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Nothing to Fear

Karen Rose

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Extract

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Chapter One

Wight's Landing, Isle of Wight Bay, Maryland

Wednesday, July 28, 2:00 A.M.

Ow. That hurt. It was his first blurry thought as fingers gripped his shoulder and shook. Hard. That really hurt. *Stop it*.

The shaking continued, but he wouldn't open his eyes. It couldn't be morning yet. He drew in a breath, smelled her perfume. It wasn't fair. She'd promised him the whole week off. No lessons. No flash cards. No stupid word games or speech therapy. Just fun in the sun. Fishing, crabbing. Riding the waves. Video games all night. Sleeping in as long as he wanted. Yet here she was, shaking him awake.

He knew she'd break her promise. They all did, sooner or later. He'd just wait her out, just like he'd waited out all the other speech therapists. Sooner or later, they'd leave. Cheryl had stuck around longer than most. He had to give her credit for that.

He swatted her hand and tried to roll over, but she grabbed him and yanked him up by his T-shirt. Her hand clamped over his mouth just as his eyes flew open. Just as he took in her face, white as a ghost in the moonlight, and her dark eyes, wide and scared. Not just scared. Cheryl was terrified, and in that moment, so was he. He stopped struggling.

'Say nothing.' She mouthed it. He nodded. She let go of his mouth and pulled him from the bed, shoving the processor in his hand. Normally he fought putting it on, put her off as long as he could. Now, he slipped it behind his ear without a word.

And flinched as the roaring began. As the processor 'turned on his ears' as Cheryl would say, instantly changing the calm, quiet world of his deafness to a loud painful mess of sound. He concentrated to ignore it. To hear what he needed to hear in the ocean of noise. Now she didn't say anything, just pulled him across the room, into the closet.

She pushed him in the corner of the closet and to the floor. Crouched down to meet his eyes.

'Someone's downstairs.' She whispered and signed it at the same time, her normally smooth hands shaking. Her whole body was shaking. 'Paul went to check. Don't come out until I come get you.' She gripped his chin. 'Understand? Stay here. *Say nothing*.'

He nodded and she snapped upright, grabbing the stack of life jackets that his father had stored on the top shelf of the closet. Then they were covering him, smelly

and musty. The door closed and he was left in the darkness.

He was hiding. Like a coward.

Temper began to simmer, mixing in with the fear. He wasn't a coward. He was going to be thirteen, for God's sake. She'd shoved him in the closet like a little kid. Buried him under a pile of smelly life jackets, while *Paul* went to check. Carefully he pushed one of the life jackets far enough away from his eye to stare at the door, trying to think of what to do. He wasn't going to just sit here while someone broke into his house. He certainly wasn't going to let *Paul* take all the credit for chasing them away.

Dim light appeared at the crack under the door and all his courage disappeared. Someone was in his room. He shrank back into the corner of the closet, his heart beating so loud he thought he could hear it. The hairs raised on the back of his neck. Painful shudders shook him. *No way. I have to do something*.

A scream cut through the ocean of sound. *Cheryl. I have to help her*.

But his body was frozen. Frozen into a useless lump in a closet under a pile of life jackets. He concentrated, listening. Pushed the roar aside like Cheryl had taught him to do. And listened.

There was nothing. They were gone. He should get up. He should.

Then there was a loud crack of sound, so loud it hurt. His head jerked back, struck the closet wall, that pain mixing in with the other.

A gun. They had a gun. Someone had shot a gun. Cheryl. They'd killed Cheryl.

And they'd kill him, too. Or worse. *Do something*. *Do something*.

What? He didn't know. Didn't know what to do. Dad. What would his father do?

He felt a sharp pain in his chest. He was too old to cry for his parents, but he wished they were here. Wished they hadn't picked tonight to go into Annapolis. It was their anniversary. They'd gone dancing. They'd come back and find him dead. Mom would cry.

He blinked, realized his own face was wet. He was hiding in a closet, crying like a baby, while they killed Cheryl. And he couldn't move.

He flinched at the second shot, quieter this time. Then more screaming.

She was screaming. Cheryl was still alive. Screaming. The sound stabbed his brain like a million knives. He could hear it. Feel it. A million knives slashing. Heart pounding, hands trembling, he yanked the processor from behind his ear.

And it was quiet. The minutes ticked by in his head. Then the closet door opened.

He shrank back into the corner, clenching his eyes shut, his teeth together. Trying not to make a sound. One life jacket was pulled away. Then another. And another. The musty smell no longer tickled his nose and he could feel the air on his face.

He made himself open his eyes, felt the whimper stick in his throat. Looked up.

She was tall, taller than Cheryl. Bigger. Her hair was wild.

Her eyes were crazy. White. *She has white eyes*.

Her mouth was smiling, an evil smile that made him want to scream.

But he didn't. Because her shirt was splattered with blood and in her hand she was holding a gun and it was pointed at him.

Eastern West Virginia, Thursday, July 29, 3:30 A.M.

The shrill ringing of her cell phone woke her easily. She was a light sleeper. She hadn't always been, but prison had a way of changing little things like that. Even though she'd been out for six months now, it was one of the changes that stuck. Even though she'd been out for six months now, prison was still the first thing she thought of when she woke.

For that alone, there would be retribution.

Only her brother Bryce knew her cell number, still she cautiously answered, 'Yeah?'

'It's me.'

She sat up, cursing the stiffness in her back. Sleeping in the backseat of a small car was far from ideal, but she'd certainly slept in worse places. 'They're home?' Her mouth curved and her heart began to beat a little

faster. The Vaughns had come home. Found the wrecked house. The empty bed. The note pinned to the pillow. The gift waiting for them in the shed. They'd be terrified. They'd cry. They'd be powerless.

Powerless. It wasn't nearly enough, but it was a damn good start.

'I'm n-not r-really sh-sure.' Bryce stammered it out, fear lacing every stuttered syllable.

Visions of triumph abruptly fizzled. 'What do you mean?' she asked, each word evenly spaced. If he'd fucked this up, he'd do a hell of a lot worse than shake. 'Where are you?'

'In jail.' She closed her eyes. Reminded herself that the throwaway cell she'd bought in Maryland was untraceable. Still, the thought of him calling her from a jail made her seethe. 'They a-arrested me for r-robbing a store. I need you to b-bail me out.'

Her laugh was cold and brief. They were on the verge of millions and he'd robbed a goddamn store. 'You want *me* to bail you out. You've got to be kidding.'

'Dammit,' he hissed. 'I called you because . . . *you know*. I c-could have called Earl.'

He'd called because he was no longer at his post. No longer keeping watch over the beach house to report on the Vaughns' activities. No longer able to tell her when they came home and whether or not they'd called the fucking police.

'You're only seventeen. They'll slap you on the wrists and put you in juvie.'

'No.' Bryce's voice dropped to a terrified whisper. 'They s-say they'll charge me as an adult. I'll go to p-p-prison. Please,' he begged pitifully. 'Get me out of here.'

That she and Bryce shared DNA seemed an impossibility. And even the fact that they did wasn't enough to make her stick her neck out for him at this point. But she did need to get him out of jail before some slick DA got him to spill his damn guts. That Bryce would hold his stuttering tongue in the face of even the most civilized of interrogation techniques was too much to hope for. Growing up with Uncle Earl had mushed his brain. Growing up with Aunt Lucy had mushed his will. It was a pity she hadn't been around to see to his upbringing herself, but she'd been . . . indisposed. Incarcerated. And now Bryce was on his way there, too. Their father must be spinning in his grave like a rotisserie chicken.

'I'll call Earl,' she snapped. 'I'll tell him I'm a clerk at the jail.' That her uncle would recognize her voice wasn't likely as they hadn't spoken in years. 'Where are you?'

'O-Ocean City.'

At least he'd had the brains not to do it in that little bumfuck town of Wight's Landing. Ocean City was an hour away. Nobody would think to tie the two together, even if the Vaughns did call the cops. 'I'll call Earl. You keep your damn mouth shut and your eyes open.' She smirked. 'And if anybody drops any soap, don't bend over to pick it up.'

'That's not f-f-funny, S-S-Sue.'

Hearing him stammer her name wiped the smirk from her face. 'No, it's not. Neither is you calling me from a damn jail.' With that she disconnected and took a look out of the back window at the dark forest in which she'd parked to get some sleep. She was far off the beaten path and had been since leaving the Maryland Eastern Shore the morning before. She'd made terrible time on the single-lane roads, having to stop every few hours to give the kid water so that he didn't dehydrate in the trunk, but she was avoiding the interstates for now. She wasn't sure when the Vaughns would be home and even though she'd warned them not to call the cops, they just might. She wouldn't let herself be found. She had too much at stake. The prize was just too sweet.

She climbed out of the car and popped the trunk. Eyed the two figures curled into fetal balls. They were still there, just where she'd left them. Still tied, just as she'd tied them.

Her prize. Her retribution.

Alexander Quentin Vaughn. A big name for such a scrawny kid. He was twelve, but he didn't look any older than ten. Bryce had summed it all up pretty well when they'd first laid eyes on the little brat cowering in that closet in the beach house. 'Kid don't look like he's worth a million bucks,' Bryce had said and in the strictest sense he'd been right. The kid was worth five times that.

But money wasn't everything.

Sometimes revenge meant a great deal more.

And when you could get them both at the same time . . . That was justice.

Alexander Quentin Vaughn. And his live-in speech therapist, who had put up one hell of a fight. The Vaughns owed Cheryl Rickman combat pay, assuming she lived to collect it, which she would not. Rickman knew it, too, from the look of dazed terror in her eyes. Sue had only kept Rickman alive this long because she could communicate with the kid.

The boy blinked back tears now. Shrank back until his scrawny body bumped Rickman's. Tying him had probably been unnecessary. He couldn't weigh more than eighty pounds soaking wet and didn't fight worth diddlyshit. The gag was probably overkill as well, but Sue didn't know if he could scream. Just because he was deaf and mute didn't mean he couldn't scream.

That he was a deaf-mute had been a surprise. One of those glass-half-full things. He couldn't tell tales to people they'd meet on the way, but at the same time he couldn't make a terrified plea for his parents to pay his ransom. It was a damn shame. She'd been looking forward to hearing the kid making that terrified plea. But the plan moved on.

Adopt, adapt, and improve. It was a good motto. Her old man's favorite, ironically. She couldn't use the kid's voice, so she'd use his face. A picture was worth a thousand words.

She looked down at them, her prize, feeling control

return. Bryce's arrest had changed very little, really. As long as she got him bailed out before he spilled his guts to some overzealous DA, the only thing that was impacted was her eye on the Vaughns. Hearing Bryce recount their pain and suffering firsthand would have been very nice, but ultimately unnecessary. Knowing if police cars lined the lonely road going up to the beach house would be valuable, but even if the Vaughns did go to the cops, they wouldn't find her. She'd be far, far away by then, tucked safely and secretly away in Earl's house. That didn't need to change either. Especially if Earl and Lucy were headed off to Maryland to bail Bryce's ass out of jail. Sue would have the run of the house to herself for a few days.

Then when they got back from Maryland, she and Earl and Lucy would have the reunion Sue had planned with such enthusiasm. She took out her phone and dialed Earl's number, noting the time. He'd be asleep, groggy. No way he'd know who he was really talking to.

The phone was answered on the first ring. 'Yes?' a deep voice drawled.

Sue went still, every muscle tightening to its breaking point. He wasn't sleepy or groggy. He wasn't Earl. She said nothing, could say nothing. The voice just chuckled.

'Is this Bryce?' *James*. Sue's blood ran cold. *Impossible*. James was dead. She'd slit his throat herself. Obviously, not well enough.

'Not Bryce?' he said genially. 'Then this must be Sue. How the hell are you, Sue?' His voice hardened. 'Free

lesson. When you kill a man, you need to make damn sure he's really dead. Now, did you want to talk to your Uncle Earl?' A moan echoed in the background. 'He can't come to the phone right now.'

Sue gritted her teeth. 'You sonofabitch. They were *mine*.'

'I have to say I'm shocked, Sue. You, a dutiful niece.' He sounded it. Shocked. 'Protecting an aunt and uncle you hated?'

'Not mine to protect, you asshole,' she hissed. *Mine to kill*. Mine to make moan and weep and wish they were dead. Mine to make *pay*. She'd had plans. *Damn him*.

James choked on a laugh. 'You were going to kill your own aunt and uncle, just like you killed that woman in Florida. And I beat you to it. Sue, you're priceless.'

He knew about the Florida murder. James Lorenzano knew too damn much. She should have stayed to make sure he was dead, but someone had been coming and she'd been forced to flee. Killing him a second time would be far more difficult. She'd just need to stay out of his way. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Don't forget I know far more about you than you know about me. I'll find you, Sue. You know I can. And when I do, you're dead.'

A chill ran down her spine. He could. James knew how to find people. That's why she'd hired him in the first place. Then she stiffened her spine in resolve. She'd come too far to give up now. 'No, you won't.'

She hung up and seethed a moment. James was alive.

That had been a bit of a shock. And he'd been to Earl and Lucy's. This was bigger than the lost pleasure of seeing Earl and Lucy writhe in pain. This meant she needed to find another place to hide with the kid.

Adopt, adapt, and improve. She would not change her destination. It had to be Chicago. No other city would suffice. No other place would be revenge.

She needed to find another place to hide in Chicago. Just long enough to get her money and her revenge. The money would be her ticket out of the country, away from James.

The revenge . . . Well, that was sustenance. Without it, there would be little reason to survive and little joy in doing so.

She needed to find a place to hide that James would never think to look. He was right about one thing. He did know more about her than she knew about him. He would visit all her old cohorts, most of whom would sell their own mother for a buck, so she couldn't call any of them. Not yet anyway. She had to hide the kid, because without him the whole plan fell flat. She stared down at the boy, her mind working. And as usual, the pieces fell neatly into place, a new plan forming.

Luckily James didn't know everything.

She glanced at her watch in the dim glow of the trunk light. She had things to do. With both hands she grabbed Rickman's shirt and hauled her out of the trunk with ease. Rock-hard biceps were about the only thing of value she'd gotten out of Hillsboro Women's

Penitentiary. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Without Hillsboro, she never would have met Tammy, whom James did not know.

She dragged Rickman off the road and into the trees, thinking about her old cellmate. Twenty-five to life had been Tammy's sentence for killing her wife-beating husband, and hadn't Sue had to listen to her cry about it every damn night for the five fucking years they'd shared an eight by ten? But to be fair, without Tammy, Sue never would have heard of the place that would be sanctuary for the next few weeks. A secret place in Chicago that opened its doors to women in need. *I'm a woman*, Sue thought with a smile. And she sure as hell was in need.

Adopt, adapt, and improve. It was a good motto. A plan was only as strong as it was flexible. Sue pulled her gun from her back waistband and quickly pumped a bullet into the back of Rickman's head. Instantly the woman went limp. A few quick steps brought Sue back to the trunk where the kid stared up at her, terror in his eyes. She laid the barrel of the gun against his cheek for a split second, nodding when she heard his muffled scream. He *could* scream then. It was good to know. A red welt rose on his cheek, a burn from the hot steel. 'C'mon, kid,' she said, pulling him out of the trunk, dragging him over to where Rickman lay, her blood now soaking the ground. Tears rolled down the boy's face and she knew he understood the concept of death. At twelve, he'd better. She sure as hell had.

Chicago, Thursday, July 29, 4:30 A.M.

It was late. Or early, Dana Dupinsky thought as she slipped into Hanover House's kitchen through the back door. In any case, there didn't seem to be much point to going back to bed. Residents would be waking in two hours and the sounds of their morning routines combined with the aroma of brewing coffee would make it impossible to sleep.

She fastened the three deadbolts that provided some measure of safety – partially from the neighborhood but mostly from those who might be seeking the residents of Hanover House, the women whose lives she'd dedicated her own life to protecting. Dana winced as the third bolt screeched. It needed to be oiled. She'd get to it when she could.

'So where are they?'

Stifling a screech of her own, Dana spun, her hand over her heart. Her shock quickly became a glare at the young woman who sat at the kitchen table, her face bathed in the eerie blue light of a laptop computer screen. 'Don't do that,' Dana hissed.

Evie Wilson looked only mildly repentant. 'I'm sorry. I thought you saw me. Sshh,' she murmured, dropping her eyes to her lap. 'He's asleep.'

Dana walked around the table, not surprised to see Evie holding the infant, the son of Ruby, one of their younger residents. Barely eighteen years old and unwed, Ruby was terrified of both the baby's father and

her own. The bruises Ruby had worn when she arrived had more than substantiated her claim. But after a few weeks in the safe haven of Hanover House, Ruby was determined to get a new start. That's what women did here. They got new starts. Some, Dana thought, got newer starts than others.

'He woke up and Ruby was so tired, I told her to get some sleep. It's all right,' Evie added, gesturing to her computer screen. 'I had some work to do for my online classes.'

Dana bit back a frown. Evie's online college classes were a source of disagreement between them. 'I thought you were going to register up at Carrington for summer term.'

Evie glanced up, then back at her screen. 'I was, but . . . I changed my mind.'

Dana's shoulders sagged. 'Evie.'

Evie shook her head. 'Don't, Dana. Just . . . don't. I went up there, I really did. I even got out of the car and walked up to the registrar's office, but . . .' She let the thought trail.

Dana's heart squeezed even as she forced herself to say what she knew needed to be said. What she'd said so many times before. 'You can't hide here forever, honey.'

Half of Evie's face grimaced while the other half remained still as stone, legacy of a madman's attack two years before. 'I know.' She looked up, her dark eyes flashing. 'Are you going to throw me out?' she asked, challenge lacing her tone.

'You know I'm not.' Dana sank into one of the kitchen chairs, so exhausted. 'For God's sake, Evie.' That she'd even ask. Hell.

There was silence between them for a long moment before Evie finally spoke again. 'So back to my original question, where are they?'

'They didn't show up. I waited for three hours and nobody that matched their descriptions got off any of the buses.' Dana massaged the back of her neck wearily. She never questioned how women came to hear of Hanover House. She knew there were pockets of information out there. Nurses, cops, other victims. Sometimes women from outside Chicago would call and Dana would meet them at the bus station, but more than half of the women didn't show up. Like tonight. 'But it wasn't all a total loss,' she added. 'I did get propositioned.' One corner of her mouth lifted. 'Guy offered me fifty bucks.'

'Would've paid the telephone bill this month,' Evie said lightly and rose to her feet. 'Hold Dylan and I'll make you some coffee. You look like you could use it.'

'Thanks.' Settling the baby comfortably against her shoulder, Dana watched Evie fumble with the coffee filters with one hand. The nerves in Evie's right hand were damaged, legacy of the same vicious attack that left her face scarred and her mouth unable to smile. Three surgeries later, the scars were less noticeable, but her hand would never be the same. Yet Evie never asked for help. Wouldn't accept it were it offered.

Evie scooped coffee from the can. 'I thought Caroline had bus duty tonight.'

Caroline was Dana's very best friend. Her very pregnant best friend. A Hanover House success story, Caroline had made a wonderful life for herself and her son, Tom. Married for two years now, she was just six weeks away from having the baby she and her husband Max had conceived in love. There were few things more successful than that.

'Nope, not anymore. She is officially off duty for the duration.'

'And what did she say about that?' Evie asked wryly.

'The usual. That pregnancy was a natural state and how she was healthy as a horse. I told her to give it up. Max just threatened to tie her to the bed.'

'Which is how she got that way,' Evie quipped and Dana grinned.

'True. So, like it or not, I have bus duty for the next six months or so.' Evie doing bus station pickup duty was not a possibility. She'd tried once, but the experience hadn't been a pleasant one for anyone involved, least of all for Evie. The client's child, terrified and exhausted, had taken one look at Evie's scarred face and burst into tears. The client refused to go with Evie and Dana ended up going to the station herself. After that, Evie never left the house without a protective layer of thick makeup that Dana thought looked worse than the scars. But it made Evie secure, so Dana never said a word about it. Dana could tell by the

way Evie stared at the dripping coffee that she was remembering, too.

Changing the subject, Dana looked at Evie's laptop screen. 'What are you taking?'

'Child psychology and statistics. The statistics course is required for a psych degree.'

Dana's eyes widened. 'You're majoring in psychology?' The thought of Evie following in her footsteps left her with a disturbing mix of pride and apprehension.

'I'd considered it. I was thinking of working with kids. And yes,' she added crossly, 'I know I can't hide here forever. I know the kids won't come to me.' Evie jerked the partially dripped carafe from the machine, poured Dana the first cup. 'I'm working on it.'

Dana traded the baby for the full coffee cup with a sigh. 'I know, honey.' She could tell Evie that her scars were not that bad and even believe it herself, but Evie didn't and that was the issue. It was normal, but so very wrong. So wrong for a woman to be twenty years old and hiding in a women's shelter because she was afraid to face the world.

Evie didn't sit down, just stood rocking the sleeping baby. It was no secret that the babies were Evie's favorite, nor was it any great mystery. Babies didn't stare, didn't judge. Didn't cringe. They just cuddled and gave you unconditional love. What a deal.

It really was. Evie kissed the baby's forehead. 'You'll leave soon,' she murmured.

Dana regarded Evie over the rim of her cup. 'You've become attached to him.'

Evie looked up, her expression suddenly unreadable. 'If you're thinking I want to keep him here, you're wrong. This is no place for a child to grow up.'

Her voice was so adamant, Dana wondered if she was talking about the baby or herself. Evie had been brought to the shelter by one of Dana's policewoman friends when she was only fifteen, a terrified runaway with a quick mind and a sassy mouth who'd quickly wormed her way into Dana's heart. Dana had become Evie's legal guardian although Evie had always been more like a younger sister. 'No, honey, it's not.'

Evie rocked another moment or two. 'He'll leave and we'll never know if he's safe. If Ruby stayed away from the baby's father or if she goes back to him.' A pause. 'It keeps me up at night, Dana. Does it keep you up at night, too?'

'Only all the time,' Dana answered dryly and watched one side of Evie's mouth quirk up. 'I wish I could take them all in, but I can't. So I do my best and pray it's enough.'

'If Ruby left Chicago she'd be safer.'

Dana nodded. 'That's likely true. But Ruby rejected the idea. You know that.'

'She might have said yes if she'd known she could have new papers.'

New papers. Indeed, some of their residents left Hanover House with newer starts than others. A

precious few left with a new identity. New birth certificate, social security card, and driver's license. Courtesy of Dana Dupinsky, full-time therapist and part-time forger. And she was damn good at both. Her documents had been withstanding scrutiny for more than ten years.

Dana knew exactly where this conversation was going. Still she kept her voice mild. 'You know the policy, Evie. A client has to request help in leaving their old home city before we even bring up the possibility of papers.'

Evie's jaw tightened. On one side. '*Your* policy.'

Dana sipped more coffee, annoyed and determined not to show it. 'My risk. My policy.' What she did was illegal. She provided forged documents. Forged *federal* documents. Her reasons were pure, but she doubted any judge would take her side. It was critically important that the women she chose to help in this way were discreet, because once they started down the path of a new identity, the secret was out. If any one woman talked . . . *It would be my ass in jail. Not Evie's. Mine*.

Evie bristled. '*Your* policy could be putting *our* clients in danger,' she said angrily. The baby whimpered and Evie went back to rocking him where she stood. 'What about all the women right here in Chicago who have no idea that we could change their lives?' she whispered harshly. 'How could you live with yourself if something happened to them?'

Dana drew in a breath. It wasn't a thought she didn't

have herself. Every damn day. 'Evie, I'll say this only once. You will not breach policy. You will not provide any resident of Hanover House with the possibility of papers. Are we clear?'

Evie's glare could cut through stone. 'Yes, ma'am. We're very clear.' Evie abruptly turned on her heel, waking Dylan who began to wail loudly. Dana glanced at the clock on the wall as shouts began to flow from the upstairs bedrooms. No, there was absolutely no sense in going back to bed. The day had officially begun.