

ANNE SCHRAFF

THE CASE OF THE

BAD SEED

PAGETURNERS®

Chapter 1

The big man sitting behind the desk must have been about seventy, Nikki thought. His large size plus the full white beard made her think of Santa Claus. All that was missing was the red suit.

Nikki Peters was there for a job interview. She'd seen the job posted online. The job title was "assistant." What got Nikki's attention was the job description. It said the work was "unique and challenging." Even better, the pay was excellent.

Nikki had a decent job at a bank. She'd managed to pay off her student loans and even save a little money. But she had become bored. At only twenty-four, she felt stuck. It

was time for a change. Now she just had to convince Hal Dempsey to hire her.

“I have a lot of experience with computers,” Nikki told him. “I can help you with your website. And I’m also good at math.”

“Those are important skills,” Mr. Dempsey said. “But tell me. Do you think you’d make a good detective?”

The question took her by surprise. At first she wasn’t sure how to answer the man. She thought for a few seconds. “I work well with people. I’m also curious and logical. Those are skills a detective would need. I think I’d be good at it,” Nikki finally said.

Mr. Dempsey was nodding. “I’ve made my fortune in mattresses, as you may know,” he said.

Nikki knew all about it. She’d done some research before applying. The Royal Mattress Company made custom

mattresses. They were well known for their personalized designs. Whatever the customers needed? A comfortable and supportive mattress was guaranteed. Nikki had read the company even supplied custom-made beds to the White House and Buckingham Palace.

“This is the situation,” Mr. Dempsey said, leaning forward. “I don’t need an assistant for the office. The person I hire will help me with some personal business. You see, I have two sons. Dylan is the oldest. He works for the company.” Then Mr. Dempsey frowned. “My younger son is Colin. He’s never wanted any part of the business. It’s been hard for me to accept. And I’m seriously thinking of taking him out of my will. That would mean leaving everything to Dylan.”

Nikki was listening carefully, wondering what her role in this would be.

“Colin has become a disrespectful, good-for-nothing bum. Now I think he might be a criminal as well,” Mr. Dempsey said. “I need someone to find out what my son is up to. That’s where the job of my assistant comes in.

“If you’re hired, Ms. Peters, I need you to get close to Colin. Bring me all the facts. There’s only so much I’ve been able to find on social media. I don’t want to make my decision until I know everything. Disowning my son is a drastic step. I need to know I’m doing it for the right reasons.”

Nikki was only half-listening to this last part. The word *criminal* had made her wonder. What had Colin done? And if it was that serious, why hadn’t Mr. Dempsey hired a private investigator? “What kind of crime do you suspect him of?” Nikki asked.

“Nothing violent,” he said. “But it’s bad enough. I’ve heard he may be scamming elderly people out of their money.”

As long as the crime wasn't murder, Nikki was ready to accept the job.

"You're hired. Will you come work for me?" he asked.

"Wow! Thank you. Yes, I would love to," Nikki said.

"That's great. And I insist that you call me Hal. All my employees do."

"Thank you, Mr.—I mean Hal," she said with a smile.

Hal had purposely not told Nikki why he had hired her. That might have changed her mind about taking the job. He had thought about using a private investigator. But he'd tried that before. This time he wanted to take a more personal approach.

He'd interviewed several young women for the position. It was important to find someone Colin would like. Someone he would let into his life. So Hal chose Nikki. She had just the right qualities. Beauty and intelligence.

A few minutes later Nikki was walking to her car. In her hand was the flash drive containing all of Colin Dempsey's information.



Now back at her apartment, Nikki was sitting on the couch. She had printed out the information and was looking through the pages. She also checked social media. Hal had been right. There was very little she could find on Colin. But an Internet search was more helpful. There were several stories on the Dempsey family. It helped to see photos of Colin and his brother.

There were also photos of Hal's three wives. The first two were the mothers of his sons. Nikki could tell who Colin's mother was by looking at her. They looked very much alike. Now she was eager to get started. This job seemed like it was going to be exciting.

For a long time now, she had been wanting to change her life. It all started

about a year ago. She'd broken up with her boyfriend. They'd dated for two years. Bart Wheeler was everything Nikki had been looking for. That all changed on New Year's Eve. Bart told her the truth. He loved Nikki. But he knew he would never marry her.

That night, Nikki cried herself to sleep. After that she told Bart it was over. There was no way she'd stay in a relationship that was going nowhere. Now, finally, she felt like she was getting over him.

It was interesting to see how good-looking Colin was. Well built. Dark hair and eyes. Great smile. He could have been a model or an actor. "Wow!" Nikki said out loud. She couldn't help but think about Hal. Father and son did not look much alike.

Colin's school records weren't as impressive as his looks. The best grade he'd ever gotten was a C. Still, he'd been accepted to a top university. When he failed at that, he joined the army. Hal had forced his son to

enlist. He hoped Colin would grow up and get serious about his life. Instead Colin was kicked out. It turned out he was not good at following orders. After that there were a string of odd jobs. Fast-food cook. Cashier. Construction worker.

The next few pages Nikki looked at were part of a report from a detective agency. Colin had been involved in an Internet scam. He'd been selling fake vitamins to senior citizens. Nikki wondered what had happened to make him do something like that. He'd come from a wealthy family. There was no need to cheat innocent people out of their money.

Maybe the photos of the Dempsey family would offer some clues. Dylan was not as good-looking as his brother. He looked more like his father. And the current Mrs. Dempsey was a beautiful woman. They all looked happy, she thought. It seemed like a perfect family.

It could be that Colin felt he was being forced into behaving a certain way. And he had fought that idea. Was it that simple? Colin was just going through a phase. He was trying to find himself. Maybe he wasn't the horrible person his father thought he was.

Hal had provided Nikki with his son's personal information. His cell phone number. License plate number. Even a picture of his car. Nikki noted Colin's address. He lived downtown. She knew the neighborhood. Most of the stores there were boarded up. The apartment buildings were run-down. Litter lined the streets. Again, she couldn't imagine the son of a wealthy man living like this. The case was getting more and more interesting. She was looking forward to her investigation.



It was early the next morning. Nikki drove to Colin's neighborhood. She passed his

car, which was in front of his apartment building. Good. He was home.

She pulled over down the street and parked. Her plan for now was to wait there until he came out. Then she would follow him. After that she'd have to somehow get his attention.

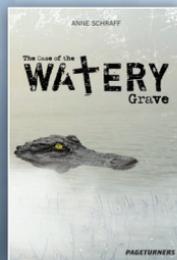
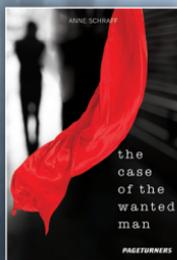
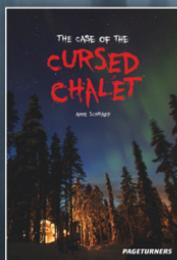
About an hour had passed. Then a young man came out of the building. It was Colin. He looked terrible. Nikki watched as he walked to his car. He was stumbling. Was he sick? Then she realized something. Colin was drunk. He dug his keys out of his pocket. Then he dropped them. As he bent over to pick them up, he nearly fell over. That's when she jumped out of her car and ran over to him.

PAGETURNERS® | DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE **BAD SEED**

Self-made millionaire Dempsey believes one of his sons is up to no good. He wants his new employee, Nikki, to investigate. But the smooth-talking bad boy Nikki meets couldn't possibly be responsible for the crimes his father accuses him of. Maybe his half-brother is setting him up.

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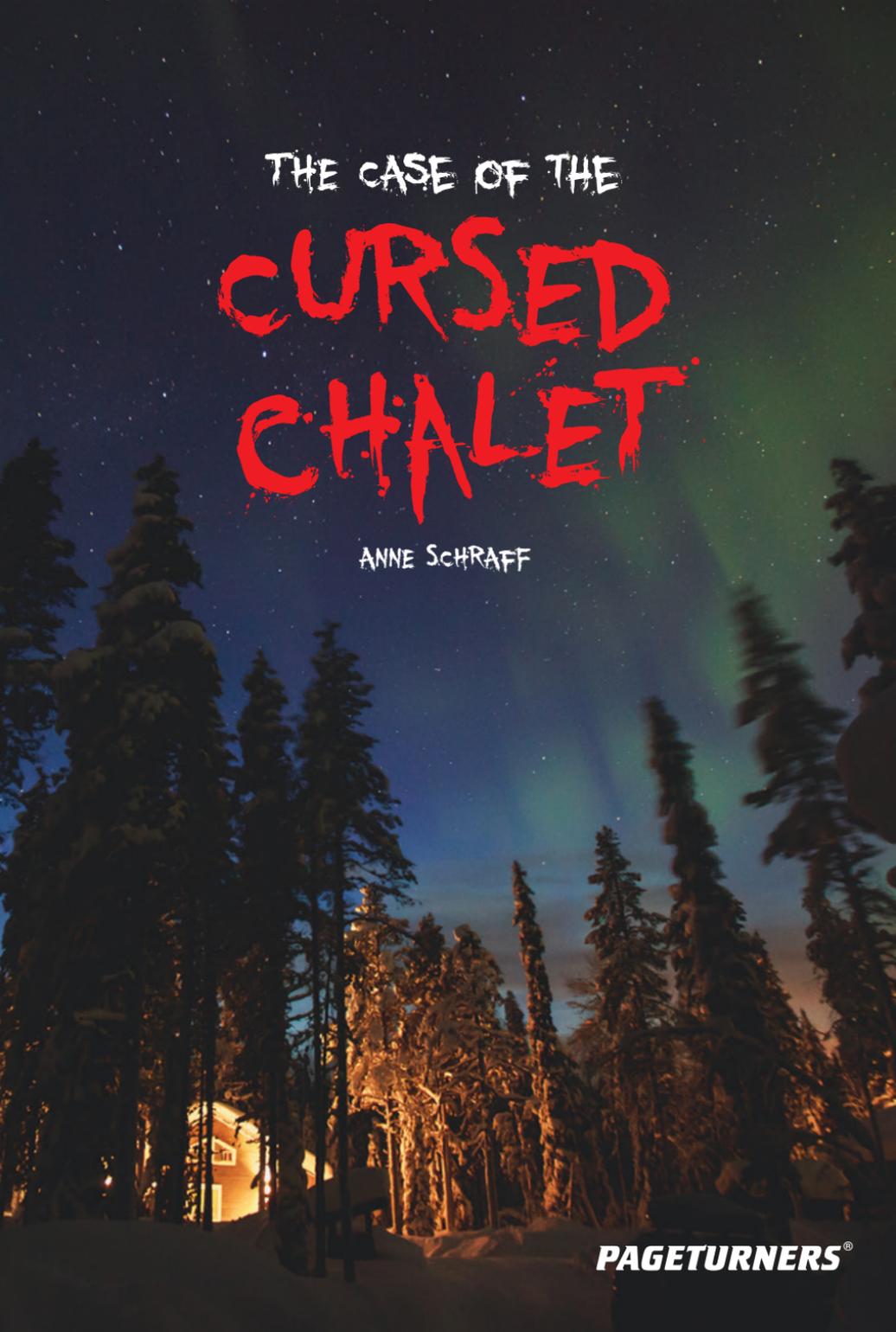
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The background of the cover is a night scene of a snowy forest. In the lower-left, a chalet with warm interior lights is visible through the trees. The sky is dark blue with a faint aurora borealis in shades of green and blue. The title is written in a distressed, hand-painted style. The words 'THE CASE OF THE' are in white, while 'CURSED CHALET' is in large, red letters with black splatters.

THE CASE OF THE
**CURSED
CHALET**

ANNE SCHRAFF

PAGETURNERS®

Chapter 1

Wait!” Nina called out. A young couple hurried away. They were nearing their SUV. Nina chased after them.

“You’re leaving already?” Nina asked cheerfully. “I thought you were staying for a week.”

Nina Blake was assistant manager at High Chalets. It was a mountain ski lodge. This was her first job. She was twenty-two and anxious to do her best. Her number-one task? Make sure guests were happy.

“We didn’t bargain for howling sounds all night!” the man shouted. “That wasn’t in the brochure.”

“And those weird rapping noises on the windows,” the woman said. She threw

her suitcase into the SUV parked in the driveway.

“Well, look,” Nina said. “Maybe somebody was partying in the next cabin. I’m sure we can straighten this out. What a shame for you to shorten your trip.”

Nina struggled to convince the guests to stay. She had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. These were not the first people to be driven away from Chalet 17. There were strange and unnerving noises inside that unit.

Nina’s boss was Mr. Cowles. He had been worried about the problem for several months.

“You can straighten out anything you want,” the man said. He slipped behind the wheel of his big car. “We’re getting as far away from this crazy place as possible. And don’t think we won’t review this dump. This is a one-star resort. No way is it five stars!”

Nina watched the SUV roar off. Then she walked to her manager’s apartment.

“Uh, Mr. Cowles? I’m sorry to say there was a problem in Chalet 17. It’s vacant again. The couple that was staying there just left,” Nina said. “They were in a big hurry.”

Mr. Cowles was a thin, nervous man. He was pushing fifty. Nina knew he had lost a long-time job due to downsizing. Now he was desperately trying to build a new career.

“What do you mean?” he demanded. His eyes were wild with panic. “What happened?”

“The young couple staying in Chalet 17. The Osborns. They took off like bats out of hell just now. They said they heard strange noises all night. There were tapping sounds on the windows,” Nina said.

Mr. Cowles turned pale. “What the devil!” he cried. He sat down hard in his chair. Then he ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Chalet 17 again! More money flying out the door! Nina, do you realize we’ve lost five guests in less than two

months? That's a lot of money down the drain! And it all affects the bottom line. The owners are going to wonder why we can't get on top of this problem!"

"I tried to talk them into staying," Nina said defensively. "I'll send housekeeping down. They can tidy up the place for the next guests."

Mr. Cowles looked furious. "The next guests? Are you crazy? How long do you think this can go on? Don't be foolish, Nina. We've got a problem. And it's a huge problem. You're the one who has to get to the bottom of it! Forget all about fluffing up the pillows! Find out what's going on in Chalet 17. Put a stop to it! If you don't, both of us are history. Understand?"

Nina nodded nervously. This was not her career. She just had to earn her teaching credential at the state college. There were student loans to pay off. She wasn't a detective!

What was Mr. Cowles talking about? Did he really think she was some kind of ghostbuster? But Nina loved this job. And she needed the income. “Well,” she said calmly. “I’ll surely do my best, Mr. Cowles.”

“I don’t want to hear that, Nina. I want you to solve this problem. Do you hear me? It cannot get around that we have a haunted cabin here. It’ll be the kiss of death for this resort. My job is on the line. So is yours! Check out social media. Make sure nobody is blabbing,” Mr. Cowles said. “And find out what is going on in that cabin!”

“Okay. Well, I’ll get right to it. I’ll try to find out what’s going on,” Nina said. She backed out of Mr. Cowles’s office.

It was a cold February morning in the high mountains. A light dusting of snow sprinkled the Swiss chalet-style cabins. They looked as beautiful as postcard pictures.

Nina had never dreamed she could find such a perfect job while she was still in

college. It paid fairly well. And when she was off duty there was time for skiing. The job also meant free evenings and weekends. This meant spending time with her drop-dead cute boyfriend, ski instructor Brian Holland.

Now Nina went hunting for Brian. Like her, he was a college student who worked here to pay for his education. High Chalets was a small resort. Brian was a ski instructor when there was snow on the ground. When the snow melted he was a janitor.

“Brian, got a minute?” Nina asked. She had found him checking out the newly fallen snow.

“Sure,” Brian said. “Darn! There’s not enough snow for skiing.”

“Brian, I told you about the spooky stuff, right? The stuff that’s been happening in Chalet 17. Well, it’s happened again. A young couple went tearing out of here this morning. They seemed to be scared out of

their wits. Mr. Cowles is beside himself. For some reason he expects me to get to the bottom of it. I don't know where to begin," Nina said.

"Could be something spooky," Brian said. "These chalets are really old. They were built back in the 1890s. Of course they've been remodeled and updated. But a lot of people have lived within those walls. Who knows what could have happened in Chalet 17?"

"What are you saying?" Nina asked shakily. "You think something horrible happened in that cabin? You think it's haunted or something? Some spook is roaming around at night?"

Brian shook his head. "Who knows? I've read about weird stuff like that happening. I've heard some of the guests' stories about the howling and rattling windows," he said.

"But what am I going to do? Mr. Cowles expects me to fix things," Nina said.

But then she remembered something. There was a really old house down the road. Mr. Peebles lived there. He was really old. Nina had talked to him once. He seemed to know everyone. And he knew everything about the mountains. “Maybe Mr. Peebles would have a clue about what happened in Chalet 17. What do you think, Brian?”

“Yeah, good idea. He knows where all the bodies are buried,” Brian said.

“Don’t say that!” Nina said. She shivered.

“Nina, come on! I just mean that he’s someone who knows all the dirt. Mr. Peebles never did like this resort. Maybe he’s behind the stuff that’s scaring the guests. He told me he’d like to see the mountain back like it used to be. He is anti-development. The woods should be for the bears and bobcats,” Brian said.

“I guess I’d better talk to him,” Nina said. “It’s a start anyway.”

Nina climbed onto her motorcycle. She drove down the highway to Mr. Peebles's house. She wasn't certain he would tell her anything useful. But she didn't know where else to turn.

The old man's property adjoined the resort. His house was made of stone. His father and grandfather had built it. That was a long time ago. The land had been all forest. A fall of fresh snow remained without footprints for weeks.

Nina got off her bike in Mr. Peebles's gravel driveway. She went to the door. But then she saw the man walking across his yard. He was piling up freshly cut cordwood. "Morning, Mr. Peebles," Nina called out cheerfully.

"Hello there, young lady," Mr. Peebles said with a smile.

Local people said the old man was eccentric. But he had seemed nice enough

the few times Nina had talked to him. His wife had died several years ago. Nina guessed he was lonely. That must be why he kept so busy chopping wood. He also built birdhouses.

“Mr. Peebles, I wonder if you could help me with something. You know I work at the High Chalets Resort. We’ve been having problems in one of the cabins. It’s Chalet 17. Guests who stay there have heard some odd sounds. They get scared to death. Then they leave. That’s really bad for business, of course. Do you know anything about it? Did something odd happen in that cabin?” Nina asked.

Mr. Peebles nodded. His face turned serious. “That’d be the cabin facing the lake. Yep, I know the one. Got a twisted pine out front.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Nina said.

“It’s not a good place for people to be.

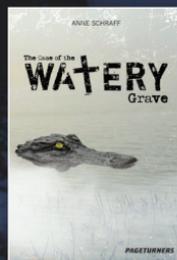
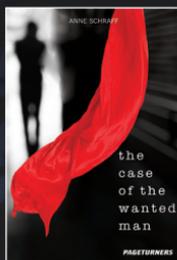
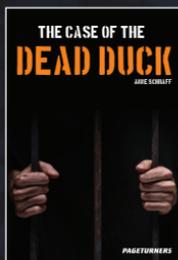
I'd shut it down. Better yet, tear it down. Right to the ground. Plow over it. Terrible thing happened there. Terrible! Worst thing that ever happened in these mountains," Mr. Peebles said. He shook his head from side to side.

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THE CASE OF THE
CURSED CHALET

The manager of the High Chalets is depending on Nina Blake to discover who is harassing the guests in Chalet 17. But after hearing about a murder in the cabin years ago, Nina begins to think that vandals are not responsible. Could the chalet be haunted?

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