

## Chapter 1

The elephant on her chest made it difficult to breathe. From her position on her living room's plush, oversized chair, her laptop balanced on the crook of her leg, Abby Carlson felt that familiar tightness press upon her as it often did during times like this—expected conversations about her childhood. It had been two months since the elephant had made its last appearance, when her aunt had told her about her stepfather. Brain cancer. Six months, maybe nine with treatment. Abby had handled the news well enough, telling herself that although her plan to finally visit him in prison and confront him about what he'd done to her as a little girl would now be expedited, it needn't be immediate. But all that had changed two days ago when she'd heard that the three to six months he had left was now mere weeks, if not days. More tumors had been found. Soon, his cognition would be severely reduced, followed by unconsciousness, then the end quickly thereafter. She'd had five years and every opportunity to visit him, but here she was, about to speak with her counselor over Zoom instead of heading to the prison; because rushing something like this didn't just bring the elephant back, it invited the whole herd.

Her computer clock read 4:29 PM. The virtual therapy session she'd scheduled two days ago would start in another minute. Her cat Thomas Magnum lay curled beside her on the couch, oblivious to his master's growing anxiety. A familiar mix of sadness and happiness came to Abby when she settled her gaze on him; sadness that the tabby she'd adopted from the local cat café would never get the chance to experience human emotion, and happiness for the same reason. When the clock turned to 4:30, she exhaled a deep sigh then moved the cursor over the "Connect" tab and clicked on it. The throbber whirled for several seconds before the connection was made, then her screen changed to the live-camera image of a smallish man seated in a wheelchair behind a desk.

She'd chosen a man on purpose. Not so much due to his gender, or Abby's self-professed reluctance to spill her guts to another woman, but because the man's profile had included a photo of his undersized body hunched over in a wheelchair, his equally undersized head twisting upward in what appeared to be a painful attempt to face the camera. If Abby was going to endure emotional pain, she figured the counselor she would choose might have more sympathy for her if he was enduring some physical pain of his own. While making sense to her, the thought had made her feel guilty at the same time. That guilt was even worse now as she sat watching him shift uncomfortably in his electric wheelchair. His under-developed arms lay like a child's on the chair's armrests. The dark blanket he wore like a shawl couldn't hide the melon-sized hump on his right shoulder. In college, Abby had known someone with a similar-looking disability; the woman had been prone to getting cold, even in warm months, and had always worn a blanket.

Abby eyed the counselor's pale expression and guessed he didn't see much sunlight. No surprise there. Other than his obvious disability, he had the expected counselor appearance: readers perched low on his nose, an Oxford/sweater vest combo, and a wisp of gray hair swept across his balding head. "Good afternoon, Ms. Carlson," he said, his voice surprisingly deep for his size.

"Good afternoon to you, sir," Abby said, managing a smile.

He waved one of his smallish hands. “Please—no ‘sir’s’ around here. Call me Harlon.”

“Okay. And you can call me Abby. It’s Abigail, technically, but only my mother called me that.”

“Abby it is.”

They locked eyes through their camera connections momentarily, an awkward silence filling the net-provided space between them, until Harlon shifted in his wheelchair and said something that surprised her. “Before we begin, I’d like to disclose something about myself. I am by no means required to discuss it with patients, but I choose to anyway since it tends to clear the air and offer some perspective.” He motioned toward his child-like, twisted upper body, no more than three feet long from head to foot, and barely seventy pounds, from the look of him. “I was born with an obvious birth defect that, well...can be disquieting to some people. I’ve even been compared to a hunchback.” He indicated the sizable hump on his right shoulder, under the blanket. “Congenital scoliosis gave me this hump, and microcephaly gave me my head and limbs.”

He manipulated a control on the chair’s armrest and reversed the chair away from the desk to quickly reveal parts of his undersized legs. The blanket lay bunched around them and fell to the floor, something Abby assumed was due to him not wishing to have it scrunched around him. He touched a control and moved the chair back to where it had been. “The doctors said the odds of a child having both these conditions is one in several million,” he said. “The odds of that child surviving to adolescence is even rarer. But others are much less fortunate than me, so I try not to complain.” He smiled and pushed up the glasses on his nose.

“It must be difficult for you, going out in public,” Abby said, surprised the session was beginning with her expressing empathy for the man who was supposed to be showing it to her.

“It was much more difficult as a child, emotionally speaking. My condition has worsened as I’ve aged, but it’s something I’ve learned to live with. On a slightly different subject, have you heard of the fictional character Quasimodo?”

“Wasn’t he the Hunchback of Notre Dame?”

“Yes!” the counselor said, his face lighting up. “Most people don’t know that. He happens to be my favorite fictional character, so I take it as a compliment when someone calls me that.” His smile broadened as he reached forward as far as he could and rotated his laptop ninety degrees to show a large bookcase against the wall. He zoomed the camera shot for her to read the titles more easily. “There it is on the top shelf, in the middle—quite a read if you have the time. I feel that I’ve always shared a commonality with Hugo,” he said off-camera.

Abby stared at the book, wide-eyed. “Talk about a doorstep.”

The counselor laughed and rotated the laptop back to face him, adjusting the zoom back to normal. “Indeed. Publishers balk at longer works these days. I mention it to give you an example of taking something good from a bad situation. From an early age, I knew that I would never play sports or even take a single step on my own. Instead of self-pity, I directed my life toward doing this.” He spread his hands and looked around the office before settling his gaze back onto his computer screen. He appeared to be reading something off of it. “Let’s see...your

written application states you're thirty-one, single, and that you wish to focus on your childhood sexual abuse, correct?"

"Yes."

"Specifically, you're wanting to speak to your abuser before he is expected to pass away soon?"

Abby's stomach fluttered. "Um...yes. I guess I need some advice on how to handle it."

"Okay. We'll begin in a moment. And no worries, we'll still have our full hour once we get through these formalities. Before we start, I wanted to let you know that I like to challenge my clients to accept their past and understand that although they cannot change it, it makes them who they are today. Like Quasimodo, we must all look past our ugliness and find contentedness. For him, it was looking down on Paris from the tower and ringing the bell. The question is, where will you find yours?"

Abby, taken in by the man's surprising insight, felt her previous anxiousness begin to melt away. She was already feeling her body relax into the couch's plushness. "I'll try my best."

They began where he suggested, her childhood. After describing her earliest years, which had been filled with mostly pleasant albeit fleeting memories of both her birth parents, she moved on to the years following her father's sudden death and her mother's second marriage. Immediately, the mood of the conversation changed. She took a breath and let the information come out without trying to sugarcoat it.

"He molested me, my stepfather. From age six to about ten. It started with touching, then progressed into other things. It happened a long time ago, but sometimes it feels like yesterday, if that makes any sense." She looked into the man's eyes. "It's weird, but sometimes I feel like it happened to someone else."

A curious expression passed before the counselor's eyes. A fleeting personal memory, perhaps. "It's common for victims of abuse to become disassociated from their trauma. I encourage you to treat your child-self and adult-self like travelers on a long voyage. You will never be the same person once you reach each signpost in life because each experience and every person you meet along the way will imprint upon you. Make sense?"

"I guess," she said. She turned to gaze out her living room window onto Lyndale Avenue, two stories below. The busy Uptown thoroughfare was especially so today, with weekday rush-hour traffic clogging the street, and pedestrians strolling along the sidewalk. Separating her hands and shoving them beneath her thighs, Abby shifted her gaze back onto the counselor. "Part of me hates myself for never resisting him. It wouldn't have stopped him, but it's always made me feel like a coward for not trying anyway."

The counselor's eyebrows arched from behind his glasses. "That's a common feeling for people in your position. As for when you plan to visit him in prison and speak with him about the abuse...I'm assuming that's why he's there?"

"He only has a few weeks to live at most. I have a visit scheduled for Monday, but he might not be in any condition to talk. And no, he's there for dealing drugs. He'll never serve a day for what he did to me."

The counselor nodded. “I see. What do you plan on saying to him?”

She prepared to say something she’d thought of many times before, a line that said if what had happened to her had taught her anything, it was that she’d die fighting rather than be subjected to anything like that again. To prove that he hadn’t truly defeated her. But instead of that, she said something that surprised her. “I’d tell him that I feel sorry for him. It must have been agonizing waking up every day, wondering if that would be the day my mom found out.”

“Did she?”

“No, I never told.”

“What do you think she would have done if you had?”

Abby huffed. “She would’ve waited until he passed out, then poured gasoline on him and lit it. Like the movie *The Burning Bed*.”

“And now that you’re an adult?”

Abby shrugged. “I’ll never know. She died two years ago. A year after my brother was killed in a car accident.”

“I’m very sorry for your losses. But what if I told you that you *could* tell her. Your stepfather too. Right now, as you sit there on your couch, during this meeting.”

She frowned. “You mean using a Ouija board or something?”

“No. I mean that just because someone is dead or locked away in prison doesn’t mean you can’t tell them how you feel. Communication doesn’t always necessitate a tacit response from the respondent. Preferable, yes, but not mandatory.”

“Okaaaay…” she began. “So how do I do this?”

“Turn and speak to them as if they were sitting beside you. But before you do, know that if it’s your stepfather, he has no ability to harm you. In fact, he won’t have the ability to touch you or even speak. You’re in control. Say your piece—anything you want, no matter how angry or vile or unforgiving it may be.”

“Hmm.” She bit her lip, then turned sharply on the couch, propping her knee onto the cushion, and folding her arms across her chest. “Jerry, I’ve wanted to tell you this ever since I was little. You did those things to me knowing I’d never tell. That makes you a pedophile *and* a coward. Just know that I feel sorry for you. It must’ve been agonizing for you to wake every day and wonder if that’d be the day my mom would find out. She would’ve killed you. Horribly. Then *she* would’ve gone to prison. That’s the real reason I never told. Because even though you stole my innocence, I refused to have it affect my mom too.”

Her breathing was coming shorter now, and her heart was pounding in her chest. But she felt better already. Empowered. She made a satisfied sound before turning back toward Harlon’s image on her laptop screen. “Wow…”

He gave a knowing nod. “The best part of this exercise is that you get to do it whenever you need to.”

“And every time, he can’t speak or touch me?”

“That’s how it works.”

She did the same for her mother, telling her how happy she was her mother had lived her life free from the prison she surely would have experienced; and that despite that gratefulness, Abby wished she’d been somehow able to communicate to her what had happened. When she was done, she turned her gaze back out the same window and brushed aside a single tear. She’d expected more of them, but then again, she’d shed enough during her life to fill a river. Not wishing to dwell on the past, she concentrated on the bustling uptown thoroughfare below. Early November in Minneapolis had brought with it the first frost of the season, and with it an explosion of reds and yellows from the maple trees lining it. She felt a touch of sadness for them, knowing they’d soon be barren until spring.

During the second half-hour of the session, they spoke of varying topics. Included in them was talk of her most recent boyfriend, Alex, whom she’d broken up with two months ago. They’d dated for a year. “Do you know where he is now?” Harlon asked.

“He lives right down the street,” she said, her face a picture of painful irony. “A mutual friend told me he’s dating a girl I went to college with. I’m happy for him.”

“Anyone since then?”

“No. I’m not ready yet.”

At the end of the session, Harlon suggested, “How about we end with a pleasant childhood memory. Keep it brief.”

Her brow wrinkled in thought. “My grandparents’ farm. I spent a few weeks there every summer. One of my favorite things to do was walking through a large field of wildflowers. I’d walk with my hands at my sides, letting the flowers pass over my palms. I remember thinking that if I could only release all my pain and shame into them, I’d feel better. That it’d make what was happening to me easier to deal with. But the idea of giving those beautiful flowers something so ugly, so vile, disgusted me. I would’ve never forgiven myself. So I kept it from them. That always made me happy, knowing they’d stay pretty and innocent.”

Abby uttered a contented sound as she turned her attention back onto the counselor. He seemed to be in his own thoughts while at the same time appearing to have closely listened to her. She felt a sudden wave of gratefulness for having picked the man out of the dozens of potential counselors, even though her initial reasons had been selfish.

“That was a brave thing that little girl did, saving those flowers,” Harlon said. He adjusted his position in the wheelchair, his smallish head stooped even lower than before.

Eying the hump on his back, Abby wished she could somehow reach through the screen and hug him. “I think I locked it away and only realized it was still there when I found out he was dying of cancer. I’m still going to try visiting him next week, but this really helped. Thank you.”

“Good,” he said. “Like I said, use this method whenever you feel the need. Think of it as your weaker self-hypnotizing your stronger self. I do it all the time.” He smiled. “Seems we’ve run out of time. Would you like to schedule another session?”

She nodded. "I'd like that." She reached for the box of tissues she'd placed beside her and used one to blot her eyes.

"Well, then..." She could see him reading something off his screen again. "How about next Thursday, same time? That'll give you time to conduct your visit and let it settle."

"That works." She went to end the session when she paused. "Would it be improper if I asked you a personal question?"

The counselor shrugged. "Not unless you're going to ask me if I ate an entire pint of Ben and Jerry's last night." They both laughed.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like, walking on your own?" As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. They sounded horridly rude, even to her own ears. Clearly, she'd overstepped.

Instead of looking offended or becoming defensive, however, he smiled. "Every day. And no, that wasn't too personal. I'm glad to share it."

She sighed. The elephant, she realized for the first time, had risen off her chest. "See you next Thursday," she said, and pressed "End Session."

\* \* \*

After feeding Thomas Magnum, and changing from her work scrubs into stylish jeans and a new sweater she'd bought at her favorite consignment store the week before, Abby grabbed the small gift off the counter she'd wrapped earlier that morning. Riding the elevator to her apartment building's lobby, she approached the doorman who was opening the door for her. "Evening, missy," he said, removing his billed cap to reveal a wisp of thinning white hair.

"Good evening yourself, Harold," Abby said, trying her best to mimic his formal air. She held out the package for him. "For Marna. Sorry to miss her birthday last week. I was swamped at work."

Harold's smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes. "Well now, you didn't have to do that."

"I sure did," she said, motioning for him to take the gift. "She remembered mine. Besides, I'm sure she's been a bit down after the surgery. How is she?"

He accepted the gift and slipped it into his doorman coat's inner pocket. "She's been better. The doctors say they got it all, but you never know." He grimaced. "Hard for a woman to lose her parts up there, even at her age."

Abby touched his arm. "I can imagine. Tell her I'll come visit this weekend when I'm off. We can watch Hallmark movies and bake cookies."

Harold laughed. "I may pass on the movies bit, but I'll take a few of those cookies." He winked. "Come over whenever."

She squeezed his arm then went to cross the threshold when he stuck his arm out to stop her. “You be careful out here, missy,” he said in a low voice. He looked up both directions of the street. “He’s out here, plucking ‘em right and left. Took that nurse from the hospital not far from here. The rapper girl too, just last week. Finished her concert down at Club First Avenue, then poof—gone out of thin air!” He made an exploding hand gesture, his eyes widening as he did.

Abby smiled confidently. “I’m the last woman a kidnapper would be interested in. The most exciting part about me is coming home from work to watch *Wheel of Fortune* with my cat. But I promise to be careful.” She stepped through the doorway and turned left down the sidewalk toward the bar that was her destination.

As she walked past familiar neighborhood shops and apartment buildings, she forced away thoughts of the serial kidnapper Harold had reminded her of. Two dozen women since the previous spring, each one’s profession represented by a different letter of the alphabet, and all abducted from their place of business. The police had witnesses and fingerprints, even surveillance photos, but had yet to find the suspect. He’d had an accomplice on several occasions who had yet to be found either. Just like everyone else in the city and across the nation, Abby had initially been alarmed by the brazenness of the crimes. Since he preyed mostly on local women between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, Abby and other women in that demographic had had much more to worry about. But like many noteworthy crimes or traumatic news events, people tended to push the continual news flashes into the backs of their minds. As fantastic as those flashes were, people had lives to live. Abby was no different.

As she now walked down the busy Uptown street, the late-autumn sun just dipping below the horizon, she replaced thoughts of kidnappers and redundant news articles with those of the therapy session she’d just had. Now *that* was newsworthy to her. Long-dormant memories of her childhood had been disturbed, like a broom raising dust from a forgotten corner. She’d gone into the session hopeful she could come to grips with the possibility she may never get the chance to confront her stepfather. She’d finished it feeling confident she could. But now, as she fought to push the dust cloud of memories back into its rightful corner, she decided she still needed that final bit of closure. Talking to the counselor had done what she’d intended—prepare her for Monday’s visit at the prison (she’d preferred to go earlier, but the prison medical department had ruled it out due to her stepfather’s recent procedure). It was a bitter irony that the man who had abused her for a large part of her childhood was now someone she hoped would survive through the weekend.

Ten minutes later she walked through the front door of The Gimlet, the swanky uptown bar. She’d only been here once, a brief visit about a year ago during a bar crawl with friends. Now, after exchanging polite smiles with the hostess, Abby stepped into the main sitting area and scanned the collections of heads. She didn’t see Derek. When she scanned the room again and still didn’t see him, she checked her phone on the chance he’d canceled last-minute. No missed calls or messages from him. She took a lap around the bustling place, deftly dodging a woman in a cocktail dress and high heels carrying an extremely full martini. Still nothing. Derek must have gotten delayed at the shop, she figured. Turning back toward the front door to call him outside, she’d just taken two steps when she heard her name called out from her left. Looking in that direction, she saw the top of a bald, African American man’s head and a waving arm from atop a row of potted plants. Weaving her way through crowded tables, she made her way to where he sat. “Sorry I’m late—I got held up at the bank,” she said, opting for a white lie instead

of having to rehash her therapy session. She plopped onto the chair opposite him and gave a huge sigh.

“You were in a *bank robbery*?” declared Derek, eyes wide. He raised both hands with feigned melodrama and looked at an imaginary person beside him. “Excuse me, Mr. Robber, if you’re looking for someone to strip naked and tie up, I volunteer.”

Abby nearly spit out a mouthful of water. “You’re terrible,” she said, flagging down their waiter. She ordered them both a Cosmo, keeping with their Thursday happy hour tradition. They made small talk for several minutes, during which she tried in vain to fully suppress thoughts of her therapy session. When their drinks came, she took a sip of hers and instantly felt warmth spread through her. The heaviness in her chest that had been present before and during the session had faded once it ended; but now, as she smiled into her best friend’s face, she felt guilty for telling him even a white lie.

He must have seen it in her eyes because he laid a hand on hers and asked, “Honey, you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, relieved he’d asked. “My bank visit was really the counseling session I mentioned.”

Derek nodded knowingly. “How’d it go?”

She took a huge gulp of her drink, set the glass down, and stared at it.

“Say no more,” Derek said, squeezing her hand. “Charles has been seeing a therapist ever since we’ve been together. I’m starting to believe that some skeletons are meant to stay buried.”

“At least I didn’t have to talk face-to-face. I found someone who does Zoom sessions.”

“Ohh, I love Zoom. It’s how Charles and I met. It’s amazing how much of a connection you can have with someone through a computer screen. I’ve thought about developing a Zoom dating site called Leer the Queer.”

Abby laughed. “I’m sure it’d be a hit, knowing your business skills. You may even give Grindr a run for their money.”

Suddenly, Derek’s expression turned serious. “Oh my God, you just reminded me, did you hear about the new Instagram post? They think it’s *him* again.”

“*Him* who?” Abby asked.

Derek gave her an exasperated look. “PK, who else? We were just talking about Nautinice yesterday. The cops got the post taken down right away, but everyone’s saying it’s him.”

Abby nodded. “My doorman just reminded me about it. Everyone thought it was going to be a real estate agent or something exotic like a racecar driver.”

“I don’t know how much more exotic you can get than a rap star with a diamond-studded microphone,” Derek said. “Her bodyguard went on the news saying he watched her walk into her dressing room alone after her concert ended. When he checked on her five minutes later, she was gone.”



“I thought the cops said they got camera footage of the suspect,” Abby said, indulging Derek’s need to gossip, even if it now involved discussing the criminal the media had dubbed the “Profession Killer.”

“They did, but it was inconclusive. Until we found out it was PK, everyone at the shop joked that maybe she got tired of all the fame and disappeared to the same island Biggie and Tupac went to.” They both laughed. “But seriously, aren’t you worried?”

Abby frowned. “Why would I be worried?”

“Because you’re a D. Only that and V left.”

She went to say something along the lines of him being ridiculous, that it was foolish to be worried about being one of dozens of potential professions and thousands of women whom the serial kidnapper could target, but even saying that seemed like wasted utility. “Derek, I appreciate your thoughts, but I have more to worry about than some weirdo who poses dead girls in their work clothes. I’m a dietitian. We’re boring. Mine is the last profession he’d target.”

“True. Maybe he’ll take a dancer.”

Abby shook her head. “He already has the stripper. It’s the same thing. At least he’s equal opportunity.” She felt warm all of a sudden. Digging into her purse, she removed a hair-tie, with the intention of putting her hair up. As she removed it, the clip from her work ID snagged on her thumb and fell to the floor beside her. A man sitting by himself at the table next to them paused from working on his laptop to bend over and pick it up. Handing it to her, he offered a brief smile.

“Thank you,” Abby said, embarrassed at her clumsiness. Had the man’s eyes lingered over her ID a second longer than necessary? She couldn’t be sure, and chalked it up to being paranoid over the discussion she and Derek were having.

“Remember the pool we have at the shop? No one’s guessed right yet, so the pot keeps rolling over,” Derek said, continuing in the same vein. “I put my money on him taking a dentist when he gets to D. If I’m right, I’m taking you to Cancun.”

“I thought you liked your dentist,” she said, taking another sip of her Cosmo. She set the half-full glass down and pushed it away from her. She hadn’t eaten since lunch, and her head was already swimming.

“Duh, my dentist is a man. PK is clearly straight,” he joked. “Good thing, because I’ve been waiting for my dentist to root inside my canal since I laid eyes on him.”

She smacked him on the arm, looking around to make sure no one heard his comment. “I can’t take you anywhere!”

“A girl’s gotta dream,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I suppose. But I hope it *isn’t* a dentist. Mine is female, and I happen to love her.”

“Let’s make it a door-to-door salesman, then. Everyone hates them.”

“Deal!” she said, reaching across the table to shake hands with him to seal it. “For once, I don’t mind being in an obscure profession. But enough of that. How’s the shop doing?”

That got them talking about work, mainly how his new position as head stylist at the hair salon was going. After talking about his oft-dramatic relationship with Charles, as well as Abby's recent breakup with her long-time boyfriend, Derek checked his watch. "Gotta run. My turn to cook tonight."

"What's for dinner?"

"Homemade carbonara. Trying it the true Italian way, without cream."

"Sounds delicious," Abby said, her eyes aglow. "No man with an apron cooking for me, so I'll settle for Marie Callender and a glass of wine."

After Derek paid the tab, since it was his turn, they made their way outside and stood on the darkened, relatively empty sidewalk. It was almost 7 PM and already the early November chill made them both shiver. "Let me walk you home," he offered.

"I'll be fine. It's six blocks."

"I insist," Derek said, removing his jacket and draping it over her shoulders. He offered the crook of his arm, then stared straight ahead in the direction of Abby's apartment building. Knowing any further protest would be futile, Abby sighed and took his arm.

They walked mostly in silence the entire way, listening to the sounds of urbanity along the way. When they reached her building, Derek exchanged nods with the doorman, who stood ready to open the door for Abby. "Thank you, Derek," she said, removing her hand from his arm. "For being such a good friend." For the first time since she'd left her apartment to meet him, the tightness in her chest was completely gone.

Taking his jacket back, he gripped her by the elbows and held them at arm's length. "Call me if you need anything. And I mean *anything*. I'm at the shop through Tuesday next week, but I'll push my appointments back if you need me before your prison visit. That weird old bag Mrs. Wilcox will be first on the chopping block. She takes her hair home in a plastic bag because she thinks the CIA IDs people with it."

Abby stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek, then turned to walk through the door. Harold exchanged a silent nod with Derek before watching him walk back the way he'd come.

Entering her eighth-floor apartment, Abby was immediately met by Thomas Magnum. He curled his body around her leg, his heavy black whiskers brushing her hand as she squatted to pet him. Fixing him dinner first, Abby popped a frozen pot pie in the oven then clicked on the TV. *Wheel of Fortune* had just started. Afterward, it wasn't long before she slipped into a luxurious hot bath while sipping an even more luxurious glass of merlot.

## Chapter 2

*The next day*

*4:45 PM*

“Guard’s here,” Abby said, glancing through the Uptown Dietitian Center’s front door. A tall, middle-aged Caucasian man in a baggy, familiar-looking black security company nylon jacket and matching cap stepped from a white van and walked confidently toward the front double doors. He made brief eye contact with both Abby and Melinda—the two dietitians on duty now—through the windowed doors and touched the brim of his cap. Handsome guy, Abby thought, at least from what she could tell from her brief glance at him. Dark blond hair peeking below the back of his cap, and a well-trimmed mustache. Before she could get a better look at him, he turned to face the parking lot. A radio sat clipped to one side of his belt, a holstered pistol on the other.

“Another new guy,” said Melinda with a sigh. “I really liked the last one.”

“Me too,” Abby said. “But at least they finally sent someone who could actually protect us if he had to. The last guy was sweet, but he was two steps away from an assisted living facility.” She glanced up at the clock on the waiting room wall before tapping Melinda on the shoulder. “Go ahead and get out of here. No reason to be late picking up Riley.”

Melinda hesitated. “Are you sure? You know what Valerie said.”

“I know, but it’s a silly rule. Besides, the guard’s here.”

Melinda looked out the doors at him. He was a picture of protectiveness—solidly build, assured stance, hands on hips. He even had a V-shaped taper to his back. “True. And Riley just texted me that practice is ending early today, so getting a head start would help. Still—are you sure?”

“Yep,” Abby said, waving her away. “You’d better get to the field while all those hot soccer dads are still there.” They both laughed.

“Okay, I’ll run then,” Melinda said, scooting her chair out and shouldering her purse strap. “There *is* a cute guy I’ve noticed lately. A lawyer, I think.”

“Married?”

“Unfortunately,” Melinda said, rolling her eyes. “All the good ones are. Oh well—have a good weekend.” She logged out of her computer, made her way through the waiting room, then pushed her way out the front door. After saying something to the guard, she climbed into her blue Corolla and pulled out of the parking lot before disappearing down the street. Alone in the clinic now but feeling an increased measure of safety, Abby began her closing procedures without worry. Due to the PK abductions over the past seven months, the clinic’s owner had hired a part-time security guard to cover the openers and closers. She’d also insisted on those procedures going from the normal one employee to two, which was not to be diverted from under any circumstances. If she found out Abby had broken the rule and decided to close by herself, she’d be upset for sure. But Valerie was a fair woman, one who had clawed and scratched her way to owning her own business without her businessman husband’s help. Abby figured she’d understand, especially since the rule had been broken on account of Melinda’s difficult situation being a single parent. Valerie had been one herself. It didn’t hurt that Abby was well-known to be Valerie’s favorite and most experienced dietitian on staff.

At precisely 5 PM, with the office still empty, Abby finished the last of her closing duties and logged out of her computer terminal. Turning out the lights, she grabbed her purse and armed the security system on the wall-mounted unit. Turning out the lights, she had just stepped outside to lock up when the guard’s voice came from behind her. “Excuse me, ma’am, is there any way I can use your bathroom? I should have gone before I got here, and it’ll be a bit ‘til I get to my next assignment.”

She turned to face the man, who stood several feet away, shifting from foot to foot. “Oh...sure, of course. I always need to go the minute I get in the car, so I’m familiar.” She opened the door and held it open for him.

“You’re an angel,” the guard said. He smiled appreciatively, deep dimples appearing in both cheeks, then slipped into the clinic’s unisex bathroom. Abby disarmed the alarm before the thirty-second timer ran out and waited patiently for him to finish, listening to the sound of him flushing the toilet. As she did so, she glanced through the front door and noticed a man in a baggy sweatshirt and ball cap pulled down over his face at the far end of the parking lot. He appeared homeless or working on it. This area of Uptown had its fair share of folks who were homeless, she knew, so she didn’t sense any danger, even when he glanced toward the clinic’s front door. But when he began walking in that direction, cutting directly through the parking lot and straight toward the clinic, Abby almost went to lock the door. But the sound of the running sink, followed by the familiar *whap whap* of paper towels being pulled from the dispenser, echoed through the empty waiting room. The guard would be out any second, she figured, and the man walking toward the clinic was still twenty yards away. Sure enough, a moment later the guard exited the restroom, a look of great relief on his face. “Whew, you saved me from finding a gas station,” he said, re-fastening his gun belt. “The last one I used was a germaphobe’s nightmare.”

“No problem,” Abby said with a laugh. “I’d probably rather go in the bushes than use most gas stations, so I get it.” She glanced back out the front door and was glad to see that the strange man had disappeared. Probably to bed down in the alley behind the clinic, she thought, or rummage through the trash. As she turned to begin re-arming the security code, she detected sudden movement behind her. Not the guard beginning his path toward the front door as she’d

assumed he'd do, but seeming to close the distance *toward* her. Animal instinct caused the hairs on the back of her neck to rise a split second before she began to spin to face him. But before she finished her rotation, the guard slipped his left arm around her neck, yanking her backward into his bulky torso.

At first, she believed he must be playing a joke on her. *Ha-ha, scared ya, didn't I?* But of course, that was ludicrous. He was the guard, for God's sake, the last person who would invade a woman's personal space in such a way. A half-second after that thought raced through her mind, realization kicked in and she bucked her body hard against his. But he was too strong, and with a squeeze of his arm around her neck he cut off her air supply. Eyes bulging, Abby clawed and scratched in vain at the guard's arm. She twisted her body hard and scissor-kicked her legs in a desperate attempt to gain enough space to breathe, but his arm was tightening across her throat even more now. She'd been without air for about five seconds, but it felt like five minutes. Her lungs instantly began to burn, and tiny black dots pinpricked her vision.

Then, a sudden thought: If she could get to his eyes with her right hand, she might have a chance. She reached up and began to scratch at his face when she felt a moist cloth clamp down over her nose and mouth. As she struggled, a crazy thought struck her oxygen-deprived brain—that he felt bad for what he was doing to her and had decided to clean her makeup-smearred face. As Abby's eyelids fluttered, her brain beginning to prepare for unconsciousness, the guard released enough pressure around her neck for her to breathe. Immediately, she heaved in a wheezing breath through the cloth. The black dots in her vision disappeared, if only for a moment, and for one amazing second her brain conjured an even better scenario—he was going to let her go. He'd realized his mistake and would even call the police on himself. *Sorry for choking you like that. I don't know what came over me...*

She inhaled again through the cloth, and just as her brain decided that thought too was ridiculous, she realized what he was doing. She tried to scream but couldn't; her throat was too damaged. She moved her lips uselessly, only the hoarse whispered words "help me" escaping them. And as the sweet chemical odor on the cloth finally registered in her brain, it all came together in a flash; she was about to become PK's 25<sup>th</sup> victim. This knowledge caused her to kick even more wildly. She gained a partial foothold on the wall and pushed off, spinning them both to the right. He corrected for it, though, and spun her back toward the wall, pinning her against it face-first. He pressed his shoulder into her back while keeping one arm tight around her neck, while giving her just enough room to breathe.

She wheezed again, fighting to keep her fluttering eyelids from snapping closed. She was fading fast. The black dots re-appeared in her vision, even larger now. Her throat made a low guttural sound that reminded her of the gravely wounded deer she'd stumbled across in the woods near her grandparents' farm when she was twelve. It had been shot with an arrow and was too weak to run when she approached to try to help it. She was the deer now. Like a light switch inside her head flipping off, her eyelids fluttered once more before they slammed shut and her world went suddenly black.