

THE KEEPERS

LITTLE
WHITE
LIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RITA
HERRON

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Little White Lies

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To Stephane Bond for being the greatest critique partner ever!

**LITTLE
WHITE
LIES**

CHAPTER ONE

New Year's Day – 1995

NEW YEAR'S EVE WAS always a bear when you were a cop. Last night proved no differently. Detective William Flagler rolled over and groaned at the sound of his phone.

Dammit, he was tired as hell. He hadn't gotten home till after seven A.M. He was getting too blasted old to pull all-nighters.

Although crime on Seahawk Island usually consisted of underage drinkers, DUIs, an occasional accident, domestic call, or someone setting a bonfire on the beach, everyone had been on alert last night. New Year's Eve always brought the partiers and the crazies.

A break-in at an apartment near the beach turned out to be a bunch of students looking for a place to ring in the New Year. Then some poor guy threw himself off the bridge at the pier because his girlfriend had dumped him. The Coast Guard reported they found the man alive.

Then he'd busted up a bar fight that had broken out over rivalry football teams. At four A.M. when he thought he was done, a couple called frantic that their sixteen-year-old son hadn't come home. Will found the kid passed out drunk in the park and drove him home. His parents had been relieved he was all right but threatened to ground him for life. They'd also thanked Will profusely for not arresting him. No need to saddle the boy with a record when he was just being young and stupid.

Will had been young and stupid himself once, too. Another officer, his boss and Chief of Police now, had cut him some slack. Will was paying it forward.

His phone buzzed again, and he snatched it up. "Flagler."

"We got a call. Three teenage girls missing." Chief Rodney Mantino said.

"How long?"

"Not even twenty-four hours, but the parents are freaked out. Sure

something bad happened.”

Will’s gut tightened as an image of his own fourteen-year-old kid, Piper, flashed behind his eyes. If his daughter was missing, he’d be calling out the damned National Guard.

He threw his feet over the edge of the bed, grateful that he was alone, although not a day passed that he didn’t miss having a wife.

Betsy had missed him, too. So much that she’d replaced him with a pool guy named Eddie. Now Eddie got to spend his nights in her bed.

No way on God’s green earth would he let Eddie replace him as Piper’s father though.

Last night he’d tried to devise a plan to win his family back. But Betsy had demanded he leave his job.

Could he?

“Flagler?” Mantino’s gruff voice jerked him from his thoughts.

“I’m on my way.” Will headed to the bathroom.

“I’d meet you there, but I think I caught a stomach bug last night.”

More like too much brown whiskey. But hey, his boss was close to retirement and who was Will to judge?

“No problem. I’ll keep you updated once I talk to the parents. Hopefully the kids just snuck out and they’ll turn up by the time I get there.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” A pause. “Sending you the name and address now.”

A voice echoed in the background, a female’s voice. So Mantino wasn’t alone. Hell, good for him. At least somebody should get laid on New Year’s Eve. It sure as hell hadn’t been him.

He hung up, jumped in the shower for a solid three minutes, then dried off and dressed.

He checked the information his boss sent. Howard and Phyllis Darling. Three daughters: Candace, Deborah and Polly. Parents hadn’t seen the girls since the night before when they left the girls home alone and went to a party.

It was possible they’d snuck out to meet friends, gotten wasted and hadn’t yet found their way home.

Still, three teenage girls alone at night could spell trouble.

A number of scenarios raced through Will's mind, none of which led to happy endings.

He strapped on his weapon, snagged his keys and new police issued cell phone, then headed outside to his black SUV. He'd pick up coffee on the way.

CHAPTER TWO

WILL CHECKED HIS WATCH as he parked at the Darling house. Two P.M. If the Darlings had discovered their daughters were missing this morning, why had they waited so long to report it?

Suspensions immediately reared their ugly head. But he had to refrain from jumping to conclusions until he talked to the family. There could be a logical explanation.

He didn't know what that would be, but he would see what they said.

The small brick ranch was situated on a side street and had been built in the 1950's. Weeds choked the front lawn and flowerbeds, and the back was patchy and had been left natural. Wood shavings and rocks covered the brittle grass.

Badge in hand, he surveyed the drive and carport as he approached the steps to the front door. An ancient blue Chevy pick-up was parked beneath the covering along with assorted tools, an old lawnmower, spare tire, and three bikes that must belong to the daughters.

He raised his fist and knocked. Seconds later, footsteps sounded, and a weathered looking man who looked mid-forties answered, a lit cigarette in hand. Gray streaked his wiry brown hair, and his eyes looked bloodshot.

He flashed his badge. "Detective Flagler. Mr. Darling?"

The man nodded but didn't quite make eye contact. "Howard."

"You reported your daughters as missing," Will said.

"Yeah, that's right." Darling's voice cracked slightly.

The older man looked upset, confused. As if he hadn't slept? Or maybe he'd imbibed too much the night before?

"May I come in?" Will asked.

Darling made a low sound in his throat, then stepped aside and motioned him in. "My wife...she's having a hard time..."

“I understand,” Will said. “Can she speak with us?”

Darling scraped an arthritic hand through his hair. Fresh scrapes streaked the man’s knuckles, stirring more questions in Will’s mind. A sob echoed somewhere close by, and Darling’s jaw tightened.

“Phyllis is in the den.”

Will followed the man to a small living room cluttered with threadbare furniture, newspapers, and laundry. Mrs. Darling sat hunched on a faded plaid couch, a tissue knotted in her hands. Her chin length brown hair was as disheveled as the tattered blue shirt and jeans she wore. She looked up at him as if lost in a nightmare.

He introduced himself and claimed a seat in a chair facing her. Mr. Darling sat down beside her and rubbed a hand across her shoulders to soothe her.

“Have you heard from your daughters?” he asked.

Darling and his wife both shook their heads, and she swiped at more tears.

“Have any of the girls disappeared or run off before?” Will asked.

“Our girls are good girls,” Mrs. Darling said in a broken voice. “They never snuck out or anything like that.”

Or if they had, she didn’t want to admit it. Parents often lied when first interviewed, afraid of being perceived as bad parents. “Let’s get something straight,” he said. “I’m not here to pass judgment. I have a teenager of my own, and I’m well aware that as parents we don’t always know what our kids are up to or thinking. They’re adept at hiding things from us that they don’t want us to see.” He paused. “My daughter says it’s just little white lies. But little white lies often lead to bigger secrets.”

Mrs. Darling shot up from the sofa and glared at him. “Our girls are not like that. They don’t hide stuff from us. We’re a happy family.”

Her defensive reaction said the opposite. There was trouble at home with the Darlings. He automatically conducted a visual sweep of Phyllis Darling’s face, arms, and hands for bruises or signs of abuse.

Mr. Darling coached his wife back onto the sofa. “Phyllis, calm down. He’s here to help. We have to cooperate.”

Her face crumpled, and she collapsed in her seat again. But this time she reached for the glass on the table. Vodka.

Will preferred whiskey himself. But it was a little early in the day.

Under the circumstances though, he guessed he couldn't blame her for having a drink. Although he wanted her clear headed.

"I assume you checked with the girls' friends and their families before you called the police," Will said.

Mr. Darling worked his mouth from side to side. "The girls don't have friends. At least none that come over here. They got each other."

Will arched a brow. No friends? Seriously. Teenagers were social animals.

"We thought they might have gone to their grandma's," Mrs. Darling interjected. "But we called her, and she hasn't seen them or talked to them."

He leaned forward with his hands clasped. "All right. Let's start from the beginning," Will said. "Tell me about your daughters. What are their names and ages?"

Mr. Darling stood and removed a photograph from the side table, then pushed it toward Will. "Deborah is the oldest, sixteen. Candace is the middle one, fourteen." He paused and swallowed hard as he looked down at the third girl. "And that's little Polly. She just turned twelve."

"They're pretty girls," Will said in an effort to create some camaraderie.

Mr. Darling nodded, and Mrs. Darling sniffled and lifted her vodka with a hand that trembled.

"I promise you I'll do everything I can to find your daughters and bring them home safely," Will said. "We already alerted authorities to look for them. If I can get a picture of the girls before I go, we'll pass that along to law enforcement agencies."

Emotions twisted the mother's face while Mr. Darling squeezed his eyes shut for a minute. Then the mother rose, walked over to the desk in the corner and returned with three school photographs.

Will's heart gave a pang as he studied their faces. Candace had long wavy blond hair and looked confident in her pose with her head tilted slightly upward. Deborah, the middle daughter, had auburn hair, and freckles dotted the bridge of her nose. Polly was a mixture of the two of them. Small framed, she hadn't quite hit puberty as the other girls had.

"Why don't you walk me through what happened last night and this

morning,” Will said.

The father released a weary sigh. “Last night Phyllis and I went to a party at the American Legion in Brunswick. Our group had been collecting blankets for the homeless and the veterans.”

“And the girls stayed home alone?” Will asked.

Mr. Darling’s face tightened. “That’s right. Candace offered to babysit so we left her in charge.”

“Does she babysit a lot?”

Darling narrowed his eyes as if he didn’t understand the reasoning behind the question. “Not really,” he finally answered. “But if we ask her to, she would.”

Will wondered if Candace had a plan in mind when she’d offered that night. “Do you think the girls might have invited friends over for a little party of their own?”

Mrs. Darling looked alarmed at the question. “I told you our girls weren’t like that. They were good girls.”

So, she kept saying.

“They didn’t have anyone over,” Mr. Darling said. “Like I said, they didn’t entertain friends at the house.”

“Did you notice anything different when you arrived home?” Will asked. “Anything out of place?”

Darling shook his head no, grim faced.

“You keep alcohol here.” Not a question but a statement. “Could they have snuck into it, gotten drunk and decided to go somewhere and hide until they sobered up, so you wouldn’t know.”

“Why do you want to keep insisting that our girls did something bad,” Mrs. Darling shouted. “Someone must have taken them and you’re suggesting they’re off partying somewhere!”

Will strived for a calm tone. “Ma’am, I’m not trying to offend you. As a detective, I have to consider all angles,” Will said in an effort to calm her. “As I mentioned, I have a teenager myself.”

“Well, if these are the kinds of things she’s doing, maybe you should go home and be a better father to her.”

Will clenched his jaw. Her verbal blow hit home.

“Now, Phyllis,” Mr. Darling murmured in a placating voice. “He’s just trying to help.”

“If he wants to help, then he should go out and look for our girls.” The woman lurched up and staggered down the hall, ranting that she didn’t like his accusations.

Mr. Darling dropped his head into his hands. “Sorry about that. She’s just upset and scared.”

Will nodded, although he couldn’t shake what she’d said.

His wife had accused him of putting his job before her. Of putting it before their family.

Of missing out on Piper’s life because he’d rather chase criminals than be a father.

CHAPTER THREE

WILL DIDN'T HAVE TIME to think about his own family right now. Three girls were missing, and it was his job to find them.

He cleared his throat. "So, you and your wife went to the party and you got home at what time?"

"Not till about three this morning," Mr. Darling said.

"That seems late for an American Legion function," Will said.

"Yeah, but it was New Year's Eve, and they had a dance, and everyone was having fun...and Phyllis didn't want to leave till the end..." He let the sentence trail off.

"What happened when you got home?"

The older man looked down into his hands as if they held answers. Or maybe he was remembering something, that he'd used his fists against his wife or daughters?

"Phyllis had a little too much to drink and went straight to bed." He rubbed at his leg. "By then my arthritis was acting up, and I was dog tired, so I went, too."

"You didn't check on the girls?" Will asked.

Darling shook his head. "Door was closed. We figured they were asleep and didn't want to wake 'em." His expression turned contrite. "I guess we should have. But they were old enough, I didn't even think about it."

Will decided to let it slide. Either he or his wife always checked on Piper before turning in. Was Betsy's boyfriend looking in on her now?

A sour taste filled his mouth at the thought. "So, you went to bed and woke up at what time?"

"Wife slept in till about ten. I took a pain pill for my leg and overslept, too."

"Were the girls usually up early?" Will asked.

“Nah. On the weekends, we have to make ‘em get up and do chores.”

“Did you hear any noise this morning? Their voices or the TV?”

He scratched his head. “Not that I recall.”

Will glanced at the loaf of bread on the counter. “How about the kitchen? Were there signs that they’d made breakfast or eaten anything?”

He mumbled no.

“Didn’t you think that was odd?”

His gaze shot to Will’s. “I thought they were still in bed. Went to wake them up. That’s when I found their beds empty.”

“What did you do then?”

“Checked the house then outside and looked for their bikes. Thought they might have gone for a ride.”

“But the bikes were still under the carport?”

“Yeah. I ran in and got Phyllis up. She figured they’d gone to her mama’s house, so she called her.”

“But the girls hadn’t gone there?”

He shook his head, his face full of misery. “I figured they’d just snuck off to the park down the way. So, I got in the car and rode down there, and looked all over, but they weren’t there either.”

Panic tinged his voice. Will felt his own rising as he listened. If it was Piper, he’d be out of his mind with worry.

“I decided maybe they’d snuck some cash and walked to the store to buy snacks, so I drove to the quick market, but clerk hadn’t seen ‘em. Kept telling myself maybe they’d come home so I drove back here, but Phyllis was hysterical. Said she hadn’t heard a word. She’d looked in their room and the girls’ backpacks were gone.”

Will offered the man a sympathetic look, although if something bad had happened to the girls, the parents would be prime suspects. Howard Darling was a big man. He imagined if Darling was angry, he could be formidable.

He stood. “May I look around in the girls’ room?”

Darling pushed to his feet with a groan and rubbed at his bad leg. “Down the hall.”

The sound of Mrs. Darling’s crying echoed through the hallway as he

followed the man into a small room. Three single beds lined the walls, one covered in a yellow spread with butterflies, one purple with blue and pink stripes, and the other bright orange.

“Was anything missing other than the girls’ backpacks?” Will asked.

“Not that I know of,” Darling replied.

“How about clothes? Make up or toiletries?” If they’d taken those, maybe the girls had run away.

“I don’t think so,” Darling said. “But my wife would know better. I stayed out of my girls’ personal things.”

Will acknowledged his comment and wondered if he could believe the man. Something about the time lapse and the parents insisting their daughters didn’t have friends didn’t feel right.

He gave a pointed look at the man’s fists. “Mr. Darling, how did your hands get bruised?”

Alarm flashed in the man’s eyes as he glanced down at his knuckles. “Working on my pick-up.”

Will gave a non-committal response. The question had definitely triggered a panicked response.

“I’m gonna check on Phyllis.” Mr. Darling fled toward the back room as if desperate to escape Will’s interrogation.

Will mentally catalogued every nuance of the couple’s behavior to scrutinize later if needed. Time to search the daughters’ room now.

He walked over and examined the bulletin boards above the girls’ beds.

Butterflies cut from art paper were tacked on the board above the bedding with the butterfly theme. There were also several pictures of dogs clipped from magazines. She’d drawn a circle around a small poodle and written – this is the one I want. Polly.

His heart tugged. Piper had begged for a dog last year for Christmas, but Betsy refused, saying she didn’t have time for an animal with Will gone all the time.

Maybe this year...

Above the purple covered bed hung a board with a movie ticket stub. Flier about a school dance. School paper clipping about the 4-H club. A shot of the

park that had been taken with a Polaroid camera. A school math paper, grade A+. The middle daughter Deborah's.

The third bulletin board held magazine pictures of a boy rock band, along with photographs from a fashion magazine. Candace's.

He checked the desk drawers for a note indicating where the girls might have gone or signs they'd been communicating with friends their parents knew nothing about.

No diary. No secret box of love notes. No pages with boys' names scribbled on them as if one of them had a crush.

If there was anything indicating their plans, they hadn't left evidence of it behind. And if they'd taken their backpacks with them as the Darlings claimed, they'd walked out of the house on their own volition.

Damn. He'd have to ask Mr. Darling for permission to search phone records. Maybe one of the daughters had made plans over the phone last night.

Twelve, fourteen and sixteen –vulnerable ages for girls.

And the perfect ages for predators to target.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILL CHECKED THE WINDOWS. Locked. No signs of forced entry.

“You done in here?” Howard Darling asked from the doorway.

“For now.” Will followed the man back to his den. The house was quiet, almost an eerie quiet. No TV. No radio. Just the creak of the old wood floor as he walked across it, and the wind whistling through the eaves of the house.

“Your wife okay?”

“She’s a wreck,” Mr. Darling admitted. “I told her I’d handle things, for her to get some rest.”

People handled trauma in different ways. If his kid was missing, there was no way Will could take a nap. But the girls’ mother had been drinking. “How is your marriage, Mr. Darling?”

Mr. Darling’s face turned red, and he clenched his fists. His eyes darted toward Will. “My marriage is fine, and none of your business.”

Will let the silence stand for a minute. “Again, I didn’t mean to offend you, but understanding the family dynamics might offer insight as to whether your daughters ran away or if they were lured away by someone else.”

Emotions darkened Darling’s face.

“Did you and your daughters get along?” Will continued.

“When they were little, I used to play catch with ‘em and take ‘em fishing.” Darling said. “But they’re teenagers now and don’t want to hang out with me anymore. They closed up in their room and listened to music and kept to themselves.”

“Typical for teenagers,” Will admitted. He used to kick the soccer ball around with Piper, and they’d make elaborate sandcastles on the beach. When had they stopped doing those things?

“Sometimes girls clash with their mothers,” Will said. “Did your wife and daughters get along?”

Darling glanced at the hallway leading to the bedroom. What was he hiding? “They did fine. Phyllis is a good mother.”

And the girls were good girls, according to her. Except Will sensed everything wasn’t as good as they kept insisting.

Talking to the neighbors and the girls’ teachers would offer more insight into the family. Typically, if a parent was abusive, he focused the abuse/anger on one child..

Will didn’t see signs of a struggle in the house. No blood or indication that Darling had killed his daughters here.

“Mr. Darling,” Will said. “Has anyone been out to the house to do repairs recently? Maybe a painter or gardener or even a cable or power company employee?”

The man scrunched his face as if thinking, then shook his head. “I work construction, so I take care of repairs around here.”

“Are you currently working a job?”

Darling knotted his hands in front of him. “Afraid not. Hard during the winter.”

Will gave an understanding nod. If Mr. Darling had done something to his daughters, a construction site would have been the perfect place to bury their bodies. Of course, he could have dumped a body or bodies at an old work site.

“How about your wife? Does she work outside the home?”

“She cleans houses,” he said.

Will fought surprise. The woman certainly didn’t use her skills in her own home. Dust coated the end tables by the sofa, the bookshelf was cluttered, and something sticky was on the floor in the hall.

“What does her job or mine have to do with finding our girls?” Darling grumbled.

“Maybe nothing,” Will said. “But it’s important I know everything possible about your family and daughters, so I can explore all angles.” He paused. “One more question. Did either one of your daughters have a boyfriend? Or maybe a guy they were interested in at school?”

Darling’s face turned ruddy. “No, they weren’t into boys. They had too

much studying to do.”

Either he had buried his hand in the sand or he was in denial. Or he knew something he didn't want to divulge.

“Can you think of any place the girls might go? Did they like the library or the park? Was there a favorite place you took them as kids?”

“We used to crab out at the marsh,” Darling said. “But I checked there already.”

“I'll have people check again.” Will removed his card and laid it on the table. “I want to talk to the grandmother, and your neighbors and the teachers at school. Maybe they can help.”

Darling rubbed a hand over his eyes, took the card and studied it. He looked miserable as if he was about to break down.

“I need the grandmother's name and contact information,” Will said. “And a list of all your past work sites.”

Darling's brows climbed his forehead. “What for?”

“Just to check in case the girls decided to go there.”

Darling's mouth tightened, but he snagged a scrap of paper from the table and scribbled a name and address on it. With a grunt, he listed two different work sites near Pooler.

Will thanked him. “Call me if you think of anything else or if you hear from your daughters. I'm going to take a look around outside.”

Darling opened his mouth as if to argue, then snapped it closed and nodded. Will let himself out. If the girls had run away, they might come back on their own.

But if they'd been lured from the house and kidnapped, the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours were key to finding them.

Several hours had already passed. The clock was ticking.

CHAPTER FIVE

WILL PHONED THE CHIEF as soon as he walked the Darling's property and asked him to have someone check out Darling's past work sites for the girls' bodies.

He'd hoped to find a note dropped from a backpack in the back yard, a phone number of a friend, an address where the girls planned to meet someone.

But nothing.

"What's the verdict?" Chief Mantino asked. "Did those girls show up?"

"Not yet, and the parents haven't heard anything. Mother is a wreck. Not sure about the father. He seems upset, but that could be guilt talking."

"You think he did something to his daughters?"

"Too early to say, although I sensed he was hiding something. I'm sending pics over for you to pass onto authorities and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children."

"Of course. I checked, and you may be right. There was a call about a domestic disturbance at that house a few months ago. No charges were filed, but I'm reviewing the report now. Officer who answered the call said the couple had definitely been fighting. The Darlings couldn't get rid of him fast enough."

So, his suspicions about Howard Darling might be spot on. "We need to organize a search team to comb the marsh, parks, the Village, and the beaches."

"I'll get on it," Chief Mantino said.

"I'll talk to the grandmother and neighbors and try to get in contact with teachers at the school to see if they can fill me in on the family. The father and mother claim the girls didn't have friends over to their house, but –"

"Teenagers lie to their parents," the chief said.

He thought of Piper and prayed she never pulled a stunt like sneaking out. “Exactly.”

Although the holiday was going to make it more complicated to track down teachers, but he’d find someone at the school who would talk.

“I’ll have Roberta call you with contact information for the school,” Chief Mantino said. “Meanwhile I’ll work on organizing that search party.”

Will scanned the ground, the carport and outside the girls’ bedroom window. No signs they’d snuck out through the window or sign of a break-in. “Alert port authorities, train and bus stations, too,” Will said.

“On it. Keep me posted.”

Will hung up, then surveyed the neighborhood. The houses were set about a half-acre apart. The closest one to the Darlings was a gray ranch with overgrown bushes dividing the property. On the other side, a dilapidated white ranch looked vacant.

He backed onto the street, then drove to the neighbor’s and parked. Christmas lights still dangled from the awning of the house, a plastic wreath on the door. He hadn’t noticed any signs of holiday decorations at the Darlings. Then again, some folks took theirs down as soon as Christmas was over. And others didn’t bother to decorate.

He was guilty of that. Why decorate a tree just for himself? It would only be a reminder that he was alone for the holiday, that his family was broken. Like Humpty Dumpty, he didn’t know how to put it back together again.

He’d have to figure it out later. The case took precedence.

He knocked on the door, his badge in hand as it opened. A middle-aged woman with curly brown hair peered at him over wire rimmed glasses. She introduced herself as Mrs. Beverly Clemson.

Will quickly explained about the missing girls.

Alarm crossed her face, and she averted her gaze. “I haven’t seen them, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Darling claim they attended a party last night and were gone all evening. They didn’t arrive home till three A.M. The girls were home alone.”

She pursed her lips in a frown.

“Did you see or hear anyone over there last night? Perhaps the girls had friends over or a boyfriend showed up?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I go to bed early. About ten o’clock. Everything seemed quiet. It’s not always like that though.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“They get into it over there sometimes,” she said. “Especially when Phyllis takes to drinking.”

“Did you ever report this to the police?” Will asked.

She shivered, fear flickering across her face. “Once, but the cops didn’t do anything. The next day though Mr. Darling came over and threatened me.”

Will tensed. “Tell me exactly what happened? Did he get physical?”

“Well, no,” she said, her voice warbling. “But he told me to stay out of his family’s business or I’d be sorry.”

That certainly sounded like a threat.

“Do you live here alone?” Will asked.

She nodded. “My husband passed two years ago. Colon cancer.” Sadness darkened her face. “He was a good man.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Ma’am.” Will paused while she collected herself. “Mrs. Clemson, was Mr. Darling abusive to his wife or daughters?”

She clenched the door edge with a white-knuckled grip. “I...can’t say for sure.”

“But you suspected he was?”

Wariness darkened her eyes as if she was still afraid of the man. Then she gave a small nod. “I stayed away from them though because of what he said.” Tears filled her eyes. “But if something happened to those children because I didn’t call the law again, I’ll never forgive myself.”

God. He patted her hand. “This is not your fault. At this point, we don’t know what happened. The girls could have snuck out to meet friends and be hiding out somewhere.” Maybe too afraid to come home and face their father’s wrath.

He pushed his card into her hand. “Call me if you think of anything else.” He cut his gaze toward the Darlings. “Or if he bothers you.”

She clamped her teeth over her lower lip, then closed the door. The sound

of locks being moved in place echoed behind him as he walked back to his SUV.

If the neighbor was afraid of Mr. Darling, his daughters might have been as well.

He drove to the grandmother's next. She lived in a retirement community about two miles from the Darlings. The apartments were built of tabby and looked old, although the property looked well maintained. A groundskeeper was picking up limbs that had snapped off in a storm.

The grandmother introduced herself as Effie Litman and offered him coffee and teacakes as she led him into a small living room that overflowed with her collection of ceramic cats.

Will accepted the coffee, touched by the elderly woman's attempt at social graces, but shook his head at the teacakes.

"I know you came about the girls," she said, her chin quivering. "I'm terrified that something happened to them."

"I understand." He joined her at the small kitchen table and noted the dishcloths and tablecloth were also embroidered with cats. "Mr. and Mrs. Darling thought the girls might have come to see you. Do they drop by often?"

She blinked back tears and stirred sugar into her coffee. "No, I wish they'd come more. I get so lonely here."

His heart squeezed. "How about your daughter? Does she come regularly?"

Effie shook her head. "She has to work, you know."

"She cleans houses?" he said.

She nodded and ran a feeble looking hand over her graying hair, hair she wore in a bun. "I wish she stayed home more. Girls need their mothers."

"Were the girls and Mrs. Darling close?"

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth, her hand shaking as she dropped it into her lap. "I think they had issues," she said. "But my daughter loved her children. She was hysterical when she called me this morning."

He reached out and patted her hand. "I understand this is difficult, but anything you can tell me about the family might help. Do you think the girls would run away from home?"

She lifted her head, silence stretching between them. When she looked back at him, confusion clouded her eyes. “What were we talking about?”

Will sighed. “Your missing granddaughters.”

She shot up, knocking the table with her sudden movement. Coffee slashed onto the table and the cup rattled. “What do you mean? My granddaughters are missing?”

Will frowned.

“Your daughter called this morning. The girls – “

She swung her hand toward the door. “I don’t know who you are or how you got in here, but you need to leave before I call the police.”

“Effie, I am a detective,” Will said, troubled by her agitation. “I need you to tell me about your daughter and her husband.”

She went still, then grabbed a dishcloth and began wiping the coffee spill. “I think they’re having a baby,” she said, a softness returning to her eyes. “I hope it’s a girl.”

Will swallowed hard as the truth dawned on him. Effie was obviously suffering from dementia.

He laid his business card on the table. “Thank you for the coffee, Effie. If you think of something else you want to share with me about your daughter and her husband, please call me.”

Frustration filled him as he walked back to his car. If Effie knew something helpful, it might be lost in her memories.

But she had been coherent when he’d first arrived and said the girls hadn’t been to see her. That matched the wife’s story.

Still, the parents had to know more than they were saying.

CHAPTER SIX

WILL HAD WORK TO do, but three missing girls were enough to make any parent panic. If he was wrong about Mr. Darling, and there was a predator lurking the streets preying on teenaged girls, the town should be alerted.

Fear swept through him. He needed to hear his daughter's voice.

He called Betsy's number as he settled in his car. Thankfully Piper answered, not his ex.

"Dad?"

"Hey, kiddo," Will said, grateful she was home and safe. "Listen, a case came up. Three teenaged girls have gone missing. You may know them. Polly, Candace and Deborah Darling."

Silence for a minute. "Yeah, they go to my school," she said flatly.

"Their parents haven't seen them since last night. How well do you know them?"

"Not well, Dad. Polly is sweet, but she's two years younger and shy as all get out. She barely looks at you when you try to talk to her."

"And the older girls?"

Her breath hissed out. "I don't hang out with them," Piper said. "Deborah is okay, I guess, but she follows her sister around like a puppy. They're always trying to flirt with the jocks, but the boys don't go for them."

"Why not?" Will asked.

"Dad," Piper said in an exasperated voice.

"So, your old man is clueless, fill me in."

"I don't know. You do remember high school, don't you? The jocks and the cheerleaders."

"Clicks," he said.

"Exactly."

What about Piper? Was she popular? Making friends? She played forward on the soccer team. What else was she into?

God. Was *she* starting to like boys?

There was so much he didn't know about his own kid...

"Dad, I gotta go."

"Wait." He didn't what to hang up yet. "Did you ever hear gossip about the girls being abused?"

A heartbeat passed. "No. You think they were?"

"I have to explore all angles. Find out if they had reason to run away or if something else happened."

"You mean, like they were kidnapped?" Piper asked, her voice rising an octave.

Betsy would be pissed that he shared information with their daughter. But if a predator was stalking young girls in the area, he wanted Piper to be alert.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." He hesitated, an image of her sweet face haunting him. "Sweetheart, promise me you'll be careful. That you won't go anywhere alone."

Another heartbeat of silence. "So that's the reason you called. To tell me not to go out alone."

"Well, yeah. I'm your dad. I worry about you."

She heaved a sigh that spoke volumes. "I thought you were coming to pick me up and we were going to get pizza."

Shit. He hated to let Piper down again.

"I'm sorry, Piper, we'll have to postpone. With missing person's cases, the first twenty-four hours is crucial. We have to get search teams looking, alert authorities."

"Fine, Dad, I should have known you wouldn't show."

"Honey, it's not like—"

"I know, I get it," she mumbled sarcastically. "Your job is more important."

He opened his mouth to apologize, but the line went dead.

Dammit, his sweet daughter had hung up on him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DAMMIT TO HELL. WILL wanted to drive straight to his ex's house and see his daughter, take her to get pizza, show her that *she* was the most important thing in his life.

But...every second that ticked by meant the Darling girls could be suffering if they'd been abducted. They could be getting farther and farther away on their own – or a predator could be transporting them to another town or state, even to another country.

He'd make it up to Piper later. She'd understand. She'd have to.

He drove to the precinct to drop off the photos of the girls to be passed along to the authorities. An hour later, the pictures had gone out and the local news had aired a segment about their disappearance.

“We checked those job sites for Mr. Darling. So far, nothing.”

He supposed that was a good sign.

“We've set up a tip line,” Chief Mantino added. “Hopefully someone has seen or heard something that will be helpful.”

“And if the girls are hiding out with friends, maybe the news clip will scare them into coming home. Or at least into calling to let their parents know they're all right.”

“We could ask the mother to make a plea on TV,” the chief said.

Will quirked a brow. “Think we'd better hold off on that. She was not in a good way. Too much booze to ease the pain.”

Chief Mantino's brows raised in interest. “Think that's a habit?”

“Maybe. Husband said she'd had too much the night before and went to bed as soon as they got home.” Will scratched his head. “Of course, he could be lying.”

“Maybe she's drinking because she's scared of him,” the chief suggested.

“Can't rule out anything at this point.” Will tapped his foot. “Except I don't

expect this to be about a ransom. Family didn't appear to have money. Mr. Darling works construction and at the moment, is out of work. Wife cleans houses for a living."

"You're probably right about the ransom." Chief Mantino handed Will a sticky note with a phone number and address on it. "We located the school counselor, Evelyn Morris. Talk to her."

"On my way." Will checked the address. Evelyn lived on the island not far from the Village. It took him less than ten minutes to reach her house.

Her place was a small bungalow about two miles from the Village. A great location if you liked the beach. Judging from the bright blue paint and seashells lining the front porch ledge, she was a beachcomber.

She was late thirties with her blond hair in a ponytail. A breeze had picked up, rustling the palm trees and bringing the scent of salt air. She tugged her sweater tighter around her and ushered him inside.

He identified himself, then settled in her den facing her. The house smelled of cinnamon and pumpkin and pine, inviting and homey, as if Christmas still lingered inside.

"I saw the news a few minutes ago," she said, worry flashing in her eyes. "I can't believe there's been an abduction right here on Seahawk Island."

Her choice of words caught his attention. "What do you mean? Do you know something about what happened to the Darling sisters?"

She drummed her fingernails on her leg. "No, I didn't mean that. I just meant that if someone kidnapped them, it's scary. Everyone at school and in town will be in a panic."

"We don't know that they were kidnapped, but if you have reason to think so, please share it," Will said.

She fiddled with the pillow on the sofa. "No, I guess it's just gossip. I was at the diner when the news aired, and people started fearing the worst."

"I see," Will said. "For now, we're considering all possibilities."

"You mean that the girls may have run away," Evelyn said quietly.

Will nodded. "Did you ever see bruises on the girls or hear talk about abuse at home? Maybe one of the girls came to you."

She shook her head. "I did see bruises a few times, and asked, but Deborah

and Candace both clammed up. Made up different stories. One time it was a bike wreck. Another they'd been playing tag football."

Typical of abuse victims to cover for their abuser.

"I talked to the parents, but need more information on the sisters," Will continued. "Mrs. Darling insisted that her daughters were good girls. Both parents also commented that the girls didn't entertain friends at their house. And that they didn't like boys."

Surprise flickered on the woman's face.

"I take it that's not exactly true. Which part?"

She pulled at a loose thread on the pillow edge. A nervous gesture.

"Please, Mrs. Morris, anything you can tell me would be helpful. If the girls are in trouble, every second counts."

She gave him a wary look. "They didn't have a lot of friends," she admitted. "But there were two girls who hung around with them. Aretha Franton and Mellie Thacker."

Names were helpful. "I'll need their contact information in case they know where the girls are."

"I can get it from school," she said. "Although Mellie and her mother moved away three weeks before Christmas. Mrs. Thacker told the school that her mother was sick, and she had to take care of her."

"All right. Then I'll need Aretha's number." He twisted his mouth. "Is there anything else?"

She studied her fingernails for a minute. "I'm the school counselor. The things my students share with me are supposed to be confidential."

Will cleared his throat. "I respect your job, but these young ladies might be in danger, Mrs. Morris. So again, *anything* you tell me might help us find them."

She inhaled. "Another girl in school came to me and said Deborah and Candace were teasing her. Bullying her."

Will had been forming a mental image of the girls, but that wasn't what he expected. Although sometimes abused kids turned into abusers themselves. "What was the girl's name?"

"I shouldn't say."

Will reached out and patted her hand. “I won’t tell her that we talked. I’ll just explain that we’re questioning as many students as we can.”

The woman nodded slowly. “Her name is Libby Barrett. She’s a freshman. A quiet, shy girl with big glasses. She likes to read and volunteers on the yearbook staff.”

“Thank you.” He started to stand, but she caught his hand.

Regret darkened her eyes. “Detective, I hope you find them. Like I said, I can’t be certain that the girls were abused, but something was going on in that house. Something that wasn’t right.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

AN HOUR LATER, WILL parked at Libby Barrett's house. According to the analyst at the precinct, she lived with her mother, a single parent who taught at the elementary school on the island.

He knocked and identified himself. The short, chubby woman led him to a den where she was obviously putting away holiday decorations. Dry needles from her Christmas tree dotted the floor, the tree bare of ornaments, making it look sad and empty. "Such terrible news about those girls," she muttered. "I hope you find them all right."

"We're searching everywhere," he said. "I wondered if I might speak with your daughter Libby."

She raised a brow. "Why would you want to talk to her?"

"Routine. We're interviewing as many students as possible hoping someone overheard something."

The woman nodded in understanding, walked to the hall and called her daughter to come down. Footsteps clattered a minute later, and a thin red-haired girl with freckles and big square glasses appeared, hugging a copy of *Wuthering Heights* to her chest.

Wariness flickered across her face when she spotted him.

"Honey, this is Detective Flagler," Mrs. Barrett said. "He needs to talk to you about the Darling girls."

Libby pushed her glasses up on her nose and crossed the room to stand by her mother.

"I don't know anything about them," Libby said.

"You weren't friends?" Will asked, studying her reaction.

Her glasses slipped down her nose as she shook her head no.

"I've been talking with as many students as possible," he said, bending the truth. "A couple of them commented that Deborah and Candace bullied you."

Mrs. Barrett gasped. "Honey, is that true? Why didn't you tell me?"

Libby's face reddened with anger. "Because it was no big deal," Libby said. "They just teased me about my glasses and freckles, that's all."

"Oh, sweetheart," Mrs. Barrett said sympathetically. "I'm sorry. Teenagers can be so cruel sometimes."

"Were they mean to you?" Will asked bluntly.

Libby glanced at her mother then at him, some emotion akin to panic streaking her face. "Like I said, it was just some teasing, nothing I haven't heard before or can't handle."

Will offered her a smile. "Can you think of any place the girls might go if they ran away?"

Libby shook her head. "I avoid them," she admitted.

"Kids talk though," Will said. "Would they have gone to a boy's house?"

Libby shrugged. "I don't know. You should ask Aretha Franton or Mellie Thacker. They were tight with them."

Will thanked her, then left his card, hoping she might decide to open up later.

He drove from the Barrett's to Aretha Franton's house. The woman who met him at the door looked irritated when he explained the reason for his visit.

"I heard the news," she said tersely. "I'm sorry about those girls, but my daughter can't help you."

Will narrowed his eyes, noting that she hadn't invited him inside. "I had the impression they were friends."

"You had the wrong impression," she said stiffly.

He spotted a slender dark-haired girl with big brown eyes behind the woman. Fear strained the girl's face, and her eyes looked red rimmed as if she'd been crying.

"Please, Mrs. Franton," Will said. "Let me speak with your daughter for a moment. Mr. and Mrs. Darling are frantic that something bad happened to their children."

Mrs. Franton pursed her lips. "Maybe they should have been better parents then."

Her tone reeked of anger. “What exactly do you mean?” Will asked.

She gripped the doorjamb, still blocking his entry. “Nothing. I...am sorry their girls are missing. They probably just ran away.”

“We’re looking into that angle,” Will said. “That’s another reason I wanted to speak to Aretha. I thought the girls might have told her if they’d planned to leave home, and where they were going.”

“My daughter doesn’t know anything,” Mrs. Franton said.

“Please, Mrs. Franton. Aretha might know if there’s someone the sisters might call. Maybe they went to meet some guys or snuck out to a party last night?” Will said. “They could be in trouble and need help.”

“I told you Aretha doesn’t know anything. She hasn’t spoken to those girls in weeks.”

Without another word, she slammed the door in Will’s face.

CHAPTER NINE

WILL SPENT THE REST of the day questioning people in the Village while the Coast Guard searched from the sky, and other officers and locals combed the beaches, the marsh, parks, anywhere they could think of that a teenager might go. They even checked the high school inside and out, but the girls weren't there.

Chief Mantino had their analyst pull the Darlings' phone records, but they found nothing suspicious. The tip line sent them racing to an abandoned ship at the marina, but it was a false lead. No Darlings, just a homeless man who'd sought shelter while he slept off his nightly binge. Police on I-16 heading toward Macon discovered a stolen car, but the prints inside belonged to a guy who'd held up a gas station the night before.

No stowaways reported. No bus tickets for three teenaged girls. And no one at the local airport spotted the sisters.

He ducked into the diner for a quick meal and ordered a burger from a waitress named Susan who'd waited on him before. She was always friendly although not flirtatious, but today she looked antsy and spilled a tray of drinks and brought a couple the wrong order.

Her little girl Marilyn was sitting in the corner with a notepad and pencil. He heard the six-year-old liked to draw and scribble down things she overheard people say. Marilyn once told him she wanted to be a TV reporter when she grew up.

She kept hovering in the back and looking towards the door as if something were wrong. Susan delivered his burger and sweet tea and dropped the bill on the table.

"Everything okay?" he asked her.

She glanced back at her daughter, then bit her lip. "Yeah, guess the news about those missing girls has all of us freaked out. I can't imagine if

something happened to Marilyn. She's all I've got."

"I understand," he said sincerely. "I had to call my daughter earlier just to hear her voice." He laid his napkin in his lap. "Did the sisters ever come in here?"

She shook her head. "Don't think I ever saw 'em here. Sorry, wish I could help."

A tall man with dark hair called her over, and Will realized it was Daryl Eaton, the lighthouse keeper. He supposed the women thought him handsome. From what he'd seen, the man kept to himself. He seemed friendlier to Susan than Will had ever seen him be to anyone else.

His phone buzzed, and he snatched it and answered, his pulse jumping. Maybe the girls had been found.

"Detective Flagler."

"Will, it's Betsy. What time are you bringing Piper home?"

He froze, his chest clenching. "What do you mean? I've been working and had to cancel. You heard about –"

"She's not with you?" Panic tinged his ex's voice, stirring his own.

"No, why? Isn't she with you?"

"No. I left her home earlier while I met some friends for dinner, and I just got back. She left a note saying she might spend the night with you."

Will shot up from his seat. "Listen to me, Betsy. She's not with me, but I'll find her. Have you called her friends?"

"I'm going to do that now."

"Is there any sign of a break-in at the house?"

A gasp escaped Betsy. "No, I don't think so."

"Was the door locked?"

"Yes," Betsy said.

"Is her bike still there?"

Footsteps sounded, and he realized she was running to the garage. "It's still here. God, Will, where is she?"

He wished to hell he knew. "Where would she go if she snuck out?"

"I don't know," she cried. "She was supposed to be with you!"

They'd planned to get pizza, but he'd let her down. Dammit to hell. If

something had happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

"I'll go look for her." He tossed cash on the table to pay for his uneaten food and hurried toward the door.

Outside, the wind picked up. A storm was brewing, dark thunderclouds rumbling and threatening heavy rain.

Fear seized him. His baby was out in this. Alone.

Sweat broke out on his forehead, fear choking him. Three teenagers close to Piper's age had disappeared the night before. And he had no idea what happened to them.

Dead God, was someone preying on young girls in the area? Did some crazy madman have his daughter?

CHAPTER TEN

THE NEXT TWO HOURS were a nightmare. Will thought he was going to lose his mind with worry.

Betsy called everyone she could think of. The officers in the Village were looking for Piper now, too.

Betsy wanted to join the search, but he asked her to stay home in case Piper returned or called.

He rode by the high school and checked the soccer fields, then the cove where he used to take Piper crabbing, but she wasn't there. Next, he went to the ice cream parlor, movie theater, then the putt-putt course.

Nothing.

She was fourteen. Where the hell did fourteen-year-old girls like to go?

The mall.

It was at least three miles from their house, but Piper was a runner and soccer player. Three miles was nothing to her.

Except it was dark now, and a storm was brewing. Lightning zigzagged across the sky.

The mall closed in an hour.

He was driving his own vehicle but set the siren on top of the car and flipped it on. Heart racing, he bypassed slower traffic, taking a turn on two wheels as he spun into the mall parking lot.

He threw his SUV into park, jumped out and ran toward the entrance, scanning the lot for his daughter and for trouble. If a predator was stalking teenaged girls, this would be prime hunting ground.

Earlier, one of his officers had canvassed the stores and owners for the Darling girls. It was possible though that they'd come here, and a predator kidnapped them from the parking lot before they went inside the mall. An officer was reviewing security footage covering both the inside and outside of

the building, but so far, no report of the Darlings being sighted.

He burst through the front door, scanning left and right. He was surprised stores were open today, but sale signs hung in various windows. He tried to remember what stores Piper liked, but truthfully, he hadn't taken her shopping in ages.

He passed a teen clothing shop and glanced inside, but the store was practically empty. He flashed a photo of Piper at the store clerk, and she shook her head. He did the same with every store he passed. Finally, he spotted the food court.

He veered toward it, fear gripping him with every step. A group of teenaged boys were hanging out by a sports themed store. Families were finishing dinner and herding their kids to clean up, so they could head home.

He surveyed the area, perspiration trickling down his neck. He was just about to give up when he spotted her.

Piper sitting alone in a booth in the pizza place.

They were supposed to get pizza. She'd come alone.

Because he'd let her down. Again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RELIEF MUSHROOMED INSIDE WILL. It was so strong it nearly brought him to his knees.

A second later, anger hit him just as hard.

She'd scared the hell out of him and Betsy. She knew better than to go out alone at night.

He gritted his teeth, desperate to hang onto his temper as he strode toward her.

When he'd almost reached her, she glanced up and spotted him. Wariness flashed on her small face, maybe even a sliver of fear. But sadness tinged her eyes, too, and a deep loneliness that made him ache inside.

He stopped in front of the table. He didn't know whether to hug her or yell at her.

He didn't say a word. He hooked his thumb toward the exit, and she stood and walked with him to the door. In the car, he remained silent and so did she.

But tension simmered between them, fueling the air.

As soon as he parked, she reached for the door handle. "Are you gonna tell Mom?" she asked.

He muttered a sarcastic sound. "She knows you were gone. She called me frantic."

Piper's shaky breath rushed out.

He climbed from the car and the two of them walked to the front stoop together. Betsy opened the door, dragged Piper inside and burst into tears as she hugged her. Will blinked back his own emotions.

It had been one damn hard day.

"I'm fine, Mom," Piper said, easing from her mother's arms. "I'm sorry I scared you."

“I was worried sick,” Betsy cried.

Didn't she think he cared? For god's sake, he'd been out of his mind.

“We were worried sick,” he corrected her, his tone harsher than he'd intended. “What were you thinking, Piper?”

“It was just a white lie,” Piper said. “You and Mom tell them all the time. You say you're coming and then you don't.”

“It was more than a little white lie,” Will growled. “It was stupid as hell, Piper. You realize I've been out hunting for three missing girls today, three girls around your age?” His voice rose with pent up anger and frustration. “You could have been kidnapped or raped or even killed tonight!”

Piper burst into tears, the terror in her eyes sucker punching him.

“Stop it, Will,” Betsy snapped. “You're frightening her.”

“She should be scared,” Will said. “Girls her age are perfect targets for perverts and murderers—”

“Don't pretend like you care,” Piper screamed. “You're just mad because you had to leave your job to come and look for me!”

Will was about to explode. “That's not true,” he said in a quiet but lethal tone. “You have no idea the thoughts that ran through my head, young lady.”

“Just go back to your job, that's all you care about, not Mom and me!”

He started to reach for her, but she bolted up the stairs. A door slamming indicated she'd locked herself in her room. The house vibrated with tension.

Betsy crossed her arms, her expression pained. “You should go now, Will. Thank you for bringing her home.”

Dammit, he wanted to pull her and Piper both in his arms and assure them that they were important, that he loved them.

“Go,” Betsy said. “I'll talk to her.”

Their gazes locked, the memory of the day Piper was born taunting him. They'd been so happy.

That day he'd vowed to be a good dad just like he'd vowed to be a good husband.

But he'd failed at both.

He swallowed hard to keep from begging her for another chance. She'd made it clear when they'd separated that as long as he was on the force, there

was no chance for them.

So, he turned and left.

Piper's words echoed in his ears. Her cries. The pain in her eyes.

Then her statement—*It was only a little white lie.*

What little white lies had the Darling girls told their parents?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three weeks later

THE CASE HAD VIRTUALLY gone cold.

Will spoke on the nightly news one more time. “I promise you the police won’t give up until this case is solved. But we need your help.” Photos of the Darling girls appeared on screen. “If you have any information regarding the disappearance or whereabouts of these three young ladies, please call our tip line.”

Since there was nothing new to report, the questions were minimal. He couldn’t tell locals that their children were safe. He couldn’t tell them anything.

At least Piper was okay. She was still angry at him. He tried to make up to her for their missed pizza date, but she’d declined offers to have dinner with him. Betsy kept telling him to be patient, but every day that passed, he felt as if Piper was slipping farther and farther away.

At least she was alive. That gave him solace. He’d visited the Darlings again and again, and their despair kept mounting.

He was almost to the door to leave when one of the news staff approached him. “You have a call, Detective Flagler.”

They’d chased so many false leads that he knew better than to get his hopes up. But false or not, they had to follow each one.

He stepped over to the desk area and took the phone. “Detective Flagler.”

“Those girls had to be punished.”

Will’s blood went cold. “Who is this?”

“They got what they deserved.”

The phone clicked silent. Will cursed and called Chief Mantino to see if they could trace the call.

“Did it sound like a man or a woman?” the chief asked.

“The voice was muffled,” Will said. “Hard to tell.”

“Let me know if you hear from the caller again. I’ll see what I can do about the trace.”

Will rolled his shoulders as he left the TV station. He hadn’t slept a decent night since he’d been assigned the case. He probably wouldn’t until he had answers.

Every day that passed lessened the chances that the Darling sisters would be found alive.

Weary and discouraged, he walked outside. Another storm threatened. The dark clouds kept coming, the winter wind picking up and beating him as he crossed the parking lot.

He climbed in his car, tempted to drive to Betsy’s and beg Piper to see him again. When she was little, he could pick her up a candy bar or a stuffed animal, and all would be right with them again.

Nothing was right now. He didn’t know if it ever would be.

That phone call disturbed him. What had the caller meant, that the girls deserved to be punished? Punished for what?

They got what they deserved. The caller implied he or she knew where the girls were and what had happened to them.

He drove from the precinct through the Village, the glow from the lighthouse twirling across the stormy sky, a guide for the ships at sea to find their way home.

He turned onto a side street, drove toward the beach and the place where he used to take Piper crabbing. How he longed for those sweet days again.

Just as he rounded the corner and drove across the causeway, a car crept up on his tail. He checked his rearview mirror, irritated at the vehicle’s blinding headlights. The car inched closer, then suddenly slammed into his rear.

He braked and gripped the steering wheel to keep from losing control, grappling to stay on the road. But the car sped up and rammed into his rear again.

His vehicle went into a spin, skidded toward the edge of the bridge, snapped through the metal edge and careened over the ledge. He fought control again, but there was nothing he could

He flew through the air then, his SUV nosedived into the marsh. Glass shattered. Metal crunched. The impact jarred his body. He heard a bone snap. His head hit the windshield and dash. His chest slammed into the steering wheel.

The car sank deeper into the marsh, cold water seeping into the car through the crack in the window.

God help him. He didn't want to die without making things right with his daughter.

Then the world went black.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Two weeks later

THEY WERE GOING TO pull the plug on him if he didn't wake up soon. They didn't think he could hear, but he'd heard every damn word they'd said. The doctors. Nurses. Betsy. Mantino.

Piper.

He didn't want to die and leave them. He had to drag himself out of this stupor.

Every time he'd tried before, his body felt so weighted and exhausted that he couldn't lift a finger, much less claw his way back to life.

Crying woke him this time. Piper. And Betsy.

"Shh, honey, I know it's hard," Betsy was saying.

"But I yelled at him the last time I saw him," Piper wailed. "And I wouldn't talk to him when he called. He thinks I hate him."

"No, honey, your father knows you loved him."

He did know that.

Memories returned. He'd been working the Darling case. Betsy called thinking Piper was with him. She snuck out to get pizza because he'd broken their dinner date. He nearly lost his mind looking for her.

Then he yelled at her.

If she'd been kidnapped or raped or murdered, it would have been his fault.

A warm hand touched his cheek. "Will, wake up and talk to us," Betsy whispered.

"Please, daddy."

Piper sounded so young. So terrified. Like she had when she was five and she had nightmares. He would slip into her room to soothe her, and everything would be alright.

He had to make it right now.

He blinked. Tried to move a finger. Blinked again and slowly opened his eyes. Just a sliver. The light hurt. His body ached. His head throbbed.

That soft hand again. Then another, Piper picking his hand up and cradling it in hers. Her palm felt so warm. So tender. It took away some of the ice coldness in his body. “Daddy?”

Her haunted whisper wrenched his gut. He summoned every ounce of strength he possessed and forced his eyes open. His fingers curled around hers.

“He’s waking up!” Piper squealed.

“I’ll get the doctor.” Mantino’s voice.

“Will?” Betsy whispered.

He blinked her into focus. Saw her tear-stained eyes searching his face. Heard Piper snuffle.

Then his daughter pressed a kiss to his hand. “Daddy, I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Piper said in a raspy voice. “If you’ll just be all right, I won’t ever do it again.”

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He shifted his head slightly and squeezed his daughter’s hand. Then he reached for Betsy’s.

He tried to speak, but his throat was so dry, he had to swallow twice to make his voice work. “Love ...you...both so much.”

“I love you, too, Daddy,” Piper whispered.

Betsy pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Me, too, Will.”

Hope mushroomed inside his aching chest. A second later, the doctor and nurse appeared. The doctor introduced himself, then shined a light in his eyes, and the nurse checked his vitals.

“You’re going to be okay,” the doctor said. “But you broke your leg and some ribs and have been in a coma for three weeks, so you’re going to need some rehab time.”

He didn’t care. He was alive.

“We’ll discuss a plan after you rest a couple more days here.”

The doctor and nurse left, and Mantino moved up to the bed. “You scared the hell out of us,” the chief said. “Thought we’d lost you.”

He’d thought so, too.

“Do you remember what happened?”

Will struggled to recall details. “A car crash.”

Mantino nodded. “You lost control?”

Again, a blank hole swallowed his memory. “I...don’t remember.”

A grave expression carved his boss’s face. “The head injury. Doc said you might not recall the accident at all.” Mantino leaned forward. “Your car nosedived into the marsh. It was pretty banged up, but we’re going to make sure there was no foul play.”

Mantino thought someone caused his accident?

The chief patted his arm. “Don’t worry about it now. You have to rest.”

“The case?” he asked.

Mantino’s mouth dipped downward into a frown. “Nothing new. I took over, but for now, the case is cold. We’ll keep working it though.” He patted Will’s arm. “Just rest up so you can come back to work.”

Will gave a small nod, although the movement wore him out.

“I’ll let you spend some time with your family,” Chief Mantino said. “They’ve barely left your side since you were hauled in here.”

Will swallowed again, his heart hammering as Betsy and Piper slipped up beside him again.

“I know you’re upset and worried about the case,” Betsy said. “But you’re going to need time to recover, Will.”

He did want the case solved. But most of all, he wanted his family. “I’m not going back,” he said.

“What?”

“Daddy?” Piper said, her voice cracking.

He reached for her hand again. “I almost lost both of you. I want my family back. You two are more important to me than any case.”

Betsy’s face crumpled, tears trickling down her cheeks. “Are you sure?”

He brushed her tear away with the back of his hand. “I’ve never been more certain about anything in my life.”

Betsy pressed a tender kiss to his lips. “Then you’ll come home with us.”

“If you’ll have me.”

“I’ve never stopped loving you,” she whispered.

Piper leaned over him and hugged him. “I love you, too, Daddy.”

It was all he could do to lift his aching arms, but he wrapped them around his daughter and his wife and hugged them tight.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY CALLED HIM THE Punisher.

He hadn't asked to do the job. The torch had been passed to him, and he couldn't deny the calling.

How could he refuse when the need for exacting justice ran in his blood?

Like his father who'd held the reigns in his big meaty hands, he now held them in his. His fists closed tightly around them, anticipation building.

Justice had to be served. Justice fitting for the sins of the sinner.

He donned his cape and hood and walked toward the cavern he created to house the new ones who needed punishing. Three of them.

Their stay would be longer than most. But it was necessary.

A smile curved his lips as an image of their terrified young faces flashed behind his eyes. They wore pretty smiles and clothes, a mask to hide the ugliness lurking beneath.

One could easily be fooled by their feigned innocence. But he knew their truth. He'd peel away the outer skin and expose the layers beneath, the vileness that had stolen their souls.

They would have to own that truth before they met their maker.

He'd experienced his first taste of blood when he was ten years old and he witnessed his father handling a problem for a local on the island.

His father's punishments were cruel. Severe. They ended in screams of terror that echoed off the ocean, blending with the waves crashing against the jagged rocky shore.

He had to live up to his father's image. Make the sinners pray for redemption. Beg for forgiveness.

Most of all, they had to suffer.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA *TODAY* AND AWARD-WINNING author Rita Herron fell in love with books at the ripe age of eight when she read her first Trixie Belden mystery. But she didn't think real people grew up to be writers, so she became a teacher instead. Now she writes so she doesn't have to get a real job!

With over ninety books to her credit, she's penned romantic suspense, romantic comedy, and YA stories, but she especially loves writing dark romantic suspense tales set in southern small towns.

For more on Rita and her titles, visit her at www.ritaherron.com. You can also follow her on Facebook and Twitter [@ritaherron](https://twitter.com/ritaherron).