

CHAPTER 1

When the telephone rang I had a mouthful of bagel. I had run the five miles from my apartment in Torrance, California to the LA Hotline office on this sunny spring morning, and needed some nutrition when I arrived. I was the only listener on duty, but I'd hoped the phone wouldn't ring so soon. I swallowed the gooey mass as fast as I could, barely avoiding choking. As it was, I coughed a couple of times. Then I picked up the phone.

"LA Hotline. This is Carol."

"Is this line confidential?"

The raspy voice was that of a man who'd long since left his youth behind. I didn't recognize it. I half hoped he was what we called an inappropriate caller, abusing the lines by talking dirty to women, and using the charge it gave him to masturbate. We were trained not to give those guys an inch, and to hang up on them. Then I could finish my bagel.

I gave a wary answer. "Yes, we're a confidential listening service."

"You won't breathe a word to a living soul about anything I say."

"No. Whatever you tell me stays with me."

And anybody who read my computerized call report. I was getting more suspicious. I checked for his number on the phone's readout. It was blocked. We weren't supposed to answer calls from blocked numbers, but I'd been so busy trying not to choke on my bagel I hadn't checked. I'd give him about one more minute.

"Because if what I tell you gets out I could end up dead."

I had a mixed reaction to that statement. If I took it at face value it would be chilling. However, we received lots of calls from people who were certifiably psycho. I decided to stay with the call, at least for a while. I didn't react to what he'd said, but kept my voice neutral.

"May I ask your name?"

"Uh..." Long pause. "Danny."

"Where are you calling from, Danny?"

We tried to gather information for call reports, but I wasn't going to tell him this. Another pause.

"I'd rather not tell you."

"No problem. Just one more question. How did you hear about us?"

"From 211."

We received a lot of referrals from 211, the number that gave out information about available services. There was nothing suspicious about that. I'd asked enough questions. "Thanks, Danny. Tell me what's going on with you."

There was silence on the line. In our class on listening skills we were trained to tolerate silence as a natural part of a call, so I waited for Danny to speak. I took a hungry look at the bagel and sniffed its aroma, enhanced by having been toasted in the Hotline office toaster oven and spread with cream cheese, but I didn't dare take another bite. As sure as I had sweaty armpits, I'd get caught having to talk with my mouth full again.

Finally, Danny started to speak, spacing his words. "There's nobody I can talk to about this. As I said, I'm liable to end up with a bullet in the back of my head."

The call had an aura of unreality about it. Sometimes suicide calls felt weird—listening to people telling about how they were going to kill themselves. But this call wasn't about suicide. It was apparently about murder.

"It sounds as if you're having a difficult time."

My comment sounded inane to me, but we were supposed to concentrate on the feelings of the caller. I couldn't very well say, "It sounds as if you don't want to get shot."

Danny was speaking again. "Yes. I've never been in a situation like this. I'm a peaceful man. I've never even been in the army. I'm caught and I don't know what to do. If I don't cooperate with them they'll do away with me. I'm sure of it. All I want to do is to run away and hide."

I still didn't know whether this was a real call, but I had to act as if it was. I didn't want to pry too much and have him hang up on me, especially if he felt I was the only person he could talk to.

"Is that a possibility?"

"What? Running away? No. They'd find me. They know everything I do. They've got me where they want me. Now I know what a deer feels like when it's surrounded by wolves."

Think, Carol, think. "Would you like to tell me some more about what they're trying to get you to do?" He hadn't told me anything yet.

Silence again. It lasted so long that I wondered whether he'd hung up. Maybe I'd stepped over the line. Still, I wasn't getting a dial tone. I ran out of patience and was just about to say something when Danny finally spoke.

"You wouldn't think that playing backgammon could get you into so much trouble."

Backgammon? Had I heard him correctly? He was going to get shot because he played backgammon? *I* played backgammon. I wanted to quiz him some more, but I couldn't mention that I liked backgammon. We weren't supposed to give out personal information. Before I could think of something suitable to say, Danny spoke again.

"What's your name?"

"Carol."

"Well, Carol, thanks for listening to me, but I have to go."

Before I could say anything more the line really did go dead. But what could I have said? "Why the hell would anyone want to kill you just because you play backgammon?"

I couldn't even have told him to call back. We didn't take calls from blocked numbers. At least, when we weren't eating bagels.

I hung up the phone and swung my chair around. I realized that someone had come into the office during the last minute or so. It was Darlene, the Hotline Manager. She was the only paid employee and the reason for its success. She'd been with the Hotline for over a dozen years. A recognized expert in listening skills, she was in charge of teaching the classes for the new listeners, bringing in experienced counselors in various aspects of psychology to teach individual sessions, including depression, grief, anxiety, domestic abuse, sexual orientation, and of course, suicide.

Darlene had empathy for the listeners, the young and the old, from teens to grandmothers, and she made us all feel comfortable by repeatedly telling us we didn't have to talk to anybody we didn't want to, for any reason whatever. I had immediately been captivated by her when I'd been looking for a volunteer job several months ago. We were kindred spirits.

I said hello to Darlene. She said hello and smiled at me from her desk on the other side of the room.

“It sounded like that call ended rather abruptly.”

I walked over to her desk. “It was one of the strangest calls I’ve had since I’ve been here.” I gave her a brief summary of the call.

“You’re right. We’ve never had a call like that. At least not that I can remember.”

Darlene thought for a minute. “Do you think it was a crank call?”

“It’s hard to say. He used proper English. His voice was a bit raspy, but other than that there was nothing remarkable about it, except that he sounded...scared. Yes, he sounded scared. I should have told him that.”

Darlene frowned. “Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do for him unless he calls back.”

“We won’t answer his call. It’s from a blocked number. I only answered it because I was trying not to choke on a bagel.”

I told her the story and we both laughed.

I was learning to cook. I figured that was one of the responsibilities of a bride of six months, especially since I didn’t have a job and my husband, Rigo, did. I was starting from scratch. I didn’t have much memory of anything that had happened before a year and a half ago when I got amnesia, but my grandmother, while she was trying to fill me in on my past, had never mentioned cooking. And since that time I’d either been traveling or had people cooking for me—until Rigo and I got married.

Thus, it was with some trepidation that I set the spaghetti and meatballs in front of him that evening. He dove in, obviously hungry, and appeared to be enjoying my attempt at Italian. I hoped it wasn’t like the time I’d put far too much horseradish in the shrimp sauce when we had guests over, and they’d sat with tears streaming down their cheeks, trying not to say anything. Finally, I screwed up my courage.

“How do you like it?”

Rigo nodded. “It’s good. I don’t taste any horseradish in the tomato sauce.”

I controlled my impulse to hit him. “How was work today?”

“Not bad. We’ve landed a new contract that’s going to require a lot of computer work on my part.”

Rigo worked for his parents’ company. I’d prodded him into taking the job, even though his pride had told him he would be receiving charity by working for his parents. That wasn’t the case. He was a computer genius, and he had been instrumental in boosting profits and expanding the types of contracts they could undertake.

Rigo asked me how my day had gone. I hadn’t looked for a paying job since we’d been married, even though I knew from talking to people that I’d taught math at the high school level before I had amnesia, including a couple of years in England. I’d have to do some work to get a teaching credential in California, and so far I hadn’t been motivated enough to put forth the required effort.

It wasn’t that we needed the money. I had inherited a pile of money from my parents, who I couldn’t remember, and recently, some more from my grandmother who’d died several months ago. I was the executor of her estate, and had made several trips to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she’d lived, after Rigo and I got married, both before and after she died. I was still grieving for her because she had been my closest living relative.

I was planning to keep the beautiful forty-acre farm she’d lived on in Chapel Hill as a hideaway for Rigo and me. Audrey, the woman who’d taken care of my grandmother for the last

several years of her life, was living in the house, rent-free, with the stipulation that she would help to keep the farm in good repair. I was paying all the expenses for doing that.

I answered Rigo's question about my day by telling him about my phone call with Danny. Although we weren't supposed to talk about our calls with people not associated with the Hotline, I figured Rigo and I were one person, and he should know everything I knew.

His comment was, "Who knew backgammon was such a dangerous game? Although sometimes I have an urge to throw checkers at you when you beat me too badly."

I tried to placate him. "You've improved a lot since we've been playing. Soon you'll be able to clobber me."

Although, whenever we played I had to practically tape my mouth shut to keep me from commenting on his every move. To some extent it was as if I were playing against myself.

Over a dessert of cherry pie (I must admit I bought it) Rigo brought up another topic.

"Dad said a house close to them is for sale. It's got a view almost as good as theirs."

And a price tag to match, no doubt. The home of Rigo's parents was on a hillside in Palos Verdes, and its view encompassed the whole Los Angeles basin, the Santa Monica Bay, and several of the highest mountains in Southern California, as well as the Los Angeles Harbor.

I glanced at Rigo, wondering why he'd mentioned it. I decided to keep it light.

"Want to buy it?"

Rigo frowned. "Maybe someday we'll be able to afford a house like that."

Actually, someday was today. I had a standing offer on the table to buy any house Rigo wanted, but it was his pride again that said we couldn't buy a house until he could afford to pay for at least half of it. I wasn't going to fight that battle tonight. However, it was the reason why we were living in an apartment, however nice. It had two bedrooms and the complex had a large swimming pool.

Rigo brightened and got a look in his eye I understood. Among his other qualities, he was a sex maniac.