

ABANDONED

A Jennifer Malone Mystery

ONE

PART I

SUNDAY

“Don’t let them kill me.”

It took a moment for Luke to understand what the woman had said. “No one is going to kill you, Helga, I promise,” he said with a genuine smile and short laugh, helping her onto the stretcher.

Once on her back, another concerned look came over Helga’s face, as if a jolt of pain had flashed through her clouded mind. “You promise?”

As a patient transporter Luke had seen this expression countless times, not only on the anxious faces of the elderly like Helga, but also children taking the ride from the hospital’s Paediatric floor to the O.R. At least with the kids their equally terrified parents were present in the cramped elevator, trying to appear unconcerned and upbeat, although they weren’t always successful in this regard. Patients over the age of 30 and more so senior citizens, were usually by themselves when Luke arrived at their room to whisk them away, often for tests they didn’t know had been scheduled. Most, however, were aware that they were going to have a surgical

procedure done, if for no other reason than their food and drink consumption had been cut off at midnight. The majority of the older transfers went down without any relatives or friends present, which Luke hated to see. This only added more pressure on him, as it meant he'd be the last non-surgical employee the patient would interact with before going under the knife.

"Yes, I promise," Luke said as he wheeled the stretcher to the nurse's station to pick up Helga's medical chart.

"Helga, you'll be back in no time with a brand new hip. How exciting," Stephanie, the daytime nurse for room 8103, said cheerfully, bringing a mild smirk to Helga's face. "Good luck."

"At this stage, it's not about luck, is it, Helga?" Luke broke in with a huge smile as he placed the chart under the side of the mattress. "It's about skill!" Before stepping to the rear of the stretcher out of her view, he briefly rested his hand on Helga's arm and added, "We got this, right?"

Helga finally grinned widely, allowing the tension in her facial expressions to dissipate, if only for a moment. "Yes. No luck is required today. We got this."

The old woman's use of modern terminology brought laughter to the other two nurses sitting at a nearby desk. "She's such a sweetheart," one of them said.

Luke inserted his key into the lock on the wall and hit the down button. "A special elevator for a special lady."

A moment later the elevator door opened and Luke pushed the stretcher into the small space, then hit "G" on the keypad. Once they were moving, he stepped to the side wall in order to speak with Helga face to face. "I noticed on your wristband that you were born in 1928. That's quite a while ago. Have you lived around here all this time?"

Luke had learned that during these short trips to the hospital's various departments and wings, this question was a good one, as it immediately got the patient thinking about something they truly loved to talk about: themselves.

The unexpected inquiry had its desired effect.

"Oh no, I was sent to this country when I was ten," Helga replied

in a nostalgic tone. "I was born in Berlin, Germany."

"Wow, ten years old leading up to World War II. That must have been some crazy times," Luke said. "I was never a big history fan in school, but I'm sure your stories would give me a new appreciation of what was really going on back then." The elevator came to a smooth stop as Luke asked, "Did your family get out of Germany before the war?"

The lines on Helga's weary face once again hardened. "Only my brother and me."

The elevator door opened, abruptly ending the conversation, as Luke still had a job to do and Helga had a surgery appointment.

"From the penthouse to the ground floor," Luke chirped as he guided Helga's stretcher down the O.R. corridor. "You know ... maybe if you're feeling up to it, I can pop in to talk with you later. Would that be all right?"

Helga had zoned poor Luke out, as she stared down the hallway identical to all the other ones she'd seen during her stay; cold, grey and unfeeling. This wasn't her first rodeo, as her pretty young nurse once commented, but it was very different. The card attached to the flowers that arrived in her room while she was sleeping made sure of that. The same message had been sent in another bouquet to her house the previous year, on the morning of a very traumatic and life changing meeting. Its meaning was not intended to bring a smile to her face then, or now.

All the best, Helga! See you soon!

As Luke tried to keep her mind off the fact she was about to lay unconscious for an hour or more, defenceless against a perceived attack, Helga scanned the faces of the people in the ultrasound/x-ray waiting room they were cutting through, as well as anyone in scrubs.

She knew they were here.

"I present to you: Ms. Helga," Luke announced to two nurses, as he positioned the stretcher against the wall and applied the brake. "She's all yours now."

"Thanks, Luke," one of the nurses replied as she took the medical chart from him. "We'll take good care of her."

“Excellent,” he replied, stepping to the foot of the stretcher. “Take care, Helga. I hope I’ll be the one dispatched to take you back to your room later.”

Helga held Luke’s warm gaze, ignoring the nurses as they began to fuss with her in preparation for her surgery.

“Remember what I said, Luke,” Helga said in a near whisper, “because you’re the only one who’ll care later on.”

Luke gave Helga a quizzical look, the way you respond to a child who is just learning how to talk, or in this case, a crazy elderly patient hopped up on drugs to combat the constant pain of a broken hip. “I will, don’t you worry about that. I’ll see you soon.”

Luke walked out of the room and called the Admitting department on his radio. “Luke here. That patient from eight is down in O.R.”

“Okay, thanks,” came the bored reply of the overworked female clerk. “There’s nothing on the board right now.”

Luke put the radio in the front pocket of his scrub top and simultaneously pulled out his cell phone to check his email. As he passed the O.R. Family Waiting Room, he heard a man with a thick accent say, “She just went in. What do you want me to do now?” Luke slowed and turned his head to see who was talking, wondering if one of Helga’s relatives or friends had shown up in her time of need. Unfortunately, his eyes were greeted with the backs of three men, one at the payphone and the others on their cell phones in conversation. He would usually stop and say a few words to reassure the waiting party, but not knowing which of the men he’d overheard, or if they were even discussing Helga, Luke returned his attention to a new message from his girlfriend with the subject line: “You!”

“Hi, Luke?” his work radio squawked. “Can you pick up some labs on 4 West and then you can go on break.”

“Sure thing. Thanks.”

Making his way back to the elevator he again wandered by the waiting room and noticed that two of the men he’d seen previously were watching the television hanging on the wall. The third man, an older grey-haired gentleman wearing an overcoat, was no longer

present.

Probably went for a coffee upstairs, he assumed.

Luke inserted his key into the wall lock and the express elevator door opened obediently. Stepping inside, he pressed the "4" button.

"And here we go," he said to the walls, "another action filled adventure starts now."

As if on cue, the elevator doors closed and sent the happy-go-lucky employee on his way, unaware that within the hour Helga would be dead.

To be continued ...