

ABANDONED

A Jennifer Malone Mystery



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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 replied 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 crammed elevator, trying to appear upbeat, although they weren’t always successful in this regard. Patients above the age of 30 and more so senior citizens, were typically by themselves when Luke arrived at their room to whisk them away, often for tests they weren’t aware had been scheduled. Most knew a surgical procedure was to be 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. It added 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 beneath the edge 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 second. "Yes. No luck is required today. We got this."

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

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

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 focused the patient on a topic they 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. Those must have been some crazy times," Luke said. "I wasn't a big

history fan in school, but I'm sure your stories would give me a new appreciation of what was really going on." The elevator came to a smooth stop as Luke inquired, "Did your family get out of Germany prior to the war?"

The lines on Helga's weary face again hardened. "Just 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 ... if you're feeling up to it, I can pop in to talk with you later. Would that be all right?"

Helga had zoned Luke out, as she stared at the cold and heartless hallway before them. This wasn't her first rodeo, as her young nurse had commented, but it was very different. The card attached to the flowers in her room made certain of that. The same message had been sent with another bouquet to her house the previous year, on the morning of a traumatic and life changing meeting. Its meaning wasn't 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 surgery, when she'd be unconscious and defenceless against a perceived attack, Helga scanned the faces of the people in the various waiting rooms they passed, 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."

"Thanks, Luke," one of the nurses said 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. "Now just relax. I hope I'll be the one dispatched to take you back to your room."

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 whispered, "because you're the only one who'll know later on."

Luke gave Helga a quizzical look, the way you respond to a child learning how to talk, or in this case, a crazy elderly patient hopped up on drugs to combat the pain of a broken hip. "I will, don't worry. You'll be fine."

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 female clerk. "There's nothing on the board."

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?" Luke slowed to see who was talking, thinking 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 occasionally 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 get some labs on 4 West and then you can go on break?"

"I can, thanks."

Making his way 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, he assumed.

Luke unlocked the express elevator and the door opened obediently. 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 ...