

CHAPTER 1

“Cynthia.”

It took me a couple of seconds before I realized the shout was meant for me. Although Cynthia is my real name, I think of myself as Carol because that’s the name I used when I first had amnesia. I turned away from the mouth-watering creations in the chocolate shop where I was buying a treat for my grandmother and spotted a remarkably pretty young woman smiling at me. She had hair as blond as mine was dark.

“Hi, Cynthia.”

“Hi.”

I didn’t match her enthusiastic tone. I didn’t recognize her, but that didn’t mean anything. I still had very little memory of my life before I was hit on the head almost a year ago. I was about to explain this when she spoke again.

“I know you don’t remember me, Cynthia. We went to high school together. Good old Chapel Hill High. I’m Alice. Alice Tisdale. We were in the same math class when we were seniors. I always envied you—you were so good at math. I could never get the hang of it. That and you were beautiful, besides.”

My bullshit detector maxed out. Meeting someone for the first time in probably eight years and talking about math class? And *she* was calling *me* beautiful? I must have scowled because she immediately came down a bunch of decibels.

“I apologize. I tend to rattle on when I’m excited. But it *is* good to see you. I remember reading about you when you finally found out who you are. I think I saw you on TV, also. Is everything okay with you now?”

I’m a fairly private person, but I couldn’t deny what was common knowledge.

“As okay as it can be, except I’ve forgotten most of my life. I’m sorry I don’t remember you.”

“That’s all right. I guess we can’t really reminisce about old times. However, there is something you could do for me, if you would. When you were in the news, my mother remembered you from high school. She used to come to the football games, because my brother played football and I was a cheerleader. She remembered that you were a majorette.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“She said you were really good. She was a majorette when she was young. I know she’d love to meet you—to see that you’re really okay. She worried about you.”

I looked at my watch to try to establish an air of urgency. “I need to get back to the house. I’m taking my grandmother a chocolate treat for her birthday.” I picked up the closest one. I wasn’t a big chocolate eater, and they all looked the same to me.

“Oh, that’s no problem. She’s sitting right outside in the car. It’ll just take a minute.”

I acquiesced to that. Hopefully, it would be a quick way to get rid of her. Alice was also making a purchase. We stood in line at the cashier’s counter. There was one person ahead of us. I turned to Alice.

“I’ve been working on replacing my memories. Chapel Hill High. I’m going to the campus one of these days to see what I can recall, if anything. What is our nickname, again?”

“The Tigers.”

“Right. And our school colors are…”

“Black and gold.”

At least, she had her facts straight.

The cashier was ready for me. I gave her a discount coupon. She looked puzzled, excused herself, and took it to the woman I assumed was the store manager. The clerk returned with a smile a minute later, punched in the discount, and I paid for my confection. She put it in a pretty bag. Grandma would be pleased. She was a chocoholic. I was operating on the principle that at her age she could eat just about whatever she wanted; it wouldn't reduce her lifespan by very much. Alice paid for hers and we walked outside into the hot, late August sun.

She led me around a corner from the shop. Cars were parked in all directions but people were in short supply. We approached a large, black, late-model sedan from the rear. It was backed into a parking slot. It had tinted windows and I couldn't see inside. Something looked strange. Suddenly, I was nervous.

"What's your mother's name?"

"Beth."

Alice was two steps ahead of me. "She's in the backseat." Alice pulled the backdoor open as I approached.

I flashed back to a similar situation I'd been involved in several months before—a car door being opened and blocking my path. I started to turn and run when a hand reached out from inside the car and grabbed my arm. This was not the arm of a woman; it was a strong, masculine arm. At the same instant, Alice slapped a hand over my mouth and muffled my scream.

The masculine arm was followed by another masculine arm, and together they pulled me into the car. I hit my head on the roof of the car as I was dragged inside, and dropped my bag of chocolate on the ground. I tried to scream again, and this time I got it out because Alice's hand had slipped off my mouth in the struggle.

Alice slid in beside me and slammed the door shut. The car started forward, instantly, driven by a man in the front seat whose impassive eyes I caught a glimpse of in the rearview mirror. I thrashed about in spite of having been knocked almost senseless by my head injury, trying to break the grip of the man on my left. I swung my free right hand across my body and managed to hit him in the nose before he captured both of my arms.

"Goddammit."

The man swore and squeezed my arms until they hurt. At that point I must have blacked out for a few seconds. My head was sunk forward against my chest when I became aware of what was happening again. Alice was yelling at the man, something about using too much force and hurting me. I felt the car accelerating. I suspected we were getting onto Interstate 40, which was right beside the shopping center. Where were they taking me?

I was scared but there was nothing I could do. I decided to play dead for a while and see what I could find out. My head hurt too much to try anything physical, in any case. I kept my head down and my eyes closed. I guessed I was being kidnapped, but why?

I'd inherited a lot of money from my parents' estate, but I'd never given any thought to being kidnapped. Because of my celebrity as an amnesiac, the media had broadcast the fact that I was getting the money, although their estimates varied widely, some closer than others. They were correct about one thing: it was in the eight-digit range.

I tried to relax my body. I would have fallen forward but Alice supported me and kept me upright. The man on the other side of me did the same thing. Alice was still chewing the man out.

"We're supposed to deliver her intact. That means without injury. Now look what you've done."

“I think the bitch broke my nose. She got what she deserved. *You* were supposed to protect her head.”

“You jerked her too hard. I was carrying the bag of chocolate. I expected you to wait until her head was inside the car. I dropped the chocolate.”

I was glad I’d hurt him. Besides his nose and my head, the casualties so far were two bags of chocolate.

The man was almost whining. “I’m bleeding like a fucking stuck pig.”

It served the asshole right. I wished I had the strength to hit him again.

“Watch your language. Here’s a tissue. Squeeze your nostrils together.” Alice put her fingers on my neck. “Her pulse is fast but steady. She’s warm. I think she’ll be all right.”

At least, this knock hadn’t given me another case of amnesia. I felt Alice pull something off my shoulder. It was the strap to my handbag, which had survived because it was attached to me. Keeping my head down, I opened my eyes and watched as Alice rifled through the bag.

She pulled out my car keys, said a few words to the driver in the front seat, and passed him the keys. Why did she do that? Were they planning to steal my car, too? It was my grandmother’s old Toyota Camry, and I doubted that its questionable value justified the use of three people and what was obviously a lot of careful planning.

Looking sideways at Alice, I watched her extract my passport from the handbag. She flipped through the pages and then spoke to the asshole. “It looks all right.”

Why were they interested in my passport? That opened up a whole new train of thought. Yesterday, I’d received an official-looking letter by certified mail from what purported to be the federal government, asking me to take my passport to a local address, which happened to be the post office, to have it checked for something. I was given an appointment for today.

I didn’t understand the reason the letter gave, but since I was a frequent traveler I decided I’d better do it. After all, what can happen to you in a post office? The clerk I showed it to took it behind the opaque wall that all post offices have, returned a few minutes later, and announced that it was in order. When I asked him what the problem was, he didn’t give me a straight answer.

I went from the post office to the chocolate shop, armed with the discount coupon given to me by Audrey, who took care of Grandma. In fact, buying the chocolate was her idea. She had received the coupon in the same mail the passport letter came in. Coincidence?

In spite of my headache, my brain was working better. What if all this was a setup to get me to retrieve my passport from my bank safe deposit box, which I had done before going to the post office? Neither the bank nor the post office was in a location conducive to easy kidnapping. The chocolate shop, on the other hand, was in a shopping center with a large and open parking lot, including many secluded corners, which made my abduction less likely to be witnessed at close hand. In spite of my scream, I doubted that anyone had called the police or been close enough to the car to see what happened.

The other alternative was to kidnap me at Grandma’s farm where I lived. It was at the end of a mile and a half gravel road, and presented its own unique problems. No, the shopping center was by far the easiest place.

Who would do this? Who *could* do this? Only the federal government. They controlled passports and the post office. Why did they want *me*? Were they going to take me to some foreign country and torture me? I’d read about this happening to American citizens. But I didn’t have any information worth torturing for.

My previous relationship with the feds included being labeled as a non-person when I had amnesia and didn't know who I was, because I had no papers of any kind, which left me with a sour taste in my mouth for all governments. If I were correct about what was happening now, the taste wasn't going to get any better, even if I survived.

I wondered why I'd fallen for the trap. Sure, Alice knew the nickname and school colors of Chapel Hill High School, but this information was readily available. She was carrying a handbag with a strap, just as I was. When we left the shop, she had placed the bag on her right side but looped the strap over her head to her left shoulder. Something you'd do in a foreign country to foil purse-snatchers—or preparing for action so she wouldn't lose it? That should have set off an alarm.

Perhaps not in the average person, but since several people had tried to kill me I was more aware than the average person. Or thought I was.

I remembered one more thing. The car we were riding in. I had spotted a similar car in my rearview mirror more than once while I drove from the bank to the post office to the chocolate shop. Again, I hadn't paid enough attention. They had picked me up sometime after I left the farm, probably close to the bank, and followed me to make sure I carried out their clever little plan, which I did, beautifully. If I hadn't, they would have undoubtedly snatched me somewhere else, but it could have been a lot messier.

Also, just before the asshole grabbed me, I'd noticed the car had a strange license plate. I hadn't acted on that information, because I wasn't sure what the plate meant. Although I lived in North Carolina, I didn't know anything about the different kinds of NC license plates. I knew a lot more about plates in California where I'd spent some time, such as what kind of plates government-owned vehicles used.

Both Alice and the asshole were patting my jeans and my thin shirt. Searching for weapons? What could I hide in my skinny jeans, which were in fashion but hell to put on and take off? Or inside my bra? I was sure the asshole was enjoying this. I was just about to take some sort of action when he stopped.

I could hear the driver talking softly on a cellphone. I couldn't make out his words, but I was sure he was telling somebody they had me. What next? The asshole had his hand on my leg again. When it went between my legs I decided it was time to wake up.

With my head down and my eyes open I could see a gap between his upraised arm and his body. Slowly I pulled my left arm across my chest, making it look like a reflex, being glad I was ambidextrous and still pretending to be in a stupor. When I had the necessary leverage, I whacked him in the ribs with my elbow as hard as I could.

His yell could have awakened the dead within a five-mile radius. The car swerved, and I saw the driver looking in the rearview mirror, this time with concern. The asshole pulled out a gun from somewhere and stuck it in *my* ribs. Alice grabbed me. Then she saw the gun.

"Enoch, put that thing away."

"She broke my ribs." He was holding the gun with his left hand and his ribcage with his right. He looked as if he were in a lot of pain. Good.

Alice was talking to me. "Cynthia, if you don't cooperate *you're* going to get hurt."

"Tell that ass...Enoch or whatever his name is, to keep his hands to himself."

"We had to search you for weapons."

"In my crotch?"

"Enoch, keep your hands off her...*and put that gun away.*"

Alice appeared to be in charge, but Enoch may not have received the memo. Although the gun disappeared, he placed his mouth against my ear. His breath reeked of cigarette smoke.

"We can make you disappear without a trace."

Then he felt his ribs and winced, which tended to trivialize his message to me.

"I think they're cracked. She's dangerous."

"Don't sneeze." My advice was based on my own experience with injured ribs.

Alice leaned forward and looked at both of us. "We're all going to be together for a while, so we have to get along. Cynthia, if you cooperate with us we won't hurt you."

Cooperate with my abductors? "Where are we going?"

"I can't tell you that yet."

"My grandmother will be worried about me. She's sick."

"I'm sorry about your grandmother but that can't be helped."

"I need to get a message to Audrey, who takes care of her. And she needs the car. It's the only car we have."

I'd been meaning to buy a new car, but hadn't gotten around to it.

"Arthur will return the car to your grandmother's farm."

Arthur was apparently the driver. How considerate. Alice had taken my cellphone out of my handbag. She started fiddling with it.

"I'll send a text message to Audrey."

How did she know Audrey had a cellphone? Other than everyone in the world had a cellphone.

"I need to talk to her."

"Sorry. Can't do that."

Alice showed me what she had written. "IVE BEEN CALLED AWAY ON BUSINESS. CONTACT U SOON. CAR WILL BE RETURNED TO U."

"My grandmother will worry."

"Can't help it."

Actually, my grandmother had Alzheimer's and had recently suffered a stroke, and might or might not worry, depending on her mental clarity. But Audrey would certainly worry. Especially, since she would know I hadn't sent the message. That didn't sound like me at all.

It was better than nothing. At least, Audrey would know I was alive. "You need Audrey's number."

"I've found it."

Of course she had. I was sure they knew everything about me. Probably more than I knew, myself, since I had amnesia. I looked out the window. We were heading east on I-40. Toward where? In a moment of clarity, I knew where we were going. To the Raleigh-Durham Airport. And then overseas?

I wondered how they would get me through security without preventing me from raising a fuss and getting detained by the TSA. Or was the TSA in on this?

