't tell now though, can you?" He winked with a wolfish sort of leer, and this time waited for her murmur that she never would have guessed. Once again, the sharp eyes lit on her face. Right at her scar. "Kids are cruel. Were they cruel to you?"

"I was—older—when this happened. People, at least most people, have been kind."

He frowned. "Weren't kind to me. Only had one friend. Willy. Can't remember his last name. That's a shame. But my friend Lyle reminds me of him. Lyle and I. We've been through thick and thin. Today I'm thick and he's thin." The old man laughed, watching Claudia to make sure she laughed, too. Almost immediately though, his face darkened. "Kids were cruel. My mother kept me home from school so I wouldn't get teased. And then, somebody died, just like that"—he snapped fingers so thick they muffled the sound—"—and left us money for surgery. Folks never told me who. When I was better, I went back to school. But I never forgot." He nodded wisely. "Kids never forget cruelty."

Claudia remembered stings from a few thoughtless remarks directed at her, but they were mild compared to the shuddering memory of her own carelessly uttered unkind words. His cunning eyes caught her slight shudder, and she hoped he wouldn't comment on it. She needn't have worried.

"This book," he nudged aside her folded hankie, "this about that colored boy?"

She bristled. Good manners only covered so much boorishness, and if this old man started spewing hate and racial epithets she'd be leaving. "It's about a hero."

The old man nodded, frowning. "Got a statue to him in the park. My ma and pa, they couldn't abide the colored. Taught me they were bad."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean disrespect, but you know

your parents were wrong. Don't you?"

The bulk of his shoulders moved uncomfortably. "Not so easy, is it, to get rid of what you were fed from birth. What you grew up on. Sort of gets to be in your blood."

Claudia didn't leave. The man seemed confused by the ingrained prejudice that scarred his perception of the world, but at least he wasn't reciting from a directory of repulsive lies.

"Economy is bad."

Ah, Claudia thought. He is reciting, from his own litany of long-repeated topics and phrases.

"Everybody talks about it. Things are bad. You agree?"

She agreed.

"But not as bad as when I was a boy. Remember the Depression of Thirty-six?"

Claudia confessed that while she had no memory of it, she had heard it was a hard time.

The old man nodded. "Hard times. Still hard. My wife is dead. She worked too much. I told her, you know. Told her to slow down, take care of herself. She never listened to me." He guffawed. "Course I never listened to her either."

He sobered. "Now she's gone. I live with my son. Good boy. Hasn't stuck me in a nursing home yet. I wouldn't go anyway. I'd shoot myself fourteen times over before I'd go in one." The watery eyes blinked rapidly. "Had to put my mom there. In a home. She was ninety-one. I was the only one left. She got sick. Nothing bad. Just old age. Went to the hospital, then a

nursing home. They told me they'd get her well enough to go home. She was fine one day at the home, the next I got a call that she was dying. And she did."

"I'm sorry."

He didn't hear. Another blink, another change of expression. He pulled several coins from his pocket, some gold, some silver, some coppery, and began stacking them in order of size. "My mom. She saved everything. Even though the nursing home tried to drain her dry, there was money left." He shook his head, a bemused look on his face. "Always said she didn't care for fancy clothes, didn't want a bunch of stuff cluttering up her house, didn't like the smell of new cars. I believed her. But she was just saving up money for me. Her little boy that kids made fun of."

He shook his head again. The doleful expression became worldly wise. "I've seen a lot of bad things. You seen any bad things?" He watched her, more closely than made her comfortable.

Just murder. Kidnapping. Theft. All in one week. Claudia didn't get the opportunity to share the bad things she'd seen.

"The psychiatrist tells me if I want to stay healthy, I gotta remember. My doctor says "Forget anything bad. It'll kill you." I tell them both, "Easy for you to say. Old doctors never die. They just lose their patients."

He paused. Claudia knew this was her cue. She groaned before laughing. "I get it. That's a good one. I'll have to remember it."

He nodded, satisfied. "I was in Korea. Almost got

killed more times than I can count. One time we were hiding in the water. Just our heads poking out. I unwrapped a candy bar to take a bite and all of a sudden, right next to me, *boom!*

Claudia started. This, too, was a satisfactory response.

“Almost scared the you-know-what out of me. Boom! Just like that.”

She was prepared this time, but knowing he was expecting a reaction, widened her eyes with what she hoped looked like amazement.

“I saw bad things there. Guys got blown up right next to me. And the Korean girls. They would sell themselves for a bit of anything a GI was willing to part with.”

Claudia glanced up at the counter. The barista still must be in the curtained alcove. And no one else had entered the shop to deflect the awkward direction this conversation was taking. It could get worse.

“My wife. I told you I was married. Oh, sure I did. Found out after she died, she’d been one of those women who had to have it all the time. You know. It.”

The conversation had gotten worse. She felt her cheeks grow hot which, she knew from long experience and helpful comments from onlookers, meant she was blushing. Her companion didn’t notice, or didn’t care.

“Couldn’t be faithful.

Now Claudia didn’t know where to look. She hoped with all her heart he would not feel it incumbent to explain in detail what *it* was.

“Darndest thing. I didn’t know none of that.

Found it all out from talking to my psychiatrist after the wife was gone. He helped me figure it out, and I put the pieces together. It started on our honeymoon in Niagara Falls."

Desperate, Claudia grasped at something before she heard details that she would never be able to unhear. She certainly didn't wish to hear about his wife's promiscuity. "That's a nice sweatshirt."

"You like it? See, it says "Gymnastics Champions." You didn't think I was a gymnastic champion, did you? I'm as big as a whole team. My granddaughter Allison bought this for me. Her team won a championship. I go cheer for her. She is a great tumbler. Needs some work at the vault though. She's getting bigger now. I tell her to wear clothes that aren't revealing." He winked. "Maybe I'm worried she will be like her grandma." He stops and holds a finger behind his ear. "My wife is talking to me. I hear her. She's saying, 'Harvey, you talk too much.'"

His name was Harvey. Claudia gave a passing thought to providing her own name but worried this might mean an introduction to the wife speaking in his ear. Harvey had more important things to talk about than names, anyway.

"My son has more than one home. He won the lottery. I say 'share some with the old man.' But then my boy says, 'Dad, you're rich enough.' It's true. Got plenty. And a lot more coins like this stashed away. See this penny?" It took a few attempts with those blocky fingers to pick the penny from the pile. "Worth more than that computer of yours."

Claudia hoped she looked duly impressed.

Harvey tried to set the penny atop the stack of coins but hit the edge of the pile instead. It toppled, and coins rolled everywhere. Harvey grunted and Claudia dropped to her knees, grabbing at scattering money.

She wished she knew how many coins had fallen. At least half of them were rolling merrily along the floor, which she only now noticed had a definite downward slope. She grabbed the penny worth more than her laptop as it rolled toward a gap in the wide floorboards, and was scooping up the rest of the straying coins when another shadow fell across the floor. Her heart leapt. She hadn't known Ezra a month ago; now she could even recognize the shape of his shade.

He smiled as she turned her face to his, and her heart jumped, if possible, even higher. "Morning prayers?" He reached a strong arm down to help her up.

"Skipping out of the duller conferences?"

"You know me too well." Ezra Prosper would not, even by those who loved him best, be described as a handsome man. He had a high forehead and brown hair that, in his own words, "ain't what it used to be." But he was wiry and quick-witted and kind and had remarkable hazel eyes and lovely teeth. Claudia thought he was perfection.

Now he gripped her hand as she led him to her table. His eyes slid over to Harvey. Claudia was about to figure out some way to introduce a man whose

name she had never formally been given, but she needn't have worried. Ezra released her and stuck out an easy hand to Harvey, who shook it. Neither of them bothered with names.

On top of *The Great Gather*, Claudia saw her handkerchief opened to reveal her aunt charm. Harvey apologized. "I wanted to look at the book. You'd hardly know he was a Negro, would you?"

Ezra didn't seem able to come up with any coherent response because he remained silent. Claudia certainly couldn't think of a comeback that would counteract a lifetime of cultivated racism.

"Your little pretty"—he nudged the charm—"fell out of that bit of a nose-blower, and my fingers just couldn't fold it nice again. Sorry about that." Harvey wagged his hand. For the first time Claudia noticed the ring finger on the left hand stopped at the second joint. "Lost a finger. You haven't seen it anywhere, have you?"

They laughed with him. Claudia said not to worry about the "little pretty," and shoved it and the handkerchief in the backpack. She piled the coins in front of the older man. "I hope they're all here."

Harvey seemed to be growing restless, unsettled. He shoved the coins in his pocket and looked around. "Is there any herbal tea in this place? Decaf?" He winked at them. "Prefer blackberry brandy, but it's too early for that."

Relieved to have something to do, Claudia told him she would check. There was no small bell at the counter, so she had no choice but to yoo-hoo at the

covered alcove. Through a crack in the flowered curtains she saw the barista, sitting in the back room with his laptop. He scurried out, coughing apologetically, and seemed surprised that customers still roamed the shop.

No, he told Claudia, no herb teas, but he had green tea with very little caffeine. Something under the high table that served as a counter caught his attention. He bent over and came up with a coin—small and gold. “You drop this?”

“Oh, heavens. Thank you. It belongs to Mr.—uh—to him.” She pointed at Harvey. “Thanks. I think the green tea will be all right.”

She handed him money and squinted at the small coin. She had only time to note it was smaller than a penny and from the Civil War era before the proprietor brought the tea. At the table, she set the cup with its floating bag in front of Harvey, along with the coin. He looked at the latter as if he had no clue what it was doing there, then frowned and dropped it in his pocket.

“Hand me the honey, could you?”

She handed him the honey. Ezra gulped as the old man poured a good quarter of a cup into his tea. He waited while Harvey took a swig and then offered his hand again.

“Nice to meet you sir, and thank you for taking such good care of my fiancée. We need to head out. Enjoy your tea and your day.”

Harvey reacted in shock. He pointed the thick forefinger at Claudia who had pulled on her

unnecessary coat and was gathering books, laptop, and backpack. "You don't work here?"

"No, just another customer. Like you."

His apologies were profuse. "And then I talked your ear off."

"It was my pleasure."

To Ezra he said, "You have a good woman. Take care of her."

Ezra assured him he had every intention of taking care of his woman. They told him goodbye and left the coffee shop. Claudia glanced back at Harvey. He sat with his honey-sweetened, partly decaf tea, wondering if he should remember or if he should forget.

## CHAPTER 2

Out on the sun-warmed street, Claudia told her fiancé about Harvey.

"Sounds like a character." Ezra had a fondness for characters. "Do you think he is a little, well, maybe suffering from Alzheimer's? I mean, the beginning stages?"

"I hope not. I hate to think so." Then, reluctantly, "Maybe."

Ezra took her hand. "He's what, about eighty-something? Sounds like he's had quite the life. And family who loves him and takes care of him. That isn't always a given, you know."

"True." Claudia felt better. Ezra had that effect on her. "But he has to be at over eighty. He said he was in the Korean War."

"Interesting." Ezra tugged at her. "Here's an idea. Let's explore."

And explore they did. The sun that caressed their skin tickled soft green buds—like goose bumps—to rise on trees and bushes.

"This town makes the hills in Barley seem as challenging as a kiddie slide," Claudia told Ezra as she gazed up an impressive set of stone steps even longer than those they had just climbed. It marched up one of

the charming bluffs, left intact eons ago when leveling glaciers missed northwestern Illinois. The city planners, with optimistic faith in the cardio-vascular health of their progeny, built neighborhoods right on those bluffs.

"That," Ezra announced as they puffed their way up what Claudia called the never-ending stairway to heaven, "is the last step. Getting hungry anyway." Ezra retraced their steps down to the business district.

"Isn't that your friend?"

Across the street, Harvey stood at a storefront on the corner, looking up at the shop's large three-sided window that projected from the old building. The bright pastel Easter display seemed to have captured his attention.

"I'd say he was more of an acquaintance."

"Let's say hello anyway." They crossed the nearly empty road and stood next to Harvey. Claudia tried to make eye contact. He glanced in her direction but with no hint of recognition. Ezra made a remark about how warm it was for March, and Harvey nodded.

"Warmest March since '52. You remember '52?" He paid no heed to Ezra's disavowal of '52. "Miserable year." Harvey waved in the general direction of the shop. "Think that was there in '52?"

Ezra and Claudia looked up, uncertain whether Harvey referred to the store, the window, or the tableau of elliptical pastel eggs hanging from crepe paper with yellow twinkle lights on a pussy willow branch.

Ezra started to respond, but Harvey interrupted.