

Chapter 18

Fire at the Clinic

You never think it's going to be your house that's burning, but as we got nearer, my heart sank.

It was right before our wedding. Steven and I were walking back to my place from having dinner nearby, and we heard sirens and saw fire trucks speeding by on my street. Smoke billowed out through broken windows and flames flared inside my apartment and the office below. I grabbed the first firefighter I found. "That's my house! It's my house!" I cried.

"Get behind the barricades and stay there until we bring this fire under control!" She turned from me and began walking away.

"Wait a minute!" I said, but she was gone before I could get any information as to the possible cause of the fire that was destroying my home and my livelihood.

Steven held me around the shoulders, leading me behind the barriers the firefighters had erected across the street from my beautiful three-story, one-hundred-year-old brick and stucco home. Looking up at Steven, I could see he was as stunned as I was, but he gained perspective quickly. "Susan, the firefighter was just doing her job. They have to bring the fire under control and hopefully salvage the house. We'll have time to ask questions later.

Once behind the stanchions, Steven and I could only examine the damage from a distance along with the other onlookers. I spotted Linda, my elderly neighbor, and went over to find out if she knew what had happened.

“I don’t know anything more than you, Susan,” she said, shouting over the noise. “We heard sirens, and the next thing a firefighter was banging on my door ordering me to evacuate my house because our houses are so close together. They feared that that blaze would spread quickly to the rest of them. I’ve never been so shaken in all my life. Susan, what could have happened?”

I just hugged her. “Linda, I don’t know. I just can’t imagine what could have caused this.”

It was horrifying to helplessly watch the building burn. Scorch marks raced up the side of the building. The heritage vines that clung to the stately building were now blackened and shriveled; they bowed away from the building in a futile effort to escape the flames. The yard was piled high with burned and broken furniture that had been pushed out of windows. Even while the firefighters struggled to contain and extinguish the blaze—it seemed so silly—I thought about my upcoming wedding. My wedding dress was still at the bridal shop awaiting my final fitting. If I’d brought it home, it would have been destroyed in the fire. How strange to endure a normal lifetime milestone after something like this. Then again, it wasn’t the first time I would experience one of life’s milestones next to a fresh trauma.

Just then Molly, Marie, and Rob came running over to us, and I could see they shared the horror I felt when they saw the building engulfed in smoke and ashes.

“Susan, are you all right?” Rob said, taking me in his arms. “Were you inside when the fire started?”

“No, no,” I answered, “Steven and I were walking back from dinner when the fire trucks raced past us and we suspected it was my neighborhood, but my God—you

never think it's going to be your own house." I felt the tears well up in my eyes, but my shock kept them at bay.

Rob shouted over the noise, "Susan, what can I do?" He took off his light jacket and put it around my shoulders. I hadn't noticed that I was shivering.

Steven responded, "Rob, I don't think there's anything *anyone* can do right now, she's shaken, but it looks like they've got it under control. We'll have to see what they say about it once things settle down."

Steven pulled me along, away from my friends. "Susan," he said, "I see Pat Jackson down the street, he's an investigator with the Annapolis Police—I'll see what I can find out from him." Then he turned and walked away from me.

My friends came back over. Molly held my hand and Marie stood next to me bewildered and speechless.

When Steven rejoined us, he said, "Pat doesn't know anything more than we do, but was called in to monitor the crowd. Apparently that's routine because if it's arson, the arsonist is very likely to stay and watch the blaze. Jesus, talk about creepy!"

That's when I broke down crying.

Once the fire was contained, the firefighter with whom I'd spoken earlier came over and introduced me to the fire chief. "Miss, I understand you're the owner of the house, this is our fire chief, Tim Hillmeyer."

"Thanks" I replied, "Chief Hillmeyer, I'm wondering..."

Before I could finish, he said, "I'm real sorry about this, Miss. I understand from one of your neighbors who was on the scene when we arrived, that you've owned the property for some time."

In staccato fashion, he asked a series of questions. How long had I owned the property? Were both my business and my upstairs apartment insured? Did anyone else live with me? Did anyone else have a key to the house? He went on and on. I tried to reply to each question as quickly as he asked them, but I couldn't keep up, I ended up mumbling a quick answer while trying to understand his next question. Finally I became so exasperated, I shouted, "Wait a minute, I'm the one with questions. How did this start? My fiancé and I left here a few hours ago and everything was fine. I come back to find my house on fire? My place of business? What happened?"

The chief took a deep breath, surveyed the building once again and said, "Well, ma'am it's too early to tell for sure right now, but preliminarily it looks like arson. We'll order a full investigation tomorrow morning, but until then, nobody can go back in the building. I suggest you call your insurance agent and report the fire. We'll provide the insurance company with the findings of the investigation after it's completed, but that'll take a while. Our arson investigators have to sort through everything. By the way, whose office is the one that burned?"

"It's my associate's office. She's right here," I said, motioning to Marie.

"Hi, I'm Marie Simone," Marie said.

Since Marie's office seemed to be the target of the arsonist, she was questioned about her clients and asked whether she or any of us could identify any client who might have wanted to destroy her patient records.

"No, I can't think of anyone. My caseload is compiled of preadolescent and teenage girls, and arson isn't usually an acting-out behavior of teenage girls," she replied. Then Marie seemed to be concentrating very hard, and muttered more to

herself than to the inspector, “But, but . . . well, no . . . I’m just thinking . . . oh, I’m just rattled about this fire. There isn’t anyone. No, I can’t think of anyone,” she said, looking up at the chief again.

The chief nodded to her, looking a little concerned and puzzled. He hesitated, then turned and walked away.

Molly, Rob, and I surrounded Marie and demanded to know who came to mind. We all knew from studying the work of Gavin de Becker and his book, *The Gift of Fear*, that most often someone assaulted or stalked has an uncanny feeling about someone they know, and more often than not, that was their intuition speaking to them and the suspicion is probably correct.

“I’ve been treating identical twin fifteen-year-old girls,” Marie said. “Their family has been experiencing some frightful events in their home—written threats to the family, vandalism, and poisoning of the family pet. There’s tremendous confusion and fear in the home. The events began happening just a year ago and have increased in frequency and intensity, to the point where the parents are concerned for the safety of the girls’ older sibling. The parents suspect one of the twins, but both deny it.”

“Jesus, Marie,” Molly spoke up, “this is more than a teenage prank—this is some serious shit.”

Nodding in agreement, Marie continued. “They brought the twins to me to determine which one of them might be disturbed, but I haven’t found signs of a disturbance in either one of them. This past week, I met with their sibling who is two years older than the twins, and she’s terrified of them.” Marie broke down crying. “I just don’t know, I can’t imagine either one of the twins doing this, I just can’t.”

I realized this was no time to pressure her for answers. We all agreed that we needed to sleep on it, gather in the morning, and assess the damage, both to the clinic and to our psyches. I decided I would stay at Steven's until the clinic and my apartment were restored . . . unless we had our wedding first.

Another source of suspicion were a small but aggressive group of people who were opposed to adolescent sexuality course materials Marie had donated to the local schools. Marie pointed out that there were those in school administration who were skeptical of the value of the course. Many parents thought nothing of allowing their children to watch hours of grab-and-rip sex on television yet would get nervous or outraged by an informative, heartfelt seminar teaching children that sexuality and intimacy were something to be cherished and nurtured. We were concerned that the controversy that Marie's video course had produced might have led someone to threaten and frighten her. Whoever started that fire had indeed frightened her. It frightened all of us.

"There isn't much doubt this was arson," the chief said in a report a few months later.

"We immediately smelled an accelerant when we got to the scene, and we quickly found a pretty crudely put-together bucket of rags and newspaper that had been doused with what turned out to be barbecue starter fluid and thrown in the window on the left side of the building on the first floor. This fire wasn't started by a sophisticated arsonist."

Later in the week the report came out, I was visited by the fire inspector who pointed out that my bedroom was located directly above Marie's office. He asked if I thought my apartment, or I, might have been the arsonist's intended target. For a brief

moment, I wondered if it could have been Steven's crazy aunt who set the fire, but it was unlikely she would have had the physical strength and dexterity to start the fire and run away so fast that she couldn't be seen.

After arson was confirmed as the cause of the fire, I was more than just a little paranoid; after all, I was the only person who lived above the clinic, and if someone wanted to hurt me, starting a fire that could race to the top floor of my historic home would be one way to do that.

We wouldn't find out until years later who set the fire, and I could never have imagined the sinister intent of the arsonist.