

Chapter 1 - The Mall Killed Them

November 1, 2024 — 8:00 a.m. Deadfall, Minnesota Police Department

Seneca sat quietly in the brown metal folding chair in the interrogation room. Ron was next to her, seated in a matching chair. A gray aluminum table, two by six with rounded corners, fronted them. With his head in his hands, Ron was resting his elbows on the table. Neither he nor Seneca wore any restraints. Both of them were borderline catatonic. A soft drink in a plastic cup sat on the table before Seneca while Ron stared at a Styrofoam coffee cup resting before him. He seemed hypnotized by the swirling mist of heat rising from the surface of the coffee.

Seneca was staring down at her My Kitty purse. The police had recovered it close to the mall's food court, far from the southwest corner of the mall where they had detained Ron and Seneca earlier that morning. The pink bag with the face of a kitten on a white oval background, two furry ears at the top, and long red straps had been returned to Seneca after its contents had been thoroughly examined. It had assuredly been made for a much younger girl, but Seneca had bought it anyway at a flea market. She thought it was “bitchin’ retro.” She carried it everywhere. Now, she clutched it like a life preserver.

The police had confiscated her hand-held tape recorder, a small EMF detector, and something labeled a Rem Pod, a large, red plastic buzzer that could light up on top of a rectangular box. After closely examining the other items crammed into her “retro” handbag and backpack, they had returned her lipstick, gum, tissues, keys attached to a pink rabbit's foot, a week-old lottery ticket, and a small wallet with twenty-seven dollars and three credit cards. Forensics had her cellphone, which, with her consent, was being searched for texts, pictures, and anything else that might help sort out what had happened the prior evening. Subject to additional investigation, her backpack and several other items were being held in custody.

Ron and Seneca were being questioned in a modest-sized room, about ten by sixteen, with gray walls and the cliched one-way window/mirror in the front wall next to the only door. The faux marble linoleum floor beneath their feet had seen better days.

Detective Lincoln, a tall black man in a crisp, gray bespoke suit with a blue tie, was standing on the other side of the table. He spoke first.

“Do either of you care to tell us what happened to the nine people we found dead at the mall?”

Silence.

Detective Anders, Lincoln’s short white partner, wore a rumpled brown suit with his shirt unbuttoned at the top and his tie loosened. He attempted to engage them.

“Look, we’re not here to accuse you of anything, and if you want legal counsel, we’d be more than happy to contact a lawyer for you. I know you’re old enough to make your own decisions, but I can call your parents and have them come down if you’d like. I saw from your driver’s licenses that, let’s see, Seneca, you’re eighteen, and Ron, you’re nineteen. Whether you talk with us now or ask for counsel, your parents, or whomever, you need to tell us what happened last night. What were you doing in the mall after closing time last evening? How and why did all those people die last night?”

Silence.

Detective Lincoln made another attempt to get them to respond. “You’re not under arrest, and we want to help you. But we’re not leaving here, and you’re not going anywhere until we get some answers. What happened at the mall last night?”

Silence.

Seneca looked up at the two detectives, glancing from one to the other. Fear radiated from her eyes. Abruptly, she looked back down at her purse.

The two detectives backed away from the desk. They huddled together before the picture window, neither sure how to elicit a response from the teens. Each had the same realization. The fear in Seneca’s eyes was not out of concern about the detectives. It was far deeper, far removed. It went back to the mall, and that fear could help explain why they now had nine potential homicides to investigate, nine more than had occurred in the previous twelve months in Deadfall. It also explained the lack of any response.

“Seneca, something happened there; something has scared you. What was it? What did you see? Are you afraid to tell us? We promise we’ll keep you safe. If someone is threatening you, we’ll protect you. Just tell us, what did you see?”

Silence.

Detectives Lincoln and Anders started to turn away to confer again, but as they did, Ron finally spoke.

His gaze moved up from the coffee cup to the detectives. He shifted his stare to the mirrored wall. With a tear rolling down his left cheek, he could only say, “The mall. The mall killed them all, and while it’s done for the night, I don’t think it’s done forever. It will never be over.” His focus quickly shifted back to the steam rising lazily from the Styrofoam coffee cup while Seneca stared down at the My Kitty purse.