

Full Scoop

Chapter One

"Maggie, what in the world are you doing up there!"

Standing on her swivel desk chair, Dr. Maggie Davenport jumped at the sound of her nurse's voice. The chair pivoted, swung to the right in a half circle. Maggie said, "Eek!," and grabbed one of the shelves of the built-in bookcase, knocking off several medical books, including Gray's Anatomy. The tome bounced off her head. "Ugh!" Maggie winced as tiny dots blinked back at her like fireflies. The chair rolled several inches.

Nurse Queenie Cloud stood motionless, her mouth forming a perfect O. "You're going to kill yourself!"

Maggie tried to get the chair under control, but it refused to cooperate, twisting back and forth as though trying to dance to an old Chubby Checker tune. "Holy crap!"

Queenie bolted forward and Maggie reached out blindly, accidentally sinking her fingers into the other woman's cap of tightly wound white curls. "Let go of my hair!" Queenie cried. She caught the back of the chair and steadied it. "Get down from there before we both end up going to the ER!"

"It's not my fault you came in here and scared me half to death while I was searching for a reference book," Maggie said. She managed to climb from the chair without further injury, but her head was already beginning to throb.

"What reference book?" Queenie asked.

Maggie finger-combed her dark hair from her face, squared her shoulders, and tried to appear as professional as she could under the circumstances. "My, um, Encyclopedia of Rare Illnesses. If you must know," she added in her best physician's voice.

"Don't you go batting those baby-blue eyes at me," Queenie said, "and don't think for one minute I don't know what you were looking for. You were trying to find your stash, that's what you were doing." She gave a grunt. "You haven't even been clean for twenty-four hours."

Maggie should have known better than to try to pull a fast one on Queenie. At seventy, the woman was as sharp as the day she'd gone to work for Maggie's grandfather. Six-year-old Maggie had shaken the black woman's hand and promptly announced that she knew how babies were made. Queenie still treated her as though she were six even though Maggie had a medical degree and a thirteen-year-old daughter.

Maggie slumped. "Hey, I've been listening to crying babies and grumpy children for almost two hours straight without a break. I'm going through withdrawal here. You can't expect me to go cold turkey."

Queenie gave a huge sigh. "I knew this would happen. Okay, you can have one." The woman reached into the pocket of her white uniform, pulled out a Hershey's Kiss, and slapped it into Maggie's open palm like a surgical instrument. "Eat fast. We have a situation in X-ray and you've got patients waiting." She hurried out.

Maggie pulled the foil wrap off the piece of chocolate and tossed it in her mouth. She held it on her tongue and felt the chocolate soften and melt. She closed her eyes and waited for her endorphins to kick in. Endorphins were good things. Exercise and sex raised endorphins, too, but she hadn't exercised lately, and she certainly hadn't had sex. She thought about it a lot; boy oh boy, did she think about it. Too bad she didn't know anybody she wanted to climb beneath the sheets with even though she often went through her mental list of the men she'd dated since returning to Beaumont. Too bad she had to count on chocolate to do the trick. Maybe if she ate less chocolate the men on her list would look better.

"Dr. Davenport?"

Maggie opened her eyes and found Alice, her X-ray technician, standing in the doorway, peering at her from beneath chestnut-colored bangs that needed trimming and reminded Maggie of a sheepdog. "I'm on my way."

A moment later, Maggie stepped into the X-ray room where a tearful six-year-old Bobby Carmichael sat on the stainless steel table, still holding a wad of tissue to his nose that he'd bloodied after falling from a piece of playground equipment at school. Maggie had ordered the X-ray in case he had a fracture. In a chair nearby, his mother was giving him a pep talk.

Alice held a ten-by-ten undeveloped X-ray. "Bobby doesn't want an X-ray."

Maggie smiled at him. "What's wrong, Bobby? X-rays don't hurt. Have you ever had one?"

"At the dentist," he managed. "But-"

The three women waited.

"It's going to hurt if she tries to stick that big thing in my mouth." He pointed to the X-ray.

"Oh, honey, Alice isn't going to put it in your mouth," Maggie said. She turned to Alice. "You might want to carefully explain the procedure to Bobby."

Queenie stood just outside the door and motioned for Maggie, who joined her once Bobby had been reassured.

"Our all-time favorite patient, Henry Filbert, stepped on a rusty nail," Queenie said. "He's in Room One. Susie O'Neal has a bad cold in Room Two and Dee Dee Fontana is in Room Three. She brought the baby in for his six-month checkup."

"I hope Dee Dee took my advice and talked to her ob-gyn about her hormone imbalance," Maggie whispered.

"Jamie Swift-Holt is with her," Queenie said. "They're early so don't knock yourself out rushing."

"I'll see Henry first; then Susie." Maggie stepped inside the exam room and found eleven-year-old Henry playing a handheld game. He didn't look up. Nor did his mother, whose nose was buried in a People magazine. "What happened to your foot, Henry?" Maggie asked as she checked the wound.

"I stepped on a rusty nail," he mumbled, pushing buttons on his game as fast as he could.

"Now, why would you go and do something like that?" Maggie teased.

He looked up and regarded her through the lens of clunky tortoiseshell glasses. His blond bangs formed a precise line across his forehead. "What? You think I did it on purpose?"

Mrs. Filbert looked up. "It was an accident, Dr. Davenport," she said, giving Maggie a funny look.

The boy frowned. "I'm not stupid, you know." He went back to his game.

Maggie didn't bother to clear up the misunderstanding as she cleaned and treated the wound and wrote out a prescription. Henry might not be stupid, but he was spoiled and downright rude, thanks to wealthy parents who pandered to him. She looked through his file. "I see Henry had his last DPT at age four. I usually give my patients an adult tetanus booster after age twelve, so we can go ahead and give Henry his now just to be on the safe side."

"Uh-huh." Mrs. Filbert's gaze was once again fixed on the magazine.

"Okay, we'll get him all set up," Maggie said. When neither acknowledged her, she shrugged and left the room.

Queenie was in the hall attaching a sticky note to a file. "I have never seen the likes," she said. "Two weeks into the school year and half the kids in town have a cold."

"Henry needs a tetanus shot," Maggie said.

Queenie sighed and muttered, "And I was counting on this being a good day."

Maggie checked her wristwatch. Ten-thirty, and she still had a waiting room full of patients. And on Friday, to boot, when she closed early for the weekend.

Susie O'Neal was a second-grader with dimples and pigtails and pinafores that her mother often sewed for her. Maggie found the two staring at the wall mural Maggie's daughter had painted; puppies tumbling playfully on a floor, one stub-tailed and spotted fellow grasping a bedroom slipper between his teeth. Mel was an amazing young artist who'd taught herself to draw almost from the moment she'd learned to hold a pencil.

Maggie examined Susie, wrote out a prescription for her cough, and offered the usual instructions on treating the common cold. Unlike Henry's mother, Mrs. O'Neal listened carefully and asked pertinent questions. The woman was not demanding; it was obvious she was respectful of Maggie's time. Maggie never failed to give Susie's pigtails a gentle tug before she left the room, if for no other reason than to see her cheeks pucker with a smile.

Jamie was playing peekaboo with her six-month-old nephew, Frankie Jr., when Maggie entered the room. The baby was all smiles and drool, and it was obvious Jamie adored him. Maggie was glad they'd rekindled their high school friendship; she and Jamie often lunched and shopped together. After swearing Maggie to secrecy, Jamie told her she was trying to get pregnant, but two months of negative pregnancy tests had prompted her to buy an ovulation kit. Unfortunately, she and Max were finding it difficult to do the deed since the antebellum mansion they'd purchased after their honeymoon was in renovation and crawling with contractors.

"That can't be Frankie Jr.," Maggie said. "It has only been two months since I last saw him, and he has doubled in size!"

Dee Dee and Jamie smiled so proudly it would have been difficult to figure out which of them was the baby's mother had Maggie not already known. They were both gorgeous, as usual, former beauty queen Dee Dee in a kelly-green dress that brought out her red hair and milky complexion; Jamie in navy, her blond hair cut in a sassy new style.

"He's going to be big like his daddy," Dee Dee said.

"You might just have another world-famous wrestler on your hands," Maggie told her. She took the baby and noted right away how alert he was.

Dee Dee shook her head emphatically. "No way am I letting him close to a wrestling ring. He's going to be a great scientist who will find cures for all sorts of terrible diseases. Or maybe president of our country one day," she added.

"Wow!" Maggie smiled at the goofy grin on the baby's face and tried to imagine an older version of him sitting in the oval office.

"Or maybe a famous male model or Chippendale dancer," Dee Dee said. "He could do butter commercials on the side."

Maggie cut her gaze to Jamie and noted her amusement. "It's always good to have a backup plan," she told Dee Dee. She measured and weighed Frankie Jr., checked his reflexes and motor skills, all the while asking Dee Dee about his eating and sleeping habits. Dee Dee answered each question carefully; then bragged about her son's latest accomplishments.

"I'm pretty sure I'm right about everything," she said, reaching into her purse for an envelope and handing it to Maggie. "But I double-checked with his nannies to make sure," she added.

Maggie nodded. Because Dee Dee had become pregnant late in life her husband had hired three nannies to help out. They each worked an eight-hour shift. "Good thinking. By the way, how are those hormones of yours?"

Dee Dee looked at Jamie. "I think I'm doing better."

Jamie nodded. She and Dee Dee had been good friends long before Max Holt had come into the picture and swept Jamie off her feet, and now the two women were sisters-in-law and closer than ever. "Most of the crying jags ended once Dee Dee got back to her normal weight," she told Maggie. "You would not believe what a one-pound gain can do to this woman."

Dee Dee shrugged. "It's true that I'm a little sensitive about my weight."

"Yeah, just a tad," Jamie added with an eye-roll. "But crying seems to work to Dee Dee's advantage because her poor husband can't bear to see her cry. Check out what Frankie gave her during the last mood swing."

Dee Dee held up her hand so Maggie could admire her new diamond.

Maggie arched both brows. "Whoa, that sucker is bigger than the paperweight on my desk!"

"You have to know how to work a man," Dee Dee said proudly.

"You should give lessons," Maggie told her. She began dressing the baby, something she enjoyed doing, and she made silly faces that had not been taught in med school. She waved her hand over his head as though performing a magic act. "I now pronounce your son adorable and perfectly healthy," she said, drawing big smiles from both women. "He's going to need his six-month shots."

"Uh-oh," Jamie replied.

"I won't cry like last time," Dee Dee promised, even as her green eyes grew watery.

Someone knocked on the door and Maggie opened it, expecting Queenie to look in. Destiny Moultrie stood on the other side. Maggie could see that she was deeply troubled; she didn't much look like the smiling photo that accompanied her column as the Divine Love Goddess Advisor for the Gazette.

"Hello, Destiny. If you're here to witness Frankie Jr.'s physical, you just missed it."

"No, I-" She looked frantic. "Is Jamie in there?" She peeked around the partially open door. "Thank goodness I found you! You wouldn't believe the lies I told Vera so she'd tell me where you were. I have to talk to you!"

Jamie looked surprised. "You mean right this minute?"

"Yes! It's urgent and life-altering."

"Oh, boy," Jamie said, wondering what Destiny had come up with this time. She didn't have to wait long; Destiny squeezed past Maggie and stepped inside.

"There's going to be a full moon tonight!"

Jamie waited. "Is that it?"

Destiny shook her head. "It gets worse. Planet Mercury is going into retrograde, and Venus is moving into the seventh house. There is going to be trouble. Big trouble!"

All three women gave Destiny their full attention. "How big?" Jamie asked. "Big like in 'biblical proportion' or big like in 'people need to look both ways before crossing the street'?"

"It's going to affect communication; people are going to be fighting like cats and dogs. Husbands and wives will stop talking to each other, road rage will run rampant, and there will be one car accident after another." She paused and sucked in air. She looked at Maggie. "Do you have a boyfriend who wears Hawaiian shirts? Or maybe a beard?"

Maggie shook her head. She wasn't about to admit she didn't have a boyfriend at the moment. Or in the recent past. Or even the distant past.

Destiny went on with her predictions. "Because Venus is involved, Cupid will run amok, so to speak. People are going to be having a lot of sex. That's about the only good news I have." She paused and took a deep breath. "This is the scary part. I'm supposed to get married."

"Huh?" Jamie wasn't sure she'd heard correctly.

"It gets much worse. Freddy Baylor, the new guy in town who bought that bait shop, is hot for me. He doesn't look as though he has had a haircut or shave in months, and he-" She paused and shuddered. "He holds fishing worms and crickets and live minnows and heaven only knows what else. I can't possibly marry him."

Queenie opened the door and stepped inside. She was breathing heavily. "Henry Filbert is gone."

Maggie looked at her. "Gone where?"

"Soon as I showed up with that booster injection you ordered, he shot out the door like a bottle rocket. After he gave me the finger and called me an ugly black witch doctor."

"Oh, gur-reat!" Maggie said. "Did you happen to see which way he went?"

"In the direction of that little strip shopping center," Queenie said. "I chased that boy for two blocks before I gave up. Just look what the humidity did to my new perm." She pointed to her hair. The once-tight curls had come unsprung and jutted from her head like tiny mattress springs. "Mrs. Filbert is having a conniption fit out front. Somebody needs to put that woman on Valium."

Maggie looked at Dee Dee. "Would you excuse me for a minute?" She opened the door and started down the hall. She could hear Henry's mother wailing from the reception room. "Hurry, Queenie! We have to find him."

Even as tall and lanky as she was, Queenie could not keep up with Maggie. "Hurry, hell," she muttered. "I'm too old for this nonsense. I should be sitting home watching the Shopping Network and collecting Social Security. I ought to put the root on that boy. I ought to-"

Maggie skidded to a stop and Queenie slammed into her. They both gave a giant ugh. "Quiet!" Maggie whispered. "His mother might hear you."

"Yeah? The way I see it, she owes me a hundred dollars for not bringing him back."

Maggie threw open the door to the reception room where Ann Filbert was in the throes of hysteria and frantically punching numbers on her cell phone. She gave Maggie a dark look and pointed at Queenie. "That woman frightened my son. I demand that you fire her immediately."

"Everything is going to be okay, Mrs. Filbert," Maggie said, noting the openmouthed stares coming from the other parents. A toddler in a pink dress yowled and reached for her mother.

"What if he gets lost or falls into a drainage sewer?" the woman cried, flailing her arms. "He's just a little boy. He has his whole life ahead of him. He has never been to a prom or fallen in love. He doesn't even have a 401K." She put the phone to her ear. "Hello? Is anybody there? Helloooo!" she shouted. She looked at Maggie. "Just wait until I tell my husband. We'll sue. We'll own this building before it's over."

Maggie glanced at her fresh-out-of-business-college receptionist, who was in the process of repairing a fingernail and seemed oblivious to the situation. "Fran, please take Mrs. Filbert into my office and offer her something to drink," Maggie said, wishing she had straight whiskey on hand.

"Kay," the girl said without looking up.

Maggie opened the front door, stepped out, and tried to decide where she and Queenie should start looking. She blinked at the sight of a small, caramel-colored goat tethered to a tree and feeding on Maggie's azalea bushes. She turned to Queenie.

The woman shrugged. "I forgot to tell you. Joe Higgins stopped by to pay on his daughter's bill just as I was returning from chasing Henry. Her name is Butterbean. She's a little cockeyed."

Maggie just stood there for a minute. Joe was a down-and-out farmer who insisted on paying his account with beast and fowl. He was not a man to take handouts, he'd told her proudly. Which was why Maggie had a dozen laying hens in an outbuilding at the back of her property that she'd turned into a henhouse. Not to mention a cage of floppy-eared rabbits, she reminded herself. Her daughter, Mel, referred to her as Mrs. Old McDonald and her farm.

"On second thought," Maggie said, realizing Queenie had no business running about in the heat. "Please hide the goat so our patients don't see her."

"Mind telling me where to hide her?" Queenie asked.

"Take her around back. Be sure to give her water. And Frankie Jr. needs his DPT."

"Okay."

"I'll be back as soon as I find Henry."

"Oh, yeah, don't be surprised if you run into people dressed like Elvis," Queenie said. "That convention is in town."

Maggie had no time to worry about men in Elvis suits. She hit the pavement at a dead run, heading toward the strip mall. Ten minutes later she spied Henry sitting at a table inside the Full Scoop ice-cream parlor. She threw open the door and marched in, unable to miss the two men sitting at the back. They were black-haired with long sideburns, and wore white rhinestone-laden jumpsuits and capes.

She turned to Henry, giving him her most menacing look. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not taking that stupid tetanus shot, and you can't make me." He scraped the bottom of the dessert dish, obviously determined to get the very last bite.

"I told him he could get lockjaw and die," Abby Bradley, the owner, called out from behind the counter.

Maggie shot her a look of disbelief. Abby was a busybody and a gossip. "I would appreciate it if you'd try not to traumatize my patient," she said coolly.

"I was just trying to help." Abby gave a huff and disappeared into a back room.

Chocolate fudge dribbled from Henry's chin. "And I'm not going to let that voodoo woman touch me," he said. "My dad thinks she's wacko."

Maggie put her hands on her hips. "Tell you what, Henry," she said, trying to keep her anger in check. "You don't want to take the shot, that's fine with me. But I'm going to have to insist you come back to my office and sign a waiver."

He blinked. "What's that?"

Maggie arched one brow. "Your daddy is an attorney, and you've never heard of a waiver?"

"Good grief, I'm only in sixth grade!"

"It's a document releasing me of any and all responsibility in case you get sick from not following my medical instructions." Maggie smiled. "In other words, your daddy can't sue me." She started for the door.

"Wait."

Maggie turned and smiled. "Yes, Henry?"

He stood. "Okay, I'll come back to your stupid office and take the stupid shot, but it better not hurt. If it hurts I'm going to tell my dad I want another doctor."

She opened the glass door and made a sweeping motion. "After you, Henry."

Zack Madden tried to ignore the doorbell. He ached all over just lying there motionless; he dreaded the moment when he'd actually have to move. The cast on his arm felt heavy and cumbersome, and his ribs were sore. He touched his forehead. The swelling had gone down, but the stitches were tight and they itched. His beard itched.

Finally, when it was obvious his visitor wasn't going anywhere, Zack climbed from the bed, grabbed his wrinkled jeans and T-shirt from the back of a chair, and pulled them on. He made his way through the dark condo, trying to steer clear of the furniture. If he so much as stubbed his toe at this point, he would just stick his revolver in his mouth and be done with it. He paused at the door and checked the peephole before unlocking it.

FBI Director Thomas Helms walked through the door, peering at him through wire-rimmed glasses. He carried a Starbucks sack. "I heard you got roughed up. Heard they found the wire," he added.

"Yeah. After I've been dealing with those goons for almost a year they finally decide to frisk me. Luckily the good guys showed up before I was shot and mounted over somebody's fireplace."

"Any permanent damage?"

Zack shook his head. "I'll still be able to have children."

Helms chuckled. "You need anything?"

Zack closed the door. "A morphine drip, maybe?"

"How about a cup of coffee instead?" The older man handed Zack a tall cardboard cup from the bag. "It's black."

"Thanks." Zack took the cup and peeled off the plastic lid. "Have a seat." He checked his watch. Eleven o'clock.

Helms sat on the camel-colored leather sofa that faced a large plasma TV screen, a serious sound system, and every other toy a man could wish for. Zack took the chair opposite him. He took cautious sips of the coffee as Helms pulled out a second cup.

"I see you have a lot of signatures on your cast."

Zack grinned. "The nurses insisted on signing it." He pointed to the cast that ran from his wrist to just below his elbow. "It's a real babe magnet."

"And the beard?" Helms asked.

"Colombian women love beards. Unfortunately, most of the ones I know were recently jailed. I just haven't had the energy to shave."

Helms set down his cup. "Nobody knew it was going to be this big, Zack. More than two thousand pounds of pure coke," he added, shaking his head as though he still couldn't believe it. "Do you know what that is worth on the street?"

"I did the math. I could buy Rhode Island."

"One of the guys is already begging to turn state's evidence. He can give us names and addresses."

Zack nodded. "That's what we wanted."

Helms grinned. "Hey, you played one hell of a mob boss, my friend. We're going to use the videos in training."

"I miss being Tony Renaldo," Zack said. "I miss the Miami Beach penthouse and the yacht and the fancy cars and Italian suits. It never gets cold in Miami. Not like here in Richmond. Women in Miami don't wear much. A thin coat of suntan oil and a bikini, and they've got a full summer wardrobe." Zack sighed. "I miss the smell of suntan lotion."

"I feel your pain, Zack."

"I want to be a real mob boss when I grow up, Thomas."

Helms looked amused. "Right now you'll have to settle for being a hero. CNN is all over this thing. Everybody from Larry King to Anderson Cooper and Paula Zahn want an exclusive. They want you, Madden."

"I want Paula Zahn."

"They've sworn to protect your cover if you'd grant an interview."

"Not interested," Zack said, "but hey, I'd still like to have Paula sign my cast."

Helms leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "Look, I know this is bad timing, but the bureau could use some good publicity. Maybe we could work a deal. You agree to go on TV and make us look like heroes, and we give you something in return. We'll even let you have yours first since time is of the essence."

"I can't think of anything I want bad enough to agree to an interview where I'd have to sit in the dark and have my voice distorted so I sound like Darth Vader."

"Have you seen the news?"

"I've been sacked out. I'm on medical leave, remember?"

"Does the name Carl Lee Stanton ring a bell?"

Zack gave Helms his full attention. "What about him?"

"He's on the run, and we suspect he's headed to Beaumont, South Carolina, to pick up the stolen money. Plus, there's the old girlfriend who rejected him. I feel sure he'll pay her a visit, so she and her daughter could probably use some protection. I'd like to have an agent inside her house waiting."

Zack looked thoughtful. "Any other agents involved?" he asked.

"Not at the moment. The police are on it, of course," he added, "but I don't have a lot of confidence in those sworn to protect and serve in Beaumont. I plan to keep close tabs on the situation and pass on information as I get it." He paused. "I also have a close friend in Beaumont. He can get anything on anybody at any time because he doesn't have to jump through hoops and deal with red tape like we do."

Helms produced a folded sheet of paper from within his jacket and passed it to Zack. "This printout has all the facts. And this-" He handed Zack a business card. "My friend can be reached at this number. He can be trusted."

"Max Holt." Zack was impressed.

"There's a jet waiting at the airport, and a rental car in Beaumont, South Carolina. If you're interested," he added.

"I can be ready in an hour," Zack said.

It was coming up to one o'clock by the time Jamie returned to the office, having gone by the convention center after leaving Maggie's office so she could cover the Elvis convention. She found her receptionist/assistant editor/bossy office manager, Vera Bankhead, staring at a sheet of paper. Vera looked up, and the expression on her face stopped Jamie dead in her tracks. "What's wrong?"

"Bad news," Vera said. "From the Associated Press," she added. "Carl Lee Stanton has escaped."

"What!"

"Here's the printout."

Jamie took the sheet of paper and quickly read the article. She looked at Vera. "What are we going to do?"

"Somebody has to warn her," Vera said. "You're her friend."

Jamie reread the article. Carl Lee Stanton had been bad news long before he'd robbed an ATM van and wounded the driver, then, two days later while on the run, killed an FBI agent. She could only imagine how dangerous he was after serving thirteen years of a life sentence at a Texas prison.

"Authorities think he's headed back to Beaumont where they suspect he hid the money before he was captured," Jamie read out loud, her expression deeply troubled.

Vera met her gaze. "We both know that's not the only thing he's after."

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The front door opened and Maggie Davenport stepped inside the reception area of the Gazette. She found Jamie and Vera deep in conversation. They were clearly surprised to see her, and even though they gave her the usual smile, Maggie felt as though something were amiss.

"Am I interrupting anything?" she asked.

"Um, no," Jamie said, and Vera agreed.

"I need to run an ad," Maggie said. "I have to unload a goat."

"Goat?" Jamie repeated.

Maggie explained how she'd ended up with Butterbean. "The best part is she's free."

"Well, you've certainly come to the right place," Jamie said, trying to maintain a casual attitude. "Our specialty is finding homes for goats."

Vera nodded. "Like I always say, you can never have too many goats." The phone rang. "Why don't you take Maggie into your office and discuss the ad," Vera suggested. "That way you won't be disturbed."

Jamie nodded. "Good idea."

Maggie followed Jamie inside her office. She chuckled at the sight of Fleas, Jamie's lanky bloodhound, lying on his back in front of a window where light pooled from a partially raised Roman shade. Skin sagged from every body part, as though someone had zipped him up in an oversized doggy suit.

"He wouldn't sleep like that if he knew how bad he looked," Jamie said.

Maggie checked her wristwatch. "I can only stay a minute. I have to get my goat home in time to pick up Mel at school." She rolled her eyes. " 'Get my goat home'? That sounds too weird."

"I have a weird life too," Jamie said, "so I can relate." She motioned for Maggie to take a seat in her small sitting area. "Okay, here's the deal. I didn't call you in here to discuss the ad. Vera came across an article from the Associated Press," she said, indicating the printout she held. "I can't think of a way to make this easier on you, so I'll just blurt it out. Carl Lee Stanton has escaped."

Maggie's smile vanished, wiped away by a look of astonishment and disbelief. "How?" she asked.

"He got away as he was being rushed to the emergency room near Texas Federal Prison complaining of chest pains. He had all the symptoms of a heart attack. I suppose the prison isn't equipped to handle that kind of emergency?" she asked.

"Not if they needed to do a catheterization or a CAT scan, or in some cases a cardiac MRI," Maggie mumbled.

"Guards were leading him, handcuffed and shackled, toward the back entrance when two men drove up in a red Jeep Cherokee and started firing. One of the men, dressed as a clown, pulled Carl Lee into the Jeep, and they took off."

Maggie swallowed. "Was anyone killed?"

"Two guards are in critical condition. A witness thinks the clown got hit, but he couldn't be certain. People were diving behind cars and bushes." Jamie paused. "Authorities suspect Carl Lee is on his way back to Beaumont for the money," she said finally.

Maggie tried to take it in. Of course he would want his money. The police had never found the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that Carl Lee had stolen from the ATM van when the driver and only occupant had broken company policy and stepped outside the vehicle for a cigarette. Carl Lee had been waiting.

"You and Mel need protection," Jamie said.

Maggie was suddenly hit with the enormousness of it. Her face went numb; the air felt thin, as though she were in a tight space and couldn't get enough oxygen. "Like the police are going to care what happens to Carl Lee Stanton's old girlfriend," she said.

"Hey, wait a minute. You were a victim, too."

A sudden thought chilled Maggie. "Mel," she whispered. "I need to make sure she's okay."

"Carl Lee has only been out for a few hours," Jamie said. "It's going to take him and his buddies a while to get from Texas to South Carolina."

"What if he somehow managed to catch a plane? What if he was provided with a disguise and fake identification? What if-"

"Anything is possible," Jamie cut in, "but it's highly unlikely that Carl Lee Stanton would take such a risk. That's the first place police are going to look. He's a cop killer, for Pete's sake! It was sheer luck that the ATM driver lived because you can bet Carl Lee meant to kill him." Jamie paused to catch her breath. "Every news station in this country is probably flashing his picture as we speak. Plus, his buddies aren't going to let him out of their sight. They expect to be paid for their trouble, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out how Carl Lee plans to come up with the money."

It made sense, Maggie thought. She met Jamie's gaze. "It's all going to come out."

"Not all of it. We covered our bases."

Maggie was thankful her parents were away and would be spared the news, if only temporarily. They had flown out two days ago for the trip Maggie's mother, a retired geography teacher, had always dreamed of taking. She wanted to see an actual Egyptian pyramid and visit the royal tombs that she'd read about and watched on the Discovery Channel. Maggie's father had surprised her with a two-week vacation package for their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary.

"Everybody in town knows I went out with him. I'm amazed it never got back to Mel." Maggie sighed. "I should have told her the truth a long time ago."

"We all talked about it, remember? We thought it would be better to wait until she was older, more mature. I can be there with you if you feel it's time."

Maggie blinked back sudden tears. "How do you tell your daughter something like that?" she asked, the dread and remorse hitting her like a huge wave. "Oh, by the way, Mel, that handsome man in the framed photo on your night table is not your father. Your real father is a cold-blooded killer who escaped prison today, and when he gets here there is going to be hell to pay."