MISSING GINI

Prologue

GINI

I have almost finished typing the case notes from my 8:00 pm counseling session. I’ve been working out a plan for Iris Manley’s next visit. I think I’ve made some progress toward helping her regain the belief that life is meaningful. Grief takes many forms and Iris’ way of coping has been to shut out any pleasure in her life, as though allowing herself to enjoy anything will tarnish the memory of her late husband. Rationally, she knows that isn’t realistic and she worries that her emotional remoteness is hurting her relationship with her teenaged children.

I am trying to help her build on that thread of self-awareness. Three weeks ago I gave her an assignment: at the end of each day she is to write down one thing that has given her pleasure that day. It could be a bird singing outside her window. It could be one of her children emptying the dishwasher without being reminded.

After the first week, she complained that it was hard to find something positive every single day. The second week she said she was finding it easier and proudly showed me the journal page with a full week of entries. Tonight she asked me if it was OK that she’d entered more than one thing on a couple of the days. I smile as I make note of that.

I’m slow to stand up when I am interrupted by the three-tone song of my office doorbell. Pushing my unruly blond curls behind my ear, I come back to the “real world.” A quick glance at the little brass clock on my desk tells me that it is already after 9:30. I’ve spent too long working on Iris’ treatment plan. As is often the case, I’ve become so absorbed that I’ve lost track of time.

My best friend Callie is due to arrive any minute for the long weekend visit I’ve been looking forward to for weeks. I’ve cleared my calendar until Tuesday to make sure we have plenty of time just for us. I don’t see enough of Callie these days, nor really in the past four years since I moved to the Hudson Valley from Long Island. It will be wonderful to just sit and catch up with each other’s lives, maybe take in a concert or play at one of the local colleges or a scenic drive in the Catskills. What we do together won’t be as important as just having time together. I miss that.

As I cross my waitingroom floor, I wonder why Callie would come to the door of the attached office rather than to the main part of the house. Then I realize that the office lights are on, while the rest of the house must be dark. I should have left a light on in the house when I came through to the office for my 7:00 o’clock client.

I hesitate for a moment before opening the outer door, glancing down at my rose-colored silk blouse and cream pants to make sure I’m presentable. It’s something I know I do automatically all the time. Callie always teases me about my perfectionism, but the habit is hard to break.

I stand on tip-toe to peer through the peephole, annoyed once again that whoever they are that design doors do not take five-foot tall people into consideration.

Before I can make out the figure standing outside, the door is thrust open. The force with which it is opened knocks me back against the end table near the entrance. As I fall, I hear the sound of breaking glass.

By the time that registers in my mind, I’m sprawled on the pale blue waiting-room carpet, facing the off-white wall, my right arm twisted beneath me.

A gloved hand clamps down on my mouth, pressing something sticky against my lips. Looking up at an angle, all I can see is a balaclava-covered head with a dark netting of some kind obscuring the eyes.

Now the hand presses something that looks like a cotton ball against my nose. It has a nasty medicinal odor. Soon I see and feel and smell nothing else.

Chapter One

CALLIE

Callie Templand struggled to wedge the last of the file folders for the families she’d seen that day into her too-full file drawers and sighed. With the kind of day it had been, she was glad it was Friday and she had the long weekend with her grad school roommate to look forward to. She hadn’t been able to see Gini as much as she’d have preferred this past few years since Gini had moved almost three hours away from Long Island to a little town in the Hudson Valley.

Callie really missed having Gini close, sharing the good times and bad, laughing and crying together. The past fifteen years had been like a rollercoaster of happiness, sadness, fear and anger. They had depended so much on each other for emotional support, quiet talks, and just plain silly best-friend adventures.

They’d both married, Gini now divorced and Callie widowed. Even while they were both married, they’d managed to retain their close friendship, though it hadn’t always been easy. Much as Callie and Gini loved each other, Mike and Ron had had nothing in common and got on each others’ nerves.

She had a momentary flash of the time they all spent together vacationing in a cabin in the Adirondacks. Mike had invited Ron to rent a boat and go fishing down at the Lake. Ron had blown him off, saying he wanted nothing to do with sunburn, mosquitoes and fish slime. Mike had gone by himself and Ron had sulked for the next three days. They had all packed up and left before their week-long rental ended..

Callie didn’t know why she was thinking about that now. After the kind of day she’d had, she didn’t need to be remembering the bad times. What she needed was to share an

uncomplicated weekend in a quiet town with her best friend.

Her work in the foster care agency was always a little stressful, but that day had been especially difficult. She’d had to remove two brothers, ages nine and twelve, from their foster family because of allegations of sexual abuse. These kids had already been kicked around from their drug-addicted mother’s house to a group home and to a previous foster home. Now they were back in the group home even more traumatized than before. The only positive thing about it this time was that the same group home in which they’d lived before had two beds available for them. They would at least be in a familiar setting with staff who knew them. She’d heard that a few of their friends from the past were still living there, too. That should help their transition somewhat, she hoped.

Callie’s heart ached for them. Abused all their lives and today even by the cop who was called in to help her deal with the enraged foster parents. Instead of gently escorting the boys and helping with the heavy backpacks holding most of their belongings, he’d grabbed each of them by an arm and shoved them, stumbling, through the door and down the house’s front walk. She’d followed, sputtering, toting two trash bags containing the remainder of their clothing.

Once they were safely in her car, she’d given that cop a piece of her mind. “Do you have children?” she’d shouted at him. “Do you treat your own kids that way?”

He’d merely scowled at her and locked himself into his patrol car, making her even angrier.

Her Director had told her more than once that she was too soft-hearted over these kids she placed, but sometimes she couldn’t help loving them as though they were her own offspring, the children she and Mike had never been able to have.

She straightened up from the file drawer she’d been leaning over, stretching her 5'7" body and placing a hand against the small of her back. At 37 she wasn’t sure how much longer she could handle this job. She often wondered if she should have gone into the clinical side of her profession as Gini had. But she knew she’d never be able to sit still for a fifty-minute session, listening to the worries of a client, much less repeat the process over and over for several hours a day. She was too restless for that. She loved getting out of the office and driving around the county making home visits. Usually. Not the ones like today. Days like today left her half-willing to quit or maybe go back to school for her Ph.D so she could work in Administration. But again, she knew sitting behind a desk all day wasn’t for her.

She willed herself to think of positive things, hoping she could leave her stress at the office. She sat down in her worn brown vinyl desk chair and took a deep, calming breath. Then another, letting it out slowly as she pictured herself sitting across from Gini at her kitchen table, a bottle of white wine half consumed, laughing about some silly thing, Gini’s blond head tilted to the side in that way she had.

Gini! She’d better get out of here and finish packing for the long drive upstate if she was going to reach Gini’s place at a reasonable hour.

She stood, quickly checking to make sure the files were locked, then grabbing her tan leather shoulder bag, she closed the drawer where she kept it and locked her desk.

As she hurried to the closet in the outer office to retrieve her forest green rain parka, she realized that the rest of the day staff had already left. The two-person night emergency crew had taken over. They were settling into their desk chairs with fresh cups of coffee, preparing to review the day’s logs for potential follow-ups.

She had always admired the willingness of the night crew to rush out at ungodly hours to handle difficult cases. They might not have to go out often, but when they did, they almost always faced the kind of situation she had encountered earlier today. The idea of doing it in the dark of night felt so much more menacing to her than her daytime duty.

Shrugging into her parka, though, her mood grew lighter as she anticipated the weekend ahead. She sang out a cheerful, “Good night!” to night supervisor Toby Hart and his co-worker, Jaime Rodrigues. “Hope you have a quiet one!”

Jaime gave her a grin and a friendly wave. Toby looked up from his scarred desk, his bald pate shining in the florescent lights. “Don’t you know not to use the ‘q’ word?” His laugh said he was only half-joking.

Chapter Two

CALLIE

After Mike’s death, Callie had sold their Coram house and moved to a small one-bedroom condo in a gated community in Middle Island. She didn’t need the house’s space nor want to live with its memories.

She liked the sense of security that came with the guardhouse and swinging gate at the entrance. Exposed as she was in her workday to worrisome situations, the feeling that she was safe at home was a blessing. And the amenities the complex offered were a pleasant bonus. She didn’t really take enough advantage of the gym and the pool, she reflected as she drove past the central clubhouse. Maybe she should sign up for the karate class she’d seen on the clubhouse bulletin board. It might make her more confident in stressful encounters like the one she’d dealt with that day. On the other hand, she’d been doing this work for fifteen years without any martial arts training. Something to consider, though, she reflected.

The rain, which had been light as she drove home from work, was beginning to pick up as she dashed from her car to her front door. She hadn’t bothered to pull into her garage, knowing that she was going back out in such a short time.

Just inside the entrance, the door to her coat closet was overlaid by a full-length mirror. As she passed it, she couldn’t avoid noticing how haggard she looked. Her hair was wet despite the hooded parka. It stuck to her forehead like strands of auburn seaweed. Her hazel eyes were red and puffy. She wrinkled her nose at her reflection. Yes, a long weekend with Gini was definitely what she needed.

She shed her work-day beige pants and brown blazer and took a quick shower, doing her best to wash away the gritty feeling that had clung to her ever since the encounter at that foster home.

Afterward she changed into comfortable jeans and a very old Adelphi University sweatshirt for the drive, pulling her hair into a ponytail. *That will have to do,* she thought, grimacing, remembering how put-together Gini always appeared. Well, Gini knew her and knew not to expect perfection... or much fashion sense at all.

She pulled her old yellow nylon carry-on duffle out of the closet and began tossing some comfortable clothes into it. Her calico, Esmeralda, pounced onto the duffle, landing with a soft “mew” on top of the heavy forest green sweater Callie had just pressed into place on top. She stretched her white paws possessively into its knit and began to kneed it with tiny claws. Tilting her orange and black face up at Callie and staring at her with her big green eyes, Esmie knew she could get just about anything she wanted from Callie.

What she wanted now was to keep Callie from finishing packing. And she wanted her dinner.

Deciding that trying to pack with the cat in possession of her carry-on was a lost cause, Callie headed for the “efficiency kitchen” where she poured out enough water and dry cat food to satisfy Esmerelda for the night. Her neighbor, Alice, would stop by to feed Esmie the rest of the weekend.

She threw together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for herself, washing it down with the last of a container of milk she found in her refrigerator. She grabbed a small bottle of orange juice and a granola bar for the car trip and went back to the bedroom to finish packing.

Esmerelda wound herself around Callie’s legs clearly saying, “Don’t leave me!” and Callie picked her up and gave her a big hug before slipping into her rain parka again and going out the door. She had thought about taking Esmie along in her pet carrier, but the little fur-ball didn’t travel well. Callie could still remember her loud, tortured meows from past travels.

As she tossed her carry-on onto the back seat of her bright blue Honda Civic she reflected on how much she loved the new car. She had had it only a month and was still not too comfortable with all its tech gadgets, though. After trading in her ten-year-old Ford, she felt like she needed a degree in computer engineering every time she drove the Civic. Well, she told herself, as she pushed the car’s Start button, *by the time this trip is over, I’ll be a pro.*

Now, sitting in the driveway, preparing to back out, the rain was coming down harder. It would be a slow drive.

She pulled her cell out of her shoulder bag and called Gini. “Hi, I’m on my way. Should be there around nine,” she told Gini’s voicemail. She knew Gini would have turned off her phone ringer if she was with a client.

While she had the phone in her hand, she decided to try Jed’s line, too. He was on assignment in Chicago, but maybe he was free to answer. She didn’t really need to talk to him. She just wanted to hear his reassuring voice after the kind of day she’d had. But that call rang through to voicemail, too.

Disappointed, she put the car in Reverse and backed out of her short driveway. As she headed for the Long Island Expressway, she was still thinking about Jed.

After only eight months with Jed, he had become her rock. He would hold her and calm her after rough days like this one, his graying brown beard brushing her cheek while she cried onto the shoulder of one of his plaid sports shirts.

Callie and Jed had met when he visited the agency to interview her for a story he was doing about a notorious foster care case she had handled. An investigative reporter for a national magazine, keen on getting the truth behind some allegations he’d uncovered, he’d nonetheless been a courteous, almost gentle, questioner.

As the interview came to a close, he’d said hesitantly, “I hope this isn’t presumptuous, but I have one more question.”

Callie nodded, “OK.”

He looked down for a moment and seemed to fumble for the words. “Would you have dinner with me? Tonight or some other night?”

Callie had been taken by surprise. She had dated very little since Mike’s death and still wasn’t very comfortable with the process of getting to know a strange man. But Jed was so earnest and seemed so nervous about asking her that she’d agreed without really thinking about it.

And so it had begun, this tentative friendship that turned into a romance, a romance so different from the youthful passion of her years with Mike, a quiet, mature romance. Not to say they didn’t have moments of passion in their relationship, Callie smiled to herself. Still, what Callie valued most was the quiet time together. The time she could just relax and talk about her day, knowing Jed would listen and hold her and soothe away her stress.

Like Callie, Jed was widowed. Unlike Callie, he had children, twin daughters, both away in college now. He told Callie that she filled up the emptiness they left behind. Callie hoped that she did more than that for him. She thought she did, but sometimes her insecurities kept her from being sure.

The sound of pounding rain on the windshield brought her out of her revery. Without even thinking about it, she’d steered her way onto the Expressway and had already traveled several miles. Now she was having trouble seeing the road ahead through the slashing rain and the sheets of water thrown onto her small car by passing tractor-trailers. Clicking the wipers to full speed didn’t help much and soon it didn’t help at all.

The sign for the Rest Area was just barely visible ahead and Callie pulled off the highway when she reached the exit to wait it out for a little while.

Grateful for a safe place to park, she took out her cell to let Gini know she would be later than expected. This time she got through.

“Gini, hi. It looks like I’m going to be late. The rain is awful.”

“OK, Sweetie. Take your time. It’s been pouring here, too, but I think it’s letting up now.” She continued, ”I have a client coming in a few minutes and then another one after. I should be done before nine. Then I’ll just hang out and wait for you. Maybe I’ll make some hot chocolate to warm you.”

“With marshmallows?”

Gini laughed, “Don’t think I have any of those.”

“Well, OK. I wouldn’t want you to spoil me.”

“Why not? I hardly ever get to see you. I need to spoil you so you’ll come more often.”

Callie heard a muffled voice calling, “Doc, I’m here” and Gini said, “My client’s here. See you later. Take care!” Callie was still smiling as the connection was broken.

These days there were only two people in her life who could make her smile like that, Gini, who’d been through every life change with her for the past fifteen years, and now Jed who she hoped would be around for at least the next thirty. She sighed, still not sure how Jed felt about that.

She settled back against the comfortable tan cocoon of the driver’s seat and laid her head against the headrest. Lulled by the drumming of the rain on the Civic’s roof, she closed her eyes.

A tap on the window startled her. Oh God, she must have fallen asleep! Who was out there? What time was it?

Coming fully awake, she saw a Suffolk County police officer, rain dripping off his plastic-covered cap, tapping on her window with the butt of his flashlight.

“Roll down the window, Ma’am.” Callie had to start the car in order to comply. She hoped he didn’t think she was going to drive away.

“Uh. Um. I think I must have fallen asleep.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I noticed that.” He looked fiftyish from the little she could see of his jowly florid face in the rain-muted lights of the rest area. “No need to apologize. I just wanted to see if you are OK.. I saw you here when I passed an hour ago and you’re still here.”

*An hour ago!* “Yes, yes. I’m fine. Just pulled in to wait out the rain and I guess I dozed off.”

He nodded. “License and registration, please.”

“What? Why? I’m not doing anything,“ she mumbled, but reached for her shoulder bag on the passenger seat.

“Just routine. I have to ask. You know, sometimes the ladies of the evening park here waiting for their ‘dates.’”

Callie found herself blushing for no good reason. “I assure you,” she began, then thinking this was not the time to argue, handed over her papers as requested.

She couldn’t believe it when he actually walked back toward his cruiser, speaking into his radio mic.

While she waited, growing impatient, she looked at the brightly-lit car clock. 8:21 already! She pulled out her cell and pressed Gini’s number. Gini must have turned off the ringer again while she was with the clients. She left a quick message, letting her know she was still on the Island and would be even later than expected.

The cop returned and handed her licence and registration through the window. “Don’t you have a hands-free device for that?” he asked.

Callie blushed. She had completely forgotten that this new car had all the bells and whistles. Of course she had bluetooth for the phone. Why had she forgotten that?

She glanced at the radio display. Sure enough, there it was, the “you are connected” symbol.

“Sorry. I forgot I have it. I haven’t used the phone while driving, anyway,” she mumbled.

“See that you don’t,” he said. “How far are you going today?”

Was that really his business? “A couple of hours upstate.”

“Well, be careful. We’re hearing a lot of reports of flooding in toward the City.”

He touched his cap and hurried back to his car.

As she merged onto the Expressway again, she noticed some standing water along the far right lane, so she carefully moved to the center making sure she signaled, one eye on the rearview mirror in case the cop was behind her.

Why did that cop make her feel so guilty? She hadn’t done anything wrong and he’d been pleasant and respectful. But she knew why. It wasn’t that particular cop. It was the one she’d had to deal with earlier in the day. The one who was called in because of the threat of violence from that foster father. The one who’d yanked the kids by their arms and treated her as if she’d been the abuser. She realized now that she’d yelled at him only partly because of how he’d treated the two boys. Mostly it was because his behavior had caused her to flash back to the cop who’d been sent to take her in for questioning when Mike died. *I’m still raw after all this time* she thought.

The rain still came down steadily, though not so bad that the wipers couldn’t cope. An overhead sign flashed “SLOW DOWN–FLOODING AHEAD ON BELT PKY’ Callie considered turning back and trying again in the morning, but her stubborn streak kicked in. She’d gotten to the Queens border and, darn it, she’d make it the rest of the way. Gini knew she’d be late anyway.

Reception on the car radio kept going in and out. She tried several FM stations, but none seemed any better. She knew she had access to tons of satellite channels, but so far she hadn’t found one she liked. She didn’t feel safe fiddling with the tuner while driving in this weather anyway, so she turned the sound all the way down. She wished she’d remembered to bring her MP3 player, but of course she’d forgotten it could be hooked up to the car’s radio.

Now the only sounds she heard were the slapping of the windshield wipers and the drone of her tires on the road. Gusts of wind she hadn’t noticed before rocked the car every so often.

She turned up the heater. *March can be such a nasty month*!

As she exited the loop of the cloverleaf onto the Cross Island Parkway, her phone sang Jed’s ringtone, “Here Comes the Sun,” and the car’s digital display read “Jed Howard.”

Callie took her eyes off the road just long enough to find and press the car’s green phone button and sighed in contentment. “Hey Jed!”

“Hey yourself! Miss me yet?” She heard the smile in his voice.

“Yeah, I do. It’s been a miserable day. Where are you now?”

“At my hotel. In Chicago. Are you at Gini’s now?”

“Not even close. You wouldn’t believe the weather here. Oh no!”

“What’s wrong? Are you OK?” Jed shouted.

“Yeah, I’m fine, but I just rode up on a complete standstill on the Cross Island. You know that area where it always floods? It looks like it’s down to one lane ahead.”

“As long as you’re OK.” Callie loved that he cared.

She sighed, “I feel like I’ll never get off the Island.”

“Tell you what,” Jed said, and she could hear the smile in his voice, “The whole time you’re creeping along, I’ll talk dirty to you.”

Callie laughed. “That’s a deal.”

By the time they finished their chat, which was really about how each had spent the day, Callie’s mood was lifted one hundred per cent. Jed had a way of framing things in a positive light and had even made her laugh about her two encounters with police that day.

She pushed the red phone button to disconnect as she eased the car to the left, exiting the Whitestone Bridge and merging onto the Hutchinson River Parkway. The rain had lightened to a drizzle.

The car’s clock read 9:54.

Once she was safely in her lane, she told the phone to call Gini.

The call went to voicemail and now Callie began to worry. Surely Gini should be answering by now. She convinced herself that Gini must have forgotten to turn her phone ringer back on after her last client left.

In any case there was nothing she could do but continue on, splashing through the puddles, forced to drive more slowly than she would have preferred.

Chapter Three

CALLIE

The rain had stopped completely by the time she reached the Taconic Parkway and she was able to make pretty good time north to Rt. 84 and west over the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge. Only a little more time along Rt. 9W and she’d reach the turn-off for Mt. Stephen.

When Gini had moved there four years ago with her now ex-husband Ron, she had described the village of Mt. Stephen as little more than a flat place on a hillside. And Callie’s memory of it from the times she’d visited Gini told her Gini was not far off the mark. She remembered a small convenience store next to a gas station across from a neighborhood tavern and a bakery. Neat Victorian clapboard houses with large porches spread out from the town center, most looking fairly prosperous with their fresh paint and bright gardens in the summer. Apple orchards climbed the surrounding hillside.

The hamlet of Mt. Stephen was only about a fifteen-minute drive from where Gini’s ex-husband Ron grew up. He’d wanted to move somewhere near his elderly parents because his mother wasn’t well. It was also a fairly easy commute for him to a job across the Hudson at IBM. It hadn’t been what Gini wanted to do, but she had reluctantly agreed to the move.

Now they were divorced and Gini lived alone in the three-bedroom brick house situated on a cul-de-sac a mile or so east of Mt. Stephen. “Would you believe Mt. Stephen has a suburb?” she’d laughingly asked Callie.

In the few years she’d been there, she had created a thriving psychotherapy practice in an office converted from the house’s attached two-car garage and was content to stay on.

By now Callie was exhausted from the rough day she’d had and the white-knuckle drive staring into darkness through water constantly splashed on her windshield by passing cars. The lift she’d gotten from Jed’s call way back along the Cross Island Parkway was completely gone.

She’d tried Gini’s number several more times during the drive, reaching only voicemail each time. She decided to give it one more try as she came nearer to the Mt. Stephen turn-off. This time a tinny voice told her the mailbox was full. The car clock read 11:21.

Tired enough to just stop at the next motel she saw, but too worried to do that, Callie drove on. Peering into the night, she saw the small blue road sign pointing toward the turn for Mt. Stephen and relaxed a little. She’d be knocking on Gini’s door in no time now.

Callie had driven this steep uphill road two or three times a year since Gini’s move and she thought she knew it well. But she’d never before done it in the middle of the night. She had to strain to watch along the right-hand side of the road for the entrance to Gini’s cul-de-sac.

The darkness was disorienting and she realized too late that she had missed the turn. She had to drive about 200 yards up the road before she saw a driveway she could use for a safe three-point turn. Even then, the road was so narrow and so steep that she almost dropped her right front wheel into a road-side ditch full of sluicing water left from the rain. “Damn it!” she screamed in frustration as she got the car safely back on the road, heading downhill.

“Finally!” She whipped the wheel into a sharp left turn, almost fishtailing the car, and entered the cul-de-sac.

There were seven modern brick houses spread a short distance apart around a wide asphalt oval. At this hour, most of them had only porch lights shining, but in the third house on the right there was a soft glow coming from two windows in the right front. Gini’s office.

Callie made a right into the driveway and parked next to Gini’s mini-Cooper, thinking it strange that Gini would still be in her office so late.

Getting out on legs wobbly from the long time in the car, she stretched her aching back and limped to the office door to ring the bell. After waiting a moment when Gini didn’t respond, Callie knocked on the door. Then she knocked harder and the door swung open a few inches, exposing a sliver of softly-lit waiting area. Hesitating briefly, Callie leaned toward the crack in the doorway and shouted, “Gini! I’m here. Are you in there? ...GINI?”

Hearing no response, she pushed the door further open and looked into the room. Three comfortable floral and dark wood armchairs stood on a pale blue carpet. A lighted, glass-based lamp topped a small table. The lamp from a second table nearer the door, still lighted, lay on the floor with it’s glass base broken. The inner office door stood ajar.

Torn between rushing into the inner office and fleeing as fast as she could, Callie froze for a moment. Then, shouting Gini’s name, she ran to the office door, dreading what she might find.

In the therapy office, Gini’s brass desk lamp burned, lighting an open file folder she’d apparently been working on. A rose-colored coffee mug stood next to it, mostly empty. The blue desk chair was rolled back away from the desk. A cheerful garden scene screen-saver scrolled across the screen of a laptop computer. A dark blue sofa and matching recliner filled the space to her right. Nothing seemed to be disturbed. The inner office looked as though Gini had just walked out for a moment, maybe to clear her head after the paperwork.

But that didn’t account for the broken lamp.

Fumbling in her shoulder bag for her phone, Callie stumbled back to her car. Standing next it, she managed to dial 911, wondering whether 911 was even the right number to call around here.

Fortunately, she was able to reach a calm, no-nonsense dispatcher who took her information and told her to stay where she was, warning her not to touch anything.

*Too late for that!* She thought, trying to remember where she might have left fingerprints as she made her way through the two rooms.

Chapter Four

CALLIE

As she waited for the police to arrive, Callie became acutely aware of the fact that she had not had a bathroom break since leaving her apartment more than five hours ago. What to do?

She could see the partially open door of the client restroom in one corner of Gini’s waiting room, but she’d been warned not to touch anything. That meant she couldn’t go through the inner office to use the connecting door to the house either. She had probably already disturbed the scene more than she should. Better to see if she could get into the main house another way.

It was possible that Gini hadn’t locked the front door of the main house. She could make a quick dash before the cops arrived, she reasoned.

She pulled a tissue from her shoulder bag, thinking it best to avoid touching anything more than she already had and made her way along the brick walkway that connected the driveway to the front steps and climbed the three steps to the small white porch. The cul-de-sac’s streetlight cast a pinkish glow on the white door, allowing her to find the brass knob easily. It occurred to her that Gini might actually have gone into the house and could have fallen asleep while waiting for her. That seemed unlikely, but she pressed the doorbell just in case, hearing the chimes echo. As expected there was no response. Even so, she hesitated for a moment before turning the knob. The door was locked.

Running now, she skirted the side of the house, praying that the back door was unlocked. She remembered from past visits that it opened into the kitchen from a wooden deck. *Otherwise it will be the office restroom or the backyard.*

Fortunately the back door opened easily and, using the flashlight in her phone, Callie was able to find the cute little half-bath next to the kitchen. She couldn’t have explained why, but it didn’t feel right to turn on the lights in the house no matter how creepy it felt with just the tiny flashlight.

It was so hushed as she came back through the kitchen that she found herself on tip-toe. She flicked the narrow beam of light around the granite countertops and birch cabinets. In the eerie light cast by the digital clocks on the microwave and electric stove, it all looked normal. Cabinets neatly closed. Blue dishtowel hanging on its hook.

Gini had apparently grabbed a quick meal between client sessions. A white plate and some silverware and utensils sat in the stainless-steel sink, soaking next to a small aluminum pan.

Gini’s cell phone sat plugged into its charger on the countertop near her coffee-maker. *So that’s why she didn’t answer it.*

Callie was touched to see two rose-colored mugs along with two packets of hot chocolate powder and a package of Lorna Doone cookies set out on floral-patterned placemats on the granite breakfast counter.

Feeling guilty and a little crept-out lingering inside the empty house, she hurriedly opened the door to the deck with her tissue-covered hand.

The glare of a large flashlight greeted her and a commanding voice shouted. “Police! Stay where you are!”

She stood half-way through the door like the proverbial deer in the headlights until her heart stopped pounding. Then, summoning a friendly smile, she said, “Wow, you’re really quick. I thought it would take you longer to get here.”

The voice behind the flashlight was not amused. “Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Callie held both hands in front of her, the left still holding the tissue and the right holding her phone with its little light still shining. Her shoulder bag banged against her hip as she stepped across the threshold.

“Walk slowly down from the deck.”

Feeling herself flush with guilt as if she were a little kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar, Callie complied. She stumbled going down the four wooden steps, unbalanced by still holding both hands in front of her with a blinding light shining in her eyes.

When she managed to reach the ground without landing on her knees, the light was lowered. She could finally see the young police officer who held it. He looked as nervous as she felt. Red-headed and freckled, he looked younger than some of her kids who were aging out of foster care.

But he was all business.

“Turn around, facing the deck,” he barked. “Put down the purse and the stuff in your hands and put your hands behind you.”

“Wait! You’re not going to cuff me are you?” Callie tensed, flashing back once more to that awful time when that cop believed she’d killed her husband.

“Yes, Ma’am. That’s what I’m doing.”

Leaning past her to put his flashlight on the edge of the deck, he pulled a ziptie from his pocket and secured her wrists.

*Not as bad as last time.* An amusing thought lessened her tension. *This kid’s not old enough to be trusted with regular handcuffs.* She suppressed a grin at the absurdity of the situation, glad he couldn’t see her face.

“OK. Turn around and tell me who you are and what you were doing in the house.”

Callie sighed. “Is this really necessary?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

As he led her around to the front of the house, she gave him her name and explained that she was Dr. Colden’s guest and that she was the one who reported her missing after driving up from Long Island.

He had a one-track mind. “So if your friend wasn’t here, what were you doing in the house? How did you get in?”

Callie tried to hide her exasperation. “Look, I left my house around 6:30 and it took me over five hours to get here because of the weather. I needed to go to the bathroom. I couldn’t hold it anymore.”

She was perversely pleased to see that the kid blushed. But his embarrassment didn’t last long. “How did you get in?”

“The back door wasn’t locked.”

“Well, I guess that was convenient for you.” His attempt at tough cop sarcasm fell a little flat. She thought she might be winning this one.

He led her over to his patrol car and opened the back door. “You just sit there while I check the house.” He slammed the door, locking her in. Not a win then.

The seat was hard and the sitting position forced by her hands ziptied behind her made her back ache. The backseat smelled like stale vomit and urine, reminding her of the stories Mike used to tell about transporting drunks during his patrol days before he made detective.

It seemed like forever before the kid came back to the car. Callie spent the time trying to ward off flashbacks to when Mike died and she was cuffed and pushed into a police car by the young cop Mike’s tough-talking partner had sent to pick her up. Detective Joe Dormato was telling everybody she’d poisoned her husband. Thirty-five-year old cops as fit as Mike just didn’t have heart attacks in Joe’s opinion.

Joe had never liked her. He had made that plain from the time she and Mike started dating. She thought at the beginning it might have been because Joe was still single and missed hanging out in cop bars with Mike. Later though, cementing Joe’s antagonism toward her, there was that nasty fight about Gini.

She tried to push that from her mind. Worry over the current situation with Gini was more than enough.

When the young cop finally came back, he opened the driver’s door and she was able to see her watch in the overhead light. 1:40 a.m.

He keyed his radio and she heard him ask for back-up. Turning toward her, he said, “I’ve got another car coming. When she gets here, you’re going down to the station for questioning.”

*Would this night never end?*

Slamming the driver’s door, he walked around to the back and she heard him open the trunk, then slam it shut, shaking the whole car. He walked by her then, carrying a roll of yellow crime scene tape which he began tying between two small trees on either side of the driveway, fencing in her car.

*I have to be able to get to a motel. I need my car. And I need my phone. I need my purse.* Now she was getting angry. Well, angry was better than scared. “Hey,” she yelled. “I need my car!” But of course he didn’t hear her or pretended he didn’t. He just kept on unrolling yellow tape and wrapping it several times across the driveway.

Shortly afterward another patrol car pulled in behind the one she was in and Callie saw a female officer climb out. She was able to make out a stocky figure burdened with holster and handcuffs hanging at her thick waist. She came around her car and peered at Callie through the dusty window and Callie saw the plump face of a fortyish African-American woman.

Nodding at Callie, she walked over to the kid, who gestured toward his patrol car a few times, apparently explaining the situation.

Then she came back and opened Callie’s door. “You can step out now.”

Callie stumbled as she exited the car and almost fell to the gravel driveway, unable to catch herself with her shackled hands. The woman steadied her by the elbow and led her to her own cruiser.

“I’m Sergeant Duprey,” she said, seating Callie in the passenger seat rather than in the back.

This car had a pleasant pine aroma, probably due to the little green tree hanging from the mirror.

Reaching into her trouser pocket, the sergeant pulled out a pair of clippers and removed the ziptie. “May I see your ID please?”

Callie looked around in confusion for a moment. “My ID? Oh. I don’t have my purse. It’s on the deck in back, I think. My phone, too.”

“Redman!” The sergeant yelled. “Did you leave this lady’s stuff out back? Go get it!”

“So that’s his name,” Callie murmured. “He never gave it to me.”

“Humph!” Sergeant Duprey must have heard her. Callie hoped he was in trouble for that.

“OK. Here’s what we’re going to do” the sergeant said after about half an hour spent hearing her story, checking her license, going through her phone contacts and texts and then searching her car. “I’ll let you take your car to a motel and get some sleep if you promise to come to the station first thing in the morning for a formal statement. There’s a motel a little ways up 9W. I’ll call ahead for you.”

Callie wanted to hug her. “You believe me!” she said.

Sergeant Duprey patted her on the shoulder. “Well, here’s the thing. I guess I just don’t see the point in locking you up right now. We still need to check you out more, though, so you better not take off. I don’t like being made a fool.”

“Believe me,” Callie said, “I’m not going anywhere till Gini is found.”

Chapter Five

GINI

I wake with a blinding headache and a nauseated stomach.

Opening my eyes takes some effort.

I have no idea where I am. It’s pitch black and smells like something burnt.

As I try to focus, I remember finishing up Iris’ treatment plan and going to the office door when someone rang the bell. That’s all.

I close my eyes and try to re-live that memory. A little more comes back to me. A hand pressing something sticky over my mouth. The smell of some kind of chemical pressed against my nose. The sound of glass breaking. Pain in my right arm.

As I wake more, I slowly become aware of the surface I’m lying on. Some kind of lumpy mattress covered by a scratchy blanket. My right arm aches and I stretch and bend it. It must not be broken. A sprain or a bruise probably. It seems to function OK, but it hurts more the more I move it.

I raise my head and everything spins. Leaning over the edge of the bed, I vomit.

I put my head down again on the hard pillow. The dizzy feeling persists.

Chapter Six

CALLIE

Following the directions she’d been given by Sergeant Duprey, Callie made her way to the police station in the morning. She was somewhat bemused to find herself looking at a yellow house with black shutters framing the windows. In her exhausted state, Callie wondered if she’d misunderstood the directions. The sight of two dust-streaked patrol cars parked on the circular asphalt driveway reassured her.

She had had only about three hours of fitful sleep, shaken awake at 5:30 a.m. from a dream in which she could see Gini at the end of a dark tunnel. The faster she ran toward her, the more distant Gini became. After that, there was no hope of going back to sleep, so she’d showered and dressed and made her way to the motel’s bright green “Hunt Club Room.” Two cups of weak coffee and the croissant that served as the motel’s “Continental Breakfast,” eaten at a somewhat sticky laminated table hadn’t done much to lift her spirits.

She’d been tempted to call Jed before she left the motel, but decided not to wake him. Chicago was on Central Time. It wouldn’t be fair to call so early. Maybe she should have anyway. He probably would have been alright with it. But sometimes she didn’t trust her instincts when it came to Jed. There was still that little bit of uncertainty about where their relationship stood and how much she could ask of him.

So, tired and edgy, she parked in a marked visitors’ space and stepped out of the car. She glanced down at her stone-washed jeans, her heavy green cardigan zipped over an old yellow shirt, and her worn running shoes. She was momentarily sorry she hadn’t packed anything more professional-looking. It seemed important to look the part of a trustworthy and dependable witness. But merely presentable would have to do. She certainly hadn’t packed yesterday with a formal visit to the police in mind.

A solid black door stood at the center front of the building between two banks of three windows each. Approaching the door, she wondered if she should ring the bell or just walk in. The place seemed so much like a private home that for a moment she wasn’t sure. Deciding that she was being silly, it really was a municipal building, she turned the knob and pushed the door open.

On the inside, it certainly didn’t look like a private home. She found herself in a large room with beige walls and a tan laminated counter running across its width. A heavy plexiglass barrier separated the public side from staff space. Beyond that by about ten feet stood a brown partition about seven feet high obscuring the back of the room. Brown molded-plastic chairs stood against the wall under the windows to her right and left. Aside from herself, the room appeared to be empty, though she could hear voices coming from beyond the partition.

Approaching the counter, she saw an old-fashioned silver-colored bell with a hand-written sign next to it that said, “Ring Bell for Assistance.”

Callie pushed the little plunger on top of the bell and waited. No one came.

Growing impatient, she plunged it three more times in quick succession. This brought an elderly man in police uniform from behind the partition. He carried a white coffee mug in one hand and a partially-eaten sugar-coated donut wrapped in a napkin in the other. Putting the donut, in its napkin, down on the counter, he slid a plexiglass panel aside and smiled, sugar sprinkles twinkling on his gray moustache. “What can I do for you, young lady?”

Callie couldn’t help but smile back. “I’m here to see Sergeant Duprey.”

“Sorry. She’s night shift. She’s gone on home. You’ll need to see Sergeant Todd. Day shift.”

“Uh. OK. Sergeant Duprey told me to come in first thing in the morning. I thought...”

“Well, you thought wrong.” The voice came from above her right ear.

Callie spun around and almost bumped into a dark-haired muscular woman in uniform, several inches taller than her own 5'7". Her nameplate read “Sergeant M. Todd.” It didn’t take Callie’s training in reading body language to know this woman was deliberately trying to intimidate her by standing so close. *Must be Officer Redman’s mentor.*

Putting her large hand on Callie’s shoulder, she turned her toward a door to the left of the lobby. “You must be the one from that shrink’s house last night,” she said.

Callie brought herself up taller, squaring her shoulder against the hand. She knew plenty about standing up to bullies. “Yes, I’m Calista Templand, Dr. Colden’s guest. Sergeant Duprey told me to come here this morning to give my statement.”

“Ha! Sure she did. Fat-ass too lazy to take it herself.” From the tone in which it was said, Callie was sure she heard the unspoken “N” word behind that comment.

She found herself being propelled through the door into another large room. This one had four battered-looking wooden desks with old-style computers sitting on them. Two of the desks were occupied by cops pecking away at keyboards, coffee mugs and donuts beside them. Police radios squawked out incomprehensible codes.

Sergeant Todd hustled her into a glassed-in cubicle and pushed her toward a brown plastic chair like the ones in the lobby. She then walked around a plain wooden desk that held a clunky-looking computer in one corner and cluttered piles of paperwork everywhere else. She rolled back a worn black vinyl swivel chair and lowered herself into it with a sigh. Opening a desk drawer and pulling out a pad of forms and a Bic pen, she cleared a space to write by pushing aside one of the paper stacks and said, “OK. Let’s start.”

Callie brought her attention back from taking in the drabness of the beige walls and tan file cabinets. About the only color in the room came from a picture hanging on the wall showcasing Sergeant Todd with an officious-looking man in a gray suit. The sergeant appeared to be accepting a commendation of some sort. Below the picture was the framed certificate itself, printed in such ornate script that the only words Callie could make out were “*IN APPRECIATION*” at the top. She wondered briefly what the sergeant had done to merit it.

Another picture stood on the desk, angled so that it could be viewed from the visitor’s seat. This one featured the sergeant, some ten years younger, looking awkward in a lacy white dress. She was smiling into the eyes of a sandy-haired man in a tux. Most likely her wedding picture. As she turned back to Sergeant Todd, it was hard for Callie to imagine this gruff woman in the role of bride. *Maybe bridezilla, though.*

After filling in Callie’s name, address, driver’s licence number, date of birth, and what seemed like a hundred more items, Sergeant Todd finally said, ”OK. Tell me your story.”

As Callie repeated the information she had already supplied to both officers last night, Sergeant Todd kept interrupting her, asking for more detail. She wanted to know how Callie knew Dr. Colden, her marital status, why she was visiting, how long she planned to stay, when was the last time she was here, when was the last time she’d seen Dr. Colden, who else knew she was coming, where did she stay last night.

Callie did her best to remain patient, explaining that she’d known Gini since graduate school at Columbia University School of Social Work 15 years ago; that she had been a widow for three years; that she was visiting because it had been awhile since she and Gini had had much time together; that they’d planned a four-day weekend; that a few friends and co-workers knew she was coming: her Social Work Director at Services for Children, her boyfriend, her neighbor; that she was staying at the motel down the road.

Then the sergeant made Callie go through the whole thing a second time.

Finally Callie had had enough. “I’ve told you everything I can. While we’ve been sitting here, you could have been looking for Gini... Dr. Colden.”

“Oh, we’re not ready to do that yet. First I’m going out to the house to look things over. Then if I think there’s any reason to look for her, I’ll call the Sheriff.”

“Sheriff? Why the Sheriff?” Callie asked, startled.

“That’s how it works. See, I’m Town Police. We do code enforcement, traffic, crime complaints. If we need any criminal investigation, that’s the Sheriff. That’s why they get the big bucks.”

Callie was stunned. “You mean all this time I’ve been talking to you, no one has even begun to think about finding Gini?”

“Oh, we’re thinking about it. But you know we have other things to do. So I want to be damn sure that you’re not wasting our time with this. I’m thinking maybe you know something you’re not saying. Thinking it might not be necessary to look for her at all. Thinking you know where she would have gone.”

Callie jumped up from the chair. “What do you mean? You think I know where she is? If I knew that, I’d go and get her myself. Why do you think I’d report her missing if I knew where she was? And what about the open door and the broken lamp?”

“Calm down. No need to yell. Maybe she broke that lamp herself. Who knows? Maybe you’re the one who broke it. How do I know you didn’t get here a couple of hours earlier than you say?”

Callie replied through clenched teeth, “I’m sure you can check my EasyPass record. I was on the Whitestone Bridge around 9:30.”

“So now you’re telling me how to do my job?”

“Are we done here?” Callie asked, exasperated.

“Yeah, we’re done. You can just hang out down the hall while I go out and check the house.”

“Down the hall?”

“Yeah, we have two cozy little cells down there. You can take a rest.”

“A cell? You’re kidding. Am I under arrest?”

“Not technically, but I don’t like your attitude and I don’t like your story, so you can just stay here while I check things out.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Callie hoisted her purse onto her shoulder and moved toward the door.

“You stay here voluntarily or I will arrest you!”

“On what charge?”

“Let’s see. Could be kidnaping. Could be obstruction. Could even be Suspicion of Homicide.”

That one cut too close to the bone. Callie exploded. “Really? Could be a lawsuit for false imprisonment. I’m not staying in any cell!”

The door opened suddenly. A short dark man in a neatly pressed uniform leaned into the room. “What’s all the commotion?”

“Sorry, Captain,” Sergeant Todd said, suddenly becoming respectful. “Didn’t mean to disturb you. This lady is being uncooperative.”

“All right, I’ll deal with it. You need to be getting out on patrol. Check with the officer on traffic control at that accident scene and then go up to Dr. Colden’s house.”

He gestured for Callie to follow him and scooped the paperwork off the sergeant’s desk.

*An accident? Could it be Gini?*

In silence he led her to a larger, more private office off the corner of the main room and gestured toward another of those brown plastic chairs. Callie pushed her hand against her back, trying to stretch out the cramped muscles before she sat. This office was much more pleasant despite the same boring tan file cabinets she’d seen in the sergeant’s room. This one had a window facing the back of the building. Through it she could see a neat lawn with some still-bare maple trees. A flagstone path ran between flowerbeds where yellow crocuses were poking up through the soil. The walls had been painted a soft blue and the desk was uncluttered.

Settling into his own black vinyl swivel chair, the Captain sighed, folded his neatly manicured hands on the desktop and said, “I’m Captain Luis Rivera. And you are?”

“Calista Templand.”

“I see. You’re the one who reported Dr. Colden missing,” he said.

Callie was still shaking with anger. Why was he so laid back when it was so important that Gini be found right away? “Please tell me something is being done to find my friend. She was gone before midnight and it must be after10:00 now,” she said tight-lipped.

“I’m sure you’ve heard that an adult can not be officially reported missing until 24 hours have passed?” he asked.

She sat forward, leaning toward him to emphasize the urgency of the situation. “Yes, but I know from my work in foster care that that’s not actually required by law. And there was a lamp broken on the floor and a file was open on her desk and there were two cups for cocoa...” Callie felt tears coming and tried to stifle them.

“Yes. Suspicious circumstances,” he agreed. “Let me look at what you told my sergeant.”

He pulled a pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket and peered down at the intake sheet, murmuring a word here and there aloud, while Callie studied him.

Short and slim with closely-cropped black hair beginning to streak with gray, he appeared confident, not overly friendly, but not hostile like the sergeant.

“Hmmm. Let’s get this typed up so you can sign it and get back to your motel,” he said, standing.

Callie sighed with relief. No additional questions. No waiting in a cell with probable flashbacks to the aftermath of Mike’s death.

He nodded at her and left the office. Too restless to stay seated, she rose and wandered over to the window. The pleasant view helped a bit to calm her.

When he returned, he carried two cups of coffee, one of them a blue mug reading “Best Daddy” and the other white cardboard. Setting them on the desk and taking a few tubs of creamer and packets of sugar and sweetener from his pocket, he said, “I don’t know how you like it, so I brought everything. It’ll be a few minutes till the interview is typed. Help yourself.”

Seated again, she dropped one sugar and one creamer into the cardboard cup as she asked, “What happens now?”

“Sergeant Todd will check the house and report back. I sent another officer up there earlier to relieve the night man so everything should be secure. When she reports, I’ll call the Sheriff if it seems necessary. I think there may be enough now for them to start a search. They can at least be alerted to the situation and send someone down to take a look. At the least, it might be a burglary. They can start with that if they are willing to. Meanwhile, you go back to your motel. Get some lunch. You can probably use a nap. We’ll call you.”

A young brunette in a stylish navy-blue skirt suit knocked once and came into the office carrying several sheets of paper and quietly put them on the desk.

“Ah! Thank you, Stella,” Captain Rivera said as she quickly exited, her heels clicking on the vinyl flooring. “Your statement. Please read it over and if it’s correct, sign all three copies.”

Callie read through it quickly. The statement appeared accurate. Although annoyed by the triplicate, she didn’t question it. She signed all three copies rapidly. If there was anything she understood, it was bureaucratic paperwork.

She handed the three pages to Captain Rivera and he returned one to her. As she took her copy back, she said, “I couldn’t help hearing you tell Sergeant Todd to stop at an accident scene. I was wondering...”

“You’re concerned that the driver might have been your friend.”

Callie nodded, barely breathing. “Has the driver been identified?”

“Yes. We are not ready to release the name yet, but I can tell you it isn’t Dr. Colden.”

Relieved, she drove back to the motel, still too tense to stop for food. She sank down on the edge of the as-yet unmade bed, wondering briefly why the maid hadn’t come through yet. She took her phone out of her bag and pressed its autodial for Gini’s number in case she’d come back. Still a full mailbox.

When she tried Jed’s number next, the phone rang five times and went to voicemail. “Jed. I really need to talk to you. Please call me as soon as you get this. It’s Gini. She’s missing!” Callie wondered if she sounded as hysterical as she felt.

She took a few deep breaths, trying to find the calm within. She could handle frightened children and screaming parents and tough-guy cops. Well, at work anyway. But this was different. This was Gini, the one person who’d been steady in her life for 15 years. The one person she could trust completely. The one person who had stood by her all through the horrible aftermath of Mike’s death. Sure, she thought she could trust Jed, too, but that relationship was only eight months old. Did she really know him? Really? Like now. Where was he? Why wasn’t he answering his phone? *Well, probably he was working and couldn’t take her call in the middle of an interview*. Yes, she told herself. That must be it. But that rationale did nothing to ease her anxiety.

Too restless to sit still, certainly not able to take a nap despite her lack of sleep the night before, she found the remote and flipped on the TV. Saturday morning cartoons. She flipped it off.

She could find nothing with which to distract her mind in the motel room. The pale green walls with fox-hunt pictures hanging on them felt like they were closing in on her. The unmade bed felt oppressive.

She needed some air. A short run would do her good and she hoped that by the time she returned, the maid would have finished the room and she could shower without interruption. After that, she thought, she’d be ready to walk to the diner she’d driven past a little way up the road. Right now she didn’t feel like she could swallow. That early morning croissant was still sitting under her ribcage.

She set off along the country road beside the motel, jogging slowly down a gentle incline at first and then finding herself running more quickly as the road made a steeper dip toward the Hudson. Callie had not been doing much running during the winter months despite the availability of treadmills at the condo’s clubhouse. She soon found herself exhilarated, but winded. She stopped to catch her breath where the road came to an abrupt end at a steel barrier on a narrow bluff overlooking the Hudson.

The urge to stay there and enjoy the panorama of the river stretching before her was tempered by the cold wind sweeping the bluff and penetrating the old Adelphi sweatshirt with which she’d replaced her sweater. She reluctantly began the difficult climb back up to her starting place.

Chapter Seven

GINI

I think I must have passed out because the next time I become aware of my surroundings there’s weak daylight in the room and my headache is mostly gone.

The smell is disgusting.

I sit up and look around for the source and see the place where I threw up. I remember that now, though it’s like out of a fog.

I know I need to do something about the smell. It’s making me retch again. I look around for something to clean it up with.

It’s the first time I’ve been able to see my surroundings. What I see makes my heart stop.

I’m in a room about 8' x 10' with cinderblock walls and two small dirty windows near the ceiling. The ceiling beams are charred. The concrete floor is covered with soot, but it appears that someone worked hard at sweeping it out. I can clearly see tracks where a broom has brushed against the powdery surface.

So this must be a basement room under a building that burned at some time. How strange.

The entrance is a wooden door with peeling brown paint. The shiny brass lock-plate on the door looks startlingly new. A large gray plastic bucket stands in one corner. Nothing but that and the cot I am sitting on furnish the room.

I can’t handle looking at and smelling the puddle of vomit on the floor and there is no water or cleaning cloth around, so I pull the stained threadbare pillowcase off the hard pillow I’ve been given and tear a piece of it off. It’s so worn that tearing it is no problem, though it does make my arm ache.

When I stand I feel lightheaded. I take a moment to get my balance and then kneel down to wipe up the mess, holding my breath. When I struggle to my feet again, my cream-colored linen pants are covered in soot and I feel woozy again.

I walk unsteadily to the bucket and drop the cloth into it. It won’t help the smell much, but at least it’s a little farther away and I won’t have to look at it.

The sight of the bucket makes me realize that it must be there so I can relieve myself. Disgusting, but if I must...

My legs are shaky when I manage to stand again, so I grab the wall to prop myself up. Then I inch over to the door.

I turn the doorknob, though I’m sure it’s useless. I examine the brass fitting more closely. It looks like a dead-lock, but the turn-bolt must be on the outside. Someone has gone to a good deal of trouble to keep me here.

I look around for another possible escape route even though I already know there isn’t one.

The windows are way too high, but I wonder if I can reach one of them if I stand on the cot. My ability to move around is improving, so I walk slowly back to the cot and manage to drag it over to the wall beneath the window. The cot is a lot like the one my grandma let me use when I slept over as a child. But hers had wheels. I wish this one did.

Unsteady as I am, the uneven mattress unbalances me when I climb up onto it. Maybe it’s good that the cot doesn’t have wheels.

I manage to reach up to the bottom frame of the window. I pound it with my fist, but it doesn’t move and the action sends a shockwave down my sore arm.

Stupid to try that! I can see layers of old brown paint sealing it. There’s a hook in the middle of the frame and, tipping my head back, I can see a metal eye in the ceiling beam where they must have fastened the hook years ago when the window could be opened. I can’t think of anything I can do with that information and tipping my head back makes me dizzy.

I wonder if I can break the window with the bucket to at least get some air, but the bucket is plastic, so unlikely. And with what’s in it now, I don’t even want to contemplate trying.

When I step down to the floor again, I am feeling unstable again, so I drag the cot back to its original position, leaving a second set of streaks from its metal legs along the floor. My captor will know I’ve moved it. I don’t know if that matters. Will they punish me for doing that? Would they punish me even if I didn’t move it? What will they do to me? What do they want with me? I have no answers.

As I push the cot to the wall, I see something I missed before. I haven’t even realized until now that I am shoeless, but there is one of my bone-colored pumps against the wall where the cot was hiding it. I don’t see the other one anywhere. Suddenly my feet feel very cold on the concrete floor. But an idea forms. Maybe I can break the window with the heel of the shoe.

I am too dizzy to try that now. I sit hunched on the cot with my back against the damp concrete wall and pull the blanket over my cold feet. I wait for my head to settle down. When it does, there are only questions: Where am I? Who brought me here? Why? Why me?

Chapter Eight

CALLIE

The old diner was kind of quaint, a throwback to those steel and glass diningcar designs from the middle of the 20th century.

Stepping through the heavy glass entry doors, Callie was greeted by a permeating aroma of bacon and coffee. The low hum of conversation and the clinking of silverware against plates was comforting. There was a feeling of normalcy in it. And nothing else had felt normal the past twelve hours.

A long cream-colored Formica counter with little multi-colored boomerang designs scattered on its surface stood to her right. Well-worn red vinyl, chrome-legged stools lined it. A blackened grill was visible behind it. Red vinyl booths with cream-topped tables matching the countertop ran along the window wall to the left. A small jukebox stood at the window end of each booth’s table.

She was late for the breakfast crowd and a little early for lunch, so the place was sparsely occupied. Three elderly women sat at a table for four in the middle of the room, their heavy sweaters and handbags piled on the fourth chair. A young couple with a baby in a booster seat sat in one of the booths. Two muscular men in blue coveralls were easing into another booth as she entered.

A printed sign reading “Seat Yourself” was propped against the unattended cash register at the near end of the counter.

Heads turned at her entrance, but no one looked particularly curious about her. She had to admit though that she was curious about them. Did any of them know Gini? Did they know she was missing? Was there something they could tell her if she knew how to ask?

Callie took a seat at the far end of the counter, near the pass-through window to the kitchen. She could see two cooks bustling about, getting ready for the lunch rush. One was cutting up vegetables and creating salad plates. The other was stirring something in a pot on the large commercial range. Their efficient movements spoke of many years of experience, giving Callie a reassuring impression that the food here would be excellent. A good thing, because her run had brought back her appetite.

A perky young waitress wearing a yellow and white ‘50’s-era uniform, her brown hair held in place by a hairnet, approached her. The black and white plastic name-tag pinned to her chest read “RITA.” Callie assessed her as a local college student doing the kind of work she herself had done to earn tuition money back when she was an undergrad. She knew what that was like and she promised herself that unless the service was abysmal, she’d leave a generous tip.

“What can I get you? Or do you need a menu?”

Callie glanced up at the specials chalked on a blackboard next to the pass-through. What she needed now was comfort food. “Oh. Uh. Can I just have a grilled cheese and tomato on whole wheat and a cup of that winter squash soup on the board?”

“Coming right up!” Rita smiled, turning away as she scribbled on an order pad and ripped the top sheet off. Turning toward a grizzled short-order cook standing by the grill in a less-than pristine white apron, she placed it on the spike next to his station. He acknowledged the new order with a surly grunt. At the pass-through window, she shouted, “Cup of squash soup!” and got an answering nod from one of the cooks.

“Coffee with that?”

“Diet Coke if you have it,” Callie responded with a smile. She could feel her lingering tension fading in this cheerful atmosphere.

As she waited for her meal, sipping her soda, Callie tuned in to the snippets of talk around her.

“Sammy says the new baby is adorable. Looks just like his Mom.”

“I want to get those tomato seeds started this afternoon.”

“You know that old Chevy I was looking at to build a stock car? Someone beat me to it.”

*A slice of small town life*, Callie reflected. *What else did I expect*?

Rita came back with her sandwich and soup, along with a pile of fries and a dill pickle. Much more food than Callie had anticipated, but the aroma from the fries reminded her how hungry she really was.

She ate slowly, continuing to try to catch snatches of conversation, but she heard nothing relevant to Gini. *Not that I really expected to*, she told herself.

As she finished the soup and sandwich and was dipping the last few fries into a pool of ketchup, more people were filing into the diner. She turned slightly on her stool, watching them find seats in the booths and at the tables in the middle of the room.

Somebody put a coin in one of the jukeboxes and strains of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” came from an overhead speaker. The sound-level rose and it was harder to catch individual conversations.

Callie had rather reluctantly decided to return to her claustrophobic motel room when Rita approached to ask if she wanted a refill of Coke or anything else.

As she was refusing anything more and asking for her check, a large swarthy man in brown coveralls came through the door. He waved to Rita, who nodded acknowledgment as he headed toward the two men in blue seated in the window booth directly behind Callie’s stool.

“Hey Jess. Hey Art. Mind if I join you?” He had the kind of hearty voice that carried even over the ambient noise. Some shuffling sounds indicated that his friends were making space for him.

With a grunt as he thumped down onto the bench seat, he continued, “I just come down from delivering some grass seed up to that development at Mt. Stephen. You know, the one with all the houses in a circle?”

Some murmurs of recognition followed.

“Yeah. So anyway, there’s a Town Clown car up there and a bunch of police tape all over the yard where that psychiatrist or whatever she is lives.”

It was all Callie could do to keep from jumping up and running over to their table. Instead, she turned a little sideways so she could see them out of the corner of her eye, as if that would make it easier to hear..

“What’s that about?” one of the others asked.

“Well, I stopped and asked the lady cop that was standing around up there and she says the shrink is maybe kidnaped.”

“Oh, come on, Harve. Who’d wanna do that?”

“Maybe a lot of people. Who knows what kind of nutcases go to her place.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Remember that crazy girl who killed herself? Charlie Irvin’s girlfriend?”

“Oh yeah. Sure. You don’t think Charlie would go after the shrink? Not after so long.”

“Not so sure. You know he still thinks that shrink drove her to it. He hates her guts.”

“Yeah. And Charlie’s pretty hot-headed. But if he was gonna do anything, he’d have done it right away. And he’d have used his fists. He wouldn’t have kidnaped her.”

Callie gasped, turning more toward the trio just as Rita came out from behind the counter carrying a tray to their table.

She remembered how distraught Gini was last year over a client who had committed suicide. It must be the girl they were talking about. Gini had called Callie that night, kept insisting that if she hadn’t been so distracted by her own divorce, she would never have missed the signs.

She watched Rita set out the new arrival’s lunch and return behind the counter with her empty tray. She was thinking she ought to stop by their table before she left, though she couldn’t figure out how to approach them. *Hi. My name is Callie and I’m the shrink’s best friend* didn’t seem like the best way to get more information from them.

As she hesitated, trying to come up with a good way to introduce herself, the heavy glass entry door opened again and she saw Captain Rivera coming through it behind a tall red-headed woman in a gray pantsuit.

The conversation in the booth suddenly turned to the weather. “Yeah, sure was a lot of rain yesterday.”

Spying Callie half-standing by her stool, Captain Rivera quickly came to her side. “Ah! I was hoping to find you here. We tried your motel. Your car was there and you weren’t, so I knew you didn’t go far. This is Detective Greenliegh from the Sheriff’s Office. She would like to talk to you.”

Detective Greenliegh smiled, holding out her hand. Callie shook it. A nice firm, confident handshake she noticed. Unpolished short nails. An attractive woman even in the drab outfit.

“OK,” Callie readily agreed. It was heartening to know that the Sheriff’s office was finally involved in looking into Gini’s disappearance. Maybe things would begin to move forward now. “I was just about to leave. Do you want to talk here?” She gestured toward a few empty tables in the rear.

“Not the best place,” Rivera said. “The two of us need to grab some lunch, though, so how about you go back to the motel and get your car and meet us in an hour at the station?”

Chapter Nine

GINI

I must have been sleeping again. A noise outside wakes me. It’s still daylight. I can make out blue sky through the dirty windows.

I’m disoriented when I sit up, but I sense danger and that brings instant alertness. Was it the slam of a car door I heard?

A pair of dark pant legs pass one window and then the other. Between the soot on the inside of the windows and the dirt on the outside, I can’t make out more than that.

Soon I hear footsteps that sound like they are descending stairs and approaching the door to the room. Then I hear the lock snap open.

I think of using my shoe as a weapon, but quickly remember that the person who attacked me last night was much bigger than me. It would only make thing worse for me, I’m sure. I shove the shoe as far under the cot as I can and make sure the blanket hangs down enough to hide it. I don’t know if I can break the window with it, but I definitely don’t want my captor to see I’ve found it and take it away from me.

The door squeals open on rusty hinges, but only to about four inches wide, and a black-gloved hand shoves a McDonald’s bag through. An eye appears above it in the crack briefly and I hear a satisfied grunt.

Then the door closes and I hear the bolt click. It’s not long before the footsteps mount the stairs and the legs pass the windows again. I hear a car door slam shut and an engine start up. Next, the crunch of tires on gravel and I’m alone again.

The smell in the room doesn’t encourage me to eat, but I know how important it is to keep both my physical and mental energy up. So I go to the door and pick up the bag and carry it back to the cot.

Opening the bag, I begin removing its contents and placing each item on the blanket. The more I pull out of the bag, the more I find myself giggling because now I recognize it as a Happy Meal! I’m getting giddy. A small hamburger, fries, chocolate milk, apple slices. A small rubbery green toy dinosaur. By now I’m giggling hysterically. A Happy Meal!

I take a deep breath to stop the giggles when my clinician’s brain kicks in. I can’t afford hysteria. And it’s really not funny. None of this is funny.

I turn to clinical analysis instead. Why would my captor bring me a child’s meal? Is it because I’m physically small? Is it because they don’t want to give me much sustenance? Is it because it makes them feel powerful to belittle me?

I’m betting on the last one.

So who would feel good about humiliating me?

Nobody comes to mind. I can’t make sense of anything, so I give it up for now and set about eating my meager meal.

When I’m done, I crumple the wrappings and open the bag to push them inside. That’s when I notice a torn-off piece of printer paper in the bottom of the bag. Pulling it out and holding it up, I see a neatly typed note:

“U think U know so much.

I think U know 2 much.

Are U Happy now?”

I don’t know what it means about what I could possibly know, but I do know it’s a threat. And it means I have to find a way out of here before my captor returns.

I panic for a moment. Then I bring myself under control.

I’m on a mission now. I drag the cot under one of the windows again and go back to retrieve the shoe. The two-inch heel isn’t much, but maybe it’s enough to break the glass. At least I can get some air and maybe I can yell for help.

I listen for any sound outside, but hear nothing.

I climb up onto the cot and get my footing. I’m glad my earlier unsteadiness seems to have disappeared.

Grasping the toe of the shoe tightly, I reach up as high as I can and bang the heel against the lower part of the glass as hard as I’m able. Over and over. My right arm is aching like mad, but I keep it up until I hear a crack and see a small spider-web fracture developing. Switching to my left hand, I bang on the little spider web break until a piece of glass falls to the ground outside. I bang more of it out until I’ve got a jagged hole about five inches across.

A heavenly breeze blows through the hole and I can smell damp earth and hear birds singing and the low of a cow in the distance.

Chapter Ten

CALLIE

Seated across from Detective Greenliegh at a wooden table in a small conference room at the police station, Callie squirmed uneasily in the hard plastic chair. It was already after 2 pm on Saturday and as best she could see, nothing had yet been done to find Gini. On top of that, when she had tried to reach Jed from her motel room, her phone rang into voicemail again.

Fretting about that, she missed what the deputy was saying.

“Ms. Templand,” Detective Greenliegh repeated, “Are you ready to start?”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I’m just so worried, it’s hard to concentrate. Can you call me Callie?”

“Sure, if you’d prefer that. So Callie, I’ve read the statement you gave to Sergeant Todd. But I’d like to expand on it now.”

Callie hoped she didn’t visibly roll her eyes. *More questions? No action*? “OK”

The deputy took her back over what she’d already said at least three times, then nodded. *Well at least she seems to be accepting it.*

“All right, now let’s talk about what you know about the people in Dr. Colden’s life.”

Callie hesitated, looking down at her hands as though there might be some inspiration there. She couldn’t think of anybody she might know. “OK, but I don’t know much about the people she knows around here.”

“You’ve presumably talked on the phone with her off and on and maybe visited with her sometimes over the past few years. I’m sure she must have mentioned some people. And there must be people you know from the past who are still in her life.”

Callie thought for a moment more, “Well, OK, there’s her ex-husband and his parents. And a couple of men she’s dated since her divorce.”

Detective Greenliegh nodded encouragement as she made some notes on an iPad. “Keep going.”

“A couple of neighbors. Her therapist.” The deputy’s eyebrows went up at that one.

“It’s clinical supervision,” Callie explained. “Gini provides it for other colleagues in the same way. Gini is a clinical social worker. She needs to consult with a therapist of her own to make sure she’s not injecting her personal feelings and issues into her interactions with her clients.”

“She has issues?”

“Everybody has issues. Therapists are probably just more aware of their own than the average person.”

Deputy Greenliegh narrowed her eyes at that, looking like she might want to comment, but thought better of it. “Can you tell me that therapist’s name?”

“Hope Something. I don’t remember Gini ever mentioning her full name.”

“OK Hope isn’t a very common name. We should be able to find her in a local Social Work Directory. Anyone else?”

“I’m sure there must be other professional contacts and local acquaintances, and people who do things like clean her house and shovel snow, but I don’t know who they are,” Callie said, thinking sadly about how little she knew of Gini’s life now.

“What about her patients?”

“Clients.”

“OK.” That annoyed frown again. “Why ‘clients’ and not ‘patients?’ Does it really matter?”

Callie nodded, “It matters to Gini. She says that if you call the people coming to you for help ‘patients,’ they think of you as the expert who is going to ‘fix’ all their problems. But if you call them ‘clients,’ they still see you as the expert, but one who is going to work cooperatively with them to help them work out their own solutions.”

Detective Greenliegh nodded, “Interesting. A fine line there. OK, then. What about her *clients*? Could one of them have a reason to harm her?”

What Callie said next didn’t help the deputy’s mood. “That’s confidential. She would never have told me who they are or what they discussed and I would never expect her to.”

“But maybe she told you some things in a general way?” Detective Greenliegh was beginning to sound exasperated.

“Once in awhile she might mention being frustrated over how difficult it is to help people who expect miracles without putting in any effort of their own. That kind of thing.”

“Anyone in particular? Especially recently?”

“Well, not in a specific way. One time she mentioned feeling frustrated by session after session with a man who was being verbally abused by his wife, but never did anything but complain about it. And I remember another time she talked about a woman who kept making bad decisions that kept her from moving forward in her life. Things like that. Nothing that could identify a client.”

Callie hesitated before going on, “There was a client who committed suicide. Gini was really torn up over it. She didn’t tell me her name or anything confidential, but this afternoon when you came into the diner there were some men in a booth over by the window talking about how a friend of theirs hated Gini because of it.”

“How did they come to be talking about that?” the deputy asked. “It seems odd that they would be discussing that just when you were at the diner.”

“One of them was saying he was up at Gini’s cul-de-sac making a delivery and he stopped to talk to the cop watching Gini’s house about why the police were there. So then the three of them started talking about Gini and the boyfriend of the girl who killed herself.”

“Did they mention the boyfriend’s name?”

“Yes. Charlie Irvin.” Detective Greenliegh nodded and wrote that on her iPad.

Still looking at her iPad, Detective Greenliegh sighed. “OK So let’s go back and talk more about the people you mentioned at the beginning. Tell me about her ex-husband. His name?”

“Ronald Makin.” As she pronounced his name, Callie formed a picture in her mind of the last time she saw him. *Brown hair rapidly receding, angry blue eyes, jaw set in stubborn defiance.* “They were only married about four years. He was pretty controlling. Gini’s kind of easygoing, so she didn’t mind much at the beginning. She mostly did what he wanted.”

Her distaste must have been obvious. “You didn’t like him.”

“He made me uncomfortable, more for Gini’s sake than my own. He’d make little comments in front of her in social settings about how she could improve her looks or her housekeeping or her income. It made me cringe.”

“Her income. So he wasn’t satisfied with her earnings? Was money a problem for them?”

“Do you think this could be about money? Like kidnaping for ransom?” Callie asked, taken aback. “I don’t think Gini has that much money, or her family.”

“I don’t know what the motive was. I’m just trying to cover all possibilities,” the detective responded. “Mostly I was wondering if money was an issue in their marriage or in the divorce.”

“I don’t think so,” Callie said, “Ron is well paid and Gini is far from a minimum wage employee even if she didn’t make as much as Ron would have liked.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s some kind of computer guru. I never really understood what he does. He works for IBM.”

Detective Greenliegh noted that on her iPad, then went on. “OK. So Colden is her maiden name?”

“Yes, she never changed it. That was one of the things that he kept bringing up, but it was important to her, so she stood her ground. As I said, Gini’s pretty easy-going, but when something really matters, she does assert herself.”

The deputy knit her brows, apparently puzzled by that contradictory behavior. “Why was she so intent on keeping her maiden name if changing it meant so much to him?”

“She’d established a career under that name. She was in her early thirties when they married, so she was well-known professionally by that name. And I think later on it was one way she could defy him a little bit, though she never said that.”

“OK,” Detective Greenliegh nodded. She glanced at the iPad again. “Tell me how they came to be living in Mt. Stephen.”

“They moved up here so Ron could be near his parents. His mother isn’t well. She has MS.”

“Multiple Sclerosis,” the deputy clarified.

“Yes. Gini understood, but she wasn’t happy about it. It meant Gini had to give up a job at a not-for-profit agency where she loved working.”

“And Mr. Makin’s job?”

“All he had to do was ask for a transfer to a different office.”

“And how long ago was that move?”

“About a year after they married. So about four years ago.”

“And you said that was to be near his parents?”

“Yes. They live in Middlehope.”

The deputy made a note of that. “I’ll need their names and address.”

Callie shook her head, “I don’t know the street address. I know his father is Ronald, Senior.”

“That helps. And what can you tell me about Dr. Colden’s parents? Are they in this area, too?”

“No. They’re in Portland. That’s where she’s from.”

“So there was no need to consider them.”

“Not in terms of living near them, no.”

Callie’s body jerked up straight. “Her parents! I have to call them!”

The deputy held her hand up in a “stop” gesture. “Let’s not rush into that. It’s not even twenty-four hours yet. No need to worry them unnecessarily.”

Callie could understand her reasoning, but it didn’t feel right. She said, “I think they would want to know. I’ve only met them once, at Gini’s wedding, but they seemed like really caring people who would be angry if they were not told right away that their daughter was in danger.”

Detective Greenliegh countered, “We don’t know that she is in danger just yet. That’s why we usually wait twenty-four hours. She might come back an hour from now wondering what the fuss is all about.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Callie asked.

“Let’s just leave it that my office will notify her parents if she isn’t back by tomorrow morning. Can you give me their contact information?”

Callie drew in a breath. “I don’t think I have it. Here I was going to call them and I don’t even have their number.” She paused. “It’ll be in Gini’s phone. I saw it on her kitchen counter.”

“All right. For now you can just give me their names.”

“Colden. Sherry and David, if I remember correctly.”

“Good. Let’s move on to the divorce. How long ago?”

Callie found herself counting back on her fingers, though she knew exactly. *She’d been visiting Gini for the week of July Fourth last year when the final papers had arrived. Ron had come pounding on the door, shouting, “I hope you’re happy now! You got everything!” Gini had stood quietly in the foyer, calmly looking up at him, “And you get to marry Hanna.”*

“It was final last July,” Callie said.

“What kind of terms did they part on?”

*Things had gotten ugly last Winter and Spring. Callie had tried to support and comfort Gini by phone and had driven up to visit a couple of times. Gini had come down to see Callie once as well*.

“Not friendly. It seemed like the more Gini learned to assert herself, the worse their marriage got. Ron started to do things like check her phone log to see who she’d been talking to or texting. Acting like he thought she was playing around.” Callie said. “Maybe because, as it turned out, he was the one actually cheating on her,” she mused.

“Tell me more about that.”

“There was a woman named Hanna who worked with Ron. They had an affair and Gini found out.”

“Is Mr. Makin with this Hanna now?”

“I don’t think so, unless they got back together. Gini told me that Hanna was pretty angry when Ron dumped her. She came banging on Gini’s door, blaming her. She was screaming that Gini was keeping Ron from committing to her.” *Could Hanna have abducted Gini?*

“Can you give me Hanna’s full name?”

“No. I never heard it. I just know she worked with Ron and lived across the river somewhere.”

Detective Greenliegh made a note of that and then stood and stretched. “Seems like a good point to quit for a few minutes. I have to make a phone call and I’m sure you’d like to stretch your legs. Back in fifteen.”

Gratefully, Callie stood. The hard chair was making her back ache.

She walked out to her Honda, enjoying the fresh air. Standing next to the car, she dialed Jed’s number again. Thankfully, this time he answered. “Callie! I’ve been trying to return your call ever since I landed.”

She ducked into the car to stifle the nearby traffic noise. “I had to turn the ringer off. Where are you? Landed where? Oh, Jed, I’ve been so scared!”

“Slow down. I’m home. I wrapped it up early and took the first flight I could get. I saw your message when I turned the phone back on when I landed at LaGuardia. What’s going on? What’s this about Gini?”

Callie leaned back against the headrest, her tension easing just from hearing the concern in his voice.

The story came tumbling out. She’d told it so many times already that it almost didn’t seem real anymore.

“Oh God, Babe! Listen, I don’t have much going for a few days. How about I drive up there?”

“Could you?” It was almost a shriek.

“Just tell me where you’re staying. I’ll be there for dinner.”

Happy for the first time that day, Callie returned to the conference room.

She found Detective Greenliegh waiting by the door. “Change in plans. My partner wants me to bring you up to the house. You can tell me about the other people you mentioned on the way.”

She held up her hand to stop Callie as she began to turn away. “One thing before we go. We need to get your fingerprints to eliminate them from whatever we find in the house.”

Callie sucked in her breath. *What if the prints that were taken after Mike’s death weren’t destroyed as promised? What would the police make of finding a match with them?* She knew she could explain what happened, but she didn’t feel up to going through that explanation with all the awful memories attached to it.

Then she uttered a relieved sigh when she remembered that her prints were also on file from last year’s renewal of her security clearance for her job at the foster care agency. No one had questioned her about a match then. *That’s probably all right then.*

Feeling reassured, she followed Detective Greenliegh to a back room in the police station where a young Town Officer rolled her fingers, one-by-one on a white pad, labeled it with her name and date of birth and signed it over to the deputy for comparison at the Sheriff’s lab later.

Chapter Eleven

CALLIE

Riding along in the Sheriff’s car, Callie shared what little she knew about the other people in Gini’s life these days, starting with her neighbors in the cul-de-sac.

Gini had told her recently that during their winter break from the boarding school they attended, she caught the teens from the house on her right smoking in the woods at the back of her property. She’d given them a firm lecture, and herded them home to their parents. She’d been avoiding visiting that house ever since because the kids’ father had propositioned her after he sent them to their rooms. She’d noticed him leering at her a few times before, but had shrugged it off.

“How did she handle that? The proposition?” Detective Greenliegh asked.

“She said she made it clear she wasn’t interested, but I don’t know exactly what she told him.”

“Did he pursue it?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“How about his wife? Did she know?”

“I don’t think so. At least Gini never said anything about her.”

“We’ll have someone talk to them anyway.” Detective Greenliegh decided, then asked, “How does Dr. Colden get along with her other neighbors?”

“It seems to be an area where people mostly keep to themselves. Some of them are young families with kids. They tend to socialize with each other around school events and such. The couple to her left are pretty friendly. Last summer, when I was here for the Fourth of July, they invited both of us over for a barbeque and pool party. I met a few other neighbors there, but I really don’t remember who. You know how it is. You get introduced to a bunch of people all at once and then you can’t remember who’s who.”

Detective Greenliegh nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been to some of those parties.”

Callie continued, “Gini said the woman directly across the circle from her is very involved in her church. Lots of committee meetings over there all the time. Lots of cars. She doesn’t socialize in the neighborhood much as far as I know, though Gini said she was friendly enough toward her. I haven’t met her.”

“Any friends outside the neighborhood she might have confided in?”

“I don’t know. When they were married I know there were a few couples they were friendly with, but after the divorce they kind of drifted away.” *Kind of like what happened to my social life after Mike died.*

“That happens,” the deputy remarked. “It’s hard to include a single woman in a dinner party or whatever. But maybe she stayed friendly with one or two of the wives?”

Callie nodded. “She mentioned someone named Vi that she’d meet for lunch sometimes. I don’t know her last name.”

As she was saying that, the deputy slowed the car and looked over at the side of the road where a broken guardrail was strung with police caution tape. “I heard there was a fatal accident here early today,” she said. “You need to be really careful on these roads.”

“I know,” Callie responded. “I heard about it this morning when I was giving my statement. I was scared that it was Gini, but Captain Rivera told me they’d identified the driver and it wasn’t. I feel bad for that family, whoever they are.”

They rode in sober silence for the rest of the drive, Callie reflecting on the difficult drive she’d made in all that rain, feeling lucky to have avoided a similar fate. She actually shuddered when the deputy turned onto the narrow road to Mt. Stephen, remembering last night’s drive up the hill in the dark.

When they arrived at Gini’s house, Sgt Todd was parked in the driveway behind a Sheriff’s patrol car and a forensics van. She strode belligerently over to the detective’s car. The moment they opened their doors, she sneered, “About time you showed up.”

Callie had to give Detective Greenliegh credit for coolness as she simply responded, “I need to look at the office,” and walked in that direction, ducking under the warning tape and holding it up for Callie.

“Is she always like that?” Callie asked.

“I don’t interact with her much,” was the only response.

A tall blond man in a gray suit was in the waiting room, bending over the broken lamp on the floor while a young woman in a Sheriff’s uniform brushed it with dark powder. He straightened as Callie and the deputy entered. “Deputy,” he nodded brusquely to Detective Greenliegh and turned a little too quickly to Callie, holding out his hand. “I’m Sergeant Mann. You must be Ms. Templand.” *Do I detect something going on between these two?*

The handshake was firm and professional, if a little stiff.

Asking Callie to wait outside, he took Detective Greenliegh into the inner office.

Though annoyed at being dismissed so abruptly, she was relieved to watch Sergeant Todd climb into her patrol car and drive away. Another Town cop still sat in his car parked at the edge of Gini’s property, but now she knew that at least she wouldn’t have to endure another encounter with the sour sergeant today.

While she waited to be summoned by Sergeant Mann, Callie scanned the activity taking place around the circle of houses. Down toward the end of the cul-de-sac, a noisy group of teens shot a basketball at one of those roll-out hoops. A toddler was riding in a toy fire engine up and down the asphalt driveway at the house next to them. Two women chatted over a picket fence between those houses. An ordinary small town scene on a Saturday afternoon.

Callie felt tears welling up in her eyes. It was hard for her to comprehend that the rest of the world was going on with life while Gini was... what? Callie didn’t want to picture what might be happening to Gini. She shook off the thought.

Detective Greenliegh reappeared in a few moments and asked Callie to join them in Gini’s office. She looked a little flushed.

Sergeant Mann seemed cool enough though as he led her over to Gini’s desk. “We’d like you to tell us what this is about if you can,” he said, holding up Gini’s appointment calendar. “Her whole appointment book looks like just a series of letters and numbers. No names.”

Callie took the rose-colored leather book, getting smudges of black powder all over her hands as she held it. *Gini’s gonna be pissed.* Looking down at the coded entries pencilled into the time slots, she said, “These are most likely client identifiers.”

“Identifiers?”

“Yes. Gini is fanatical about confidentiality. She told me one time that she lists her clients by number in case anyone else looks at the book.”

Sergeant Mann nodded, “So someplace around here there’s a name list that matches up to the numbers?”

“I’m sure there must be. Probably in an encrypted file on her computer.”

“We’ll have to get one of our IT people to look at that,” he said.

Callie shook her head, “Not without a warrant.”

Behind her, she heard a sigh from Detective Greenliegh.

Sergeant Mann commented, “I’m sure that can be arranged,” and asked Detective Greenliegh to make a note of it. “Meanwhile, I’d like you to listen to the messages on Dr. Colden’s machine. I’ve erased the SPAM calls already, but there are some that appear to be from clients.”

Callie said, “That makes me really uncomfortable.”

“I’ve already heard them. You might as well. We won’t share anything confidential unless we need to to find your friend.”

“OK,” Callie replied, “but it still feels wrong.”

There were several calls from clients wanting to make or change appointments. Callie noticed that Sergeant Mann had listed their names and Caller ID numbers on a pad next to the phone. She wanted to object, but knew that the Sheriff would check them out whether she liked it or not.

One woman went on at length about her mother’s dementia until the beep cut her off. It was embarrassing to Callie that strangers were hearing this woman’s intimate revelations.

At the end of that message Sergeant Mann pressed “PAUSE” and said, “The next one is the one I really want you to hear.” He pressed the “PLAY” button.

The Caller ID read “Henry Clarke.” There was a male voice, slurred as though he’d been drinking. Background noise sounding like the cheers and groans of patrons in a sports bar added to that impression. “Hey Dr. Colden. Virgin-I-a. I need to call you Virgin-I-a. OK? Yeah. It’s Henry. I’m jus’ calling ‘cause I love hearing your voice on the phone. I love you Virgin-I-a. You know I love you. And I know you love me, too. It’s not that transfer thing you said. I love you. I want to see you. I want to....” The message-ending beep mercifully sounded, cutting him off.

Sergeant Mann switched off the play-back. “Did Dr. Colden ever mention a client named Henry? Or any male client who was coming on to her?”

Callie shook her head, “I was telling Detective Greenliegh before we came over here that Gini never talked about specific clients. What goes on in her sessions stays in her sessions.”

*But who was this Henry Clarke? Was he having a drunken fantasy or could he be a threat?*

“That’s frightening,” she said aloud. Then she thought for a moment. “But he thinks Gini is in her office. He can’t be her abductor.”

Detective Greenliegh commented, “He said he called her machine because he likes to hear her voice. It doesn’t prove he hasn’t abducted her.”

Callie shivered.

“What did he mean by ‘transfer thing,’ do you know?” Sergeant Mann asked.

“I think he could have been told by Gini that his feelings for her were an example of transference. It happens sometimes in therapy when a client substitutes the therapist for a person he has feelings for. I’m sure Gini could explain it better.”

“Do people ever act on those feelings?” Detective Greenliegh asked.

“It can happen,” Callie agreed. She really didn’t want to think about that possibility.

Sergeant Mann broke into her morbid thoughts to ask, “When you got here last night, what exactly did you notice? Please be as specific as you can.”

Callie sighed. “As I told the police last night and again this morning, the outside office door was slightly open. That glass lamp base out there was broken on the floor where it is now. The bulb was still lit, though. The desk lamp was lit in here, too. A client file was open on the desk.” She glanced at the desktop, noticing the file was now closed and covered with black powder. Going on, she said, “Gini would never leave a client file lying open like that.” She paused again, remembering. “That coffee cup was on the desk like it is now.” *Except it didn’t have black powder all over it then.* “Her laptop was on. With a screensaver running.” She noticed that it was closed up now and sitting on a corner of the desk. Had the detective planned to take it with him? *Well, she’d stopped that!* *Not without a warrant.*

“Tell me what you did then,” Sergeant Mann said.

“Well, I was scared to stay in here. I knew this wasn’t right. So I went outside and called 911.”

“And then?”

“I... I needed to go to the bathroom really badly. I’d been in the car five hours.” She saw Detective Greenliegh nod sympathetically.

“So I tried the front door, but it was locked. I rang the bell in case Gini was actually in the house, but no one answered. So then I went around to the back because I knew there’s a door to the kitchen from the deck. Lucky for me, that door wasn’t locked, so I went through the kitchen and used the half-bath next to it.”

The sergeant nodded encouragingly.

“When I came back through the kitchen, I noticed the breakfast bar was set for two... with cocoa packets.” Callie began to break down. “Gini promised she’d have cocoa for me when I got here...”

“Take your time,” Detective Greenliegh said gently. “What else did you notice?”

“There were a few dishes soaking in the sink. Oh, and her cellphone was on its charger on the counter near the coffee maker. That’s about all I remember.”

“What about her purse?”

“I didn’t see it. But I only came into the kitchen and bathroom. She usually leaves her purse on the hall table near the livingroom.”

“It’s not there now. Maybe she has it with her,” Sergeant Mann said.

Callie shook her head, puzzled. “But her car is here. And her phone. And she’d never just leave a file open or go out without locking all her doors.”

Sergeant Mann nodded, apparently finished with that line of questioning. “OK. Let’s all go through to the house. You can look around for us. Would you know if anything is missing?”

“I don’t think so. I only visit a few times a year.” *And I’ve never snooped into her things. It doesn’t feel right. Seems like a sneaky way of getting me to search where they can’t without a warrant.* “But I’ll try,” she said, “Anything to help find her.”

Detective Greenliegh handed her a pair of Nitril gloves and moved toward the door connecting the office to the main part of the house.

As she donned the gloves, Sergeant Mann remarked that at least she wouldn’t be leaving any new fingerprints in the house. She countered his remark, saying somewhat smugly, “I used a tissue last night. There won’t be any of mine unless I left them last time I visited.”

They climbed the short flight of stairs from what had been the garage level to a door opening into a laundryroom off the kitchen. The kitchen, when they entered it, looked just as it had last night in the small beam of her phone’s flashlight except for more of that black powder everywhere. She looked sadly at the sooty cocoa packets.

Then, as requested, Callie walked from room to room, opening cabinets and drawers, the deputies following closely behind her, watching her every move.

No purse and nothing out of place as far as Callie could tell. But, as she’d said earlier, she wasn’t that familiar with the things Gini owned now.

Re-entering the kitchen, Callie blinked back the tears that welled up when she saw the cocoa packets again. Then she slowly surveyed the room, trying to visualize it as it was the night before. “Wait!” she shouted, “Her phone was on the counter. Near the coffee maker.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes. I’m positive it was there. I remember thinking that that was why she hadn’t answered when I kept calling from the car.” Now there was only a charger cable dangling from the wall outlet.

“OK. Well, maybe the Town Police took it back to the station to check it out. We’ll follow up on that.” Detective Greenliegh made another of her incessant notes on the iPad.

Chapter Twelve

GINI

My head is becoming clearer with the fresh air coming through the window. I sit on the cot going over and over in my mind who could possibly have done this to me.

Ron would have no reason. Or would he? Does he want me back enough to abduct me? I don’t think so. And if he does, why would he leave me alone like this? And how would the note fit in? Sure, I know a lot about Ron. We were married for God’s sake. But I don’t think there’s anything he could think I know too much about. Hanna, of course, but that was all out in the open a long time ago.

Hanna? I don’t think so. Her harassment has been over for a couple of months at least. She’s a big woman, though. She could have overpowered me. But no. That’s crazy. But still, I don’t know anything about her except for her affair with Ron. What could I know too much about besides that?

Did Ron have other women? I don’t know too much. I know too little.

Who else besides Ron or Hanna?

Mark? Because I told him I don’t think we should go on seeing each other? Would he hold me captive to keep from breaking up? I don’t think he cares enough about me to do anything like this. And he’s not the type anyway. He’s cool and reserved. He’d never do anything so rash. And the note. If he has any secrets, I don’t know what they are. He never discloses anything personal, probably never in his life, much less to me. It’s one of the reasons I don’t want to be with him. He’s so buttoned up. On the other hand, sometimes he does seem to think I’m his private property. Still... it doesn’t make sense that he’d do this. It doesn’t make sense that anybody I know would do this.

I start going over my client list in my head. I don’t see people who are psychotic in my practice, just people who are troubled about aspects of their lives. But then, who knows? Maybe somebody has been masking psychosis. I should be able to tell, but I’m far from perfect. I could have missed some sign of psychosis in the same way I missed Sandra’s suicidal ideation last year.

Oh my God! Sandra! Could it be Charlie, Sandra’s boyfriend? I know he still blames me for Sandra’s suicide. Thinks I pushed her too hard emotionally. Maybe I did. I still feel awful about not being able to help her. It haunts me. Hope says I have nothing to feel guilty about, but what if I let my divorce distract me and I wasn’t fully there for Sandra? Does Charlie think I know something damaging about her or maybe something she told me about him? It’s possible. But what? And why now, a year later?

Wait. Is it because this is close to the first anniversary of Sandra’s death? Could that have triggered something in Charlie? Realizing it’s the anniversary triggered my own guilt feelings. That’s why I asked Hope for a session. For Charlie, is it some kind of revenge motive? But what good would abducting me do?

I shake my head to rid myself of that thought and start running my current client list through my mind. I do know a lot of intimate details about all of them, though what could be considered “too much?”.

The last person I saw, Iris. No. She’s still too depressed to take any kind of action, certainly not as bold as this. And she’s not physically strong enough anyway. I dismiss Iris as a possibility.

There’s Marion. She’s tall and pretty powerful-looking. But her issue is coping with her mother’s dementia. Not likely to blame me for that or worry about me knowing too much about it. Besides, she might be strong enough, but she can’t even leave her house unless she finds a care-giver. I can’t imagine her having the time it must have taken to prepare this room.

I wish I could at least tell if it’s a man or a woman. Could it even have been more than one person? I don’t remember anything that would make me think so. I don’t remember anything but that one person. They didn’t say anything to me or to anyone else before I blacked out, so I have no reason to think there was more than one person. And because they didn’t say anything, I have no voice I can remember either.

I try to remember if I smelled any particular scent, like perfume or aftershave. It was so quick. I don’t think I had time to smell anything except whatever was on that cotton ball. Oh, wait. There was a scent of cigarettes. So a smoker. But that could be either a man or a woman. This line of thinking isn’t helping at all.

Back to my client list then. What about Dan? Guilty feelings over his girlfriend’s death a couple of months ago. Says she wouldn’t have been in the road for that pick-up truck to hit her if she hadn’t been sneaking over while his wife was at work. No reason to think I know too much about that. He didn’t tell me much more than what I remember reading in the newspaper the day after it happened, except for how he feels about it.

Maybe Henry? He was pretty angry when I told him his feelings for me were an example of transference. Could that be? Would he take it this far? He is seeing me for anger management. I think he might be capable of abduction. But still, that would be about his misguided feelings for me, not about something I know too much about. I can’t think of anything I know that could make him threaten me.

I’m getting nowhere with this. What I need to do is figure out how to get out of here. I can worry about who did this later.

I wonder if I can rush the door when my abductor comes back. Not realistic. I’d never get past them.

I look around the room again in desperation. I wish I could reach higher on the window. It looks big enough to crawl through if I could break out the rest of the glass. But when I stood on the cot to make that hole in the glass, I could barely reach up to the lower part of the window. I can’t possibly hope to climb up the bare wall!

I look down at the cot in despair.

Suddenly, I remember thinking that the cot I’m sitting on is one of those old metal folding beds like Grandma’s. What if...?

I stand up and drag the mattress onto the floor. I’m right! All I have to do is pull the two ends upright.

I reach down and pull one end up. It’s stiff and I have to struggle with it. My arm hurts, but I manage to do it. The other end folds more easily and I flip the hinged metal arm and fasten it over the little peg on the other side. I walk around it and fasten the other little arm over its peg.

I’m feeling triumphant! Euphoric! I’m so glad I used to help set up and take down one of these for sleep-overs at Grandma’s when I was a kid!

Taking a deep breath, I push the cot flat against the wall under the broken window and lay the blanket and my battered shoe on top.

Scrambling up by using the groove where it’s folded at the bottom and then the braced metal arm, I’m able to crawl onto the metal head and footboard that are now making a sort-of shelf on top. It sways a little as I kneel on it, leaning toward the window, but I’m able to keep my balance by grabbing ahold of the protruding hook in the window frame.

I pound away at the glass with the shoe, the cot rocking a little with each arm swing, until there’s nothing but the wooden window frame with a few tiny sharp shards left poking out of it around the edges.

I sit back on my heels for a moment, catching my breath and letting the ache in my right arm subside. Then, to protect my hands and knees from the broken glass, I spread the blanket over the lower window frame and as far over the gravel driveway outside the window it as I can reach.

Gingerly, I poke my head farther through the opening and look around. Nothing to see but the driveway and tall winter-battered grass beyond, stretching to some bare trees in the distance. Turning my head to the left, I see the end of the driveway where it opens to a road. To the right, I can see some neglected outbuildings a few hundred yards away.

The only sound I hear is the twitter of birds.

I push my shoulders through and, with a heave, I’m balancing my hips on the bottom of the frame. My back burns as it scrapes against the little glass shards still protruding from the top.

I grit my teeth against the pain from the little cuts and, with a bit more effort, I’m arm-crawling out onto the blanket in the driveway. I give a final thrust with my feet. The cot rocks away while I scramble free.

Chapter Thirteen

CALLIE

As Detective Greenliegh drove Callie back to the Town Police Station to retrieve her car, she asked her about the other people in Gini’s life they hadn’t talked about yet. “You said there were a couple of men she dated recently?”

“Yes. Well, one recently, the other about six or seven months ago. I don’t think that one was serious. She was just trying to get back to having a social life after the divorce.”

“I’ll need his name anyway.”

“Tony something. I’ll try to remember his last name and give it to you.”

“And the current one? That’s more serious?”

“I think so. She’s been spending quite a bit of time with him from what she told me.”

“His name?”

“Mark. Dr. Mark Rose. He’s a psychiatrist. She met him at a University Mental Health conference at New Paltz. He was speaking about how licensed psychotherapy professionals and psychiatrists can work together to benefit patients, one providing talk therapy and the other medication. She said she went up to ask him a question after his talk and he invited her to discuss it over coffee. That was a little before Thanksgiving, I remember, because she came down to the Island to spend that weekend with me and she was really excited about him.”

“Did she say what she found attractive in him?”

“Is that important?”

“I’d like some insight into his personality. Some idea about the possibility that he could be responsible for Dr. Colden’s disappearance.”

“Well, OK. I guess I get that, but I can’t imagine he could be responsible. She said he was rather reserved and intellectual, very attentive to her. Very different from Ron who tends to be more outgoing, more demanding. She told me she was delighted by Mark’s interest in the arts, classical music, ballet. Interests that she had never been able to share with Ron. Ron is more of a rock music and action movies guy.”

Detective Greenliegh nodded, indicating she understood what Callie meant. “Do you know how we could get in touch with Dr. Rose?”

“He has a practice somewhere outside of Poughkeepsie. But I think he lives on this side of the river. Highland I think she said?”

”OK. We’ll check that out. Can you think of anyone from her past? Anyone from even before she was married who might still be carrying a torch for her, or a grudge?”

Callie considered that. “It seems far-fetched to me that anyone from more than five years ago would still care enough to abduct her.”

“I know. But these things do happen. You never know what will trigger someone even years later.”

“There was someone before Ron,” Callie said slowly. She really didn’t want to go there, yet what the deputy had said could possibly be true. She took a deep breath. “Gini had been dating my late husband’s partner. His name is Joe Dormato. He’s a Suffolk County Police detective. He got a little rough with Gini and she called it off. Refused to see him again. But it’s hard to believe he could be so obsessed with her that he’d do something like this after all this time.”

Detective Greenliegh responded flatly, “As I said, it happens. We have to look at every possibility, even the ones that seem remote.”

Callie nodded, furrowing her brow at the unhappy memories the mention of Joe evoked. She was glad that they arrived at their destination a moment later so she didn’t have to talk about him anymore.

Pulling into the Police Station lot next to Callie’s car, the deputy said, “I’ll call you tomorrow. Can you write down all those names and what you know about them for me?”

“Sure thing,” Callie said, stepping out onto the asphalt.

As she was closing the cruiser’s door, the radio crackled. She heard a garbled voice say something that sounded like “nine <crackle> ashoo.”

She shook her head, wondering how police ever understood the radio dispatchers as she watched the Sheriff’s car pull out and head back to 9W.

Suddenly feeling very much alone, she sighed. Nothing she could do now but go back to the motel and wait for Jed.

Chapter Fourteen

GINI

The gravel in the driveway cuts my stocking feet as I stand, but at least it’s not glass. I’m proud of myself for thinking about covering the glass shards with the blanket. I take a moment to relish my freedom and take stock of my condition.

My back is stinging and I glance over my shoulder, seeing the blood-tinged shredded remains of my rose silk blouse. My hands hurt and when I look at them I see ragged and broken fingernails. I’m covered with soot. My injured right arm is throbbing.

I admonish myself, aware that I can’t give in to worrying about any of that now.

I pick up the blanket and shake out as much glass from the underside as I can. I decide I need to take it with me. It’s pretty cold out here even with the sun still shining and all I’m wearing is my thin, shredded blouse and torn linen slacks.

I turn around and look at the house or what is left of it. It’s about two-thirds gone. I can tell from the front, the part that’s still standing facing the road, that it was once painted a cheerful yellow. It’s faded now and covered with greenish mold and the still-clinging remains of soot. Through the charred timbers of the burned-out area, I can see raw boards covering freshly-repaired steps leading down to the basement room from which I’ve just escaped. A blue tarp is spread across the floor above that room, apparently meant to keep the room safe from rain dripping through the floorboards. A chill goes through me and I wrap the blanket around my shoulders. The scratchy surface bothers my wounds.

I have to ignore that. I’ve got to get as far away from here as I can. And as fast as I can.

Where should I go? I can see the road at the end of the grass-filled gravel driveway. My first thought is to go to the road. Maybe I can flag down a passing car. But I don’t dare do that. What if my captor is on the way back? What if they have somebody watching the house?

There are those old broken-down out-buildings to the right, but I don’t dare hide that close to the house. And there’s no way I can get help if I do that anyway. Out beyond the buildings, overgrown fields stretch out on a hillside. A rocky cliff looms in the distance. It’s obviously useless to go that way.

I remember hearing a cow. There must be a farm nearby. But which way? Nothing here is familiar at all.

The trees straight across the field that I’m facing are probably the best place I can go right now. If I can reach those, I’m sure I can find a hidden place to sit down and think.

Clutching the blanket, I stumble as quickly as I can across the uneven muddy field. I think my feet are bleeding now. I hope I’m not leaving a trail. Maybe the mud will obscure it. Maybe my feet will get infected. I can’t let myself worry about that.

It seems to take forever to reach the trees. They’re farther away than they looked. By the time I reach them, the sun is going down.

Before I enter the woods, I make a mental note that the sun, setting above the cliff, is showing me which way is west. That means the road, on my left, is to the east. I’ll try to remember to keep the road to my left. I hope I’ll be able to see the road once I’m in the woods.

I wrap myself more tightly in the blanket and move as quickly as I can deeper into the woods until I feel safe. Vines and brambles grab at me as I push through between tree trunks. Roots protrude from the ground, making the footing treacherous. I slip a couple of times on moldy fallen leaves.

I feel too tired to go on. My back and feet are burning. I lean my head against a large tree trunk. Its rough bark scratches my cheek, but I like the solid way it feels. Something I can depend on.

But I know I can’t stand this way for long. Propped up against the tree, looking back the way I came, I see headlights at a distance through the branches to my left. I remember that’s where the road is. So far I’m keeping the road in sight. That’s good. There will be people somewhere down that road. So I must continue to remember to keep the road to my left.

I turn to watch where the car goes. I think the headlights turn onto the property I just left. Yes, the headlights are shining on the side of the burned house and then they go out. I need to go deeper into the woods. My body rebels, but I make myself move on.

It is fully dark now in the forest.

I stumble over something, a fallen branch I think. I stifle a cry. I don’t think I can be heard from here, but I don’t want to take the chance.

Looking back through the trees, I see the beam of a powerful flashlight throwing light on the house.

I push deeper into the woods until I can’t see the beam of light anymore. I’m so tired! I can’t go on. I think I’m safe here, though.

I wrap the blanket tighter and settle on some soft moss at the base of a strong tree, folding the edge of the blanket around my cold feet. It’s hard to find a way to sit that doesn’t hurt my back.

I listen, but hear only the scuffling sounds of small animals.

Animals! Oh my God! There are probably bears in these woods! Maybe coyotes!

I have no experience with wild animals! I’m a city girl. But I’m much too tired to move anymore. I’ll have to take my chances.

I vow to remain awake and vigilant until my body is rested and it’s light enough to go on.

Chapter Fifteen

CALLIE

Back at the motel, Callie stopped at the desk to arrange for Jed to be added to her room reservation and to pick up a key card for him. The young desk clerk gave her a knowing smirk when she gave him Jed’s name. It made her wonder fleetingly how many illicit liaisons occurred in this place, though on second thought, those couples probably wouldn’t register both their names.

As she climbed the outside stairs to the second floor walkway, she contemplated calling Jed to see how much longer he expected to be. Admitting to herself that all she really wanted was to hear his voice, she decided not to distract him while he was driving.

She smiled to herself when she remembered how he’d kept her sane talking her through the rain delay on the Cross Island Parkway. Maybe he wouldn’t mind at all. Still, she made herself refrain from following that impulse.

Instead, she sat in the room’s comfortable brown tweed recliner and leaned it back, trying to relax and clear the jumble of thoughts from her mind. She convinced herself that if she could focus on one thing at a time, it might be possible to retrieve some clues from what little she knew about Gini’s life during the past few years.

But, rather than focus on Gini, she couldn’t get her mind off Jed. She found herself thinking back over their relatively short relationship, marveling at how quickly Jed had become a significant part of her life.

Like Callie, Jed had been widowed. The death of his wife Marta five years ago from cervical cancer had left him to raise by himself twin daughters, Linda and Laura, who were only thirteen years old at the time.

Callie could barely imagine what that must have been like, raising two girls through the turbulent teen years. And doing it without the knowledge a woman brings about what it is to be a girl learning to deal with physical changes, romantic longings, mercurial moods. All the while trying to help them through their mourning for their mother, while dealing with his own loss. She knew that Jed was a man who would have grieved in private, not wanting to upset the girls more than they were already upset. Wanting to be strong for them, to help them cope with the sense of abandonment that came with their mother’s illness and death, he would have kept his distress tenderly hidden.

She knew, too, that raising them alone had cost him career opportunities. He’d told her he had turned down countless assignments because they required overnight travel. His daughters had come first in his life as he tried to be both father and mother, attending every basketball game Laura played, every concert in which Linda sang. He shepherded them through first dates, first loves, first break-ups. And somehow he had managed to remain calm and steady, though he’d admitted to Callie that it hadn’t always been easy. There had been shouting and tears over his refusal to let Linda wear a revealing gown to her Junior Prom. Screaming over his insistence that they couldn’t go to unchaperoned parties. A confrontation over marijuana use when Laura’s grades were slipping.

Jed had gradually disclosed all of that to Callie during the quiet evenings they spent together, explaining why he had only recently begun to date again now that the girls were away at college. Laura was a freshman at Perdu and Linda was at Oberlin.

Callie had met the twins when they were home for their winter holiday breaks and found them delightful, poised, caring, mature for their years. Linda, with her light brown hair, took after Jed. Laura, raven-haired, looked so much like the portrait of her mother that stood on the mantel that it was startling to look from one to the other. What a reminder of loss seeing Laura every day must have been for Jed!

Callie had worried that the girls might resent the place she was assuming in their father’s life, fearing they would think she was trying to replace their mother. But the opposite had been the case. Laura told her that she was glad to see that her father wasn’t lonely with her and her sister gone. Linda had echoed that sentiment, saying, “It’s about time he met somebody,” confiding in Callie that she and her sister had tried several times when they were in high school to set him up with the single mothers of their friends.

Those thoughts led to difficult memories of her own anguish after Mike’s death. She reflected that it was good that she had had no children in need of comforting. Until then, she had yearned for a child. Three miscarriages had led to despair and what seemed like endless medical tests and procedures. She and Mike had just begun to talk about the possibility of adoption when he’d died of a sudden massive heart attack.

How could she have withstood that week of horror while dealing with the needs of a child? The shock of finding Mike crumpled on the bedroom floor was alarming enough without trying to explain the loss of a father to a child. Add to that the trauma of her arrest on suspicion of murder and it had been almost more than she could handle even for herself. She shuddered as she remembered sitting on a cot in a narrow jail cell, her fear for her future pushing against her need to allow herself to grieve.

She’d had very little emotional support from her parents during that time. Her father, a retired high-ranking Military Policeman, had always been emotionally distant. When her mother had called him away from his golf match at the Club on the grounds of their Florida retirement community, all he’d been able to offer Callie was the advice to “buck up.” Her mother, a retired dressmaker, had flown to Callie’s side once she was out on bail, but her incessant hand-wringing had only added to Callie’s anguish. After a week of that, she’d persuaded her mother to go back home.

An only child, Callie had had no sister or brother to turn to. Only her best friend Gini had been able to help. In a practical way by finding a lawyer for her. More important, in an emotionally supportive way, knowing just the right things to say, knowing when it was best to say nothing and simply offer a tight hug.

Gini had been living in Mt. Stephen by then and had taken time from her own therapy practice to come down to the Island and stay with Callie.

The memory of all that Gini had done for her then reminded her of how much Gini needed from her now. It shook Callie out of her reverie and she became aware of the fading light in the room. She looked at the clock on the nightstand and saw that it was already past five o’clock. It shouldn’t be long before Jed would arrive.

Remembering her promise to write down the names she’d mentioned to Detective Greenliegh in the car, she found a sheet of motel stationery in the console drawer and sat at the small round dining table near the window. As she started the list, it occurred to her that it might help her puzzle things out for herself if she kept a copy, so she reached for her shoulder bag and pulled out the small notebook she always carried.

With a sigh, she wrote each name and what she remembered about each person in both places. Her list looked so pitifully short. She shook her head as she added the last bit of information she could remember.

As she continued to stare at her list hoping for some additional fragment of information to percolate from her memory, her cell sang, “Here Comes the Sun,” Jed’s ringtone. With a broad grin, she snatched it up and answered.

“Hey Babe. I’m outside the motel. What room are you in?”

“204. Around the back.” Grabbing the key card, she ran down the outside steps to meet him.

Before he had fully exited his Jeep, he was in her arms, her cheek pressed against his gold sweatshirt.

“Whoa! I should go away more often,” he laughed, returning the embrace. Then, holding her at arms’ length, he took in her haggard face, the tears lining her eyelids, her fly-away hair, her rumpled yellow t-shirt. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be joking.”

Callie shook her head and hugged him again, “No, please. I need a little lightness right now. It’s been an awful day.”

Jed extracted himself and reached into the back seat for his overnight bag and his laptop. Locking the Jeep, he followed her up the stairs.

Once inside the room, he held her again, Callie collapsing into in his arms in a long, silent embrace, tears freely flowing.

After awhile, she stood back. “Jed, I’m sorry. I don’t want to blubber all over you. I’m so grateful that you came.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. I want to be with you, to help in any way I can.”

They sat on the side of the bed, holding each other, quietly appreciating their closeness for a little while.

Finally Jed pulled back a little and faced her. “I’m loving this, but.... Practical consideration. I’m starving. What do we do for dinner?”

Callie glanced at the clock on the night stand. “It’s almost six. I’d like to watch the local news in case the Sheriff has decided to publish the picture of Gini I texted to Detective Greenliegh. And then we can go to the diner down the road.”

“I don’t really feel like getting back in the car. Do you think we can get pizza delivered? After four days in Chicago, I’m yearning for a nice flat New York pizza.”

Callie laughed. “Actually, the diner is walking distance. But pizza sounds good. There’s a list of restaurants in that motel folder over by the TV. See if you can get your wish.”

Jed got up and crossed the room. Opening the folder and laying several pages of motel information one by one on the bed, he finally said triumphantly, “Ah ha! Rizzo’s Pizzeria! ‘We Deliver!’ What do you want on it?”

“Just plain is fine. No, wait. Extra cheese. And a side salad.”

“Large pizza. One side extra cheese. One side pepperoni. Side salad,” Jed chanted as he pulled out his phone. “Coke? Beer?”

“Beer if they have it.”

Order completed, Jed wandered over to the table. “What’s all the paperwork?”

“I promised Detective Greenliegh I’d write down the names of all the people I know about in Gini’s life. It’s really a pitifully short list.”

Before Jed could respond to that, Callie noticed the time and grabbed the remote to snap on the TV, searching for a local news broadcast.

A prim-looking blond with too much mascara shading her blue eyes sat at an anchor desk saying, “In our top story today, there was a fatal accident last night near the 9W intersection with the road to Mt. Stephen.”

The screen switched to a view of the broken guardrail with caution tape stretched along its open top. “Town Police Sergeant Saroya Duprey was on her way home along Rt. 9W this morning after her overnight shift when she came upon a broken guardrail. Subsequently, she saw a crumpled red Toyota sedan in the ravine resting against a stand of trees. Upon climbing down to it, she found the body of a woman pinned in the driver’s seat.”

The scene shifted to a bright blue tow truck winching a red sedan up an incline. “The driver has since been identified as 40-year-old Dr. Hope Hebron, a local psychotherapist.”

Now the smiling formal portrait of a woman with auburn hair worn in a short no-nonsense cut appeared.

Callie shouted, “Jed! Oh my God! That has to be Gini’s therapist! I didn’t know her last name, but how many therapists named Hope can there be in this area?”

“You’re right. There can’t be many. But we don’t know for sure,” Jed tried to reassure her.

“But what if it is? Gini’s missing! Her consulting therapist is dead!”

Now a State Trooper appeared on the screen talking about the slippery conditions of the roads the night before.

But Callie shook her head, “No. Jed, that was no accident!”

They were distracted by a knock on the door as the blond anchor’s image returned to the screen.

“Pizza’s here!” Jed announced and Callie clicked the “mute” button, still hoping to see Gini’s picture later in the broadcast.

While Jed paid the delivery girl, Callie grabbed her cell and shuffled through her shoulder bag for the deputy’s card.

“Deputy Greenliegh, it’s Callie Templand. It’s about the fatal accident last night on 9W. Please call me.” Tapping ‘End,’” she said, “voicemail” and put the phone down on the nightstand.

The TV flickered silently in the background while they ate. Callie was too tense to eat much, but Jed was thoroughly enjoying his half. Callie watched the newscast to the end, disappointed that Gini’s picture was never shown and there was not even an announcement about her disappearance.

She expressed as much to Jed, who commented that police often delay publishing information about missing persons because such publicity brings hundreds of false sightings, costing precious police time in checking them out.

Callie could understand that, but it added to her frustration over how little seemed to be happening toward solving Gini’s disappearance.

After tossing the last bits of crust into the pizza box for disposal, Jed stood behind her and pulled her head back against his chest. He put his hands on her shoulders and began to massage her tight neck muscles. She sighed, relaxing against him.

Just as her eyes were beginning to close, her cell rang, bringing instant excitement. “Happy Days are Here Again,” Gini’s reserved ringtone.

She jumped up and ran to the nightstand where she’d left her phone and, with shaking fingers, swiped the green button. No one was there.

She checked for voicemail, but there was none. Then, a moment later, her text tone pinged. Her hand shaking too much to retrieve the text, she mutely handed the phone to Jed who

read aloud, holding the phone for Callie to see, “**Cal Im OK. U shd go home**.”

“Jed! That’s not Gini!”

“No, it’s not. Even I know Gini wouldn’t write like that. Where’s that deputy’s number?”

Callie found Detective Greenliegh’s card again and Jed pressed in her number. “You should put this in your Contacts, how much you’re using it.”

This time Detective Greenliegh answered. “Callie, I was just about to call you back.”

Jed quickly identified himself and explained what happened.

When he read off the text message, Detective Greenliegh asked him to forward it to her and promised to try to track the location of Gini’s phone. Then she asked Jed to give the phone back to Callie and said, “I got your message about the car wreck.”

Callie said, “I heard the name on the news. That’s why I called you. I think that poor woman must have been Gini’s therapist. How many therapists named Hope can there be around here?”

“Yes, I had the same thought when I heard it. We’re looking into it.”

“Thank you. Is there anything new you can tell me about the search for Gini... Dr. Colden?”

“You can call her Gini. I know who you mean. No, nothing really useful yet.” Her voice paused. “The forensic crew did find a shoe in the bushes near the driveway. We’re bringing a dog in in the morning to see if he can pick up her scent.”

“Thank God you’re taking this seriously. I was getting so frustrated today.”

“I know you were,” Detective Greenliegh said, “but there are procedures we have to follow. It takes time.”

Callie sighed, “I know, but time is what we don’t have.”

“I’ll stop by your motel in the morning. Will you have that list for me?”

“It’s already done.”

“OK then. Get some sleep. Expect me around 10:00.” With that, Detective Greenliegh broke the connection.

Chapter Sixteen

CALLIE

Too shaken to settle down, Callie paced the floor, her sneakers making scuffling sounds on the worn brown carpet. “Jed, they found her shoe outside the house! Oh my God, Gini, where are you? What happened to you? Who has your phone?”

Jed snaked an arm around her waist and drew her to him, doing what he could to calm her. She shook with fear and anger, stiff against his chest.

“Tell you what, Babe. I don’t have answers for you, but you and I are going to get them.”

Taking her hand, he led her to the table where the papers they had pushed aside for dinner lay. “Let’s start with the notes you’ve got here. Tell me about these people.”

Callie sat and pulled the list over to a spot between her chair and the one Jed took.

“OK. But it’s a pitiful list.”

“Yeah. You said that. But if it’s all you know, let’s make it work.”

“OK,” she sighed, resigned to what seemed a hopeless task. “First on the list: Ron Makin. I’ve mentioned him to you before. He’s Gini’s ex. Took up with this Hanna who’s next of the list, but I don’t know her last name.”

“Any reason Ron would want to harm Gini?” Jed asked.

“I don’t think so. The divorce wasn’t friendly, but I can’t imagine any reason Ron would do anything to her, especially almost a year later.”

“Are he and Hanna still together? Or does he still care enough about Gini to try to get her back by abducting her?” Jed asked, tapping his pen on Ron’s name.

Callie drew back and stared at him. “That sounds like something out of those movies you like to watch.”

“Those movies are made because those things happen. Can’t rule it out.” Jed put a checkmark by Ron’s name.

Callie shook her head. “OK. But I really can’t believe it.”

“What about this Hanna? Could she be angry at Gini for something?”

“Maybe. Gini said Ron and Hanna broke up. She said Hanna blamed her for that. Said Hanna thought Ron dumped her because he wanted to get back with Gini.”

“Which takes us back to whether Ron would abduct her to get her back,” Jed insisted.

Callie nodded meekly, but still couldn’t really comprehend that possibility.

“At any rate, it seems like Hanna needs a good look-see,” Jed said, putting a check mark by her name. “We have to find out her full name and where she lives.”

He made a note of that next to Hanna’s name. Then he moved his finger down the page. “Next name. Tony with no last name?” Jed asked.

“He’s someone Gini dated for a very short time after her divorce. I don’t think it was serious. I doubt he’d have any reason to abduct her. And anyway, I don’t know who he is beyond that.” Jed put a question mark after Tony’s name.

“Dr. Mark Rose,” Jed said. “Now that name I recognize. That’s who Gini’s seeing now, right?”

“Yes. But he’s a psychiatrist and he’s prominent in the area. Seems unlikely he’d do something crazy like that. And besides, from everything she’s told me, they’ve been getting along really well. Why would he want to kidnap her?”

“Who knows? Maybe he’s nuts. Maybe he gets his kicks by abducting women.”

“Oh, come on,” Callie said. “You’ve got to stop watching those crime videos.”

“What else do you know about him?” Jed persisted.

“Gini said he’s kind of reserved, intellectual, not the hot-headed type who might kidnap someone! He’s divorced, with two children, a daughter who’s away at college and a son in high school. He has a practice near Poughkeepsie and I think she said he lives in Highland.”

Jed wrote those facts next to Dr. Rose’s name. “Any chance his kids don’t like him dating?”

“Wow. You really are grasping at straws.”

“I have a suspicious mind. That’s what makes me such a hot-shot investigative reporter,” Jed grinned.

Jed’s joke helping to improve her mood, Callie snorted and punched him in the arm. That didn’t stop him from putting a check by Mark’s name and adding “son and/or daughter?” under it on the list in Callie’s notebook.

“OK. Next on the list. Neighbor on right’?” Jed pointed to the list.

“Yeah. I don’t know his name. I told the deputy about how he hit on Gini one time.”

“Only once?”

“As far as I know.”

Jed put a check there. “Maybe he has more on his mind than just making a pass.”

Callie shrugged, “I don’t know any more about him. It’s hard to say. But that’s such a creepy idea!”

“I know. But another idea we can’t rule out.,” Jed said. Then, “OK. Next one. Who’s Charlie Irvin?”

“That one might be important.,” Callie said. “When I was having lunch today at the diner, some guys were talking about seeing the police up by Gini’s house and one of them mentioned that name. Said Charlie’s girlfriend was a client of Gini’s and that she killed herself and Charlie blames Gini.”

“Whoa! Big checkmark by that one!”

“I don’t know. I think it was about a year ago because I remember Gini calling me, very upset over a client suicide, so it’s probably the same one. That’s a long time to wait for revenge, if that’s what this is.”

“Worth looking into, though.”

Callie had to agree as she watched Jed make the check by Charlie’s name darker.

Then she went on to the next name. “Detective Greenliegh also asked me about anyone from before Gini’s marriage. It seemed pretty far-fetched to me, but she said sometimes people hold grudges or obsessions for years. So that’s the next name. Joe Dormato.”

“What’s his story?”

Callie pursed her lips. “This is really hard for me. Remember when I told you about Mike’s partner who was convinced I murdered Mike? Well, Joe’s that partner. There was a time when he and Gini were dating. I had introduced them. I’ve had a hard time forgiving myself for that.”

When she paused, Jed gave her a moment and then asked, “What happened?”

“One day after they were seeing each other for a few months, Gini called me. She was crying and her voice was all raspy. She said... she said Joe grabbed her by the throat and wouldn’t let up until she was close to passing out. Then he threw her onto the couch and stormed out the door. She said it was over some little thing. I can’t even remember what it was now.”

Jed put his hand over hers, quieting the shaking. “Do you want to tell me the rest now? Or would you feel better if you didn’t?”

“No. It’s OK. That was the worst part already.” She went on, “I told Mike, of course, and he was furious. No man should treat a woman like that! So Mike went over to Joe’s place and had it out with him. It got physical.”

“Whoa! Two cops? I hope they didn’t get their guns out,” Jed commented.

Callie pulled back. “Mike would never!”

“How about Joe?”

“Joe? He had a few complaints about excessive force from suspects. But I don’t think he’d ever pull his gun on anybody without justification. And never on Mike! Anyway it didn’t come to that. Just two guys with bruised knuckles and battered egos.”

“OK. So Gini. What happened with Gini and Joe afterward?”

“Gini refused to see him again. Joe kept calling and apologizing and sending her flowers. But she wasn’t buying it. Mike said Joe was angry about it for a long time. It hurt Mike’s relationship with Joe, too.”

Jed put a big, very dark checkmark by Joe’s name. “Maybe that’s why he accused you of killing Mike.”

“I think so. A big part of it anyway. Can we drop it now?”

“Sure. So that’s the whole list?’

“Except for the other neighbors and some local people she may socialize with that I don’t know. There was a woman named Vi she mentioned having lunch with sometimes, but I don’t know anything about her.” Callie looked up, shaking her head. “I can’t believe I know so little about my best friend’s life now.”

“You know the important stuff, the love that you share with her, the memories.” Jed hugged her. She wondered if he was thinking about how he’d learned to cope with his loss of Marta.

“You’re right. But that just makes it worse now.” She felt the tears coming and snuggled into his chest.

Laying his hand on the papers, Jed asked, “Have the cops said they would interview these people?”

Callie straightened up. “They wouldn’t ask for the names otherwise, would they?”

“No, I’m sure they wouldn’t. I’m just thinking out loud.”

Callie suspected that, while it was the boyfriend who was holding her, it was the reporter she was hearing. She remembered his remark earlier about the two of them getting answers. “Are you thinking we should talk to these people ourselves?”

“Maybe.” Jed nodded his head. “I haven’t told you this yet, but before I came up here, I called my editor to tell him where I’d be. When I told him what was going on, he asked if I thought there was a story in it.”

Callie pushed herself back from Jed’s embrace. “Jed, you can’t turn Gini into some magazine article!”

He laid his hand gently on her arm. “No. Of course not. I told him it was personal. He said to keep it in mind anyway in case it turns into a big story.”

“And if it does turn out to be a big story?” Callie asked, frowning.

“That would be up to you. I wouldn’t write about it if it upset you,” he said. “But it could end up that you would want me to, especially if it would help Gini. Like if she was gone a long time and making it public would help find witnesses who’d seen her. Remember, you were just saying you wished the Sheriff would publish her picture.”

“But I meant just for local people who might have seen her around here. I didn’t mean in a national magazine a long time from now. I don’t even want to think that could ever be necessary!”

“I don’t either. But you know that kind of thing happens. It’s why I have my job. You can’t avoid thinking about it even if you don’t want to. Besides, if it does turn out to be something bigger than we know now, other people will write about it. If I wrote it, at least you would have some control over how her story is told.”

“I see that,” Callie said. “As much as I hate the idea, I’d still rather have you be the one who wrote about it. At least I know that to you Gini is more that just a story for a paycheck.”

“Exactly.”

“But I still don’t want to think that could happen. We’re getting ahead of ourselves. She’s only gone one day. We have to find her now so that can’t happen,” Callie said firmly. “So what do we do?”

Jed said briskly, “Start with background. I have my laptop here. You know I have subscriptions to some pretty powerful Search apps. I’ll see what I can find out about these people.”

Chapter Seventeen

CALLIE

Setting his laptop on the table, Jed gave it a moment to boot up and then reached across for Callie’s notebook. “OK, let’s see who we can learn something about.”

Callie studied the list over his shoulder. “I think we can leave Ron for last. I know quite a bit about him. The others are strange to me. Except Joe. I think you should check on him just in case Detective Greenliegh is right about an obsession.”

“Right. So let’s start with Joe,” Jed agreed. “I don’t know how much I can get on him. I’m not a hacker and he’s a cop, so it’s likely there’s not much public information. For example, I’m sure no internal investigations of citizen complaints will show up.”

He hit a few keys, bringing up a search field on an app Callie had never seen before. After entering “Joseph Dormato” and “Suffolk County, NY Police,” they waited expectantly while the computer whirred quietly.

Joe’s picture and a thumbnail biography appeared, listing commendations and other service-related information. As Jed had predicted, nothing about disciplinary activity appeared. “His middle name and age at the time of publication are here, though,” Jed said. “That gives me more to use for a little deeper digging.”

With that, Jed cleared the screen and began entering the new information. Grinning, he turned to Callie. “Your ‘friend’ Joe seems to like bar fights. He’s made the news a couple of times.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t lost his job,” Callie said, looking over Jed’s shoulder at the news reports.

Jed nodded, “It can take a lot to fire a cop with a lot of years and commendations behind him. And these incidents were off-duty.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing worth talking about,” Jed said, clearing the screen.

Callie felt disappointed. Finding something negative about Joe would have been a kind of quiet revenge for all he’d put her through. But she shrugged it off and pointed to the notebook page, “Try this Charlie Irvin.”

“Think I should use ‘Charlie’ or ‘Charles?’”

“Both, I guess,” Callie suggested.

“OK, let’s start with ‘Charles,’” Jed agreed, entering the name in the slots on his screen along with “Mt. Stephen, NY.”

A page of possible websites popped up and Jed clicked on the first one. “He’s a carpenter,” he said, pointing to the screen where the picture of a smiling young man with a blond military haircut appeared. Another picture featured a black pick-up truck with what appeared to be one of those magnetic signs on the door reading “Irvin Enterprises: Fine Carpentry.” Some examples of his work appeared in additional pictures. “He does nice work, but there’s not much text,” Jed commented.

“Well, of course it’s his business site. He just wants to showcase his work there. Try a different link,” Callie directed, becoming more engaged in the project.

As the next screen opened, Callie gasped. “That’s a news story about the girl who killed herself!”

Silently, they both read through the story dated almost exactly a year ago.

**March 16. Mt. Stephen, NY**

Yesterday morning local carpenter,

Charles Irvin, arrived at the Maria Road

apartment of his fiancée, Sandra Hadlock,

a popular local restaurant hostess, for a

planned outing, only to find her unconscious

on her livingroom sofa.

He reportedly attempted CPR

unsuccessfully before calling for an ambulance.

Fire Department spokesman Matthew Muir

reported that EMTs responded within 20 minutes,

but were unable to revive Ms Hadlock.

According to the Medical Examiner’s

Office, the cause of death appears to be suicide

by means of opiates. Toxicology results are

pending.

Funeral arrangements have not yet been

announced.

Callie clung to Jed’s shoulder, her grip tightening the more she read. “That poor girl! And poor Charlie!” she breathed. “And poor Gini, dealing with her guilt feelings!”

Jed reached up and cradled her hand on his shoulder. “I know.”

He saved the page for possible later review and moved on to the next link, but nothing new could be learned there, nor under the name “Charlie” when he tried that next.

Callie needed a short break after reading the news story. She stepped out onto the motel’s second floor walkway for some air. Jed came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin on her head. They stood that way in silence until the cold air made Callie shiver.

Returning to the room, Jed sat at his laptop again, saying, “Let’s see what we can find out about Dr. Rose.”

Callie nodded, pulling the second chair around so that she could see the screen without continuing to stand. “I don’t think you’ll find anything sinister there, but I’ll admit I’m curious about him. I didn’t learn a lot from Gini.”

Jed entered “Mark Rose” and “psychiatrist,” then “New York.” Several links appeared, all seeming to relate to his professional life.

“OK. Undergraduate degree from Harvard. M.D. from Columbia University Medical School. Interned at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. Psych Residency at Downstate Medical Center. Pretty impressive.”

“Sure is,” Callie agreed. “I like his picture, too. He looks handsome and competent,” she said, staring at the tall dark-haired figure in a charcoal-gray suit with an ice-blue tie.

Jed read on, “Private practice in Wappinger’s Falls. That’s near Poughkeepsie, right?”

Callie nodded, “I think so. We could check the map.”

“No need right now,” Jed said.

“Anything about his personal life?” Callie asked.

Jed did some key clicking, finally arriving at a page which had a picture of Dr. Rose beaming at his daughter Rachel in cap and gown at her high school graduation. A teen-aged boy resembling the doctor, except for the sullen look of boredom on his face, stood slightly away from his father. “Gini mentioned that he has two children,” Callie said.

“Looks like there’s a wife in the picture,” Jed said, pointing to a slim blond woman in a clinging white dress standing off to the side.

“They’re divorced. I think the children actually live with her,” Callie said. “But of course they would both come to their daughter’s graduation.”

“Of course,” Jed agreed. He clicked some more keys, but couldn’t find anything more about the doctor’s private life.

“Who does that leave?” he asked, looking at the notes again.

“Just Ron,” Callie responded. “I don’t think you’ll find anything I don’t already know.”

“Probably not, but let’s look anyway,” Jed said, entering Ronald Makin’s name.

Other than links to some professional pages and a listing of Ron’s current address and phone number, the only thing of interest that came up was a Facebook page. “Interesting,” Callie said. I wouldn’t have expected Ron to be on Facebook.”

The page was a disappointment, though. Apparently, Ron had established it at some point but hadn’t entered much information or accepted any Friend requests. “I wonder if that was something Hanna wanted him to do?” Callie mused. “She might have been his only Friend and then he Unfriended her.”

“Don’t know,” Jed replied, shutting down the laptop and stretching. “Doesn’t matter I guess except that we might have gotten Hanna’s last name if she was his Facebook Friend.” He paused, then said, “Maybe I can get it anyway.”

He reopened the laptop and began clicking keys again, finally arriving at a page from IBM personnel public contact listings. Scrolling down, he smiled, “What do you know! Hanna Destine. Human Resources Recruiting Specialist.”

“That might not be the same Hanna,” Callie said.

“No, but maybe I can find out more,” Jed replied, going back to his search. “OK. This Hanna lives in Hyde Park. She’s 29 years old. Lives alone. Could be.”

“So what now?” Callie asked.

“For now, let’s just put that information on your list in case it turns out to be useful,” he said, noting it under Hanna’s name on the notebook page and adding a question mark.

“Is Gini on Facebook or other social media?” Jed asked. “We might be able to learn something about Friends we could contact if she has a page.”

Callie shook her head, “No, she doesn’t want anything personal online for fear some client might misinterpret something. She thinks it might interfere with her therapeutic relationships.”

“That’s out then. Anyone else we can try to find?” he asked.

Callie looked over her notes. “Can you get the name of Gini’s neighbor? The one on the right?”

“Piece of cake,” Jed said. “I can get the whole cul-de-sac if you want.”

Sitting and staring at the computer screen was making Callie restless. “For now, how about just the guy who came on to Gini? You can always go back and look for the others later.”

“No problem. Do you know the house number next door to Gini?”

“No, I’ve never paid attention. But don’t house numbers usually go by fours? Gini is number 12, so the next house should be either eight or sixteen.”

Jed entered each address in turn. “Eight Stephen Circle is Richard and Gloria Harring.”

“That’s the people on the left. They invited Gini and me to a barbeque last Fourth of July. Nice couple.”

“OK. Then the one on the right is Ralph and Celia Sommers.” He made a note of the names of both neighbors on Callie’s list. “I think that’s about it for now.”

Callie agreed. “So what do we do next?”

“I’d say we need to make a plan for getting more information. One thing I could do is use my press credential to get information from the police that they wouldn’t give you.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Callie jumped up. “They know you’re with me. They’ll know you aren’t just following leads for a story. They’ll kick you out and then they won’t even tell me the things they’d tell me as her friend. So far the Sheriff’s office has been really cooperative. I don’t want to hurt that.”

“OK. It was just a thought,” he soothed her. “I’ll stick to the online research. I can probably find more if I give it more time tomorrow. And any in-person interviews we’ll do as friends of Gini.”

“That’s better.”

“So let’s do this. You take the lead as Gini’s friend. I’ll tag along as your fiancé.”

“My what? What did you just say?” Callie’s eyes widened.

Jed turned red. “Damn! I meant to ask you first.”

“Now? You’re proposing now?” Callie was sputtering, backing away from him.

Jed stood and reached out for her hands, pulling her closer and earnestly looking into her eyes. “Callie, when I was in Chicago, I missed you so much. I wanted to be with you and I suddenly realized what that meant. I realized it meant always, not just for that moment. I thought I could never feel this way about any woman after Marta and I think I was fighting it for a long time, but Callie, I can’t keep fighting it. I’ve fallen in love with you. I don’t ever want to lose you. That’s why I decided to wrap up my interviews and fly home early. I was going to buy a ring and get down on one knee the minute you got home. And then when I landed and saw your text, I knew I had to be with you right away. I know this isn’t a good time and it isn’t the way I planned to do it, but...”

“Yes! It’s crazy, but yes!” Callie pulled her hands free and flung her arms around him.

“Let me finish,” he laughed, backing out of her embrace and getting down on one knee. “Calista Templand, will you marry me?”

“Yes! Again yes! Jed, It’s like what you said about Marta. I thought I would never find love again after Mike, but my love for you has been growing for a long time now. I never said it out loud because I didn’t know how you would take it. I need you in my life and right now, more than ever. Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Jed stood and caught her around the waist, lifting and twirling her around.

“How can I be so happy when I’m so worried?” Callie sobered for a moment.

“‘Cause you are a wonderful, complicated woman.”

Callie laughed, “Shut up and kiss me.”

Chapter Eighteen

GINI

The cold and the fear have kept me awake most of the night. I must have dozed off for a time though, because now I am wakened by growing sunlight filtering through the branches overhead. I am instantly alert to the sounds around, though I hear nothing but the scratching of small animals among the old dead leaves on the ground and the excited twitter of birds leaving their nests in search of a morning meal.

The dawn light is useful. It reminds me which way is east. East is where the road is. I remember I need to keep the road on my left so I will keep moving toward a place where I can find help and so I don’t go back toward that horrible house.

I struggle to my feet. Ouch! My feet are so cold I can barely stand. No matter. I have to move. I can’t stay here. I tell myself walking will warm my feet.

I think I should relieve myself first. I pull the blanket around me and limp to a spot behind a tree. Why am I doing this? There’s no one to see.

The short walk does warm my feet, enough that now I feel the pain from all the little cuts on my soles. I try to decide which is worse: the cold or the pain. Maybe someday I’ll write a paper on that. “Psychological Affect of Cold vs Pain in Human Response.” Why am I thinking that? Weird how the mind works.

I need to find my way out of here while I can still reason. I feel my ability to think clearly slipping away. I know why I’m getting confused. So many trees.

My stomach is growling and my throat is dry. I have to find food and water, especially water. It’s too early in the spring for anything edible to be growing in the woods, at least anything I know is safe to eat. The truth is that I know nothing about what is safe to eat in the woods in any season.

The more I walk, the more confused I get. Why am I here in these trees anyway? I feel like I should know, but my brain is fuzzy.

Why are my feet so sore? And my back?

My cream-colored pants are filthy and torn and my blouse feels like ribbons hanging off my back. Why am I in this condition?

I have a blanket to wrap around me. How did I get a blanket? No matter. It’s warm. But it’s scratchy. It hurts where it touches my sore back.

I need to find water.

I need to find my way out.

Why am I so confused?

OK, Gini. Get it together! Figure out which way to go.

I think I hear church bells. Am I hallucinating? Church bells mean Sunday. Is today Sunday? Why don’t I know?

I decide I should walk in the direction of the sound of the bells. But now they’ve stopped.

I’ll go toward where I think they were.

Wrapped in the blanket and limping on my sore feet, I keep stepping on roots protruding from the ground. It hurts, but I have to keep moving.

I need water. I’m so dry. I try to swallow, but can’t produce saliva.

Now a wide tree trunk blocks my path and I make my way around it.

Have I changed direction? I’m not sure if I’ve changed direction.

No matter. I don’t know for sure where I need to go anyway.

I stumble over a fallen branch and land on my hands and knees. It’s so hard to get up.

Now my knees are bleeding through my light-colored slacks.

Dragging the blanket is so hard. I drop it. But now I’m really cold. I need the blanket. So I pick it up again and wrap myself in it.

Is that a less dense patch of trees to the right? I think maybe that’s the edge of these woods. Maybe there are people there.

At the thought of meeting people, I’m afraid. Do I need to be afraid of meeting people? I think I need to fear someone. Who? Why can’t I remember who?

I’m so thirsty. So tired. So cold. So confused.

Yes, it’s a clearing ahead.

I see an open field with humped-up rows of bare soil like it’s been plowed sometime. That means a farm. Yes. It has to be a farm.

I stumble forward. Is it safe to look for the farmer or should I stay hidden in the woods?

I sit down on the blanket at the edge of the woods to think.

I’m so tired.

I don’t know how much time has gone by when in my hazy mind I hear the worried voice of a child. “Miss? Are you ok, Miss?”

I must be hallucinating.

Then a small hand pushes my shoulder. “Miss? Are you ok?”

My eyes flutter open, then close again..

The voice stops and I hear pounding footsteps running away.

I want to get up and follow the child, but it’s too much trouble to even keep my eyes open. I probably dreamed that child’s voice anyway. I let myself drift.

“Miss! Wake up, Miss!” A woman’s voice now. Sharp with worry.

Strong arms lift my shoulders. I scream in pain.

“Oh you poor thing! Your back is all torn up. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Tears blur my eyes. The voice is so kind now.

Then a man’s voice. “Help her up.”

“I’m trying to. She’s in pain, God bless her.”

“Let me.” Large hands run under my armpits and pull me to my feet. I sway and he holds me up.

What’s happening? Is this all part of the same dream? I can’t seem to make sense of what’s going on.

“Take her to Molly,” the woman says as the man hoists me over his shoulder. I scream again.

“It’ll be ok,” the woman says soothingly, laying a gentle hand on my arm.

I can see her clearly now that my eyes are beginning to increase their focus. Rawboned, with chestnut hair tied back with a red bandana, denim jacket, faded jeans.

“Molly,” I repeat, trying to make sense of the conversation.

“Yes, Molly will take good care of you. She’s a nurse.”

I fade out again draped over the man’s shoulder, my cheek against the softness of his plaid flannel shirt.

Chapter Nineteen

CALLIE

After a blissful night together, Callie and Jed decided to walk down to the diner rather than take either car. The sun was shining and all would have been right with Callie’s world had it not been for her nagging fear for Gini’s welfare.

“Jed,” she said as they walked hand-in-hand like teenagers, “we need to figure out how we can approach the people we want to talk to. I can’t imagine walking up to them and saying, ‘Hi, my name is Callie and I want to know what you know about the disappearance of my friend.’”

“True. We need a plan,” he responded, “but I think we need to hear what that deputy says before we can make one.”

“And she’s not coming down until around10:00,” Callie sighed in unhappy resignation.

“Maybe I can use that time to look deeper in the search programs on my laptop. I have a feeling I didn’t do a very thorough job last night. Give us some more concrete background.”

“What can you find that goes beyond what you got already?” Callie asked.

“Oh, criminal charges, real estate transactions, bankruptcies, birth and marriage dates, divorce filings. Things like that.”

Callie chided him, “You’re not an investigator. You’re a spy.”

Jed just chuckled and they continued in silence until the diner came into view.

Her mood brightened somewhat when Jed grinned as he saw the gleaming silvery aluminum siding of the diner, “I haven’t seen a diner like that since I was a kid! This is wonderful!”

“Wait till you see the inside,” she said, trying to match the lightness of his comment. “They have those little jukeboxes on the tables. And the waitresses wear those fifties’ uniforms with the white collar and cuffs. And hairnets!”

Jed laughed, “I’ll bet they don’t have fifties’ prices, though.”

Callie agreed, “But they’re not bad. And the food is good. At least my sandwich was and other people’s looked good.”

When they entered, the “Seat Yourself” sign still stood on the counter, so they looked around for an empty table. The place was much busier than it had been at lunchtime the day before when Callie was there.

Seeing a couple vacate one of the window booths, they slid into the vinyl benches on either side of the table. Callie shrugged off her heavy cardigan and draped it over her shoulders.

Rita, the young waitress from yesterday, approached with a tray and a damp cloth, clearing the table and wiping it down. “Nice to see you again,” she greeted Callie. “Be right back with some menus,” she said over her shoulder as she whisked away the tray of dirty dishes.

She was back in a moment with two enormous laminated menus. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” they said in unison and laughed.

Almost immediately she returned with a coffee pot, a cream pitcher and two heavy white stoneware mugs. “Sugar’s on the table. I’ll give you a few minutes to decide what you want.”

“This is perfect!” Jed said, perusing the menu. “‘Pancakes, French toast, eggs any way you want ‘em, waffles, hashbrowns.’ I’m in heaven.”

Callie laughed, swept along by his obvious enjoyment. “French toast and Canadian bacon for me,” she decided.

“I’m going with the Farmhand’s Breakfast! I’m starving.”

“How can you be starving after you ate all of your pizza and some of mine as well last night?” Callie exclaimed.

“I worked it off in bed.”

Callie blushed, “Shh... people can hear you!”

“So they’ll know I love my fiancée!”

Callie said, “You know, I can’t get used to that word yet. I love hearing you say it, but it’s such a new thing. I still can hardly believe you asked me.”

“And I hardly believe you accepted,” Jed said. Reaching across and taking her left hand, he said, “You know what we have to do now? We need to get you a ring.”

“I think we might be a little busy for that. And I don’t really care about having one. I’ve been there before.”

“So have I, but I do care. It’s important to me. Call it my way of proving you’re all mine.”

Callie rewarded that with a frown. “That’s a rather chauvinistic view.”

“You know what I mean. You’re still you, independent of me, but it means everyone will know that we’re a committed couple.”

Callie decided to accept that as an apology, but she mused, “I wonder why men don’t wear engagement rings if that’s what it means?”

Jed knitted his brows, “Darned if I know. But you can buy me one if you want.”

Was he teasing her? “You’d wear my ring if I gave one to you?”

“Sure would.” He paused, holding his left hand before his eyes and studying it. “I think I’d look silly with a diamond solitaire, though.”

Callie laughed. “When we get back home I’ll see what I can do.”

“Seriously, that’s what I want to do as soon as we’re back home. Get a ring for you, I mean. It’s important.” Jed went on, “Remember I told you I called both my girls when you were in the shower last night? The first thing they both asked was what kind of ring I gave you. That, and Linda wanted to know whether they can be bridesmaids.”

“They’re eighteen. It’s all a romantic adventure for them,” Callie said, “But it shows they both approve and I’m really glad about that.”

“They liked you a lot when they met you. In fact, after you left they wanted to know when I was going to pop the question. They’re both really excited that I have now.”

A short plump redhead leaned around from the booth behind Callie. “I couldn’t help overhearing. Best wishes!” She stood up and came to the side of their table. “If you want to get a ring while you’re here, I know a great place.”

They exchanged doubtful looks.

“No, seriously,” she said holding out her hands. “See these?”

“They’re gorgeous!” Callie agreed, examining the four dazzling rings on the woman’s stubby fingers.

“Right?” she said. “There’s a guy up the mountain past Mt. Stephen who handcrafts jewelry. Every ring is different.” She flicked her fingers, the multi-colored stones in her rings twinkling in the diner’s florescent lights.

“Is he open Sundays?” Jed asked eagerly.

Callie opened her mouth to say something again about not having time for shopping. But then their new friend said, “He’s open every day. He sells out of his house. Name’s Stan Irvin. I can give you directions.”

*Irvin?* Callie thought. *Any relation to Charlie Irvin?* She noticed a look of comprehension on Jed’s face as well. Suddenly, she was more eager to shop for a ring than she could have imagined.

“Well,” Jed said, trying to sound casual, “We really should take a look, don’t you think, Babe?”

Smiling, the woman said, “You won’t be sorry,” and went on to give them specific directions, describing a house with a high hedge around it and a blue sign in front. She warned them that the road up the mountain would be rough going this time of year, but insisted it would be worth the trip even so. “My name’s Missy, by the way. You can tell Stan I sent you.”

Chapter Twenty

CALLIE

Returning to the motel after their hearty breakfast, they were surprised to find Sergeant Duprey getting out of a battered silver Chevy parked near their staircase. Her stocky form dressed in faded jeans and a heavy red turtleneck sweater, she looked somewhat like an exotic tortoise not quite ready to poke her head out of her shell. Her dark eyes scanned the parking lot nervously.

*Clearly not on duty,* Callie thought.

“Ms. Templand,” she said as she approached them. “I was hoping to find you here. There’s something I need to tell you.”

“OK,” Callie said. Noticing that the sergeant was looking curiously at Jed, she added, “Sergeant, this is my fiancé, Jed Howard. Jed, this is Sergeant Duprey, Town Police.”

When she said “fiancé,” she noticed the sergeant’s quick glance at her left hand. *Jed’s right. We do need to get a ring.*

Shaking Jed’s hand, Sergeant Duprey asked, “Can we go inside? I don’t want to talk out here.”

“Of course,” Callie said, leading the way up the steps to the second level walkway. *Well, this is interesting!*

From the top of the stairs, the sergeant paused to once again survey the parking lot before continuing along the walkway. She ducked through the room’s door quickly when Jed held it open.

Once inside the room, Callie drew the drapes closed and invited her to sit in one of the chairs at the table by the window.

As Sergeant Duprey settled into the chair, she said, “This isn’t an official visit.”

Callie said, “Well you’ve got me really intrigued now. But I should tell you that If you don’t want to be seen, this will have to be quick. Detective Greenliegh from the Sheriff’s Office is supposed to be coming by in a little while.”

“No. That’s OK. Janice is one I can trust.” *Getting more interesting by the minute!*

Then she went on nervously, “Callie... can I call you Callie?”

Callie nodded. “Of course. In fact, I wish you would.”

“Thank you. And please call me Saroya,” she responded. “So Callie... and Jed. I don’t want to take up a lot of your time, so here’s the thing. You know that I’m the one who found that poor woman in the car wreck yesterday?”

A virtual video of that broken railing played in Callie’s mind. “Yes.”

“Well, I heard she was a friend of Dr. Colden...”

“Yes?” *So I was right. It is the same Hope.*

“Well, here’s the thing.” She took a deep breath. “When I found her, she was still alive. Just barely, but alive.” She was almost whispering.

Callie crouched down next to the chair to hear better.

“She... She spoke to me. She said, ‘Pick-up... Black.’ She was moaning and her face was all bruised, so it was hard to understand, but I’m positive that’s what she said.”

“Pick-up. Black,” Jed repeated slowly. ”So,” he asked, “you think she was telling you her car was hit by a black pick-up truck?”

“Yes. That’s what I made of it.”

Jed asked, “Did you put that in your report?”

“Yes, of course. And I handed it over to Sergeant Todd when she came to the scene to relieve me because I was actually off-duty. What worries me is I don’t know if she paid any attention to it. Just sent it down to Files maybe. One more accident report, you know? And even if she did notice it, she might not think it means what I think. There are so many black pick-ups around. Even Sergeant Todd herself drives one.”

“Have the police examined the car for paint residue?” Jed asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve been off-duty since then. But when I heard about the connection to your friend I thought you should know.”

Callie grasped her hand between her own. “Thank you so much, Saroya! We were sure it wasn’t just an accident on a slippery road.”

Saroya nodded, “I patrol that road every night, up and down it in all kinds of weather. I know there’s a curve there, but not a sharp one. It’s not a place I look for accidents.”

She stood then, “I’d better go. People might recognize my car down there.”

Jed asked, “What people? Who are you afraid of?”

“I’d rather not say. It would take too long to explain.”

“OK, then,” Callie said, respecting her wishes, though she was dying to know. “I really appreciate this. Thank you again!”

“You’ll make sure Janice... Detective Greenliegh... hears this?”

“The moment she gets here. Believe me!” Callie shook her hand and added, “Take care of yourself.”

As Saroya descended the stairs, Callie turned to Jed. “That was really revealing, wasn’t it?”

“About the black pick-up?”

“That, yeah. But more-so what she implied about the Town Police. She doesn’t trust her own Department, Jed.”

Chapter Twenty-0ne

GINI

“I think she’s awake,” a woman’s voice.

“I’ll leave you to it then, Mom. I have to get back to work,” a younger female voice coming from behind me somewhere.

A sensation of warmth seems to be moving along my arm.

I open my eyes. I’m lying on my side in a strange room. Light and airy. Big windows with simple gauze drapes the color of wheat. A brightly-patterned quilt hangs from the off-white wall across from me.

A woman hovers over me, moving her hands a few inches above my arm. The warm sensation moves along the path of her hands as they continue along my body to my hip and my leg.

Gray hair in a long braid, a round smiling face without makeup, kind brown eyes, a navy blue sweatshirt with an image of a lion lying down with a lamb.

“How are you, Hon?” she asks me, removing her hands in a sort of sweeping motion. The warm feeling remains briefly.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in my home. My name is Molly. What’s yours?”

I have to focus. My name. I’m sure I know my name.

“I... I can’t seem to find my name,” I tell her. “Why don’t I know my own name?” I’m becoming agitated. I struggle to push myself up to a seated position, but I don’t have the strength to do it. I collapse back onto the pillow, my head swimming.

“It’s OK,” she says. “You’ll remember soon. You were dehydrated. That can make your mind fuzzy.”

Then I connect to what she said earlier. “You said ‘Molly.’ Someone said they were taking me to Molly.”

“That’s right. Good. See, you are remembering something already.”

I try again to push myself to a sitting position and Molly helps me, plumping a pillow behind my head. “Ouch!”

“Careful of your back, Hon. It’s pretty scraped up.”

“It hurts. Why does it hurt? I don’t remember hurting my back.”

“You’ll remember everything in a little while when you’ve had some more rest and some more fluids. It’s going to be OK.” She pauses to pick up a jar holding some kind of greenish cream. “Here, let me put some salve on those wounds.”

“How did I get here? Where is this? I mean besides your home?” I ask while she gently applies the salve to my back. I can’t seem to understand who she is or why I’m in this room or what she’s doing.

“One of our community families found you this morning on our property. You were in a bad way, so they brought you to me.”

A hazy memory surfaces. “Nurse. I remember a woman saying ‘nurse.’ That’s you.”

“That’s right. Good. You’re remembering more.” She closes the lid on the jar and sets it next to a well-thumbed Bible on a nightstand by the bed. Turning back to me, she says, “I think you might be able to eat something now. That will help.”

When she leaves the room to get me something to eat, I push myself higher against the pillow. My mind seems to be clearing a little and I look around curiously. I’m on a firm bed covered by a patchwork quilt, a different pattern from the one on the wall. A polished wooden rocking chair sits next to the bed, with what looks to be a hand-woven rose-colored throw over its back. Small potted plants line the windowsill. Through the window I see the ridges of a plowed field climbing up a hillside. Bare trees out beyond the field.

A farm. I remember seeing plowed fields before somewhere. Yes. Before the people came and brought me here. My memory is starting to work.

The room smells like something minty or grassy, like the stuff she rubbed on my back. I look up and see dried bundled herbs hanging from the ceiling. That must have been some kind of herbal remedy she put on my back.

Then I notice next to the bed on the side away from the windows there’s a tall stand from which an IV bag partially filled with a clear liquid hangs. I look down at my right arm and see a gauze pad fastened by a strip of adhesive tape.

What is this place? Molly said, “Our community” and “My home,” but the rack looks like something in a hospital room. And Molly is a nurse. Is this a nursing home? Why would I be in a nursing home?

Molly returns with a bowl of soup on a white wooden tray with some French bread that smells heavenly. She snaps short legs out from the bottom of the tray and sets it across my lap.

The soup is rich with bits of chicken and thick slices of vegetables. I eagerly spoon it up. I didn’t realize I was so hungry. I wonder when I last ate.

Now my head is starting to clear more. “Gini,” I say. “My name is Gini... Virginia.”

And then it comes flooding back. Going to the door expecting Callie. The tape over my mouth. The basement room. The cot. The threatening note. The high window. The woods.

I tell this to Molly, all in a rush, fear tinging my voice.

She puts her hands gently on my shoulders and says, “You’re safe now, Gini. It’s going to be OK.”

I squirm out of her grasp. “A phone! I have to use your phone! Callie will be so worried!”

“I’m sorry, Hon. We don’t have phones in our homes here.”

“No phones?”

“No. This is a simple-living community, Plowshare Acres. We call ourselves Brothers and Sisters of the Soil. We have joined together to live plainly. Our homes have no phones, no tv, no computers.”

“Like the Amish?” I ask.

“No, not as simple as that. We do generate electricity and cook and heat with propane. We have radios and CD players, but we try to keep the distractions of the outside world to a minimum. Our farmers use mechanized equipment: plows, tractors. We own a couple of pick-up trucks, too, mostly to take our produce and craft goods to town. When we can afford it, we hope to replace those trucks with electric vehicles to cut down on emissions.”

“Town!” I interrupt, excitedly. “We’re near a town? Can someone take me to town? What town is it? I thought I heard church bells. The town can’t be far. Is it Sunday?”

“The bells you heard were most likely from our chapel. We ring them every morning for prayer before we begin our day. It may well be Sunday. We don’t pay much attention to the calender. Every day is the Lord’s day.”

I am beginning to worry that I’ve found myself in some sort of cult. Maybe one of those that don’t let people leave.

“What about town, though?” I ask. “Can someone take me where I can find a phone?” I try to swing my legs over the edge of the bed and let out a groan and almost knock the tray to the floor.

“In good time, Hon. You’re in no condition to travel just yet.”

I persist, “Then can someone take a message to the town for me? I’m sure people are looking for me.”

“Yes, Hon, I’m sure they must be. Both your friends and the person you escaped from. You’re much safer here right now. And you need to rest.”

I do need to rest. I’m getting very drowsy. I wonder if she put something in the soup, maybe one of those herbs drying above my bed.

Chapter Twenty-two

CALLIE

As they stood on the second floor walkway watching Saroya’s beat-up Chevy drive away around the corner of the motel, a Sheriff’s car passed it coming toward them.

Callie waited for Detective Greenliegh to park and then waved to her when she alighted from her cruiser. They waited on the walkway as the deputy ascended the stairs, her red hair glinting in the sunlight.

“Good morning, Callie,” she said, shaking her hand, “and you must be Jed?” She gave him a quick appraisal, whether as a cop or a woman, Callie wasn’t sure. Apparently finding him acceptable either way, she smiled.

Rather than restate the obvious, that he was, indeed, Jed, he said, “Good morning, Detective. We really appreciate your coming by,” and, holding open the door to Room 204, he ushered her inside.

“I’m glad you called me,” she said, putting a large brown satchel on the table by the window and reaching into it for her iPad. “OK if we sit here?” She pulled out one of the chairs without waiting for an answer.

Callie took the other chair and Jed rolled the armless desk chair over, straddling it, with his hands on its back and his chin on his hands.

“There are several things I want to tell you, but first I need to ask you something.” She reached into the satchel and pulled out a clear plastic bag containing a soiled bone-colored pump with a two-inch heel. “Does this look like something your friend would wear? Do you know her shoe size?”

Callie drew in her breath. “Oh God, yes!. That’s got to be Gini’s. She always wears a heel, even with jeans, because she’s so short.”

“And the size?”

“Yes, she’s a size 6B. I know because she used to always tease me about my big feet compared to hers when we went shoe shopping together.”

“Good. Thank you,” the deputy responded. “This is the shoe that was found by our Crime Scene Unit in the bushes near the driveway. We called in K-9 this morning and showed it to the tracker dog. He ran around in the driveway like he was circling an invisible car, a pretty big one. Then he ran to the end of the driveway and kept running back and forth from there to the first area where the car must have been parked. We think he lost her scent right there in the driveway.”

Callie jumped up, too anxious to stay seated. “Someone took her in a car. That’s what I’ve said all along.”

Detective Greenliegh nodded. “That seems to be the case.”

Callie was pacing. “She lost her shoe. Does that mean she was trying to run? Or was she dragged? Was she unconscious?”

“Well, obviously we don’t know. We think it’s likely she was carried. There were no scuff marks on the driveway. It’s hard to say, though. The driveway was still wet from rain Friday night. Ordinarily we might expect scuffing to show, but there were a lot of police vehicles there afterward, and your car, too, of course.”

That made Callie feel guilty. Had she obscured evidence last night?

“Maybe she kicked the shoe off on purpose,” Jed said, “to leave a clue.” Callie was fleetingly reminded again of the shows Jed liked to watch.

“Could be. We can’t know what was on her mind.” Detective Greenliegh reached into the satchel again, retrieving another plastic-wrapped item. “This is Dr. Hebron’s phone, recovered from her car.”

Callie stared at an iPhone in a dark blue case.

“We’ve finished processing it, so it’s OK to handle it,” Detective Greenliegh said, taking it out of the plastic evidence bag. “I want to show you the last two texts.”

Holding it out for Callie and Jed to see, she quickly accessed the Contacts list and brought up Gini’s name. “The first one is dated Friday at 3:04 pm.”

Callie read aloud, “**I’m expecting a friend for the weekend, but I’d like to talk to you again soon about my reaction to client suicide.”**

“That’s consistent with what you told me about their professional relationship,” the deputy said.

“Yes. Gini’s asking for a counseling session with Hope.”

Jed added, “Looks like she was troubled about one of her clients.”

“I wonder if she’s still thinking about Sandra or if it’s someone else.” Callie mused.

“And Dr. Hebron responds that she has some time free on Wednesday.” The deputy flicked the screen down a notch. “But then there’s something different. At 5:34 am on Saturday, there’s another text to Dr. Hebron.”

Callie read, “**I need Ur help. Coming here. Suicidal.**”

“But that’s impossible!” Callie breathed. “She was gone when I got there around midnight and she didn’t have her phone with her. And who is it about? Who is coming? If Gini felt like someone was in danger or felt threatened, she wouldn’t text her therapist! She’d call the police. This makes no sense.”

“That’s what I thought when I read it, too.”

Jed said, “I’ll bet that’s the same person who sent the text to Callie last night.”

“Yes. We think that’s likely. That’s why I wanted you to see it.”

Callie sat back down with a thump. “But how did they send a text from Gini’s phone? I told you yesterday that that phone was on the kitchen counter when I went into the house Friday night.”

“And you’re sure it was there.” It was a statement, not a question.

“OK,” Jed said, “That means that someone went into the kitchen between say, midnight and 5:00 am and took Gini’s phone. Then they used it to lure Hope to her house.”

Callie and Detective Greenliegh both nodded agreement.

“Why would Hope go, though?” Callie asked. “And if she decided to go, wouldn’t she at least call the police before she left?”

Detective Greenliegh sighed, “Logically, yes. But we don’t know the history between Dr. Colden and Dr. Hebron. It’s possible that Dr. Hebron knew about a suicidal client of Dr. Colden’s and took it to be a request for help in talking him down. An intervention.”

“Especially since Dr. Hebron would have known how upset Gini was over Sandra, how it shook her confidence in her ability to deal with a potentially suicidal client,” Callie said. “But that would mean that the person who sent that text knows about a suicidal client’s history, too.” Callie said.

Jed said grimly, “Knows about that history or is that history.”

Callie put her head in her hands, “Oh God. I don’t want to believe that. Abducting her as part of a suicide plan?”

“We can’t know right now,” the deputy said calmly. “What we do know is that whoever it is, they have Dr. Colden’s phone.”

Callie shook her head, “We keep coming back to that. How would they get the phone? There was a cop guarding the house all night. Or at least that’s what Captain Rivera told me.”

“Did he mention a name?” the deputy asked.

“No, but when I left there was a young guy named Redman putting up the caution tape. So probably him. Sergeant Duprey was there, too. I think Sergeant Duprey probably would have left, but would come by to check in with him at some point.”

“Speaking of Sergeant Duprey, did I see her leaving here when I was pulling in?” Detective Greenliegh asked.

“Yes. She wanted to tell me something really important and she wanted you to know, too. I was going to tell you right away, but I got distracted by the things you brought.”

The deputy’s eyebrows asked a silent question.

Callie continued, “You know she was the one who found Dr. Hebron. Well, she told us that when she reached Dr. Hebron’s car down in the ravine after the accident, Dr. Hebron was still alive. And she said something. Sergeant Duprey is sure she heard, ‘pick-up... black.’”

Detective Greenliegh’s face wore a puzzled expression. “I requested her accident report when I made the connection to Dr. Colden. I don’t remember seeing that. It’s not something I’d have missed.”

“She said she wrote it in her report, but she thought they might have just filed it away like any other accident record,” Callie explained.

The deputy made a note on her iPad. “I received a typed transcript. I’ll request the original. Odd that the typist would leave that out, though.”

Jed asked, “Did the Sheriff impound the car? Have you looked for paint residue?”

“We will now if we haven’t,” the deputy said grimly, making another note. “But, getting back to Dr. Colden’s phone. You were saying the Town Police were at the house all night?”

“I can only say that they were there when I left for the motel and that Captain Rivera said someone was there all night.”

Detective Greenliegh made another note. “I’ll ask the Captain.”

“He seems very nice,” Callie said, hoping to hear something about why Sergeant Duprey was so wary.

But all she got in response was, “Yes, he’s a true gentleman. I haven’t worked with him very much yet. He only took over in January.”

That information didn’t sound important to Callie, but Jed seemed to prick up his ears at it. *I’ll have to ask him about that later.*

“Well, I guess we’ve exhausted everything you can tell me today,” the deputy said, rising, “except that I still need that list of Dr. Colden’s contacts.”

Callie slid the sheet of paper across the table to her. She glanced at it before putting it in her satchel. “No new names added?”

“No. I’m really sorry. I wish I knew more.” She thought of adding Hanna’s possible last name, but decided not to since they weren’t sure they had found the right Hanna. The neighbors’ names the Sheriff could find out easily enough without their help.

“Can’t be helped, I guess,” the deputy said. Then, “Oh, I almost forgot. I have something for you.”

She reached into her pocket and extracted a single house key in a small plastic bag. “Our tech found this hidden on a ledge under the back deck. I’m going to entrust it to you. It opens the back door. We’re finished with the house, so if you want to, you can go up and stay there now.”

Callie palmed the key and looked at Jed, “I don’t think Gini would mind. I’m supposed to be there this weekend anyway.” *And maybe we can search it some more for something I might have missed when the deputies were over my shoulder.*

Jed shrugged, looking casual, although apparently thinking the same thing, “It seems like a good idea to have someone staying there to watch the house,” he said smoothly.

Detective Greenliegh agreed, shaking hands with each of them and promising to keep them informed if she learned anything they needed to know.

“Hmm,” said Jed in a hard-boiled gumshoe voice as they watched her descend the stairs, “The old ‘need to know’ dodge.”

Callie couldn’t help laughing, “Yeah, the police only tell you things they want you to know, but they expect you to tell them everything.

Chapter Twenty-three

CALLIE

It didn’t take them long to pack up the few belongings they’d each brought for the weekend.

Callie commented, “I’m not going to miss this boring motel room.”

Jed laughed, “I’ll bet you’ll miss the maid service, though.”

“There is that.”

They carried their bags down the stairs to their respective vehicles and drove both around front to the office where they turned in their key cards and Callie signed the credit card slip. Noting the cost, she shook her head. Two nights in a motel had not been part of her budget for this trip.

Jed noticed her grimace and on the way back out to the cars said, “I’ll pay half of that. I used the room, too.”

Callie was about to refuse, then decided to graciously accept. After all, they were a couple now and fair is fair.

They climbed into their vehicles and, Callie’s Honda leading the way with Jed’s Jeep following, they pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward Gini’s house.

Callie slowed as she approached the broken guardrail and she gestured out her window for Jed to pull over.

Alighting from her car, she waited for traffic to clear and then crossed the road to the caution-tape barrier where stared down into the forested ravine. Jed came to her side and put his arm around her shoulders.

A path of freshly broken saplings led to a large oak, its trunk scarred by what they knew must be the impact of Hope’s red Toyota. A few bits of broken glass glistened in the shaft of sunlight penetrating through the bare branches of the tree.

Callie couldn’t help the tears that formed. “I didn’t even know Hope, but I feel so sad for her. And for Gini. She’ll be devastated when she finds out what happened to Hope.”

Jed pulled her closer. “I know. It’s a horrible thing.”

“I can’t explain why, but I needed to see this. Yesterday, Detective Greenliegh slowed down when we passed here and pointed it out. I had no idea then that the victim was Hope,” Callie said. “Seeing where it happened helps somehow. It makes it real. Sort of final proof that it’s true.”

Jed said, “Sometimes seeing a horror that’s real is more calming than imagining it. I’ve felt that way visiting some of the crime scenes I’ve written about.”

Though neither was particularly religious, the moment seemed to call for bowed heads and silent prayer. Then Jed led her back to her car, hugging her close. “We’ll find out who did this. I promise.”

They exited 9W a short time later, and turned onto the narrow Mt. Stephen Road, Callie still leading, climbing uphill till they arrived at Gini’s cul-de-sac.

A Town Police cruiser was parked in the driveway next to Gini’s Mini-Cooper, so Callie pulled in behind the Mini and Jed parked in the street.

Before Callie could shut off her car, Sergeant Todd appeared at her window. “What are you doing here? This is a crime scene.”

Callie rolled down the window and replied patiently, “The Sheriff’s Office gave us the key. The investigation here is finished.”

“Not till I say so.”

Hearing the exchange of words, Jed approached from the street. “Is there a problem here? It’s obvious you’ve been taking down the tape.”

“Who’re you?”

Callie intervened. “This is my fiancé, Jed Howard.” Again that glance at her bare finger.

Jed stood eye-to-eye with the woman, solid as a rock, his expression mild, but his body tense. “Please let my fiancée exit her car. You can call the Sheriff to confirm what she’s telling you.”

Sergeant Todd stepped back, apparently conceding that she had no authority to stop them.

They heard her muttering something as they walked around to the back of the house.

Jed asked, “Is she the one that gave you such a hard time when you made your statement at the police station?”

“Yeah, she’s a real peach.”

They climbed the steps to the deck and used the key Detective Greenliegh had given them, opening the door into the kitchen. Callie surveyed the room. Since yesterday, nothing seemed to be disturbed including the pervasive smudges of black fingerprint powder. “We’ll need to clean this up. I’d hate to have Gini come home to this.”

Jed agreed. “Leave it for now, though. We can do it this evening. First we need to get you that ring and then this afternoon we need to talk to some of the people on your list.”

“Before we think about that, I need to walk through the house. I won’t be comfortable until I’ve made sure everything is the way it was yesterday,” Callie said. “The idea that someone could have come in here and taken Gini’s phone makes me nervous.”

“OK. Why don’t I go back and get our bags from the cars while you do that? I want to see if that nasty cop is gone. Or would you rather I stayed with you?”

Callie said she’d feel more comfortable if he walked through with her, commenting that they could see whether the cruiser was still in the driveway from the front windows.

Satisfied a short time later that everything was as it should be and that Sergeant Todd had driven away, they returned to the kitchen.

Jed sat on a stool at the breakfast bar and asked Callie for her notebook. “Let’s see who we can try to see this afternoon.”

Callie plunked the notebook down on the counter. “I’m getting cold feet about this. We really should leave questioning to the Sheriff.”

“People won’t be as open with the Sheriff as they will with Gini’s friends.”

“I know. It just makes me nervous.”

“You’re good at talking to people. How many potential foster families have you interviewed?”

“That’s not the same and you know it. And it’s not the same as when you interview sources for a story either, though maybe a little more like that.”

Jed reached out and caught her around the waist and gave her a quick hug. “Maybe not, but I think we need to do it. And we’ll tell Detective Greenliegh everything we learn. We could be a big help to her.”

“You know,” Callie said, “she’s been surprisingly open with us. It makes me feel kind of underhanded about not telling her before we do it.”

“You know she’d discourage it.”

“That’s why I feel guilty about it.”

“We’re not going to confront anybody. Just talk to them about how worried you are about Gini so maybe somebody will mention something useful.”

“I know. And I am. So worried!” Callie pulled out another stool and opened her notebook to the list of Gini’s contacts.

Jed had remembered to bring his laptop from the car and he opened it now. “Let me see whether I can find anything we missed last night... Damn! No signal.”

“I thought you had one of those Hot Spot plug-ins,” Callie said.

“I do. It’s not finding the satellite,” he answered, annoyed. “Must be the location here.”

“Can’t you hook into Gini’s network?” Callie asked.

“I wish I could. I would need her router password,” Jed explained.

Callie shrugged, “I guess we’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

She placed the notebook between them on the table.

Jed gave an exasperated sigh and pointed to Charlie Irvin. “I hope he’s related to Stan. If not, we’ll have to use his carpentry office number and he’s not likely to be there on Sunday.”

He picked up his phone and opened the AnyWho phonebook site. “At least this works. We should call ahead to Stan anyway to make sure he’s home. Let’s see if Charlie is listed at the same place....OK, here’s Stan’s number.” He took a clean sheet from the notebook and wrote it down. “Now Charlie... Just the business number for him. Well, we can hope.”

“While you’ve got that open, let’s see if you can find a number for Gini’s ex, Ronald Makin and her boyfriend, Mark Rose. Those are the only ones we need to call whose full names I know. Except Joe Dormato and there’s no way I’m calling him. I’m happy to leave him to the Sheriff.”

Jed found a number for Ron and added it to his list. The only number for Mark was his office, where, like Charlie Irvin, he wouldn’t be on a Sunday. “Too bad we don’t have Gini’s phone. Bet his cell number is in her Contacts.”

Callie sighed, “I wish you hadn’t reminded me about her cell being gone.” She gestured toward the dangling charger cord near the coffee maker on the countertop. “That’s where it was Friday night.” Then she added, “Well, I guess we can see Ron anyway, not that I really want to.”

Jed nodded, ”After we get you that ring and maybe find out how to reach Charlie on a Sunday.”

“You know, if it weren’t for the possibility of finding Charlie, I wouldn’t care about the ring. I told you this morning it’s not important to me.”

“And I told you it is to me. I want my fiancée to have the most beautiful ring in the world.” He leaned over and kissed her.

“Ummm... back to business, Mister!” Callie said, playfully pushing him away.

Jed sighed, “Right. Let me call Stan.”

“Speaking of calls, I just thought of something. We should check Gini’s answering machine in the office in case anyone left a message after I listened to them yesterday with the Sheriff’s people. I’ll go do that while you call Stan Irvin.”

It took Callie a few minutes to wade through the new messages on Gini’s machine. Among the sales pitches and scam calls, there were a few legitimate ones. A couple were from people wanting to change appointments or make new ones. Like yesterday, there were a couple of rather lengthy ones from clients who tried to tell Gini their latest problems right there on the answering machine. Callie tried not to listen to those, knowing Gini wouldn’t be comfortable with that, but she took down any names she learned and their Caller ID numbers in case they might be important to her quest. The deputies had convinced her yesterday that confidentiality had its limits in this situation. She wasn’t too sure she would give these new ones to the Sheriff, though. She’d have to think about it.

Jed was grinning when she got back. “Guess who answered the Irvin phone?”

“Not Charlie?”

“Yes, Charlie. He said Stan’s his brother and Stan’s out right now, but if we come on up, he can show us Stan’s stuff.”

“Wow! That’s great! And I have good news, too. There was a message from Mark Rose on Gini’s machine, with Caller ID. He tried to reach her this morning.”

“OK then. Which do you want to do first? Visit Charlie or call Mark?”

“Let me call Mark. He sounded annoyed. Said he’d called her cell three times yesterday and again today and it wasn’t in service, so he tried the office. He said, ‘I know you have company this weekend, but I didn’t think you’d turn off your phone.’”

Callie dialed Dr. Rose and introduced herself. As she started to explain what was happening, he cut her off abruptly, “I’m with the detective now. I’ll get back to you after he leaves,” and hung up.

She shrugged. “It sounds like Det. Greenliegh’s partner is with Dr. Rose. He said a detective was there and called him ‘he.’ He was awfully curt.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t have to be the one to break the news anyway.”

“Me, too.”

“So this means we should go visit Charlie and find you a ring,” Jed said decisively.

Chapter Twenty-four

CALLIE

Jed drove westward along the mountain road, passing and quickly leaving behind the tiny village of Mt. Stephen, then rumbling over a sturdy wooden bridge traversing a stream swollen with winter snow run-off. On the far side stood a dilapidated wooden mill, it’s paddlewheel half-collapsed into the rushing water.

“I wonder what that mill was for,” Callie remarked. “It doesn’t look like anyone could have grown much grain around here.”

Jed nodded, “No, I don’t think it could have been a gristmill. I’d bet on it being a sawmill. Plenty of trees here.”

Callie was silent for a little while, thinking about how much history this area held and how much fun it might be to come up here with Gini to explore it.

Then, thinking about Gini, she remembered something totally unrelated to this place. “Jed, when Detective Greenliegh was talking about Captain Rivera, you looked like something rang a bell for you.”

He thought for a moment, trying to remember what had caught his attention. “Yeah. Well, maybe. About a year ago, one of the guys in my unit had an assignment to check out a police scandal in some town in the Hudson Valley. I didn’t pay much attention at the time, but I remember something about the Chief and some top brass being arrested for some kind of corruption. So when the deputy said that the Captain was new I wondered if the scandal was in this town and that’s why the police have a new Captain.”

“If that’s right, it might explain Saroya’s wariness.” Callie mused. “Maybe she’s not sure all the bad apples have been cleared out.”

“Maybe she knows they haven’t been.” Jed said, adding, “I wonder if it explains Sergeant Todd’s attitude, too, assuming it was actually this town.”

“Like her mistrust takes the form of belligerence? Could be.”

“Well, not our problem,” Jed shrugged.

They had decided it was best to use Jed’s Jeep based on the advice from Missy, the woman in the diner, about the roads up the mountain being so bad. It proved to be a wise decision. Once they left the paved road, they encountered rough gravel pockmarked with ruts and mudholes. Definitely a 4-wheel-drive surface.

“Pretty lonely up here,” Callie remarked as they climbed through deep woods, passing an occasional weathered house or mobile home, some looking prosperous, others less so, several with an ancient car up on blocks or a derelict kitchen appliance lying in the yard.

Jed nodded grimly, “I was thinking the same thing. Looks like there could be plenty of places where you could hide somebody you kidnapped.”

“Oh God, Jed! What if...” Callie choked on the rest of the sentence.

Jed reached over and put a hand on her knee. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you more, but I can’t help having thoughts like that.”

Callie tried to shake off that image, forcing herself to return to thinking about their purpose for the trip instead. “It doesn’t seem like a place someone who works with gold and gems would want to live.”

“Guess he likes his privacy,” Jed responded, just then spying a faded blue sign in front of a high hedge. “‘IRWIN ENTERPRISES.’ I guess we’re here.”

A crushed-stone driveway opened just past the sign and Jed made a right turn.

The house was a surprise, a modern low ranch, cedar shingled, with bright blue trim on window frames and front door. A security camera was displayed prominently above the door, slowly panning a neat front yard where empty flower beds promised a bright summer display.

“See those silver strips edging the windows?” Jed asked. “Those are linked to an alarm system.”

A young golden retriever-cross came lolloping up to the car, grinning like it hoped they’d throw out a tennis ball to fetch.

After seeing the security arrangements, Callie was rather surprised the dog wasn’t some rottweiler or pitbull. Even so she wasn’t sure it was safe to exit the car until the front door opened. A muscular blond man in his late twenties dressed in a white tee-shirt and jeans leaned out. “Don’t mind Ruby,“ he yelled, “She never met a stranger. To her everyone’s a friend.”

Laughing, they stepped down from the Jeep and made their way to the door, Ruby circling around their feet, tongue hanging out.

“You must be Charlie,” Jed said, holding out his hand to be shaken. The man’s grip was strong. As he extended his arm, his tee-shirt sleeve slipped up past his bicep revealing a heart tattoo with “Sandra” written in a flowing script across it.

“Sure am. Are you the one that just called?”

“Jed Howard. And my fiancée, Callie Templand. Nice to meet you.”

Charlie ushered them inside, telling Ruby to stay out, and led the way to a room on the left where three glass cases proved that this was, indeed, a jeweler’s shop.

Callie couldn’t help gasping at the display even as she was watching Charlie cross the room and trying to decide how to approach her questions. *Seems really friendly. Not what I expected from hearing those men talk in the diner.*

Jed took the lead, apparently deciding it was best to shop first and ask questions later. Leaning over the closest display case, he said, “Your brother’s really talented. Did he make all these things himself or do you do some of them, too?”

“Me? No. Stan’s got all the artistic talent in this family. I’m a lowly carpenter.” Then he added, “But what you’re looking at in that case isn’t all by Stan either. See the silver bracelets and pendants in there?” Charlie was nodding toward the end of the case where Jed stood. “Those are made by a woman who lives in kind of a commune over toward Plattekill. Name’s Nancy. They don’t use last names. Stan helps her out by showing her work.”

“Like an artists’ colony?” Callie asked.

“More like a religious cult if you ask me. Harmless, though. They all do something to earn money. Nancy makes jewelry and she’s really good.” He paused, “But you didn’t come here to see the silver stuff.”

“No,“ Jed agreed. “A gold ring is what we’re looking for.”

Callie was still examining Nancy’s display. “Could I see that heart and star pendant, though?” she asked.

Charlie smiled at her as he walked around behind the case and unlocked it with a key he took from his pocket. “One of my favorites.”

Opening the zipper of her green cardigan and holding the pendant up to her throat, Callie looked in the mirror that stood on top of the glass case. The old green t-shirt she wore under the sweater didn’t do it justice, but she could easily imagine the simple yet unique pendant lying against a silk blouse. Flipping over the tiny white price tag, she couldn’t believe how reasonable it was compared to prices for silver work on Long Island. “It’s beautiful! I’ll take it,” she smiled.

Jed stood by, enjoying how her eyes shone as she fastened the clasp behind her neck. Charlie smiled and nodded. Then he turned and searched through a wooden cabinet behind the case until he came up with an unnecessary box for it.

“OK,” Callie said, sensing that Jed might be growing impatient. “Now you can show us the rings.”

Charlie moved behind the farthest case and gestured toward the display on the top shelf.

Jed mumbled, “No diamonds,” and Callie laughed.

“Jed, I don’t need a diamond. Mike gave me one, you know. It just sits in a safe.”

Jed looked crestfallen, “I wanted to give you a diamond.”

Callie shook her head, “No, really. I want a ring I can wear every day. Something I don’t have to be afraid to wear in some of the neighborhoods I go into.”

Charlie stood there politely, apparently knowing when it was best to keep quiet. Based on his cocked eyebrow, though, he seemed puzzled but too polite to ask why she would go into scary neighborhoods.

“OK,” Jed gave in. “The most important thing is for it to be something you love. Come and look.”

Callie stood by his side, looking from one ring to another. “They’re really beautiful. Every one of them. I don’t know where to start,” she said. Then suddenly, “There! The moonstone! That is a moonstone, right?”

For the first time, Charlie seemed uncertain. “I think so.” He took it out of the case and Callie held it, turning it to all angles. The glowing center stone was surrounded by a half-circle of tiny gemstones in a rainbow of colors, their sparkle playing off its glow.

She was slipping it onto her finger when she heard an interior door open. The man who came through the door and crossed the room bore a striking resemblance to Charlie, though he looked a good ten years older and some forty pounds heavier.

“Stan, you’re just in time,“ Charlie said. “This lady wants to know if that ring’s a moonstone.”

“Sure is. You know your gems!” He smiled broadly at Callie.

“I love it! And I’d really like to have it, but this one is too big. Do you have it in a seven?”

“Give me ten minutes and this one will be a seven. I make them all a little big to start with. It helps people try them on,” Stan explained, taking it from her. “Let me make sure you’re a seven, though,” he said, pulling a jangling set of metal measuring rings from a drawer behind the case and slipping one of them on her finger.

Nodding, Stan laid the measuring set on the countertop and went back through the door through which he’d entered. They could see the end of a worktable laden with unfamiliar devises before he closed the door.

Charlie picked up the cluster of measuring rings and turned toward the drawer from which Stan had taken them.

Jed nodded to Callie. Now was their chance to talk to him.

Casually, Jed remarked, “Maybe you know the friend Callie came up here this weekend to visit, Gini Colden.”

Charlie spun around and flung the ring set to the floor. He came out from behind the showcase scowling, his face completely transformed from the friendly salesman’s smile. “You’re a friend of that bitch?”

Callie stepped back, feeling stung. “I wouldn’t call her that.”

“Then you don’t know her very well.” He stormed out of the room, slamming the outer door.

“That went well,” Jed said sardonically.

Within minutes a black pick-up truck roared by the window, kicking up the driveway’s crushed stone in its wake.

They stood there uncertainly until Stan returned a few minutes later.

“Here’s your ring. Try it on.” Then, “Where’s Charlie?” he asked, looking around the room.

Jed explained what happened and Stan nodded. “Yeah, you hit his trigger spot.”

He went on to say, “I don’t have to tell you this. I don’t usually talk about it to strangers, but since you’re a friend of that therapist, I guess I should explain.”

He told them his version of the story they had already read on the online newspaper site. A year ago Charlie had been engaged to a girl named Sandy. Sandy had had a rough life before she met Charlie and had a problem with self-esteem. She kept putting off setting a date because she said she loved Charlie too much to marry him and be a burden. Charlie, thinking it would help her deal with her past trauma, convinced her to see a therapist. She agreed to make an appointment with Dr. Colden, saying she hoped seeing her would help to clear out what she called her “devils.”

Stan didn’t know exactly what happened. If she told Charlie, he never shared what she said with Stan. But somehow, the counseling sessions must have opened up her old psychic wounds and stirred up those “devils.” One day Charlie found her passed out on her couch with an empty pill bottle clenched in her hand. He called an ambulance and tried to do CPR while he waited, but it was too late. “The one year anniversary of that day is this week. He puts on a good face, but I know it’s eating at him.”

“And he blames Gini,” Callie said.

Stan nodded. “Blames himself, too, for talking her into therapy.”

“That’s so sad,” Jed said, “And now there’s something else. When Callie got here Friday night, Dr.Colden wasn’t there. It looks like she was abducted during the time Callie was driving up from Long Island.”

Stan looked shocked. “No! That’s awful.” He shook is head. Then he stared at Jed. “You don’t think Charlie has anything to do with it? That’s not why you came up here? To accuse him?” He was becoming agitated.

Callie tried to calm him. “No. No. We’re not accusing him. We really did come to find a ring. We just got engaged last night, so while we’re waiting for word about Gini, we decided to go ahead and find a ring. A customer of yours, a woman named Missy, showed us the rings she’s bought from you. I thought they were really stunning, so we came here. We didn’t even know he knew Gini,” she lied.

Stan relaxed some, but the friendly demeanor was gone. “Let’s settle the purchase, shall we? And get you on your way.”

Callie had hoped to take a look at men’s rings, but under the circumstances, they were only too glad to turn over their credit cards for the two purchases and flee.

Chapter Twenty-five

CALLIE

After their disturbing trip to the Irvin home on the mountain road, they decided it would be best to stop back at Gini’s house to have a quick lunch and restore Callie’s composure. During the ride back from the Irvins’, Callie remarked that, unlike herself, Jed never seemed to lose his equilibrium and he laughed, “Remember, I raised two teenagers.”

For lunch, Callie raided Gini’s refrigerator for things they should use up that might spoil if left too long. “There’s not much here,” she said, “We should probably have stopped at that little store in Mt. Stephen when we passed through.”

“I could make a quick run back up there, if you want,” Jed shrugged.

“No need. I’m sure there must be something we can fix in here,” Callie responded, leaning deep into the refrigerator.

Jed took advantage of her position to give her a playful swat on the butt.

“Hey! No fair!” She came up laughing, then delved into the nearly empty frig again.

Finding a carton with five eggs left in it, a partially used container of milk, some somewhat wilted spinach and a soft tomato, along with part of a package of shredded Swiss, Callie asked, “How about a veggie-cheese omelet? There’s some bread if you want it, too.”

Jed agreed and then asked curiously, “Why wouldn’t she have laid in groceries, knowing you were coming for the weekend?”

“Oh, that’s part of the fun. When we visit each other we never shop for food until the other arrives. We like to figure out what we’re going to cook and then go down to the supermarket together, or even better if the season is right, a farmers’ market.”

Jed’s expression seemed to say, “Women. How can anyone understand them?” But aloud he simply said, “OK, then. Omelet it is. I’ll start mixing.” He added, “While I’m doing that, you’d better go check the office phone again in case there’s something new on the machine.”

“Oh! Right!” Callie agreed and made her way through the laundry room to Gini’s office.

It didn’t take her long to eliminate the spam calls on the machine and she heard no others of any consequence. She didn’t know exactly what else she could have expected. Did she think someone was going to leave a ransom demand on Gini’s phone when they knew she wasn’t there to get the call? *That’s an odd thought. No one has mentioned the possibility of ransom. Not even the Sheriff.* No, it was a call saying that Gini was safe that she was looking for. It was the lack of that call that was discouraging. It seemed like every hour brought more letdown.

Feeling glum, she returned to the kitchen. As she stepped through the laundry room door, she saw that Jed had already heated a pan and was pouring the egg mixture into it.

Callie’s mood lifted and she found herself grinning as she watched him. “Do you know how great it is to be engaged to a man who can cook?”

Jed shrugged. “I enjoy it now, but it took awhile. When Marta got sick, I had no clue. I had to learn, though, if my kids were going to eat.” To Callie, who’d been treated to quite a few dinners Jed had prepared, it was obvious that he’d taken the challenge seriously.

She could see, though, that her light-hearted remark had brought sad thoughts about Marta, so she changed the subject and said instead, “No new messages. But I had an idea. I realized I could forward Gini’s calls to my cell. That way I won’t have to keep checking and I won’t miss any calls when we go out.”

“You are brilliant, Babe!” Jed reached out to hug her, not quite pulling off the light tone, but clearly glad to be distracted from his memories.

She returned the hug with a quick squeeze and twirled away, seeking dishes and utensils.

“Did you see anything to drink in the frig?” Jed asked.

“Orange juice. White wine. Milk. Iced tea,” Callie responded, inspecting the refrigerator again.

“Better not have the wine. We need to be sharp if we’re going to interview people.”

“You’re no fun. But you’re right. And wine is best when you can sip it a leisure anyway. So milk? Iced tea? I could make coffee.”

“Not my first choice, but we should use up the milk.”

That settled, Callie found glasses, plates and utensils so Jed could serve the omelet.

When they had almost cleaned their plates, Jed said, “OK. Let’s figure out who to talk to next. I was thinking we should introduce ourselves to the neighbors before we go to meet the ones where we have to drive.”

“Good idea. I think most of the neighbors should be around on a Sunday.”

“First we have to set up visits to Gini’s ex and her current,” Jed said.

Callie wrinkled her nose like something smelled bad. “I really hate the idea of talking to Ron. He knows what I think of him and he probably won’t want to talk to me either. And I’m a little nervous about Dr. Mark, too. He was really abrupt on the phone.”

“I know,” Jed said, “but we definitely need to talk to both of them. How about we split up? I arrange to see Ron and you see if you can meet with Dr. Mark?”

Callie nodded, “That sounds good. Mark was probably just harried by having the Sheriff’s detective there and upset about Gini. And he and Ron live in different directions, so splitting up would save a lot of time.”

“Plus it means you don’t have to talk to Ron,” Jed teased.

“That’s the truth for sure,” Callie agreed, wrinkling her nose again.

“Let’s see if we can reach them and set up both of them for around 3:30 or so. Then we can have a little time before we leave to snoop around the neighborhood.”

“Snoop?” Callie asked.

Jed laughed, “What else would you call it?”

“Um... informally investigate?”

“Right,” Jed said, “snoop.”

When Callie called Dr. Rose, he sounded as reluctant to talk her as the first time, but somewhat grudgingly agreed to meet her at a coffee shop in Highland at 3:30.

“He doesn’t want me to come to his house,” she told Jed.

“Interesting. I wonder what he’s hiding? Not Gini, I hope!”

“Oh my God, Jed! You’re scaring me again. Don’t even think like that!”

“We have to think like that. We don’t know who has her. And we don’t know this guy.”

“But Gini really likes him. Maybe she’s even falling in love with him. It’s hard for me to think he could be the bad guy. I admit he didn’t sound very friendly. But I think you have to keep an open mind about him at least.”

Jed caressed her cheek. ”I’m trying, but I’m not getting a very pleasant impression of him. I have to say though that hearing how unfriendly he sounds, I’m glad he wants you to meet him in a public place.”

“I think he’s just being cautious. He doesn’t know me, after all.”

“True,” Jed said, giving her a quick hug. “If he knew you, he’d know you’re super sweet and downright virtuous.”

That elicited an cynical chuckle from Callie.

“I wonder what he does know about me?” Callie mused. “I’m sure Gini must have mentioned me to him at some point.”

“Well,” Jed said, “I guess you’ll get a chance to find out this afternoon.”

Callie’s arrangement having been made, Jed found Ron’s phone number in the notes he’d made the day before and called, introducing himself as Callie’s fiancé.

Hanging up, he said, “Ron sounded surprised by my call, but he seems eager to meet with me. He said he was already informed by the Sheriff that Gini is missing. He sounds genuinely worried.”

Callie said, “Yeah, in spite of my opinion of him, I think he does still care about her.”

Chapter Twenty-six

CALLIE

Having concluded that their plans for the afternoon were as complete as they could make them, Jed and Callie left the house to start their canvass of the neighbors around the cul-de-sac.

Glancing back at his black Jeep as she walked past it, Callie remarked, “I wonder where there’s a car wash around here. Your Jeep looks like it took a mud bath.”

Jed shrugged, “That’s what Jeeps are for. But, yeah, it could use a good hose down. Time enough for that when we finish up here.”

At the end of the driveway, he asked, “Left or right?”

“Let’s do the couple I’ve met before first,“ Callie decided, turning toward the left.

A low picket fence divided the front of the two properties, a taller one at the rear. As they walked up the neighbors’ driveway, Jed noted that because the houses were set at an angle to each other to accommodate the circular street, it would be difficult to see much of Gini’s property from that house.

“You’re right,” Callie said, glancing toward Gini’s driveway, partially hidden by the fence. “Probably you could see more of her driveway from the second floor, but the best view would be from across the circle.”

Nonetheless they climbed the short set of steps to the bright red front door bearing a wreath of silk-flower daffodils and rang the bell. Big Ben chimes sounded and the yipping of small dogs instantly followed.

A plump blond woman wearing a pink tunic over charcoal gray yoga pants opened the inner door and peered through the glass of a sturdy storm door. “Oh! I know you! You’re Gini’s friend from Long Island.”

“That’s right,” Callie responded. “I’m glad you remember me.”

“Come in. Come in!” she welcomed them, pushing the outer door wide and ushering them into a terra cotta-tiled foyer. “Rich, we have company!”

A tall, balding man of about fifty rose from the chintz-covered sofa where he’d been watching a baseball game and nearly overwhelmed Callie with a bear hug. “Sit. Sit.” He gestured toward the sofa, picking up a remote and shutting down a large flat-screen TV. “Just Spring Training,” he shrugged.

Meanwhile his wife scooped up two small fluffy beige dogs and hustled them into another room where the yipping continued only slightly muted. “I’m Gloria,” she told Jed, returning to the livingroom.

Callie finished the introductions and then Gloria was off to the kitchen without asking if they wanted anything. She returned quickly with a tole-craft tray bearing a coffee carafe, delicate coffee cups and dessert dishes piled with wedges of coffee cake topped with slivered almonds. She set this before them on a long glass-topped coffee table.

As she poured coffee into their cups, Gloria said, “I hope you’re going to tell us what’s going on at Gini’s house. I’ve been dying to know what all the police were doing there. I tried her phone, but the voicemail box was full.”

Jed asked, “Didn’t the police come by to question you?”

“No. The Town cops just taped off her driveway and hung around.”

Rich interrupted, “Not like the Sheriff’s people. They looked pretty busy for a little while from what I could see. But I couldn’t tell what they were doing.”

“Kept looking around in the bushes is all I could see,“ Gloria contributed.

Rich held up his hand toward her in a “stop” gesture. “Please Callie, Jed, tell us what’s going on. We’ve been really worried, especially when she didn’t answer her phone.”

Callie took a sip of very good coffee and started to explain. “I came up Friday night to visit Gini. It was very late because I got stuck in flooding coming through the City.”

“That was some bad rain,” Rich agreed.

“So I didn’t get here till nearly midnight and when I arrived, Gini was gone.”

“Gone!” Gloria breathed.

“Missing,” Jed explained.

“Oh, thank goodness! I thought you meant...,” she paused, “But missing is bad, too.”

“Yes.” Callie agreed. “We’re trying to talk to people who know her, to see if anyone has seen or heard anything that could help us find her.”

Rich asked, “Shouldn’t the police be doing that?”

Callie nodded, “They are. Or the Sheriff’s Office is anyway. But I thought that maybe people would be more willing to talk to me than to a cop.”

Rich said, “Could be. We would have been glad to talk to the police, though. Only, as I said before, they didn’t even come to our door. Neither the Town cops nor the Sheriff.”

“Well,” Jed said, “maybe you can tell us what you would have told them. Have you seen anyone you don’t know hanging around the neighborhood?”

Gloria replied, “I don’t know that we’d have noticed anyone strange. You know, Gini has clients coming and going and Madge across the way always has a lot of church people over.”

“Not to mention all the friends of kids along the street,“ Rich added. “And plumbers and what-not working at people’s houses. There are always a lot of different cars and trucks around.”

“The weather was bad that day so we weren’t outside,” Gloria added, sounding worried. “Maybe if we had been....”

Callie made some reassuring noises while Jed asked, “Did Gini ever mention being afraid of anyone or even just someone who made her uncomfortable?”

Gloria shook her head, “Not that I remember, but anyway we didn’t see much of her over the winter. It’s just now getting to be good enough weather to see people out and about.”

“And,” Rich added, “when we did catch a glimpse of her, she seemed to always be busy with clients or the boyfriend.”

“The boyfriend,” Jed said. “What can you tell us about her boyfriend?”

Callie gave him an annoyed look.

“Don’t know much to tell,“ Rich said. “He drives a black Mercedes with MD plates, so I guess he’s a doctor.”

“Not very friendly,” Gloria commented, “not even a nod if he sees us outside.”

“Did Gini tell you anything about him?” Jed persisted.

“Not that I can recall, but as I said, we haven’t seen much of her lately,“ Gloria said. Rich nodding assent.

That area of inquiry apparently closed, Jed asked, “OK. Any scary-looking clients?”

“Just regular-looking people. Maybe sad or worried, but regular people. We can’t see much anyway. Just when they drive past.” This from Gloria.

“The fence blocks a lot of our view,” Rich explained.

Callie rose reluctantly, admitting to herself that nothing more could be learned by staying. “It’s been great seeing you again. I wish the circumstances were better. I hate to cut the visit short, but we need to get on to the rest of the neighbors.”

At the door she added, “Thanks for the coffee and the information. Every bit we can learn is a help.”

She found one of her business cards in her shoulder bag and wrote her cell number on the back. “If you remember anything or see anything strange later, please call me. We’re staying at Gini’s house, so I’ll be right here for a few days.”

Rich said, “Don’t forget to call us if you learn anything about Gini,” and handed her a memo-pad sheet with their number scribbled on it.

Outside on the concrete walk, Jed said, “I don’t think we learned much there.”

Callie agreed, then added, “You seem obsessed with making Mark Rose a suspect.”

Jed shrugged, “You notice, they didn’t seem to like him much.”

“They don’t even know him.”

Turning left again, Jed took the lead when they reached the door of the next house, the first one at the entrance to the circle. He stepped up onto the brick floor of the porch and rang the bell.

A gangly teen-aged girl with fly-away pink hair answered, holding a sniffling blond toddler on her hip and flicking her eyes toward the storm door handle as if to make sure it was securely locked.

When Jed began to explain what they wanted, she shouted through the glass that she was the babysitter and didn’t live in the neighborhood and wasn’t allowed to open the door. They would have to try another time.

Jed wrote a note on the back of his business card and pushing it into the slit of the storm door frame near the lock, and shouted, “Please ask the people you sit for to call us.”

Callie said, turning away, “Not likely they will. Especially when they look at that business card and see you’re a reporter.”

“You’d be surprised. A lot of people think seeing their names in print makes them celebrities.”

As they crossed the road, Jed looked toward Gini’s house. “Better view from this side, anyway.”

“Even from here, you can’t see much except the end of her driveway, though,” Callie responded.

“No,” Jed agreed. The fence still hides a lot.”

The man who opened the door at the first house on that side appeared to be in his eighties. He pushed the stormdoor out a few inches and squinted at them through thick lenses. In the background, a ball game blared from a TV.

“Who is it, Pop?” a woman’s voice shouted from somewhere inside.

“I don’t know them!” he shouted back.

“Well, let me by then,” the voice got closer and a waspish woman pushed past him. “We don’t buy from door-to-door sales and we like our own religion,” she shouted through the storm door.

“No, Ma’am,“ Jed said. “We’re neither of those.”

Callie wished she’d had time to stick her foot in the opening of the outer door before the woman wrenched the elderly man back by his arm and slammed both inner and outer doors shut.

Turning to Callie, Jed shrugged, “Struck out with that one.”

She sighed, “They probably couldn’t see much anyway,” as they trudged on to the next house.

Callie’s enthusiasm for the process was diminishing fast. She wondered how Jed could endure interview after interview in his work. She looked at her watch. “Jed, we need to leave soon if we’re going to keep those appointments.”

“Right. Let’s just try one more. Is the next one where the woman you call the “Church Lady” lives?”

“Yes. Gloria called her Madge. I didn’t know her name before.”

When they reached the driveway at Madge’s house, Jed turned to look across to Gini’s. “This one has a really good view.”

Unfortunately, when they rang the bell there was no answer. “It’s Sunday,” Callie noted. “She’s probably got some activity at her church this afternoon.”

“Maybe we can catch up to her this evening,” Jed said, putting his arm around Callie’s waist and drawing her close as they crossed the circle back to Gini’s.

Chapter Twenty-seven

CALLIE

The drive to Highland was stop-and-go and Callie was becoming impatient. Who would have thought driving in the Mid-Hudson area would be as bad as on Long Island? A small convoy chugged ahead of her at the center of which was a pre-fabricated house split in half, each half on its own flat-bed trailer. Escort vehicles with flashing lights and red flags came before and behind it. The road was too narrow to allow cars to pass, so traffic backed up for miles. What she remembered as a pleasant drive with small towns interspersed with apple orchards and farms became a long dull crawl. Periodic traffic lights and shopping districts added to the back-up at intermittent intervals. Nervous as she was about talking to the reluctant Dr. Rose, the delays only increased her tension.

Eventually, though, she passed signs for the Walkway over the Hudson and knew she didn’t have much farther to go. Thinking about the Walkway brought memories of visiting the site with Gini shortly after Gini’s move to the area. It had been a warm day in October and the fall colors on the trees along the banks of the Hudson had been spectacular. They had walked partway out onto the converted railway bridge that led all the way across the river to Poughkeepsie, marveling at the view. The memory now brought a rueful smile. They had had such a delightful “girls day out.” Now she could only hope and pray that they would have many more in the future.

When she finally reached Highland and found the Daily Grindings Coffee Shop, its sleek chrome and glass facade looked rather more upscale than Callie had envisioned. But maybe she should have expected that from what she’d heard already about Dr. Rose.

Just as she had at the police station the day before, she felt suddenly shabby in her jeans and heavy cardigan with its yarn slightly shredded by tiny claws. But it was too late to do anything about that now. And, in any case, she reminded herself again, she had not packed anything more stylish. Funny how she found herself caring about her appearance when she hardly gave it more than a brief thought most of the time. It must be because she was here on Gini’s behalf and Gini always knew exactly what was appropriate to wear. She felt as if she was somehow disappointing Gini, meeting her boyfriend looking like this.

The coffee shop appeared to be extremely popular. Groups of chicly-clad twenty- and thirty-somethings clustered around the entrance sipping from tall cranberry-colored cardboard cups.

Finding a parking space proved difficult. She circled the parking lot full of BMWs and Audis until someone backed out of a narrow slot not far from the door and she was able to slip into it, thankful for her small agile *affordable* car.

As she approached the entrance, the tall dark man she recognized from yesterday’s internet research stood waiting. He wore pressed khakis, a soft-looking blue pullover and an exasperated expression. “Dr. Templand?” he asked abruptly.

“Ms, actually. But please call me Callie. You must be Dr. Rose.”

He nodded stiffly, notably not suggesting she call him Mark, and led her to a minuscule table near the back, far from the crowd gathered near the bustling barista station. She noted that the table was already set for two with bone-white mugs bearing the same coffee-grinder logo that appeared on the front window. A carafe of plain black coffee on a warming tray sat at its center next to a ceramic sugar and creamer set matching the mugs.

*Definitely a cut above those cardboard take-out cups. But what if I wanted a latte?*

Seating herself, she fiddled with the silverware set out on her cranberry linen placemat for a moment, then caught herself and made her hands still. He looked across at her as if she were a bad-mannered child who ought not be taken out to a public place.

Pouring a cup of coffee for himself, then reaching across to pour for her, he said, “I’m not sure what you think you can learn from me.”

*Cutting right to the point apparently.*

“I won’t know that until we’ve talked,” she countered, reaching for the sugar bowl and scooping one spoonful into her cup, then adding a dollop of cream.

“*Ms*. Templand, I will tell you right from the outset, as I told that Sheriff’s detective, I have no idea what can have happened to your friend.”

*Your friend?*

Unwilling to ignore the condescending way he emphasized her lack of professional title, Callie replied, “*Dr*. Rose, you have spent more time with Gini than I have over the past few months. If she was feeling threatened by someone or something, I think you would have noticed.”

“You are making an incorrect assumption.” He drew back in his chair. “We did not have such a close relationship as you imagine.”

*Past tense?*

“Really?” Callie asked, trying hard to keep her voice level. “Gini gave me the impression you two spent a good deal of time together.”

“If you mean the occasional Saturday dinner or a concert at one of the local colleges, I suppose you could construe it that way.”

*And the occasional night in her bed with your Mercedes in her driveway.*

“OK,” she conceded. “You and Gini aren’t as close as I thought. Even so, I think you would have picked up on any emotional nuances like fear or depression. You are a psychiatrist, after all.”

“I prescribe medication for my patients. I don’t psychoanalyze them. And I certainly don’t analyze my friends and colleagues.”

*In which of those categories is he putting Gini?*

Callie raised her coffee cup from its saucer, her grip tense on the handle. If he was trying to make her angry, it was working. She tried another tactic. “Tell me this. Did Gini ever say anything about problems or threats from clients?”

“Surely you don’t think we would discuss confidential communication?” He sounded affronted, as though she had attacked his ethics or his integrity.

“Of course not. I know how careful Gini is about that. But if she felt threatened, she might have mentioned it without breaking confidence.”

“She had a consulting therapist for that.”

“Yes,” Callie said bluntly, “and that therapist is dead. In a very suspicious accident.”

“Surely not suspicious. I saw the news coverage. Merely an accident,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Callie decided not to elaborate. There was no advantage in telling this infuriating prick all that she knew.

She carefully lifted her cup again and took a few calming sips. Internally, she was shaking with anger now and had to hold it in both hands to keep from spilling it. Setting it down carefully instead of giving in to her desire to throw it at him, she rose from her chair, saying, “I’m sorry I’ve taken up your time.”

*Sorrier you’ve taken up mine.*

Striding from the shop, she wished the place had the kind of door she could slam.

As she drove south, Callie was still boiling. She decided that she needed to calm down before she began driving erratically and became a road hazard. Fortunately, she’d been reminded as she drove north of the perfect place to cool off. The Walkway over the Hudson beckoned her.

When she pulled into the primitive parking lot, she found only two other vehicles sitting there. It had been much more crowded that time she came with Gini. But now it was still early March and outdoor recreation was not as tempting as it would be in warmer weather. Right now it was perfect for her, though. The cold air near the river really met her need.

She left the car near the squat concession stand, not yet open for the season, and jogged out onto the surface of the bridge. A cold wind blew off the river making her wish she had worn something warmer. She slowed to a brisk walk for a few hundred feet more, wrapping her arms around her chest against the cold and then rested, looking out over the rail at the river below. A wide gray barge laden with stacks of lumber and a rusty old oil tanker passed below her. She reflected that in only a couple of months the Hudson, like the waterways surrounding Long Island, would be crowded with cabin cruisers and sailboats. She vowed to come back then...with Gini.

The loud unmistakable honking of Canada Geese drew her attention and, looking up, she saw the long “V” flying north far overhead. *The promise of Springtime,* she reflected, but the thought brought only sadness.

Two young women on bicycles rode past her, their cheeks glowing with exertion and the chill. They greeted her with joyful smiles and a friendly wave. Seeing their youthful exuberance reminded her of the happy times she and Gini had so often spent together. She repeated her vow. *I’ll come back with Gini when the warmer weather comes.*

Hugging herself against the chill, she headed back to her car, her equanimity restored and her determination to find Gini renewed.

Chapter Twenty-eight

CALLIE

Jed had not yet returned from his interview with Ron Makin when Callie reached the

cul-de-sac, so she decided to go ahead without him and talk to more of the neighbors before she lost the energy the visit to the river had given her.

Opting to begin with the one she expected to be the most distasteful and get it overwith, she turned to the house on the right. She admitted to herself that she was hoping the guy who had propositioned Gini was not at home. She was sure that she would be uncomfortable talking to him. But she squared her shoulders and told herself that it couldn’t be as unpleasant as her meeting with Mark Rose had been.

She walked past a low hedge separating the properties and approached a brick Colonial with cobalt blue shutters framing its windows upstairs and down. Ruffled white curtains adorned all the windows and a “Welcome Spring” lawn flag stood near the porch steps.

She breathed a sign of relief when a slim woman in her forties, brown hair up in rollers, answered the door. “Hello,” she started, speaking quickly, “I won’t take up much of your time. I’m a friend of Gini next door and I’d like to talk to you about her.”

The woman held the door open just enough to be heard. “What about her?”

Callie hesitated at the hostile tone. “Um... Did you know she’s missing?”

“Missing? Really? No, I didn’t know. I just got back from upstate a couple of hours ago.” She paused, “But I can’t say I’m surprised. Probably ran off with someone’s husband.”

“Why would you say that?” Callie asked, although she thought she knew why.

“Everyone knows. Men coming and going all the time.”

“Excuse me?” Callie said. “I can’t imagine what you’re implying. She does have male clients coming for therapy. Maybe that’s what you’ve been seeing.”

“Ha! Clients? That what she calls them? There’s not a man in the county that’s safe from her. Thinks she’s such a cute little thing,” she sneered.

Callie stood straighter. “I’m sure that’s not true.” *Though it’s true Gini really is “a cute little thing,*” she reflected.

“Think what you want. I know what I know.” And with that, she closed the door, leaving Callie shaking her head in disbelief. *Oh well. She wasn’t home when it happened anyway. But was her husband away, too? Better ask Jed to follow up later. I sure don’t want to.*

A “For Sale” sign stood on the lawn in front of the next house to the right, and the blank, uncurtained windows advertized an empty house.

Crossing the circle, she found that Madge was still not at home, so she went on to the next house where a pair of tricycles and other children’s toys cluttered the lawn. The view of Gini’s place was excellent, but unfortunately, no one came to the door. She stuck her business card with a note into the crack of the storm door as Jed had done at the other house earlier.

Feeling discouraged, she turned toward the top of the circle where the teens she’d seen on Saturday were again noisily shooting hoops.

As she approached, the game came to a halt and three sets of curious eyes appraised her.

“Hey,” yelled the tallest, a muscular kid with a blond man bun, “you the lady with the blue Honda?”

Callie was taken aback for a moment. “Yes. That’s me. Do you know everybody by what they drive?”

“Mostly,” he grinned.

“That’s great. Sounds like maybe you can help me.”

For some secret teen reason, that brought a shove and a snicker from one of his buddies. “Cut it out!”

“Seriously,” Callie said, “If you know which car is mine, you probably know I’m visiting Dr. Colden.” Three heads bobbed.

“Yeah, but she ain’t there,” the short, dark one said. “I heard she was kidnaped.”

Callie nodded. “It looks that way. That’s why I need some help. I’m trying to find her.”

The third boy, a freckled redhead, spoke up, “What about all those cops that were over there yesterday? That’s their job.”

The blond one added, “Yeah, this morning I saw the Sheriff over at the empty house with the lady from the Real Estate office. Bet they thought someone hid her there.”

Callie replied, “Yes. The Sheriff’s searching for her. I didn’t know they looked at that house. I’m glad they did. But I feel like I need to be looking, too. She’s my best friend and I can’t just sit around and wait.”

The words “best friend” brought nods. That was a concept they understood.

“So, like, how would we be able to help?” asked the dark one. “We don’t know nothing.”

“It’s possible,” Callie said, “that you know something and don’t realize it.”

“Like what?”

“Like cars. You know cars and you know which cars belong in this neighborhood.”

“Right,” the redhead nodded. “We do.”

“I don’t,” said the dark one.

“You don’t live here.” Dismissed by the redhead, he picked up the ball and began to bounce it hard on the asphalt driveway, making loud thumps.

“So,” Callie said, over the noise, “You two live along the circle?”

They nodded. “This is his house,” said the blond pointing his chin at the redhead, “and I live down at the other end. He’s Jamie and I’m Tyler, by the way.”

“Callie,” she said, shaking their sweaty hands.

Tyler picked up the thread. “So you think we would know if some car that didn’t belong here was hanging around. Like we noticed your Honda.”

“And your boyfriend’s Jeep,” Jamie added.

“That’s right,” Callie replied, amused that they’d figured out her relationship with the Jeep’s driver. “So... did you see any strange vehicles on Friday or maybe a few days before that?”

“We usually hang out here after school,” Jamie said, “but it was pretty wet Friday.”

“Yeah,” the third boy said, coming back into the group, holding the ball on his hip. “We were inside playing video games.”

Disappointed, Callie said, “So you didn’t see anything?”

“Not Friday,” Tyler said.

“But...?” Callie held her breath.

“Yeah. It might be nothing, but a couple of times in the last few weeks there was an old Ford F-150 pick-up up the street from your friend’s house. Not right in front, though. By the empty house. It was weird because no one lives there now and I never saw the driver get out.”

Callie’s heart jumped. “What color was it?”

“I think black or dark blue. It was getting dark both times I saw it. We usually break up the game at sunset and I was walking home. I live in the end house on this side.”

Callie thought for a moment. “There was an older man there when I went to the door?”

“Yeah. That’s my grandpop. He lives with us.”

Choosing not to elaborate on the rudeness of the boy’s mother, Callie went on, “Did you get a look at the driver?”

“Only a shadow. They were parked away from the streetlight and I wasn’t paying much attention anyway. At least not till I saw it the second time. It didn’t stand out right away. You know, we see a lot of pick-ups around. Carpenters, electricians.”

“Cesspool cleaners,” the dark one offered.

“Shut up, Hal,”

“That’s why I noticed, I guess. It was late for any of those repair guys to be around and there was no writing on the door or anything.”

Hal held his ground, “And a worker would’ve gotten out of the truck, right?”

“That’s good logic,” Callie said, sensing that the smaller boy needed some validation.

“Any other strange vehicles?” she added.

“There’re always a lot of cars by Mrs. Hotaling’s,” Jamie said.

“She’s the lady with all the church committees?” Callie asked.

“Yeah, but they just park around the circle and go in her house. They don’t hang around.”

“Sometimes other people have friends over, too. We don’t know everybody,” Tyler acknowledged.

“I’m sure that’s true,” Callie said, “but you’d have noticed anyone acting strange, I’m pretty sure. Like Tyler noticed the pick-up.”

They all grunted agreement.

The sun was starting to set and a silver Toyota sedan pulled up to the curb. An olive-skinned woman looked at Callie curiously as she rolled down the window and shouted Hal’s name. He dropped the ball and jogged over to the car, getting in on the passenger’s side.

It was clearly time for the group to break up. Jamie picked up the ball that Hal had dropped and tossed it onto the porch of his house while Tyler started rolling the portable basket along Jamie’s driveway toward the garage.

Callie waved her thanks to the boys and began to walk back to Gini’s.

On her way she made a point of walking past the empty house. Coming abreast of it, she stepped to the curb and looked toward Gini’s house. The curve of the roadway made the view of Gini’s driveway perfect. And looking up, she could see that Tyler was right about the lack of a street light close by.

Satisfied, she quickened her walk to a slow trot. She couldn’t wait to get back to Gini’s house and call Detective Greenliegh with her new clue.

Chapter Twenty-nine

CALLIE

Callie had just finished leaving a message for Detective Greenliegh when Jed came through the back door carrying a paper shopping bag with a large red Chinese symbol on it. “I come bearing sustenance, Madame.”

With a flourish, he set each item out on the table, imitating the tone of an snooty waiter. “General Tso’s Chicken. Beef with Broccoli. Fried Rice. Fortune Cookies. Tea bags. Chopsticks.”

Callie gave him a crushing hug.

“Whoa!” he shouted, “Let’s have Chinese food every night!”

Laughing, Callie found plates and napkins, setting them out on the kitchen table before filling Gini’s kettle with water for tea.

As they ate, Callie told Jed about her conversation with the teens. “You know those kids who are always playing basketball up the street?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, a couple of them are real car buffs. They keep tabs on all the vehicles around the cul-de-sac. One of them said there was a dark-colored pick-up hanging around near that empty house up the road a couple of times in the past few weeks. It has to mean something, Jed. A black pick-up ran Dr. Hebron off the road.”

Jed was more cautious. “I hope you’re right, but there are lots of black pick-ups.”

Callie stopped with her chopsticks half-way to her mouth. “Jed. Remember when Charlie Irvin slammed out of the house? He drove by in a black pick-up!”

Jed nodded. “He did. It was in the picture on his website, too. But is it the same black pick-up your teens saw? And is either of those the one that hit Dr. Hebron?”

Callie backtracked, remembering more of her conversation with the boys. “And anyway, Tyler said there was no sign on the door of the truck he saw. Charlie’s said ‘Irvin Enterprises’.”

“That sign on Charlie’s looked magnetic. He can take it off anytime,” Jed remarked.

Callie shook her head, not knowing what to think. “Ok. Well maybe the paint analysis from Dr. Hebron’s car is done. Maybe then we’d have a better idea about the truck.”

Both of them knew it was unlikely that the analysis would be done so soon, so Jed changed the subject. “How was your visit with Dr. Rose?”

Callie sputtered, “I can’t believe Gini actually finds anything to like about that guy! He’s as cold as ice and totally condescending,”

“You know I thought all along he sounded like a snob,” Jed said, “but you kept telling me Gini really likes him. So she must see something in him beyond what you saw.”

“I’m so afraid she still feels the need for a man to be in control. He was absolutely dominant every minute of our meeting. It’s a pattern I’ve seen in her before, but I thought she’d finally overcome that after Ron.”

Jed nodded, “Do you thinks he could be so controlling that he’d abduct her to keep her all for himself?”

“Jed, that sounds so sinister! But anyway, he acted like he doesn’t care that much about her.”

“Could he be behaving like that to cover it up?” Jed asked. “Remember, he didn’t want to meet you at his house.”

Callie pushed her plate aside, no longer hungry. “I don’t know. I guess he could be ruthless enough. But Detective Mann was at his house when I called, remember. Wouldn’t he have found her?”

“Not without a search warrant,” Jed countered.

“You’re really scaring me,” Callie said. “But really, I don’t see why would he do it.”

“Why would anyone?” Jed asked. “I could ask the same question about Ron. More so in fact.”

“Tell me about Ron,” Callie said, needing to move away from the horrible possibility Jed had brought up, yet needing even more to be willing to consider it.

Jed took a sip of his tea and wrinkled his nose. “Did I ever tell you I hate tea? I only brought it because they threw the bags in with the order.”

“About Ron?” Callie insisted.

“Yeah. Ron. I think he still loves Gini. I think he’s genuinely scared for her.”

“So you don’t think he could have abducted her?”

“It doesn’t seem likely. And you know how suspicious I can be.”

“I know. You’ve been proving it all day. It’s your reporter instinct, I guess. So, tell me what he said.”

“He said he was glad to know that you are here looking for her.”

Callie frowned. “He really said something nice about me?”

“Yeah,” Jed nodded. “He doesn’t seem to hold anything against you. He was glad Gini has a friend to look out for her.”

“There it is again. That idea that Gini needs someone to look out for her. Like she’s not a grown woman who can take care of herself.”

Jed grunted. “Seems like someone is proving that true right now.”

Callie didn’t want to hear that. “Jed, we don’t know what happened. Maybe she was taken by surprise. Maybe she was overpowered. Oh, God! What am I thinking?”

“Sorry. What I said was snarky. But seriously, whatever happened, Gini wasn’t able to control it. And it’s the way Ron came across, you know? Like he thinks of her as a delicate child who needs protection.”

“He does. That’s why they’re divorced. That, and Hanna.”

Jed said, “Ron says he doesn’t understand what went wrong. Before Hanna. He told me he ‘put her on a pedestal.’”

Callie grunted, “You know that’s just another way to keep a woman in her place.”

“OK. I’ll make a point of remembering that. No pedestal for you,” Jed teased.

Callie decided not to veer off into a discussion of her feminist sensibilities. *Probably ought to sometime, though*. Instead, she asked, “Did you ask him about Hanna?”

“I didn’t need to. He went on about how he should never have been unfaithful and he’s learned his lesson and all he wants is for Gini to forgive him.”

“Not likely, at least not for his sake. She told me she was working on it with Hope’s help for her own peace of mind, though. To stop carrying that anger around,“ Callie said. “But getting back to your talk with him, he’s definitely not seeing Hanna?”

“No. He said they don’t even work at the same office anymore. He hasn’t seen her in a long time.”

“So he doesn’t know if Hanna still blames Gini for when he dumped her?” Callie asked.

“He said the last he heard, she was seeing someone new.”

“That sounds like a dead end then.”

“I think the cops should still track her down to be sure. Ron might not know what’s really going on with Hanna. By the way, he did verify her last name. We found the right one,” Jed said.

Callie’s phone pinged, interrupting the conversation. “It’s a text from Detective Greenliegh.” She thumbed her phone and read aloud, “Thanks for the info on the truck. I’ll stop by in the morning. I want to talk to you again.”

Callie replied with a “thumbs up” icon and put the phone on the table.

“What was that about?” Jed asked.

“Oh. What I told you before. The black pick-up. I texted Detective Greenliegh about it. She just answered.”

“Interesting. So she’s thinking what you’re thinking? Dark pick-up. Black pick-up...”

Callie nodded, “She didn’t say. She did say she’s coming over tomorrow to talk about something though.” She paused, “But, like we were saying a little while age, there are so many dark pick-ups everywhere that it seems far-fetched to assume it’s the same one. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking.”

“Even so...,” Jed mused aloud. Then, handing her a fortune cookie, he said lightly, “I guess speculation isn’t getting us anywhere. So let’s see what life has in store for us.”

Callie smiled, happy to be talking about something more pleasant. “You first.”

“OK,” he said, snapping the sticky shell and drawing out a long strip of paper. “Your lucky numbers are 5, 12, 16, 24, 41.”

“Turn it over,” she laughed.

“Hmm... ‘Happiness comes as the wild bird sings.’ He shook his head. “That one’s going to take some pondering.”

“I hope it doesn’t mean you have to be free to be happy.”

“Not a chance! Open yours.”

Callie silently made a wish as she cracked hers open. *Please say something positive!*

“‘You will find what you are seeking.’ Oh, Jed! I pray that’s true!”

Later in the evening, having reluctantly concluded that there was nothing more they could do that day about finding Gini, Callie was comfortably cuddled against Jed’s chest on the sofa, She had drifted off while watching a boring movie on TV when Jed’s cell blasted “The Ride of the Valkyries.” Startled, she jerked upright, her mind, half-asleep, registering fear.

“It’s OK, Babe.” Jed laid a hand gently on her shoulder. “That’s just my editor’s ringtone.”

He grabbed his phone from the end table and Callie listened as he said, “Jed here... Yes... I don’t know... The office would be a trek. What do you need?... Uh huh... Can I do it from here? I can try to connect from my laptop. If not, there must be a library with access... Yeah. OK... I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Hanging up, he said, “They need me to look at some follow-up stuff from my Chicago story. He thinks I can probably get access to the Chicago papers at the University Library in New Paltz. I’ll run over there early tomorrow if I still can’t get connected with my laptop.”

“They’ll let you use their system?”

“I’m pretty sure they will. You’d be surprised how impressed librarians can be by my press credential... and my boyish charm.” Callie smacked him on the arm.

“What about Detective Greenliegh? She said she’s coming over in the morning.”

“Looks like you might get her all to yourself.”

Chapter Thirty

GINI

When I wake again, I feel much better. My back and feet are still tender and I have some pain in my right arm, but I am more alert. For the first time since I’ve been here, I’m really hungry.

I sit up and realize that I’m no longer dizzy, so I put my feet on the floor and stand gingerly. I find that I can stand on the polished wooden floor in bare feet with very little pain. My balance seems to be ok, so I walk to the door and call to Molly.

She bustles down the hall from a room at the far end, wiping her hands on a blue dish towel. “Oh! Gini, I’m so glad to see you up. Would you like to come into the kitchen and get something to eat?”

Gratefully, I agree and she puts her hand under my arm to support me for the short distance to the kitchen, though I am pretty sure I could do it without help.

“There’s some lamb stew left from dinner. Fresh made,” Molly says and, hearing the word “dinner,” I look out the window. I was concentrating so hard on getting up and walking that I haven’t noticed till now that it’s dark outside.

It troubles me to think that another whole day has gone by and I haven’t been able to let Callie or Hope or anyone else know I’m OK. I’ve begun worrying about my clients, too. I have two scheduled for Tuesday evening and several more each of the next few days. How will they react when they arrive for their sessions and I’m not there? Especially the fragile ones. I can’t let that happen.

Recognizing that fretting over that won’t help anything, I push the thought aside. I will figure something out in the morning. If I was able to get myself out of that basement, I will find a way out of here as well.

I sit on a solid wooden chair at a plain oak table. To distract myself from worrying, I examine my surroundings. The kitchen is modern, with open shelving on which plain white dishes are stacked. Pots and pans hang from hooks in the ceiling above a long butcherblock counter flanking a white gas range. Simple blue and white gingham curtains cover the room’s two windows. Lots of small pots of plants like the ones in the bedroom sit on the windowsills.

More to make conversation than out of real curiosity, I ask as Molly dishes up the stew and sits across from me, “Is the furniture hand-made?”

“Oh yes. We have a very well-equipped carpentry shop. Our carpenter often sells pieces like this on the outside. People appreciate how well-made they are.”

“I’ve never been in a place like this before. Everything seem primitive and yet modern at the same time.”

“I don’t know that I’d use the word ‘primitive’,” Molly says a bit tartly.

“I didn’t mean it in a derogatory way,” I say. “It’s just that everything seems hand-made and very plain, yet you have modern appliances. I don’t know what to call it.”

Molly smiles, “Call it simplicity. We do. We have only what we consider the very basic necessities of a comfortable life. No dishwasher, no clothes dryer. A good sturdy stove and refrigerator and washing machine, though.”

I look around the kitchen again, verifying for myself what she describes. My eyes light on the plants on the windowsills which makes me think about the dried herbs in the room in which I’ve been staying. “Molly,” I say, “can I ask you something? I don’t mean to be rude, but with the herbs and all, are you a real nurse?”

Molly laughs, “You mean as opposed to a witch doctor?”

I feel myself blushing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s OK, Hon. I understand how you must be confused. Yes, a real nurse. B.S.N. from SUNY Plattsburgh and additional courses in Holistic Nursing.”

“The herbs,” I say, beginning to understand. “That was an herbal salve you used on my back, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Our community members call it ‘Molly’s Miracle Cure.’ It’s got some comfrey leaves and calendula in it. Wonderful for skin abrasions.”

“I can understand why they call it that. My back and feet feel so much better.”

Molly smiles, “I’m so glad to hear that. And I also use western medicine of course. Did you notice the IV stand by the bed?”

“I wondered about that,” I say, nodding toward the tape still on my arm.

Molly says, “Right. While you were asleep, I gave you intravenous fluids because you were so dehydrated.”

I find that reassuring. But then, thinking again about the room I’ve been closed up in and the constant care Molly has given me, I can’t help returning to my fear about my situation.

I find myself pleading, “Molly, I really appreciate all you’ve done. You probably saved my life. But this can’t go on. I need to find a phone and let people know I’m OK. I need to report what happened to me to the police. And I need to be at my office for my clients.”

“I know, Hon. I haven’t forgotten that. I’m going to send my daughter to fetch Pastor Tom. He’ll know what to do.”

She rises from the table and pats my shoulder. “That reminds me. You need to be properly dressed when you meet with Tom.” I glance down at the long white nightgown I’m wearing. “We found some clothes and shoes I think will fit you at the Exchange.”

“Exchange?”

Molly nods, “It’s the name we give to a room in the Community House where people drop off unwanted clothes and books and toys and such for others to use.”

I shake my head. These people are so different from the world I know. Who just shares belongings like that? In my world people sell those things or donate them to Good Will or some other charity that will sell them. They don’t just leave them for anybody who wants them.

Molly disappears down the hall for a few minutes and returns with an assortment of neatly pressed used clothing. Holding up some faded jeans, she says, “These look about right. And there are a couple of decent shirts and this sweater.”

She holds out an apparently hand-knit lavender pullover with bright floral embroidery at the neckline. “Shoes may be a problem. We found some sneakers I think will fit,” she says, bringing out a pair of red Keds. Then she puts some new, packaged underwear and socks on the table. “These were bartered to the Exchange by one of our customers who runs a discount store. Much of our business here is done through barter.”

I don’t understand. “Barter?”

“Yes. It benefits everyone. Some of the patrons who need our produce or craft-ware can’t afford to pay in cash, so they pay in whatever way they can. They get the things they need and we get things we can’t make or grow here. We do it among ourselves, too. Say I need a couple of bars of soap. I offer our soap-maker some of my herbal teas. It works beautifully.”

I’m still shaking my head in wonder as she helps me carry the clothes to my room.

Am I really thinking of it as my room? I don’t want to think that I’ll be here long enough to have my own room. Anyway, Molly must need this room for sick people. She must run some kind of clinic here for members of the community.

I ask her about that and she confirms it. “Sometimes I take care of people here instead of sending them out to a hospital. Not anyone who needs specialized care, of course. I don’t have the equipment here.”

Before leaving me so I can try on the clothes in privacy, Molly tells me to yell if I need help.

I know I’ve been weak, but I’m not helpless! I can dress myself!

I chide myself for such harsh thoughts toward someone who has been so kind. But I realize it means I’m feeling more confident in my own abilities and that’s a good thing. I’m sure that Molly is just being the great care-giver she is by nature.

It does hurt a little when I raise my right arm to pull first a camisole, then a tee-shirt and finally the sweater over my head, but I can manage with only a slight wince with each tug. I’m definitely feeling better.

Looking at myself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. I have to roll up the bottoms of the jeans about three inches and the sweater hangs to my fingertips. I push the cuffs up above my wrists. That’s better.

The sneakers fit fairly well, but they have no laces.

With the oversized clothing and my hair puffed out around my head, I look like some waif who should be begging on a street corner. My friends and colleagues would never believe I could look like this.

Friends and colleagues! How am I ever going to get back my normal life?

I finger-comb my hair. That helps a little, though the curls still want to go their own way. The shampoo Mollie used when she helped me wash my hair probably didn’t have any conditioner in it.

As strong as I felt a moment ago, the sight of myself in the mirror brings on an overwhelmingly helpless feeling. I sit on the edge of the bed and dissolve in tears. Thoughts swirl in my head. Am I a guest here or a captive? Molly has been so good to me, but she isn’t helping me get back to my life.

Is it possible she won’t let me go? What if they grow their community by keeping people from leaving? No, that’s crazy. Molly said they’ll bring the Pastor to help me. What if he won’t? Or can’t? Maybe I should sneak out on my own now that I have clothes. No. My abductor could be just down the road.

I don’t know what to do. I might not be safe even when I find a way to get home.

I shake myself. I can’t let fear take over. I have to find a way to help myself.

I force myself to think again about who could have done this to me. If I can figure that out, I can tell the police when I get out of here and then I won’t have to be afraid to go home.

I still can’t imagine anyone I know wanting to harm me. They said I know too much. What do I know? I still can’t think of anything serious enough for someone to do this. I’m just going around it circles again. None of it makes sense.

Interrupting my mental merry-go-round, Molly knocks, then peeks through the door. “Hon, Pastor’s not going to be able to see you till morning. He has a Bible-study class to lead this evening.”

I burst into tears again and she rushes over and puts her arms around me. “It’ll be OK.” she croons. “We’ll go to Morning Prayer together and then Pastor Tom will meet with you right after. That’s what he told Amy.”

“Amy?”

“My daughter. You haven’t met her yet.”

I nod acknowledgment. I remember Molly saying she was going to send her daughter to bring the Pastor here. And I remember hearing a younger woman’s voice when I first woke up. That was Amy I assume.

“Meanwhile,” Mollie says, “you need to get a good night’s sleep. I can help you with that. I know a wonderful healing technique that will relax you. Actually, I used it with you while you were asleep when you first came here, though I’m sure you won’t remember.”

“You’re not going to knock me out with one of those herbs, are you?” I ask suspiciously, remember the soup.

“No, Hon,” Molly laughs. “This one is totally non-invasive. It’s just sending healing energy to you through my hands. Have you ever heard of Therapeutic Touch?”

“Is that what you were doing when I woke up the first time?”

“So you do remember. That’s right.”

“I just remember it felt warm where your hands were near my arm,” I say. “It’s not like ‘laying on of hands,’ is it? Like some of those evangelical preachers you see in movies?” I ask apprehensively.

Molly shakes her head. “It’s a little like that, but it’s not necessarily a religious thing. I do believe it’s God’s energy coming through, but you can learn to do it even if you don’t believe that. It was created by a nurse, actually. Dolores Krieger, along with her friend Dora Kunz. They taught it for years to nurses and others to help patients relax and to sooth pain. I learned it directly from them, in fact, at one of the training weekends they used to run across the river from here.”

I’m still not sure, but I have come to trust Molly. She has already shown me that she is a skilled healer in other ways. And nothing harmful happened this morning when she was doing it as I woke. So I sit in the rocker as she directs and allow her to pass her hands over me, a few inches away from my body. She tells me to close my eyes. I feel a warmth and a sort of tingling sensation. I relax so completely that I drift off to sleep.

Molly has to gently wake me when it’s time to undress and go to bed.

Chapter Thirty-one

CALLIE

Once again Jed had not been able to access the internet for his laptop search apps the night before, so he grabbed a quick cup of coffee in the morning and said he’d get some breakfast somewhere along his route. He took off in his Jeep for New Paltz, leaving Callie to a lonely meal of Pop Tarts that she found in a cupboard.

She briefly reflected on the need to replenish Gini’s groceries. But instead of sitting down and making a shopping list, she found herself obsessing over Detective Greenliegh’s promised visit. She wanted so badly to hear something positive from the Sheriff’s office, but all she could do now was speculate about what the deputy wanted to tell her. Speculating was not a good thing. There were too many negative thoughts pushing through.

After her breakfast, she found herself wandering aimlessly around Gini’s place, unable to settle on anything with which she could distract her thoughts. The house felt so empty, so desolate without Gini’s cheerful presence. Having Jed there was wonderful and, she admitted to herself, delightfully distracting, but still it was Gini’s house and only Gini’s presence could fill it with warmth.

Now even Jed had gone out and left her alone.

Callie didn’t like this lonely feeling. Ordinarily, she was happy to spend time by herself, but the empty house felt downright eerie.

She surveyed the books Gini had arranged on the shelves next to the livingroom’s stone fireplace, even though she knew she wouldn’t be able settle her mind enough to comprehend anything she read. She wasn’t even sure what title she had been looking at immediately after moving to the next.

Then she remembered her vow to search the house for anything that might have been overlooked during her walkthrough with the Sheriff’s deputies.

Starting where she stood by the livingroom bookcases, she began shifting a few books at a time so that she could look behind them. She thought about opening each book to see if any notes fell out, but that seemed a little too obsessive. And too much like something out of a gothic mystery novel.

Next she went through the drawers of the small antique secretary Gini used for personal business. There she found only household bills and receipts, paperclips, rubberbands, stamps and other common office supplies. Having had that thought about gothic mysteries, she amused herself by wondering whether the desk had a secret drawer, but logic prevailed and she convinced herself not to search for one.

Under the sofa cushions she found a few coins and enough dust to make her sneeze. She was amused by that, thinking that Gini was not as bandbox perfect as her wardrobe made her appear. But she knew that anyway. They’d lived together through two years of grad school.

Tiring of the fruitless effort, she looked out the front window wondering whether 8:30 was too early to go across to Madge Hotaling’s house. She could no longer resist the need to be doing something more constructive than searching for some unknown clue like an overaged Nancy Drew. If she had any idea what she was looking for, it would be different.

Pulling on her old sweatshirt against the morning chill, she stepped off Gini’s porch, glad that they had discovered that all of Gini’s doors opened with the same key so that she could use the front door. She walked across the circle to the neat brick house. A corner of her mind registered rows of purple and yellow crocuses coming open along the flagstone walk. At the top of the short flight of steps, she rang the bell next to the dark blue door. She smiled to herself, reflecting that, after all she’d heard about Madge Hotaling, when she’d come here with Jed she’d half expected the doorbell to chime “How Great thou Art.” But it was just a normal two-tone doorbell she heard again.

A sixtyish woman with a tight steel-gray perm, wearing a light blue housecoat, opened the door, looking puzzled at first. Then she smiled and said in a rush, “Ah! I’ve been hoping to meet you. You’re Gini’s friend. I’ve seen you coming and going over there. I know she’s missing, bless her. Have you heard anything?”

Callie interrupted the flow. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Oh no. I’ve been up for an hour. Come in. Can you use some coffee? Breakfast?”

“Coffee would be great.”

Ushering Callie through the house, she introduced herself as Madge and gestured toward a tan upholstered bench in a cozy breakfast nook tucked into a corner of the all-white kitchen. Through a door to the left Callie could see the burgundy-patterned wallpaper of a formal dining room, its polished mahogany table stacked with piles of colorful brochures.

Madge set a china cup and saucer decorated with delicate blue flowers before Callie and placed a coffee carafe on a brass trivet in the middle of the table. She sat across from Callie with her own cup, saying, “I’m so glad you stopped by. I’ve been wanting to talk to you about the goings on over there, but I’ve been so busy... and I don’t like to intrude.”

Callie nodded, “That’s why I came over. I’ve been trying to visit Gini’s neighbors, hoping to learn anything I can about what happened Friday. I stopped over at Gloria’s house yesterday, but she and Rich couldn’t tell me much.”

“No. I imagine they don’t have a very good view of Gini’s house,” Madge commented.

“They don’t, that’s right. They can see cars going into her driveway, but not much else.”

“Who else did you talk to so far?” Madge asked, stirring her coffee.

“Some kids playing basketball up the street and the woman from the house on Gini’s right.”

Madge harrumphed at that. “I suppose she told you Gini tried to steal her husband.”

“Something like that. Do you think she has any reason to believe such a thing?”

“I don’t like to gossip, but I’m afraid she’s rather fixated on women being attracted to him. She even accused me of flirting with him after I lost my husband, may he rest in God’s peace.” She chuckled, “Can you imagine a young man like that being interested in me?” She sipped her coffee and then continued, “In truth, it’s the other way around. He has a roving eye as they say.”

Callie nodded, “I heard something like that from Gini.” She went on, “At any rate, she didn’t know anything about Friday. She said she had been away for the weekend.”

“Oh, yes,” Madge nodded, “I remember seeing her two boys home last week. Spring break, I think. She must have taken them back to that boarding school they go to. Somewhere around Syracuse.”

“Did her husband go upstate as well?”

Madge shook her head. “Now that I couldn’t tell you. I didn’t see him around this weekend, but then I’ve been out most of the time myself.”

Callie was disappointed, but moved on. “That brings us back to the main reason I’m here. Were you home on Friday? I need to know if you saw anything odd across the street if you were.”

“Well, you know,” Madge said, ”I don’t always sleep well and the commotion over there with the police arriving and all woke me up.”

“That would have been around midnight,” Callie acknowledged.

Madge concurred.

“How about earlier? Say from around seven and onward?”

“Well, obviously I don’t watch the neighbors’ houses all the time. I did see a woman leaving Gini’s office, probably around eight or so, a client I imagine. I wasn’t really paying attention. Gini has clients a lot of evenings.” She took a sip. “But then there was something odd a little later. I had typed up the Church Bulletin for Sunday, you know. I’m the Congregation Secretary. So anyway, while it was printing out, I got up to stretch and looked out the window.”

Callie tried to hide her excitement as she waited for her to continue.

“There was a pick-up truck pulled up next to Gini’s car. Where clients usually park? I remember thinking it was odd because she wouldn’t usually see a client that late.”

“Did you see anybody get out of it? Or in?”

“No. Just the truck sitting there.” She added some milk to her coffee and stirred before continuing. “Saturday morning, one of the neighbors called and told me Gini was missing. I saw a police officer on duty out there, so I went over and told her about the truck. She wasn’t very nice.”

*Sgt Todd,* Callie thought. “You didn’t mention it to the Sheriff’s people when they came?”

“No. I was on my way out when the Sheriff came. I didn’t think it was necessary to repeat it. I assumed the police officer would pass it on. And I had things to do.”

“Of course,” Callie agreed.

“But later on yesterday morning there was something else strange. You know that police officer who was so abrupt with me? I saw her at Gini’s house again when I stopped home after church to pick up some flyers for the Women’s Mission League. She was on her knees, looking under a blue car in the driveway. Yours, I think?”

“Looking under my car?”

“Yes. I thought it was odd. But maybe she was looking for something she dropped or maybe she thought you had a flat or something.” Madge shrugged. “Well, anyway, I guess your car was OK. I saw you driving it afterward.”

“True.” Now Callie couldn’t wait to go across and look under her car. Sergeant Todd must have come back to the house while she and Jed were up at the Irvins buying the ring. Probably Madge was right that the sergeant was looking for something she dropped. But even so, Callie couldn’t resist the urge to look under her car herself.

As soon as she could gracefully end the visit she thanked Madge for the coffee and the information and took her leave, promising to let Madge know as soon as she heard anything about Gini. Madge assured her that Gini was in her prayers and, in fact, her name had been included among those in her church’s Prayer Circle.

Callie thanked her again for that act of kindness and hurried back across the road.

As she knelt in the gravel of Gini’s driveway peering under her car, Detective Greenliegh pulled in. “Did you lose something?” she asked as she exited her cruiser.

“Oh, hi!” Callie replied, dusting off her hands and knees. “I was talking to the neighbor across the way this morning and she told me that she saw Sergeant Todd looking under my car. So I was curious to see what she was looking at.”

“Let me do that.” The deputy went back to her car for a moment and came back with a small electronic devise with which she slowly circled the Honda. “Ah ha!”

“What?”

“There’s a GPS tracker under your right rear fender.”

“A GPS tracker? Do you think Sergeant Todd put it there? Why would she do that? It doesn’t make sense.”

“You told me she accused you of knowing where Dr. Colden is. Maybe she thought you’d lead her to her.”

Callie shook her head. “That’s nuts. It’s not even her case. It’s yours.”

“That’s true. She’d be a hero if she found her though.”

Callie could see that. Sergeant Todd seemed to need to be important and solving Gini’s abduction would certainly fill that need. “I’ll bet she’d really crow if she beat the Sheriff to it,” she said. “Well, it didn’t do her any good. And it couldn’t anyway because I don’t know where Gini is.”

“Of course not.”

Callie reflected briefly. “But what made you check for it to begin with?”

Detective Greenliegh shrugged, “Just a hunch. I’ve seen police do that before.”

Realizing she wasn’t going to get a more specific answer, Callie invited the deputy inside.

“You said you wanted to talk to me.”

“You and your fiancé, yes. Is he joining us?”

“No, he had to do some work over at the University this morning.”

Helping herself to a kitchen chair and gesturing for Callie to be seated, she said, “It isn’t much, but I wanted to tell you we have a preliminary report on the paint taken from Dr. Hebron’s car. They can’t give make and model yet, but it’s automotive and degraded. So not a new vehicle.”

“I guess they can’t tell if it’s a truck,” Callie said, disappointed.

“Not from the paint analysis so far, but we do know from the height of the smudge on Dr. Hebron’s fender that it was a tall vehicle, which suggests a truck or SUV.”

Callie thought for moment, “So, putting together what Sergeant Duprey said with what the boys told me yesterday, what you’re looking for is an older model black Ford F-150 pick-up?”

“Looks that way. It’s something to start with anyway. I have someone running vehicle registrations now, but there’re going to be a couple hundred like that in this county and more in the surrounding ones. It won’t be easy. Eliminating them one by one will take a long time.”

“Oh! Wait! How could I forget? I think I got distracted by that GPS you found. There’s more about a truck and it’s really important.” She went on to repeat to Detective Greenliegh what Madge had said about a pick-up in Gini’s driveway Friday evening.

“Did she say what color it was?”

“No. I don’t think so. I just imagined it was black. I didn’t even think to ask.”

“Well, assuming it actually was black, that puts a truck like the one we are looking for right at the scene of the abduction. And it fits with the dog circling the perimeter of a large vehicle,” the deputy said, rising and moving toward the door. “I’d better get back out there and see if I can learn anything more from Mrs. Hotaling or other neighbors. I don’t suppose she got a license plate number. We’re never that lucky.”

When she was gone, Callie felt abandoned, alone in the house again with no idea what she could or should be doing. Then she remembered the fingerprint powder in Gini’s office and gathered up some Lysol wipes from the kitchen.

She wiped off the area around Gini’s desk as best she could, then tried to check out the desk drawers in a continuation of her earlier search. Unfortunately, the drawers were locked as she should have expected.

Disappointed, she walked through to the waiting room.

Pausing for a moment to glance out at the street through one of the waiting room windows, she saw Detective Greenliegh jump into her cruiser and rapidly exit the cul-de-sac.

Chapter Thirty-two

GINI

“Morning has broken like the first morning.

Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.

Praise for the singing.

Praise for the morning.

Praise for them springing fresh from the Word.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thanks to Molly’s Therapeutic Touch last night, I had a wonderfully deep sleep. But now, anticipation of my meeting with the pastor has me worrying again.

I am holding a hymnal, standing next to Molly and her teen-age daughter Amy in a double horseshoe of jeans-clad worshipers of mixed ethnicity, morning light bright through clear glass chapel windows. I let the music wash over me. It’s so beautiful that I almost allow myself to relax, but I don’t dare let myself. I’m too anxious for the service to be over so I can finally talk to Pastor Tom.

He stands on a slightly-raised platform at the open end of the horseshoe looking down at his flock, his resonant voice leading the singing. A tall man in a plaid flannel shirt and jeans like the others, he carries himself with a presence it is hard to ignore. With his broad shoulders and longish auburn hair, he looks more like a lumberjack than a minister. My mind wanders and I find myself wondering what calling led him to gather this odd congregation.

My thoughts return to my own fears when I sense that the early morning service is almost over. And then it isn’t. There’s a short sermon I barely hear in my distracted state, except that I realize suddenly that it seems to be about me when I hear Pastor Tom read a Biblical passage:

“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show

hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality

to angels without knowing it.[[2]](#footnote-2)“

An angel? Me? I think it might be an amusing idea to share with Callie someday. Right now it makes me uncomfortable. I don’t think I’ve been very loving or kind or generous of spirit during the time I’ve spent here.

Then, finally, the sermon ends with an invitation for anyone to speak who wishes to share thoughts, concerns or requests for prayer. Molly presses my arm when the pastor looks my way, but I say nothing. The only thing I want to share by now is a screamed, “Get me out of here!” Hardly angelic.

The community members, uplifted for the start of their day, shake hands all around and quickly disperse, except for one couple with a young boy who approach me for a handshake. The woman says, “I don’t know whether you remember us,” and the sound of her voice brings the scene flooding back to me. First a child’s voice I’m only half-conscious of hearing. Later a woman trying to help me stand and then a man who carried me.

“You are the ones who found me!” I am overwhelmed with gratitude and reach out to hug her.

She smiles and says, “I’m so glad we were able to help,” leaning down then to the tow-headed boy, who looks about six years old. “This is the real hero, our son Adam.”

Adam gives me a shy smile and politely shakes my hand.

“Adam,” I say, “you really are a hero. You saved my life.”

He flushes and turns away, running to catch up with a group of children outside. I notice through the open chapel door that they are gathered around Mollie’s daughter Amy who, hoisting a brown-skinned toddler into her arms, begins to usher them toward a barn-like red building. I wonder if it’s a schoolhouse. Surely these kids go to school somewhere.

Pastor Tom steps down from his platform and approaches me, interrupting my thoughts about the children. The couple I’ve been speaking with acknowledge his presence with quick head bows and move toward the door.

At his approach my anxiety rises again. I’m almost trembling with anticipation over what he may or may not be able to offer me in terms of help. Molly notices and puts her arm around me as she makes the introductions.

“Good morning, Gini,” he says, bending toward me and taking my hand in both of his, his long fingers reaching past my wrist. “Please come into my office.”

He leads me through a door behind the platform, into a small room with just a plain wooden table and a few chairs like the ones in Molly’s kitchen. Densely-packed bookshelves line two walls and bare windows are centered in the other two. As in the chapel, there are no religious pictures or objects on the walls.

Molly follows us and he asks her to get some coffee for the three us. I take note of how readily she complies, bobbing her head the way the couple I spoke with did.

I sit forward, at the edge of the chair he indicates, trying to quell my nervousness. Drawing on what’s left of my inner resources, I start to speak. “Pastor...”

“Tom,” he interrupts.

“Tom.” I take a deep breath, ready now to come to the point. “I really need to get to a phone to let everyone know I’m OK. And to work out how I’m going to get home.”

“Certainly,” he says. “But you may be in danger when you leave here. We need to proceed cautiously.”

I ball up my fists tightly against my hips. “Please. This can’t go on. I can’t just stay here.” I know I may sound a little hysterical, but I can’t help it.

“Of course not,” he says sympathetically.

Molly returns with coffee and some delicious-smelling fresh rolls as I’m saying, “Molly has been wonderful and I’m grateful to all of you. You’ve probably saved my life, but...”

“Thank you, Hon,” Molly says as she sets the breakfast things on the table.

I’m on a roll now. I refuse to be side-tracked. “But,” I continue,”I need to go home. And there are people who must be worried sick. I could be dead for all they know.”

Molly pats my shoulder and Tom says, “We know that. We don’t want to keep you from your loved ones, but we don’t want to endanger you either. I’ve called the local police about you and...”

“Called? You have a phone?” I interrupt, almost shouting.

Molly says soothingly, “Pastor has a cell phone for emergencies.”

“You never told me that!”

“It was not for me to tell.”

Tom ignores the outburst and response and goes on, “Captain Franklyn will be here to speak with you in about half an hour.”

“Captain Franklyn? Not Captain Rivera?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know a Captain Rivera. But Captain Franklyn told me you were taken from a different jurisdiction. He said he received a bulletin about you.”

“A different jurisdiction? I don’t know. I live in Mt. Stephen, but I don’t know where we are now. All I know is I met a Captain Rivera one time when I helped the police communicate with someone in a hostage situation.”

“Yes, Molly told me you said you are a therapist. You must be quite competent in your field if you were asked to do that.” Tom says, a note of admiration in his voice. Then, “Mt. Stephen isn’t far, but you’re across the Town line now. I’m sure Captain Franklyn can contact your Captain Rivera.”

I nod. Hearing that my own familiar Town Police will be involved makes me feel more optimistic about my prospects.

“Captain Franklyn said he is very anxious to get you back to your home. But he needs to hear your whole story first. He needs to be sure he can protect you.”

I am elated by the words “get you back home” and I smile at him. “I’ll tell him anything he needs to know if it will help me get home.”

Molly stands up and begins fussing over me. “Eat something. You need your strength. That’s likely to be a long interview.”

Before she finishes speaking, there’s a knock on the office door and a bulldog of a man in a blue uniform pushes through without waiting for an invitation to enter.

Tom stands and strides in two steps across the small space. “Hank! Good of you to come so quickly.” Leaning down toward the shorter man, he takes his hand in that two-handed grip.

“Good to see you again, Tom. Hello Molly. And this must be Dr. Colden.”

“Gini,” I say, standing and holding out my hand for a bone-crushing shake.

“You’ve got a lot of people worried, young lady.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling them,” I nod toward Tom and Molly. “I need to let everybody know I’m OK.”

“Well, then, let’s sit down and you fill me in so I know what I need to do with you.”

“What you need to do is take me home.” I know I sound petulant, but enough is enough.

He ignores that and says, “Tell me, from the beginning, what happened to you.”

I decide that the quickest way to get myself out of here is to go along with him. He doesn’t seem to be the kind of person who deviates from a plan.

I try to make it as brief as possible. I tell him about being thrown to the floor and about the tape on my mouth, then about waking up in the basement room. I tell him about the note in the Happy Meal. I describe my escape through the window and describe the burned-out house I saw afterward.

He leans forward several times as if to interrupt, then sits back and lets me continue. I tell him about my night in the woods and my rescue by the people who brought me to Molly.

“Clever and brave,” Molly comments sounding as proud of me as she would be of her own daughter.

Captain Franklyn ignores her and asks, “That house. It was just on the other side of the woods?”

“Yes. I think so. I don’t know how far I walked or what direction I was going. I tried to keep the road on my left, but I kept getting turned around. I didn’t see any other houses, though.”

He says to Tom, “That burned-out house sounds like the old Kuhn place. Burned down maybe ten years ago.”

I can’t hide my body’s startled response to the name.

He obviously notices. “You know the Kuhns?”

What should I say? I can’t tell him I have a client by that name. Or actually I could if I thought Dan had anything to do with this, if I thought Dan was a danger to me. But I don’t think that. The name must be a coincidence. But who except Dan would know both me and a house where people named Kuhn used to live? The name can’t be a coincidence. My mind is going at a gallop.

I have to say something. He’s staring at me, waiting for an answer. “I... I’ve heard the name.”

“Don’t try to avoid the question. Do you know someone named Kuhn?”

“All right. Yes. I have a client by that name. But that’s all I can tell you.”

“Has your client threatened you?”

“No.”

“Has someone related to your client threatened you?”

“No. In fact I’ve never met anyone related.”

He pushes back his chair and walks across to the door, talking into his police radio.

“Marylou,” I hear him say, “Get me the name of whoever owns the old Kuhn place now. Yeah, the one that burned down, say ten years ago, out on Friedley Road.”

He returns to his seat and says, “We’ll see if it’s your client owns that house. If they do, you’re going to have to talk to me about them.”

My mind is whirling. Didn’t Dan tell me during his intake that both his parents died in a fire? The more I think about it, the more certain I am that he told me that.

I’m running Dan’s sessions through my mind. I’m pretty sure he never talked about a fire other than that mention when I was taking his family history. I remember now thinking that his reaction to that trauma was something we ought to explore when we got deeper into his therapy. His presenting issue was much more recent: guilt about the hit and run that killed the woman he was seeing while his wife was at work. Nothing about his parents.

I’ve told Captain Franklyn I’ve never met anyone related to Dan. That’s true. I do remember suggesting that his wife come in with Dan for couple counseling, considering the upheaval in their marriage when his infidelity came to light. But she refused. What was her name? Mary? No. Marilyn. So Marilyn Kuhn. That name doesn’t raise any red flags.

I think again about the only clue I have, the note. “U think U know so much.” Could that be from Dan or his wife? How would that fit in? What am I supposed to know? I still can’t figure that out, even when I focus on Dan as the possible author.

Captain Franklyn is still staring at me, waiting for me to say more.

“There was that note,” I say. “The kidnapper thinks I know something, but I don’t what that is.”

“Would you tell me if you did? If it was about a client?”

“If I thought I was in danger from a client because of something I was told in session, yes, I would have to.”

I still can’t see Dan as a threat. But has he told me something I didn’t recognize as dangerous knowledge, something I can’t remember now?

I wish I had my case notes. Maybe reading through his file would trigger some memory. A thought occurs to me. Maybe if I can contact Hope, she would remember something I told her. Or I could ask her to look at his file. She has a set of my office keys and the password to access my client codes. I remember giving them to her last fall when I went down to visit Callie, in case there was a client crisis while I was unavailable.

“Captain Franklyn, is it possible for you to get in touch with my consulting therapist? She might be able to help.”

“Who’s that?”

“Her name is Hope Hebron.”

His eyes widen and his lips form a straight line. “You don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?” I feel a sudden chill. His look is so ominous.

“It was all over the news, but I guess you haven’t heard any news staying here.” There’s a note of disapproval in his voice as he glances at Tom.

I’m frozen to my seat. “What? What don’t I know?” I repeat.

Picking up on my anxiety, Molly leans over and puts her arm around me. I’m grateful for her warmth when Captain Franklyn says more gently than I would have expected, “A therapist by that name was killed in a car crash up 9W Saturday morning.”

“No! Not Hope!” I’m really shaking now, leaning into Molly’s shoulder.

“Oh, Hon!. I’m so sorry!” Molly says. “Was she a good friend? You had more than just a professional relationship?”

I’m crying uncontrollably now. “Y...y...yes. I can’t b...believe it.”

Captain Franklyn rises and quietly leaves the room while Pastor Tom comes and takes both my hands in his. “Will you allow me to pray with you for your friend?”

I nod, unable to form words.

Chapter Thirty-three

CALLIE

After finishing the fingerprint powder clean-up as best she could, Callie came back into the kitchen. Should she find something for an early lunch or wait for Jed to return?

She decided that fixing something to eat would give her something to do, and anyway she had no idea how long Jed would be.

The whole time she was cleaning, her mind had been churning with possibilities about what had caused Detective Greenliegh to take off so fast. Had they found Gini? Had a suspect emerged to be questioned? There had been no lights or siren, so it couldn’t have been an emergency.

Maybe it had nothing to do with Gini. Detective Greenliegh must have other cases. Funny how that hadn’t occurred to her before. She was so fixated on Gini’s disappearance that it was like nothing else in the world existed. She hadn’t even found time to focus on her own engagement.

Well, when all this was over, she and Jed were going to have one hell of a celebration. And Gini would be the most honored guest. She refused to doubt that.

Turning to the task at hand, Callie surveyed the sparse contents of the refrigerator. They’d used up most of Gini’s perishables, leaving a hunk of hard cheese, a half-empty jar of applesauce, most of a loaf of bread and some current jelly. She and Jed had added some left-over Chinese food and the remains of the six-pack of beer that had come to the motel with their pizza. By mutual consent, they had left Gini’s bottle of wine unopened. That would be for celebrating her return.

She remembered seeing some canned soup in one of the cabinets and a box of peanut butter sandwich crackers in another. *Soup and crackers it is.*

Setting out some hunks she sawed off the cheese, along with the crackers, Callie heated the soup and declared it lunch. She was sure Jed wouldn’t mind using up the Chinese leftovers.

She was at loose ends again once she finished the simple meal and washed the soup bowl and pan.

She decided the best thing she could do was to make that run to the supermarket she’d been contemplating. It felt really important to replenish Gini’s food supply, like a magical promise that if she bought the groceries, Gini would be back in no time to prepare them with her.

Callie thought she remembered where the market was from when she’d shopped there with Gini a few times. To be sure, though, she decided she’d better ask Google for directions.

As she pulled her phone out of her shoulder bag, it occurred to her that before she went out, she needed to call her supervisor at the foster care agency. She had to let her know she didn’t expect to be back to work Tuesday as planned.

Samantha was shocked to hear what was going on and readily told Callie she could take the rest of the week if necessary...using her accumulated vacation days, of course.

After that she remembered to call Alice to make sure her cat would be fed. Once again her call was met with consternation. Alice had met Gini when she visited Callie’s condo and could not believe such a thing could happen to such a nice person. She went on about that at some length and then began to regale Callie with a story about how Esmie wouldn’t eat while Alice was in the room, but then all the food was gone by her next visit. It took a few minutes for Callie to extract herself from the call. Alice was a sweet neighbor, but the woman really loved to talk!

Once she was able to disconnect and to look up the location of the supermarket, she sent Jed a quick text telling him where to find the house key in case he returned first.

Shortly afterward, when she was finally ready to climb into her Honda, she set the supermarket location into its GPS and drove out of the cul-de-sac.

The market was some twenty minutes away and, as she recalled, set off to one side of a huge parking lot shared with a laundromat and a dollar store.

Only a few minutes after she made the turn onto 9W from Mt. Stephen Road, her car’s “low gas” signal began to beep at her. Callie glanced at her fuel gauge and was startled to see that the indicator was on Empty. All that driving she’d done and it hadn’t occurred to her that she might need to fill the tank. Ordinarily she filled up when she got down to about a quarter of a tank. This showed her just how distracted she’d been!

She continued on the route laid out by her GPS, hoping that she had enough fuel to make it to a gas station somewhere along the way. Unable to fully focus on anything but the gas gauge and the continuing beep of the audible reminder, she drove slowly, edging toward the right in case she had to pull over. Eventually she saw some distance ahead a service station’s tall roadside sign and uttered a sigh of relief. As she drew closer, though, her car slowed alarmingly.

She managed to roll off to the shoulder, thankful that the gas station she’d noticed was by now an easy walk from the place she’d stopped.

Getting out and locking the car, she started walking toward the pumps.

A Town Police cruiser pulled up beside her and stopped. Of course it would be Sergeant Todd lowering her window and leaning out to yell, “Hey. Is that your car back there? The Honda?”

Callie walked up to the cruiser to answer as calmly as she could, “Yes. I ran out of gas.”

Sergeant Todd gave her her superior sneer. “Figures. You need to go back and put your hazard lights on.”

Callie raised her hands in a conciliatory gesture, saying, “OK. Sorry. I forgot,” and turned back in resignation. Sergeant Todd was the last person she wanted to deal with. Best to just follow instructions. As she turned, she could hear the patrol car’s radio crackle and saw the sergeant pick up her mic to respond.

She watched her squeal out onto the road, siren blasting.

Relieved that the encounter was cut short, she returned to her car to turn on the hazard lights and then set out again on a mission to buy enough gas to bring the car itself to the pumps.

Finally arriving at the gas station, she entered its small convenience store and explained what she needed to the smiling woman behind the counter. Answering in a heavy accent Callie couldn’t identify, the woman told her she could borrow a gas can, but would have to leave a $10.00 deposit to ensure its return.

Callie had not anticipated using cash at the market and had brought only a credit card and her keys, so she was forced to leave her credit card with the clerk while she filled the borrowed gas can at the pump outside. The clerk advised her to use Pump Number One. She understood why she was directed to a specific pump when she saw a hand-printed sign taped above the hose advising her that patrons must go to the station’s mini-mart to pay in advance. Sighing, she wondered why everything had to be so complicated.

She lugged the heavy can back to her car and poured the gallon of gas from it into her tank, somehow succeeding in not spilling any on her hands or clothing as she tipped the unwieldy can into the filler.

Setting the empty gas can in her trunk, she was finally able to drive to the station and pull up to a pump. She knew now that she would have to go into the mini-mart to return the gas can, leave her credit card again and tell the clerk which pump she was using. So annoying.

When she finished pumping and retrieved her card the second time, the woman behind the counter smiled broadly and wished her a good day. *If she only knew what kind of a day I’m having!*

Her shoulders tense, she drove the few miles more to the supermarket. Fortunately the store didn’t look very busy. Only a few cars stood in the lot close to the entrance. Several others were clustered near the laundromat.

She found herself surveying the lot for old black pick-up trucks and realized that she had been doing that wherever she went without being consciously aware of it. There was only one here, though, and she could see by the bowtie logo on its grill that it was a Chevy.

Grabbing a cart from a Cart Return corral, she crossed the parking lot and pushed through the store’s automatic sliding entrance door, finding her ears assaulted by an overly-loud sound system playing canned oldies music.

She tried to block it out while taking a moment to get oriented to the store’s unfamiliar layout. Was everything set up to annoy her today or was it just that she was so much on edge?

OK. Produce to her right. Dairy aisle at the far left. Meat and deli probably in the back. Frozen food cases in the middle. She hoped she could navigate the aisles quickly and be on her way.

She had never gotten around to making an actual list, so she ran through in her mind what things would make the most sense to purchase. She didn’t think she’d feel much like eating, but she was resigned to the fact that this shopping trip was a necessity. She had to at least replace what food of Gini’s they’d consumed. And, even if she didn’t feel like eating much, Jed always seemed to be hungry.

Still, it was hard to decide how much food to buy because of the uncertainty over how long she’d be staying at Gini’s house. Her conversation with her supervisor had given her breathing room in case she needed to stay several days. She thought Jed was going to be able to work remotely for a another day or two, wrapping up his last assignment and doing online research before his next one. But it wouldn’t be long before he had to go back to work in person. That thought brought on a sense of melancholy she did her best to push aside. She was feeling low enough already.

Forcing herself to get on with it, Callie decided she’d replace Gini’s eggs and milk and pick up some fresh fruit and some vegetables and greens for salad. Maybe some cold cuts and some easy-to-fix things like burgers and pasta. Enough grab-and-go meals to tide them over for a few days.

Finishing up with a half-dozen hard rolls from the bakery, she stood in line at the check-out counter, clinging to the hope that Gini would not be gone longer than those few days. Not even as long as that.

Chapter Thirty-four

GINI

I’m feeling a kind of numb resolve now. It can’t be a coincidence that I was abducted and Hope was killed on the same night. The same person who thinks I know too much must think it’s something Hope knows...knew... too. I don’t know how they connected me with Hope, but they must have somehow.

Could it be something Hope told me rather than the other way around? I’m pondering that when Captain Franklyn returns, pushing through the door without knocking as he did before. In his brusque manner, he hurries to my side and nods as he says, “I’ve arranged for your transfer. Luis Rivera is sending a car for you.”

I am elated. I am going home! I want to throw my arms around him, but I restrain myself. I don’t think he’d take it well.

It feels like I’ve been away forever and now a giant burden has been lifted. But the elation is tempered by the sobering realization that so much is still hanging over me. I don’t know who abducted me. I don’t know who is responsible for Hope’s accident. I don’t know when I will feel safe to resume my client sessions. I’m really worried that I might have to let down my clients if it’s not safe to be home.

I walk with Molly back to her house so that I can pack up my new clothes. I don’t think I’m going to need anything beyond what I’m wearing, but Molly insists that I keep them. She finds a small canvas tote bag decorated with the same lion and lamb graphic that Molly wears on her sweatshirt. She says the tote used to be Amy’s, but Amy won’t mind if I take it. By now I’m used to how things work around here, so I go ahead and place the extra shirts and underwear in it. Molly slips a jar of her miracle salve into the tote, saying, “You’ll need this for your back a few days more.”

I look around at the room where I’ve been staying, feeling almost nostalgic about it. Can it be that I’ve been here for only two days? It seems so much longer.

And although I’m anxious to get home, a part of me wants to stay here where I know I’m safe.

Sensing my anxiety, Molly folds me in a huge hug. Then she reminds me that I’ve hardly eaten a thing all day and insists that I have some lunch while I wait for my ride.

She’s such a Mother Hen, but she’s right. Despite my fears and my heartache over Hope, now that I know I am going home, I feel hungry again. She shoos me into the kitchen where she slices into a fresh loaf of rye bread and brings out a container of chicken salad.

Seeing the bread makes me curious about the wide variety of fresh baked goods Molly has been feeding me. “Do you have a bakery in the compound?” I ask as I spread butter on the bread.

“Oh no,” Molly replies. “Most of the women here are bread bakers. There’s always someone with a few fresh loaves of something to share.”

Comments like that no longer surprise me. I simply nod and get on with my meal.

While we’re eating, Amy pops into the kitchen and I finally have a chance to spend more than a fleeting moment in her company. Like her mother, she wears her hair in a long braid down her back, though hers is a dark gold color which sets off her rosy complexion perfectly.

When she grabs a dish from the shelf and joins us at the table, I remember wondering where she was going earlier with the group of children, so I ask her. “I saw you herding some of the kids to a red building near the chapel this morning. Is that the school?”

“No,” she replies, “that’s the Community House. The kids here are home-schooled, but after Morning Prayer I take the young ones over there for some recreational time. It keeps them out of their parents’ hair while they get some chores done. The older kids help with the chores, of course.”

*Of course.* “Are you still being home-schooled, too?” I ask.

“Well, I have been. I’m about finished with high school now,” she tells me.

Molly jumps in with more than hint of pride, “Amy’s been accepted at four colleges for next fall. She’s working now on deciding which one she wants to attend.”

We spend the rest of the meal talking about college life and how different it will be from life in this community. I am wondering if it will be a shock to her after home schooling, so I ask her whether she has ever attended school in a standard setting.

“I did until the fourth grade,” she tells me. “That was when we lived in Albany, before we came here.”

Molly nods, “Yes. That seems like a lifetime ago now.” There’s something sad behind

those words, but I don’t think it’s appropriate to ask more, so I return to the topic of college.

Amy tells me she has applied to four small Christian schools where she will likely encounter other home-schooled students. She is currently favoring one in West Virginia because it has a well-reputed Early Childhood Education program she’d like to pursue.

I ask her if she expects to return to the community once she has her degree and she says she would like to be able to do that. “I’d like to give back for all the community has done for me by starting a pre-school here for the little ones who are too young for home schooling.”

The meal and the discussion keep me engaged for awhile, but when the conversation lags and Amy excuses herself, my mind goes back to the wait for the police car to come for me.

As I wait, I keep returning to thoughts about Hope. I wonder aloud to Molly, “Why would anyone hurt Hope? Maybe it was an accident after all. I think I would feel better if that were true. At least I wouldn’t be feeling like it was somehow my fault. Still, it did happen on the same night I was abducted. That has to mean something.”

Molly, of course, has no answers, but she offers a hug and some murmured assurances that it could not be my fault, no matter how it happened.

Finally, in late afternoon, through the kitchen window, I see a patrol car pull up outside the chapel.

Molly picks up my tote bag and walks back to the chapel with me where we see Tom coming out to join us.

Molly gives me a hug and says, “I want you to know what a joy it’s been to have you here.”

I find that hard to believe. I feel like I’ve been such a whining burden. But I’m grateful that she feels that way.

“Molly,“ I say, “I can’t express how grateful I am for all you’ve done for me.”

“It really was a pleasure. We don’t get many visitors,” she says, then adds, “Listen, Hon. When you get settled in at home and catch up on things, come back and see us. I’d love to show you what all we have going on here. I think you’ll be amazed. You know, Pastor Tom runs a small dairy operation and the family who found you keep sheep. Your sweater probably came from them and the yarn was spun right here. You should come in the summer when we have our Craft Fair and invite the public. But I’d like to have you come sooner than that anyway, just to visit.”

I think she’s running on like that because she’s afraid for me.

“I’d like that,” I say, looking down at my sweater with new appreciation.

In truth, I can’t think that far in advance right now. My whole future seems to be compacted into one experience: the combination of joy and fear that going home means.

Pastor Tom takes both my hands and bends way down to look into my eyes. His dark blue irises hold me immobile until he releases me. “You’re going to be just fine. God is with you.”

“Thank you,“ I say, hoping it’s true. It’s hard to trust in anything after the past few days.

The police officer leans out of her car and yells, “Come on. I don’t have all day!” and I take the tote from Molly and hurry around to the passenger side. I hear a click as she releases the lock. I thank her for coming to get me.

“No thanks needed. Just doing my job.”

We ride in silence for awhile. I am relishing my freedom, enjoying the passing scenery. Farm fields with grazing sheep and horses. Tracts forested with green pines and winter-stark oaks and maples. Here and there a few houses clustered around a small group of shops. Orchards where apple trees climb hillsides in orderly rows, their twisted branches still winter-bare.

“How far are we from Mt. Stephen?” I ask.

“Probably 20 minutes.”

“I’ll be so glad to get home!”

“You’re not going home,” she says flatly.

“Oh. You mean because I need to go to the police station first to explain what happened?”

“Nope.”

“Wait. Where are you taking me then?”

“Until they catch your kidnapper, you’re in protective custody.”

“No! You can’t do that! I don’t want protection! I want to go home.” I’m sounding petulant, I know, but this is too much!

“Sorry. Not just yet.” There’s a flatness in the way she says it, an ominous lack of emotion that makes me push back against the finality of the statement.

“I can’t believe it. I was held prisoner in a basement. Then I might as well have been a prisoner at Molly’s house. And now I’m going to be a prisoner again?” I hear myself yelling.

“Shut up,” she shouts, suddenly animated, shaking my shoulder with an iron grip. “I don’t need hysterics from you!”

I quiet down, trying to think about how to get out of this. I really, really do not want to wait any longer to go back to my own house and see Callie and wear my own clothes and sleep in my own bed.

“Officer,” I begin, trying a more conciliatory tone.

“Sergeant,” she interrupts.

“Sergeant, I have a friend staying with me.” I don’t think Callie would have gone back home. Knowing her, I’m sure she wouldn’t leave until she knew I was OK. “She can make sure I’m safe.”

“Yeah, her and her fiancé. Not!” the sergeant says.

What is she talking about? Callie was coming up alone and anyway she’s not engaged. I’d have been the first person she told. Besides, even if she and Jed did get engaged, she told me that she’d be free this weekend because Jed is on assignment in Chicago. He wouldn’t be with her.

I decide to take advantage of the sergeant’s misinformation. “Right,” I say, “a man in the house, too. I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll be fine alright, with me right here. That’s how you’ll be fine,” she says, as she makes a sharp right with the cruiser, pulling onto a worn-out asphalt parking lot with grass growing through its large cracks. A flaking red and white sign by the entrance says:

STAR MOTEL

Affordable Rates

Cable TV

She drives around to the back of the one-story stucco building. “Our room’s back here.”

“No!” I shout, but she ignores me and gets out, walking briskly to a faded red door labeled “21.”

I undo my seatbelt and try to open my door. She’s locked me in and I don’t see a release lever. I think fleetingly about cop shows on TV where the back of the patrol car is set up like that. Is it normal in the front?

I try to reach the driver’s side door, but I can’t climb over the center console full of computer equipment.

I’m stretched halfway across the console when she comes back. She opens my door and grabs me roughly by my injured arm, yanking me out and shoving me across the pavement and into the room. I land with a bounce on the bed closest to the door and she locks me in while she returns to the car. I don’t have time to unlock the door from the inside before she returns with a blue backpack and my tote bag.

This isn’t like any protective custody I’ve seen on TV shows.

I look around frantically for a phone. There is none in sight.

This is not protective custody.

Chapter Thirty-five

GINI

The cop stands over me, all tight muscle and menacing scowl. It seems clear that she must be the one who abducted me originally, But I don’t know who she is. What does she want with me?

I make myself as tall as I can, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Please,” I say, in as calm a voice as I can muster, “I don’t understand. Why are you keeping me here?”

“Oh, you know all right.” She leans forward, her face inches from mine. I smell garlic and cigarettes.

I summon all my client-soothing skills. It’s imperative that I remain calm and in command no matter how shaken I am inside. I lost my cool in the car. I can’t let that happen again.

“Sergeant,” I say, “I’m sure you have good reason to think I’m a threat to you. But I don’t know what that is. If you’ll explain, I’ll help you in any way I can.”

“Don’t use that shrink-speak on me. I was there that time you helped with that hostage-taker. I know what you’re trying to do. Only now you’re the hostage.” She laughs in my face. It’s all I can do not to visibly gag from her breath.

I sit up straighter, squaring my shoulders and leaning back away from her, creating some much needed space. “Seriously,” I say. “I really don’t know what this is about. I’m sure you must be the one who left the note in the Happy Meal about something I know too much about, but...”

“Damn right!.”

“I don’t know what you think I know. I don’t even know who you are except for the police officer who was sent to take me home.”

“Nice try.”

“Sergeant...”

“You know who I am.”

“Please believe me. I really don’t.”

She moves away a little, still looming over me.

“He told you all about me.”

Now I am even more perplexed. I shake my head. “Who told me? What about you?”

“Come on! He told you about the hit and run.”

Is this about Hope’s accident? No, it can’t be. That was after my abduction. Hit and run? Wait! Is it Dan? That would confirm the connection to the Kuhn house where I was held.

I venture, “Is this about something a client told me in confidence?”

“Now you’re cooking. He told me what he said to you.”

“And what was that?”

“Stop playing dumb.”

“Honestly, I don’t remember ever being told anything that would involve you. I really don’t know who you are or what you think I know.”

“You keep saying that. OK. Let’s pretend I believe you. Let me introduce myself.” She holds out her hand for a handshake, which I do not accept. “My name is Marilyn Todd. Ring any bells?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“My husband is Dan Kuhn.”

I nod as dawn breaks. “OK” So this is the woman who didn’t want to come in for counseling. Marilyn Kuhn, I thought. But not by that name.

“Dan Kuhn is your client.”

I nod again. No point in denying what she already knows. “OK. That’s true. But what do you think he told me?”

“I said before. About the hit and run.”

This has to be about the accident that killed Dan’s girlfriend. I don’t want to divulge how much I know about that, so I ask, “How does that involve you?”

“He told you my truck was damaged, right?”

“Not that I recall.” I can see she doesn’t believe me, but it’s true. I don’t think he ever mentioned anything about her truck. I don’t think I even knew Dan’s wife drove a truck.

“I told him I hit a deer. I think he believed it at first. But then...” She begins pacing the area between the bed and the door. Then she abruptly turns on me. “You told that other shrink, didn’t you?”

Other shrink? Does she mean Mark? Or Hope? Oh no! Did she kill Hope? How would she know about Hope? Two hit and runs?

I am feeling sick to my stomach, but I try to remain outwardly calm, “I’m sorry? What other shrink?”

“You’re playing dumb again. I have your cell phone. I saw your texts to her. What’s her name? Hope? ‘Need to see you about my reaction to a suicidal client.’ That was about Dan.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

“Hah!”

“No, really. It was about someone else. Did Dan threaten suicide?”

“You know he did. So does everyone I work with. I told everybody for weeks how worried I was for him.”

This is all news to me. I’m sure Dan never indicated any such thoughts to me. Did I miss another suicidal threat like I missed Sandra’s? I really don’t think so. I’m so much more alert to the signs now, almost hyper-alert.

“I’m sure Dan never told me that,” I say, “and anyway, even if my text had been about him, I couldn’t have told Hope. I never got to meet with Hope after I sent it.”

“Right. I took care of that.” The full horror of what she is confessing freezes me.

“And now,” she says, “your other girlfriend and her fiancé are snooping around. I have to stop them, too.”

My other girlfriend. Callie. She’ll go after Callie now. And she must mean Jed? How can that be? My mind is racing. Callie said Jed’s in Chicago. And fiancé? She said the same thing in the car on the way here.

I have to keep her talking. “Do you mean the friend who was coming to visit me this weekend?”

“Yeah. What’s her name? Caliope Temple or something. Stupid name.”

*Calista Templand*. “Callie? You’ve met her?”

“Oh yeah. She’s the one reported you missing.”

“I see. Yes. That makes sense. She would have arrived after you abducted me so she would have found me gone.”

“Right. So anyway, the next day she’s up at the Station reporting a missing person. And guess who gets to take the report? Me. Pretty funny, huh?”

*Oh yeah. A barrel of laughs*.

She continues, “Then who shows up the next night but some guy in a Jeep she claims is her fiancé. But when she tells me that, I look at her hand and she’s got no ring. Then when I see her on the road today, she’s got some ring, but it ain’t a diamond. Looked like one of those rings that crazy Irvin guy up in the hills makes. I think they just went up to his place and bought any kind of ring from him just to pretend they’re engaged. Don’t know why they would think anyone would care.”

Charlie Irvin’s brother she must mean. I’ve heard he makes jewelry. I think Charlie lives with him. Up on some back road on the mountain. Her story might have some basis in fact. On the other hand it isn’t like Callie to run around buying jewelry. Especially when I know she would have been worrying about me. But why would this woman make that up? Why does a ring matter anyway? And how can Jed be here? So many questions I can’t answer.

Marilyn turns abruptly and reaches toward her hip. I gasp. Is she reaching for her gun? No, thank God. She’s fishing in her pocket. Now she comes up with a cell phone.

Brandishing it at me, she says, “Your phone! I told you I have it. And you know what? Now you’re going to make a call to your friend, Callie, ‘cause I need her here. I tried to set up a little accident for her, but the damn GPS didn’t work, so I have to find another way.”

I try to stall her. “How did you get my phone?”

“Simple. I went up to your house and told that idiot Redman that was guarding it to take a break. He’s so dumb he didn’t even notice I was off-duty.”

Chapter Thirty-six

CALLIE

Feeling happy to have accomplished something, Callie put the groceries away. At least she and Jed would have food for later and Gini would find her frig and pantry partially re-stocked when she returned.

Callie pushed back the thought *IF she returns.* She wouldn’t let her mind go there, though each passing day, each hour, made that “if” harder to ignore.

As she poured herself some of the apple cider she’d bought on a whim when she passed a cider mill along the highway, she picked up her phone to check in with Jed. Before she could call his number, Jed’s ringtone sounded.She grinned.

“Hey, Babe,” he said, “I got a little side-tracked at the library, but I’m leaving New Paltz now. I saw a carwash on my way here. I’m going to stop there. Shouldn’t be too long.”

“OK I’ve been grocery shopping. There’s plenty of food here now.”

“I had lunch on campus, so don’t fuss with anything.”

“OK. Love you. See you in awhile.”

Just hearing his voice buoyed Callie’s spirits, shutting off the morbid fears for the moment.

Almost immediately, her phone rang again. This time, “Happy Days are Here Again,” Gini’s ringtone. Startled, Callie dropped the phone.

By the time she reached it where it had skittered under the table, it had stopped ringing.

With shaking hands, she saw that there was voicemail.

“Callie, it’s Gini.” Definitely Gini’s voice! “I broke free. I’m safe. I need a ride. I’m at the Star Motel. Lattintown Road. Room 21.”

Desperately, Callie pressed “Call Back.” An electronic voice responded with a “not in service” message.

She went to her Contacts list and tried Gini’s number from there with the same result.

She took a few calming breaths. She knew she had to think clearly about what it meant, but she couldn’t slow her thoughts. *That was Gini’s voice. Gini doesn’t have her phone. How can that be Gini’s voice? Did she find a way to grab her phone when she escaped? That must be it.*

She played the voicemail again. It was Gini’s voice, she was sure, but now that she listened more closely, Gini sounded strange. Scared. She must still be frightened from her ordeal. Is that why she turned off her phone, so it couldn’t be tracked?

Where was the Star Motel? She could find that out easily enough. “Hey, Google,” she said, “Location of Star Motel. Lattintown Rd.”

Her phone’s electronic voice replied, “I have that information for you. Would you like directions to the Star Motel?”

“Yes!” Callie shouted and, like magic, a road map appeared on her screen.

She was almost out the door when she stopped herself. Better let Deputy Greenliegh know Gini was safe. And Jed.

She shot a quick text to both of them and ran to her car.

Following the GPS map, she was barely aware of passing scenery. Road, stop lights, other cars were dealt with as they were encountered, but she could not have described where she was at any given moment. She was just pressing on, turning where the GPS told her to turn.

Finally she heard, “You have reached your destination on the right,” and found herself entering a beat-up parking lot with a faded-looking red and white sign reading “STAR MOTEL.”

She circled the low stucco building, peering at door numbers until she came to 21.

A Town Police patrol car was parked by the door. *Looks like Gini called the police for help. Was she afraid I wouldn’t come?*

As she exited her Honda and approached the room, the door opened abruptly and a large hand grabbed her arm, pulling her roughly inside.

“So nice of you to join us,” Sergeant Todd said with a nasty sneer, shoving her onto the closest bed.

Beyond the bed, in the middle of the room, Gini sat in a desk chair, looking small and fragile in an odd-looking lavender sweater and rolled-up jeans, her hands tied securely to the chair’s arms with zipties.

Chapter Thirty-seven

GINI

From my shackled position in the motel desk chair, I watch Marilyn manhandling Callie. I can’t do anything to help her, trussed up like this. What could I do even if I were free? I’m no match for her.

“So nice of you to join us,” she says to Callie in her nasty way.

What does she want with Callie? Callie doesn’t know anything about what she’s done.

She shoves Callie down onto the bed and gets out more zipties. Now she’s pushing Callie against the spindles of the colonial headboard and cuffing both her hands there.

“I don’t understand,” Callie says, pulling against the ties. “What do you want with me? Or Gini either?”

“You know too much.” Just like what she said about me.

Callie says, “All I know is that you took my Missing Person Report and then you were at Gini’s house later.”

“I had a complaint that you were bothering the neighbors. Somebody told you something.” *Someone complained? Who? Tyler’s mother? That crazy woman next door to Gini?*

“Nobody said anything about you.” Something in how she says that makes me think that’s not strictly true. I wonder if Callie does know something about Marilyn.

“Oh sure. And where’s that fiancé of yours?” Marilyn makes finger quotes around ‘fiancé.’ “I can’t wait all day for him to show up.”

“He’s working. He’s not coming here now. But he knows where I am. When I don’t come back, he’ll come looking for me.”

“Good. Then I won’t have to go looking for him,” Marilyn says with a satisfied nod.

Callie didn’t correct her when she called Jed her fiancé. So Callie’s really engaged to Jed? Maybe I can use that as a diversion. “Callie!” I shout joyfully, “You and Jed are engaged? That’s so wonderful!”

Marilyn gives me her sneer. “Doesn’t matter. Ain’t gonna be a wedding.”

Callie glares at her. “I don’t know what this is about, but I assure you I will be marrying Jed.”

“You think you’re leaving here alive?”

Callie looks at her cuffed wrists and becomes very quiet.

Marilyn gives her a self-assured nod. “Yeah. You’ve got the picture.”

“Marilyn,“ I say, trying to stall as long as possible in hope that Jed will eventually show up as Callie said. “Callie doesn’t know the things you’ve been telling me. Maybe if you explain, she’ll understand.”

“Sure. Why not? Let’s all settle in for a nice chat. I can’t leave till my shift is over anyhow.”

What does her shift have to do with it? I decide not to ask.

“OK. So,” Marilyn says, settling into the room’s worn armchair with her back to the curtained window and looking toward Callie. “Your friend here, Dr. Colden, is a really good listener. She listens to everybody’s troubles and she learns everybody’s secrets. Don’t you?” Glancing at me, she continues, “My husband decided he needed to see a good listener like her because this little tramp he was seeing on the side got run over and he felt guilty. He was so guilty he even tried to kill himself, the fool. Everybody knows that.” *Everybody knows that because that’s what she’s been telling everybody. I’m sure it’s not true. At least I think I’m sure.*

I see Callie nodding at her encouragingly.

“He had no business feeling guilty that tramp got run over. He shoulda felt guilty he was sleeping with her, but that’s not what he felt guilty about. He felt guilty because when it happened she was on the way to our house, OUR house! Where OUR bed is!” She pauses. “Idiot!” she spits.

“So anyway, he goes to this good listener over here to cry about his girlfriend. And he tells her about how the pick-up that hit her looked like mine.”

I’m about to interrupt to repeat that he never mentioned the truck to me when I see Callie’s eyebrows go up.

“Yeah. You know about the pick-up don’t you?”

“What pick-up? What would I know about a pick-up?” Callie asks, but she’s not a very good actress.

Marilyn pounces. “Like I said when you came in. Snooping around the neighbors.”

Callie says, “You’re saying a pick-up hit your husband’s girlfriend and Gini’s neighbors in a whole different neighborhood know about it? How would they know?”

“Everybody knows. The whole damn county knows.”

My clinician’s mind can’t help running through possible personality disorders: *Paranoid? Narcissistic?*

“OK,” Callie says, playing along with her. “So everybody knows a pick-up truck hit her.”

“Right. So I told Dan. That’s my husband, Dan Kuhn. I didn’t take his name thank God. So anyway, I told Dan I hit a deer and he believed me.”

Callie nods and repeats. “He believed you.”

“Yeah. But then he gets to talking to your friend over here and he starts to put two-and-two together and he starts asking me questions. He asks me if I was really working an extra shift that night like I told him.” She turns toward me. “You put that idea in his head, didn’t you?”

I shake my head. “No. We never discussed anything like that.”

“Oh sure. Like I believe that.”

“Whatever you may believe, I can only tell you we focused on the concern he brought, not on anything about you or your truck.”

That enrages her. I should have phrased it more gently. She’s yelling now, “How can you say that? Of course you talked about me! I’m his wife! He was cheating on me! How could you not talk about that?”

She’s decompensating before my eyes! I try to calm her. I explain as gently as I can, “As a therapist, I have to focus on the concerns my client brings to me. If you had come in with Dan for couple counseling, then we would have focused on your marriage. That’s how it works.”

“Oh no. I remember when Dan said you wanted us to both come together. No way. He’s the one with the problem.”

“Exactly,” I say, humoring her. “So we worked on the problem he presented.” She seems to accpt that finally.

“So anyway,” she resumes, facing Callie, “he gets it in his head that I didn’t really hit a deer and he starts to question me about whether I was really working that night. That’s when I knew I had to shut your friend here up. I know he told her he suspected me.”

I shake my head.

“Don’t pretend he didn’t tell you!”

“I’m not pretending. He really didn’t,” I say in my most soothing voice.

“Oh sure. And then when I get your phone, I find out you told that other shrink, too.”

Now I see Callie’s eyebrows go up. She must know about Hope.

“Marilyn,” I say, “I told you before, that text to Dr. Hebron was about my reaction to a different client.

“Yeah. Right.”

Then Callie says bluntly, “So you ran Dr. Hebron off the road.”

“Well aren’t you the smartass?” Marilyn rises and leans over Callie. “See, I told you you know too much.”

Callie asks, apparently trying to divert Marilyn’s attention from herself, “How did you know what car Dr. Hebron was driving anyway?”

“Hah! I started hanging around at night down the street from your friend’s house. I thought maybe I’d catch Dan visiting her when it wasn’t his appointment day. It wouldn’t surprise me if he took up with her after his other tramp died.”

I am startled by that one. Dan “taking up” with me?? How far do her fantasies go?

“So then, as long as I was there, I decided to see who else was visiting her. Maybe I could catch her doing something I could arrest her for. Like selling prescription drugs or something.” *Does she really think I have access to prescription drugs?* “So I took down license plate numbers and ran them at the station the next day. I kept a list, see. And it paid off.”

“OK, I get that,” Callie says, “You figured out which car was Dr. Hebron’s. But how did you know what her relationship Gini was and how did you know she’d be on the road at that hour?”

“Well, you know I have her phone,” she nods toward me. “I could see what they texted to each other. So all it took was one more very clever text from your friend’s phone.”

Callie nods. She doesn’t seem surprised about those texts. I wonder why?

Then Callie changes the subject. “So can you tell me one more thing? Why did you accuse me of lying about knowing where Gini was when you were the one who abducted her?”

Marilyn smiles. “I had to look innocent, didn’t I? Making out like you did it was brilliant.” I see Callie slowly shaking her head as though she can’t believe what she’s hearing.

Then Marilyn turns to me and says, “But you had to mess it all up and escape.”

Since she’s brought it up, I ask her the question that’s been burning in the back of mind ever since I woke up in that basement room, “What were you planning to do with me? You couldn’t have left me there forever.”

“Well, yeah, I could. Since my husband owned the house, it would’ve been easy to make it look like he kidnapped you and left you to die. He was your crazy client after all, not me.” She shakes her head, “But you had to escape and ruin it all.”

Callie says, “I don’t understand what good it did you to do all this. Won’t your husband just go to the police anyway with his suspicions?”

Marilyn smiles grimly, “He might’ve. But see, poor thing got ahold of my off-duty gun this morning. So distraught over that tramp’s death that he shot himself in the head. When I get home and find him, I’ll be so upset.” She grins.

I stifle a gasp. Dan’s girlfriend. Hope. Now Dan himself?

With that, she looks at the digital clock on the night stand and says, “It’s been fun, ladies. But my shift is about over now. I have to take the cruiser back to the Station and get Dan’s car so I can go home and find Dan. I had to leave my truck home till I can get the fender fixed. So I drove Dan’s car today. He wasn’t gonna use it anyway.” she laughs at her own grim joke. “See. I thought of everything.”

She picks up the backpack she brought from the car, the one that held the ties she used to bind us. Now she reaches into an outside pocket and suddenly there’s a can of lighter-fluid in her hand. She’s taking a cigarette lighter out of her uniform pocket.

Callie says, “Your patrol car is outside. People will remember seeing it.”

And I add, “Plus Captain Rivera knows you were sent to pick me up.”

Smiling, she splashes some fluid over Callie’s legs and comes around the bed to my chair. “And then your smartass friend came to get you and I left you in her hands. No idea what you two got up to after that.”

“We’re cuffed. The police will know we couldn’t have set a fire,” I tell her, hoping she will free our hands.

“Plastic melts. They won’t be able to tell,” she laughs.

Callie starts thumping on the wall, her cuffed wrists straining against the spindles of the headboard. She’s screaming “HELP!” at the top of her lungs. I can’t see her legs past Marilyn’s bulk and I’m petrified. Are her legs on fire? I try to kick out at Marilyn’s shins, but my lightweight sneakers make no impact.

Suddenly the door bursts open.

A female Sheriff’s deputy shouts, “Sheriff! Drop the lighter!” Her gun is steady on Marilyn’s back.

Marilyn wildly splashes more lighter fluid onto the bed and flicks the lighter. Nothing happens. She flicks it again and a small flame erupts.

Before she can touch the flame to the bedspread, a male deputy rushes past the female and tackles Marilyn to the floor, the flame catching on the sleeve of his jacket. His partner dives onto him, crushing out the fire on his arm, screaming, “Alex! No!”

I think I fainted then because the next thing I register is Jed holding Callie in his arms while the two deputies haul Marilyn out of the room.

Chapter Thirty-eight

CALLIE

They left the motel in a short caravan, the Sheriff’s car leading the way with Marilyn Todd locked in the back seat, Callie following with Gini by her side, and Jed’s Jeep taking up the rear.

At the Sheriff’s Headquarters, Janice and Alex escorted Marilyn to a holding cell, asking the others to wait in a sparsely-furnished lobby. They chose three adjoining black vinyl and chrome chairs, Callie sitting in the middle, holding hands on each side with the two most important people in her life.

Gini, looking almost ghostly pale, was shivering despite her warm sweater and Jed rose from his seat to wrap her in his jacket. She thanked him with a wan smile.

Before long, Detective Greenliegh reappeared and examined the wrists of both women. “Come into the back,” she said, nodding toward a door on the right. She led them through to a room with a first-aid logo on the door where a young dark-haired Sheriff’s Deputy with an EMT patch on his uniform was gently wrapping Sergeant Mann’s burned wrist in protective gauze. “Get that checked by a doctor in the morning,” he cautioned him before turning to Callie and Gini.

“You’ve got some pretty bad abrasions,” he said, examining the raw patches both bore from having their wrists bound in the motel room. “A little ointment will fix you up for now, though.”

Gini grinned, “I’ve got some great salve out in Callie’s car.”

“Well, maybe you can use that later,” he replied. “For now, I’ll use our standard ointment. We’re pretty happy with it.”

Having been ministered to, the women were escorted by Sergeant Mann to a waiting area from which they could see Jed through a glass wall sitting across a desk from Detective Greenliegh. “Giving his statement,” Sergeant Mann said. Nodding at Callie, he added, “You’ll be next.”

He led Gini into a larger office at the rear of the waiting area, leaving Callie alone with her thoughts.

She was not alone for long, though. Shortly after Gini was led away by Sergeant Mann, Callie was joined by Captain Rivera and Sergeant Duprey of the Town Police. Apparently they, too, had statements to give.

They greeted her sympathetically, Captain Rivera taking her hand, apologetic for allowing Callie to get dragged into this situation. “I had no idea Sergeant Todd was in such a tragic emotional state. I take full responsibility. I should have been more aware.”

Callie assured him that he had no need to apologize. He could not have known that what was behind that gruff demeanor was so sinister.

Sergeant Duprey sat down next to her, silently putting her arm around Callie’s shoulders, comforting her until Callie was called in to Detective Greenliegh’s office.

By the time all three had finished their statements and signed them, Gini was back in the waiting area, quietly talking with Jed. Callie was happy to see how comfortable the two of them seemed with each other. Although she had talked about each of them to the other, they had met only briefly before.

They all watched Sergeant Mann join Detective Greenliegh in her office and Callie wondered when they would be told they were free to go.

The two deputies came out of the office, shrugging into outer jackets. Sergeant Mann grimaced as the cuffs brushed against his bandage. They stopped by the chairs where the five witnesses were sitting and Sergeant Mann said, “Janice and I are feeling too wired to go home yet. We’re going down to the all-night diner down the road for a snack.”

Janice Greenliegh added, “Would you like to join us? You probably haven’t eaten in hours. And I, for one, would like a chance to put all the pieces of this story together. I’m sure you would, too.”

It wasn’t long before they were seated together at a long table created by pushing a square table up to the end of a booth in a quiet corner of the diner, a much more modern granite and chrome one than the cute ‘50s diner near Mt. Stephen.

Over coffee and some wonderful apple pie which almost made up for missing dinner, they were able to share with each other the pieces of the puzzle they each held, unknown to the others.

Janice Greenliegh, sitting at the end of the table, held Alex’s hand gently, avoiding the bandages on his wrist. Noticing that as she turned toward them, Callie grinned. *Thought so!*  “Janice... OK to call you Janice?” After a nod, she continued, “I saw you rushing out of Gini’s street yesterday morning. Was it something to do with Gini’s case?”

“Yes. Captain Franklyn, from over where Dr. Colden was found, got Alex’s number from our Missing Person bulletin. He called to let us know she was safe. Then he said she had been held at a burnt-out house owned by a Daniel Kuhn. He gave Alex Daniel Kuhn’s address and Alex asked me to meet up with him so we could interview Mr. Kuhn together. Of course we didn’t know what relationship if any he might have with Dr. Colden... Gini.,” she nodded toward her. “We were hoping to learn about that, plus get some information about that burned house.” Alex took over. “Oddly enough, I’d been looking over cold cases recently and recognized the Kuhn name from a fatal arson fire about 10 years ago. Putting that together with the message about a burned house...,” he shrugged. “Well, anyway, when we arrived, we saw an old black F-150 pick-up in the driveway. It had a large dent in the right front fender. So of course we ran the plates. They came back registered to a Marilyn Todd at that address. We recognized her name, so then we ran her Driver’s License for confirmation. That’s when we saw her picture and knew who she was for sure.”

Janice continued, “We recognized Sergeant Todd’s picture on the license and we already had our eyes on her for other reasons. We were surprised to see her truck in Kuhn’s driveway. Of course we didn’t know she was his wife.”

Alex said, “Her name was probably in the cold case file I looked at, but it didn’t register with me.”

Gini asked, “Are you allowed to tell us the other reasons you were interested in her?”

Captain Rivera answered for her. “We had asked the Sheriff to look into some reports we had that she was taking bribes for not writing traffic tickets. There had been some allegations before, but we were hoping for better proof this time around.”

Jed nodded, “That relates to what kept me at the library yesterday. I was checking old court reports and newspapers to see if that scandal last year I remembered was about this department. It was. There was a huge blow-up over an audit that confirmed that the Commissioner and high-ranking officers were allowing evidence from certain cases to mysteriously disappear.”

Sergeant Duprey nodded as Jed continued, “Some lower-ranked cops were accused of corruption, as well. Marilyn Todd was one of the accused, but she wasn’t prosecuted.”

“Right,” Alex said. “We didn’t have enough evidence on individual lower-ranking officers. People who bribe cops aren’t likely to come forward.”

“So, of course,” Janice intervened, “when her name came up connected to the truck and Kuhn’s address, we became very interested.” She paused, “Once we knew she was connected to Daniel Kuhn, we realized that she must be the wife in the cold case Alex was talking about even though he hadn’t recognized the name right away. Possibly involved in the fire that killed her in-laws.” She turned to Gini, “The house where you were held, you know. Plus there were some things about her I’d heard from Saroya.”

She nodded toward Sergeant Duprey who added, “I couldn’t tell you much that day at the motel, Callie. I was worried that I did the wrong thing when I turned the accident report over to Marilyn, but of course I couldn’t say that to you.”

Callie acknowledged that. “We could tell you were troubled by something going on in your department.”

“It was that black pick-up truck that poor dying woman told me about. I was the officer on the scene when Dan Kuhn’s girlfriend was hit and then the next day I saw the damage to Marilyn’s pick-up. I knew she was Dan’s wife and Marilyn had talked about how he’d been seeing that woman on the side, but I couldn’t really believe she’d do something like that. Until I was reminded by Dr. Hebron’s crash. That made me wonder, but even then, I had no way of knowing that she had any connection to Dr. Hebron. At that point, it just made me think about the first hit and run.”

Captain Rivera said, “I wish you’d come to me with your suspicions after the first accident.”

“I know. I should have. But here’s the thing. I didn’t want to believe it. Plus you were new and I didn’t know who I could trust.”

Callie said, “So everything revolved around that truck.”

Janice agreed, “Yes. I had just finished running the plates and license from the truck in the Kuhn driveway when I got your text that Gini was at the Star Motel. I called Captain Rivera to let him know where she was. That’s when I found out that Marilyn Todd had been sent to bring Gini home.”

Captain Rivera added, “When Janice told me about the truck, I tried to raise Sergeant Todd, but she didn’t answer her radio or her phone.”

“And that’s why Alex and I rushed over there. We never even got as far as the door at the Kuhns’ house before we took off.”

“So,” Alex added soberly, “we didn’t know that Mr. Kuhn was lying dead inside.”

Janice continued, after a moment of silence, “When we got to the motel, we listened at the door for a few minutes and when somebody screamed, we broke down the door,” she said.

Callie explained, “It was getting dark outside and I saw headlights and shadowy movement outside through the drapes. I didn’t know it was you, but I thought maybe I could attract the attention of whoever was out there.”

“It’s good that you did,” Alex said. “The door was pretty solid. We weren’t hearing much till you screamed.”

Jed added. “I rushed over there, too. What Callie said in her text didn’t seem right to me. Why would Gini go to a motel when she escaped? I got there a few minutes after you and I saw what you did from the parking lot. You two were incredible.”

“And don’t you dare say you were just doing your job,” Gini warned with a grin.

Captain Rivera’s phone rang, interrupting the conversation. He pushed his way out of the booth so that he could stand to reach it in his pocket. “Rivera... yes. Yeah, OK. We’ll handle it.”

Turning back to the group he said, “I’m sorry to break this up, folks, but Saroya and I need to get down to Dr. Colden’s house. The neighbors are complaining about reporters all over the place.”

Gini gasped and turned white. “I don’t think I can....”

“It’s OK,” Captain Rivera said. “We’ll get them off your property. Just give us a little head start and then you can follow.” He added, “Saroya, it looks like you’ll be working your shift after all. I had someone covering because I didn’t know how late we’d be needed by the Sheriff, but now you’re back on duty.”

“No problem,” she said, rising and hustling toward the door.

About half an hour later, Callie, with Jed following, pulled up to a scene straight out of a movie. Spotlights from two news vans shone on Gini’s front lawn. Video cameras were trained on Sergeant Duprey as she gestured forcefully toward the shotgun that Gini’s neighbor, Rich Harring, held in his hands. Dressed in a navy blue terrycloth bathrobe over striped pajamas, he stood at the end of Gini’s driveway where he’d apparently been fending off reporters and curious neighbors.

Officer Redman, the kid who had given Callie such a hard time that first night, was ineffectively barking at a cameraman on the sidewalk in front of Gini’s house, gesturing wildly with his handgun.

Gini and Callie watched as Captain Rivera quietly disarmed his young officer and pointed toward his patrol car. Head down, the dejected redhead meekly obeyed the obvious order.

It didn’t take long for Captain Rivera and Sergeant Duprey, with the help of two more Town cops, to clear Gini’s driveway and allow Callie’s car and Jed’s to pull in.

Telling them to remain in the car for a moment, Captain Rivera requested the office door key from Gini, whose purse had been found in Marilyn’s pick-up and returned to her. He unlocked the door and surveyed the lawn to make sure the reporters were keeping their distance before escorting Gini and Callie from the car. Jed quickly followed the women inside.

As the door closed, they could hear Captain Rivera shouting, “Nothing to see here, folks! The Sheriff will have a statement for you in the morning.”

EPILOGUE

Late Tuesday morning, with the help of a Town cop guarding the property, they were able to evade the reporters outside the house. Callie and Jed had decided to take Gini for a celebratory brunch at a waterfront restaurant outside Kingston. They’d have taken her to dinner, but Jed would be leaving for home later in the day.

Callie had opted to take those vacation days Samantha offered and stay the rest of the week to help Gini cope with the trauma she’d experienced.

Gini’s parents had been informed that she was safe and had been persuaded that it was not necessary to fly down as they had planned as soon as they heard she was missing. Gini told Callie she was glad it would be only the two of them for the next few days. She didn’t think she could cope with her parents’ loving concern right now.

“To two reasons to celebrate!,” Jed raised his orange juice glass.

“To your engagement!” Gini responded, looking a bit wan, but more like herself in a pretty cream-colored tunic over fitted indigo jeans.

“To your rescue!” Callie countered.

Gini had told them as briefly as possible the night before about her ordeal in the basement. It was not something she wanted to dwell on and they didn’t press her, at least for now. Callie thought it was safe, though, to talk about the time Gini had spent with Molly at the Plowshare Acres compound.

“I think I know something about the place you stayed,” she said. “When we went to buy my ring, the jeweler had a display of silver work.” Holding up her heart and star pendant, she showed it to Gini. “I bought this. It was made by someone named Nancy who lives in a community like the one you described. I think it must be the same place. Did you meet anyone named Nancy?”

“No. Well, she might have been at Morning Prayer, but I was too upset to notice who I met. It’s very likely, though. Molly said they have lots of artisans living there.” Leaning toward Callie, she picked up the delicate silver piece and held it in her palm. “It’s beautiful!”

“Isn’t it? Everything I saw by her was lovely. You know I’m not much for jewelry, but in this case I would really love to meet the artist. Do you think sometime when I’m here again we could go over there? I’d love to meet Molly, too, and thank her for all she did for you.”

Gini nodded, “I promised Molly I’d come back when I got my life together. But it’s going to take some time and some therapy.” With tears welling in her eyes, she almost whispered, “I need a new therapist, too.”

Callie knew that Gini must be thinking about the trauma to Hope’s family as much as of her own loss. She had promised Gini that she would go with her to Hope’s funeral, only two days away. She was acutely aware that Gini would need all her support when they met Hope’s husband and children.

Clearly not wanting to dwell on that, Gini changed the subject, asking, “What about your plans? Have you set a date?”

Jed jumped in, “As soon as she’ll have me.”

Callie smiled, “I’d have you right now, but we need to work things out, like our living arrangements. I’ll have to sell my condo and we have to deal with storing or combining furniture. Plus a million small things we haven’t had time to think of. But believe me, Gini, you’ll be the first to know. I want my Maid of Honor to be ready.”

Gini reached over and gave her a huge smile along with a side hug.

“Speaking of relationships,” Callie said too brightly, trying hard not to grimace, “how has it been going with Mark?”

Gini looked away. “I think that’s over. He’s not who I thought he was. He called me Friday morning and said he wanted to see me Saturday. When I told him I was expecting company for the weekend, he got really annoyed. Acted like I was supposed to be available anytime he wanted me to be, like some kind of Call Girl!

“I told him that if he was going to be that demanding, I didn’t think we should see each other anymore. I don’t need another Ron.”

“Yeah,” Callie agreed now that she felt free to say what she thought. “I met him. He’s definitely not who I think you thought he was. I’ll bet that’s why he was so cold to me, though. He must have resented being the one who was being dumped.”

“Sounds like he may have displaced his anger with me by being hard on you. It does fit his behavior pattern, though I’m only noticing it in hindsight now,” Gini said.

Before Callie could go on talking about her impression of Mark, Jed broke in, “Hold that thought. We’re going to have to get back soon if I’m going to get through City traffic before rush hour.”

Gini groaned, “Oh no! That means facing those reporters again!”

Jed nodded sympathetically, “I know. But they’ll go away soon enough when the next sensation comes along.”

Then he shifted in his seat and said, “Gini, before I go, I have to ask you. How would you feel about me telling your story? My editor asked me if I’d be able to do that.”

Gini sighed, “I don’t know, Jed. I know you’d do a more compassionate job with it than those vultures by my house. But I think it will be a long time till I’m ready to talk about it. And there are other people to consider, too. Molly for example. She was a big part of it and I’d want to talk to her about how her community would feel. I don’t know if they have rules about publicity. I wouldn’t want to upset them. They were so good to me.”

Jed nodded, “I’ll consider that a ‘maybe.’”

1. © Eleanor Farjeon and Yusef Islam [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hebrews 13:1-2 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)