

MISSING

by Virginia Nygard

CHAPTER 1

5:10 A.M. FRIDAY, MARCH 2nd

Detective Carmella Callenda spoke with forced calm into her phone. She visualized Captain Brad Delvin pacing in his pajamas. “That’s right. Nothing. Unlike the robberies lately, there’s no forced entry, no footprints, nothing. This time, people are missing instead of valuables.”

“So you’re saying this isn’t an abduction?”

“I didn’t say that, but I can’t see Mayor Hanson and his wife walking out on their son.”

“Didn’t you say the room was a mess?”

“The sheets and pillows were dragged onto the floor; but nothing’s broken, no signs of a struggle. It just doesn’t add up to abduction—yet.”

“Then how the hell can two people disappear without a trace, without a fight, without *something* left behind, Carmella?”

“Captain, right now, that’s a question only the great Houdini could answer. Maybe I’ll give him a shout on my Ouija board at lunchtime.”

“I don’t need your sarcastic wit at five in the morning, Carmella. Don’t tell me what you don’t have. What the hell have you got?”

“Stephanic’s still collecting trace evidence in the bedroom. All we do have is a crying five-year-old who wants to know where his mom and dad are.”

“That’s just great,” Delvin growled. “Well, finish up and bring the kid in.”

“Can’t. Teddy’s staying next door with his aunt, Melanie Roberts. She said the kid woke up with a nightmare, found his parents gone and ran to her place. Then she called 911.”

“What does she know about their disappearance?”

“Apparently nothing. I don’t know who’s more upset, her or the kid.”

“Okay, okay. But when the media finds out DeBary’s mayor and his wife are missing, I’d better have answers. They’ll be shoving microphones in my face, or up my butt, depending on how

surly the mob gets. And that's *nothing* compared to what Sheriff Henderson will do if we keep coming up with *nothing!*"

Carmella tapped off her cell phone when she realized Delvin had already hung up on her. She hoped reporters chose the latter option the captain posed.

As Reece Stephanic reached for his Volusia County CSI bag, he jostled the floor lamp. The torchiere wobbled and thumped one of the end piers that framed the elaborate, oak-trimmed bed. Stephanic steadied the lamp and continued packing.

The sound drew Carmella's attention. Just as Stephanic switched off the light, she noticed a sparkle below the mirror in a corner of the bookcase headboard below.

"Hey!" Carmella yelled. "Turn that on." She kept the shimmering substance in her line of sight.

"Stephanic, I thought you cleaned this headboard."

"I did, Detective."

"Yeah, the way my ex used to wash dishes." She crouched and squinted at the mystery substance. "Look at this. It sparkles." She snapped her head in his direction. "How the hell did you miss that?"

"I...I..." He shrugged. "Maybe it fell when I banged the lamp?"

She gave Stephanic a look women have perfected—the look that screamed *Idiot Male!* And she knew all about idiot males. She'd lived with one for two years. "Never mind. Go. Just go." She returned her attention to the bed and heard the door slam behind him. She pulled on a pair of sterile gloves.

How any law enforcement agency, even one in Florida—the wild, wild, west of the South—could hire a bumbler like Stephanic, is beyond me. Carmella pulled her cell phone from her jacket and shot photos of the substance from several angles. She opened a small ziplock bag, took a sterile brush, swept the sparkly flakes into the plastic bag, and tucked it into her pocket with the gloves and brush.

She had one of those tingly feelings at the back of her neck that spread throughout her nervous system. She'd had them since she was a child. Grandmother said it was a guardian angel whispering in her ear, so Carmella had named him Angelo.

Comforted by the thought of Angelo's presence, she had slept peacefully each night—until she lost her innocence, and faith in anything intangible. Nothing, not even Angelo, had been able

to save her from the evil rupturing of body and soul that stole her faith, her trust, her ability to love. Love required relinquishing control while keeping trust and faith in oneself as well as others.

Yet, years later, as a Pittsburgh police officer, she'd felt more than coincidence had saved her life. In a chase, she cornered a suspect on a rooftop. They struggled, and he hurled her into the alley three stories below. She landed atop a pile of sagging, bedbug-infested mattresses discarded by the building's superintendent a few hours before her fall. Carmella had felt the tingling return then, squeezed her eyes shut, and whispered, "*Grazie, Angelo. Long time, no see.*"

Even now, Carmella scratched phantom bug bites as she wondered what Angelo's tingling warning meant this time. So far, nothing had posed a threat in this routine police call. Had Angelo upgraded over the years from her protection against immediate danger, to an early warning system that would divert her from lethal confrontations? Is that why she hadn't yet found a clue to solve the recent robberies? *Stop interfering, Angelo. I can handle myself now in hostile situations. Where were you when I really needed you?* With a smirk and a shrug, she sat and swung her legs onto the mayor's bed. On her back, she inched toward the bookcase until her head rested inside the shelf.

As she scanned the underside of the headboard, Carmella wondered where Hanson got the money to afford this lifestyle. A piddling mayor's salary wouldn't account for it. Neither would a modest paycheck from the start-up chemical company venture with partner Hayden Stephanic. Like any small business, DeBary Chemicals must have reinvested as much capital as possible into growth. So how did Hanson manage to appease Brooke, his high-maintenance wife, with the house of her dreams and a private kindergarten for Teddy? She stopped thinking and stared.

From a spike of wood the size of a toothpick, hung a gleaming, silver mass. It shone as if it were liquid but clung to the wood as though dry. Traces showed other masses had been on the wood, too. Stuff that...that what? That dropped like water—or blood—and shattered into glitter on the shelf below?

Flakes of the substance clung to the recessed light switch, too. Had the Hansons—or an intruder left the residue there? By turning on the recessed light? Why? She took more cell phone photos then tugged on her gloves, broke off the sliver of wood, and put it in another plastic bag.

Stephanic's carelessness sparked a flame of concern. Carmella knew there was a perfectly good satellite crime lab in Daytona, but it had limitations. Of the ten disciplines covered by Florida's regional crime labs, Daytona was equipped to do three—Chemistry, Latent Prints and Impressions, and Trace Evidence. Anything they couldn't identify might be farmed out to one of

the other six labs in the state with a specialist in that field. What if this odd trace evidence went missing, or was accidentally destroyed? Should she talk to Will Mears? In the midst of churning up worrisome scenarios, a sense of calm enveloped Carmella, and her neck tingled again. “Well, Angelo,” she murmured, “I suppose you agree this means a trip to see Will Mears?”

She glanced at her watch. Five-forty A.M. *He’s probably in his rocking chair on the porch, smoking a pipeful of cherry tobacco, catching a breeze and a glimpse of moonlight through the palm trees, looking like Santa Claus on vacation in Florida.* She flipped open her cell phone and punched Will’s number.

“And a good early morning to you, Detective Callenda. What is so important that it can’t wait until sunrise?”

She heard an owl’s cry somewhere in Will’s vicinity. “How nice it is to be retired, sitting on the porch at five in the morning, listening to hooty-owls and night critters scuttling home before the sun wakes up.”

“Not all that nice. I had to get up four times to piss and I couldn’t get back to sleep again, if you must know. What’s your excuse? Are you having pee troubles, too?”

“Pee trouble, no. Sleep trouble, yeah. Zach and Brooke Hanson are missing. Teddy woke up and found them gone.”

“For this announcement you disturb my urinary-induced meditations?”

Carmella sighed. “No, Will, for the silvery blob and flakes I found at the scene— about which I have a creepy feeling.”

“Ah. Your friend Angelo’s at work again, eh? Heh, heh, heh.”

“I never should have blabbed to you about Nana’s superstitious theories.”

He chuckled again. “Come on down. I’ll put on a fresh pot of coffee.”

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