Lethal Legacy

Linda Fairstein

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Extract

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LITTLE, BROWN

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ONE

"I want you to open the door for me."

Only silence.

"Look through the peephole," I said. "I'm not a cop. I'm an assistant district attorney."

I stepped back and squared off so the woman inside the basement apartment could check me out. The hallway and staircase had been cleared of men in uniform, including the detail from Emergency Services poised to knock down her door with a battering ram, which was there when I arrived at the scene a short while ago at one o'clock in the morning.

I didn't hear any sound from within. No sense of her movement.

"My name is Alexandra Cooper. You're Tina, aren't you? Tina Barr." I didn't say what my specialty was, that I was in charge of the DA's Office Sex Crimes Prosecution Unit. The police weren't certain she had been assaulted by the man who had earlier invaded her home, but several of them thought she might reveal those details to me if I could gain her confidence.

I moved in against the metal-clad door and pressed my ear to it, but heard nothing.

"Don't lose your touch now, Coop." Mike Chapman walked down the steps and handed a lightbulb to the rookie who was holding a flashlight over my shoulder. "The money on the street's against you, but I'm counting on your golden tongue to talk the lady out so those guys can go home and catch some sleep."

The young cop passed the bulb to Mercer Wallace, the six-foot-

six-inch-tall detective from the Special Victims Unit who had called me to the brownstone on the quiet block between Lexington and Third avenues in the East Nineties.

Mercer reached overhead and screwed it in, illuminating the drab, cracked paint on the ceiling and walls of the hallway. "Somebody—most likely the perp—shattered the other one. There are slivers of glass everywhere."

"Thanks, kid," Mike said, dismissing the rookie. "No progress here, Detective Wallace?"

"We haven't got a homicide," I whispered to Mercer. "And they sell lightbulbs at the bodega on Lex. I don't know why you think we needed Mike, but please get him off my back."

"Damn, I've listened to Blondie charm full-on perverts into boarding the bus for a twenty-five-to-life time-share at Sing Sing. I've seen her coax confessions from the lying lips of the deranged and demented. I've watched as weak-willed men—"

Mercer put his finger to his lips and pointed at the staircase.

"Tina, these two detectives are my friends. I've worked with them for more than ten years." I paused to cough and clear my throat. There was still a bit of smoke wafting through the hallway. "Can you tell me why you don't want to open up? Why it is you won't trust us? We're worried about your safety, Tina. About your physical condition."

Mercer pulled at my elbow. "Let's go up for a break. Get some fresh air."

I stayed at the door for another few minutes and then followed Mike and Mercer to the small vestibule of the building and out onto the stoop. It was a mild October night, and neighbors returning to their homes, walking dogs, or hanging around the 'hood were checking on the police activity and trying to figure out what was wrong.

The uniformed sergeant from the Twenty-third Precinct, whose

team had been the first responders, was on the sidewalk in front of the building, talking to Billy Schultz, the man who had called 911 an hour earlier.

"What's the situation behind the house?" Mike asked Mercer as I caught up with them on their way down the front steps.

"Two cops stationed there. Small common garden for the tenants. Back doors from both the first floor and Barr's basement apartment, but no one has moved since they've been on-site."

"What do you know about the girl?"

"Not much. Nobody seems to," Mercer said. He turned to the man standing with the sergeant, whom I guessed to be about forty, several years older than Mike and I. "This is Mike Chapman, Billy. He's assigned to Night Watch."

Mike worked in Manhattan North Homicide, which helped staff the Night Watch unit, an elite squad of detectives on call between midnight and eight a.m., when precinct squads were most understaffed, to respond all over Manhattan to murders and situations, like this one, that the department referred to—with gross understatement—as "unusuals."

"Billy lives on the first floor," Mercer said. "He's the guy who called 911."

"Good to meet you," Mike said. He turned to me. "What's her name?"

"Tina Barr."

"She your friend?" he said to Billy.

"We chat at the mailboxes occasionally. She's a quiet girl. Keeps to herself. Spent a lot of time gardening on weekends in the summer, so I ran into her out back every now and then, but I haven't seen her much since."

"Lived here long?"

"Me? Eighteen years?"

"Her."

"Tina sublets. A year, maybe more."

Mike ran his fingers through his thick black hair, looking from Billy to me. "You sure she's in there?"

"I could hear a woman crying when I first got here," I said. *Whimpering* was a more accurate word.

"Tina was sobbing when I knocked on her door," Billy said.

"But she wouldn't open up for you?"

Billy Schultz adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose while Mike scrutinized him. "No, sir."

"Why were you knocking? What made you call 911?"

"Mercer gave us all this, Mike. Let me get back inside."

He held his arm out at me, palm perpendicular like a stop sign. "Don't you want the chronology from the horse's mouth? Primary source. Catch me up, Billy."

I had one hand on the wrought-iron railing but stopped to listen.

"I'm a graphic designer, Detective. Worked late, stopped off for a burger and a couple of beers on my way home," Billy said. He was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. There were smudges of ink or paint on his jeans, too dark in color to be blood, I thought. "It was about twelve-thirty when I got near the building. That's when I saw this guy come tearing out the front door, down the steps."

"What guy? Someone you know?"

Billy Schultz shook his head. "Nope. The fireman."

Mike looked to Mercer. "Nobody told me about that. The fire department got here first?"

"Not for real," Mercer said.

"I mean, I assumed he was a fireman. He was dressed in all the gear—coat, boots, hat, even had a protective mask of some kind on. That's why I couldn't see his face."

"Did you stop him? Did he talk to you?"

"He flew by me, like there was a forest fire on Lexington Av-

enue he had to get to. Almost took me out. Even that didn't seem odd until I looked up the street for his truck but there wasn't one around. Just weird."

"What did you do then?"

"I unlocked the door to the vestibule, and as soon as I got inside, I could smell smoke. I could see little waves of it sort of spiraling upward from the basement," Billy said. "We don't have a super who lives in the building, so there was no one for me to call. I figured whatever happened had been resolved. By the guy I thought was a fireman. But I wanted to check it out, make sure there was nothing still burning."

"Sarge, you want to get me that mask?" Mercer said.

The older man walked to the nearest squad car and reached in for a paper bag while Billy Schultz talked.

"I went downstairs first. It was pretty dark, but I could make out a small pile of rubble in the corner of the hallway, a couple of feet from Tina's door. Nothing was burning—no flames—but it was still smoldering. Kicking off a lot of smoke. That's when I knocked on her door."

"Did she answer?" Mike asked.

"No. Not then. I didn't hear anything. I figured maybe she wasn't home. I ran up to my apartment, filled a pitcher with water, and came back down to douse whatever was still smoking. Figured the other firemen must have gone off to a bigger job and that the last one—the guy who almost plowed me down—was trying to catch up with them."

The sergeant passed the bag to Mercer, who put on a pair of latex gloves from his pocket before opening it.

"It's when I went downstairs the second time that I heard Tina."

"What did you hear, exactly?" I asked.

Billy cocked his head and answered. "I knocked again, just be-

cause I was worried that the firemen might have left her there even though there was still something smoldering in the hallway. She was weeping loudly, then pausing, like to inhale."

"Words," Mike said. "Did she speak any words?"

"No, but I did. I told Tina it was me, asked her if she was all right. I was coughing myself from the smoke. I told her she could come up to my apartment."

"Did she answer you?"

"No. She just cried."

"How do you know it's Tina Barr you were talking to?" Mike asked.

Billy hesitated. "Well, at that point—I, uh—I just assumed it, Detective. She lives there alone."

"What next?"

"I went home to get a bucket and broom. Swept some of the trash into the bucket to throw out on the street—"

Mike glanced at the sergeant. "Yeah, we got it, Chapman. Looks like amateur smoke bombs."

"The sobbing was so bad by then, I called 911, from my cell. Maybe she was sick, overcome by the smoke. I waited out here on the stoop till the officers came. Three minutes. Not much longer. That's when Tina went berserk. That's when I knew it was her, for sure. I recognized her voice, when she was yelling at the cops."

Mercer removed a large black object from the bag and dangled it in front of us.

"Yeah," Billy said. "That's what the fireman had on his face."

"Found it halfway up the block," the sergeant said. "Right in the perp's flight path."

"That's not department gear," Mike said. "It's a gas mask. Military style."

It was a black rubber helmet, with two holes for the eyes, and a broad snoutlike respirator that would fit over the mouth, with a long hose attached.

"Couldn't see a damn thing," Billy said. "It covered his entire face."

"What did the cops do?" Mike asked.

"I led them down to the basement. They knocked on Tina's door and one of them identified himself, said they were police. That's when she started yelling at them to leave her alone. I mean screaming at them. Freaked out. Sounded like she collapsed—maybe fell onto the floor—crying the whole time."

"What makes you think she's alone in there?"

"We're guessing," Mercer said. "She's the only one to make a sound—no scuffling, no struggling, no other voices. But that's another reason ESU won't leave."

Mike prodded my side with his fingers as we started up the front steps. I went back in the vestibule toward the basement staircase.

"One of the cops told Tina he just wanted to make sure that the fire hadn't affected her," Billy said, drawing a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his smoke-fogged glasses. "Asked her if she could stand up and look through the peephole at his badge, for identification. She went wild."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked.

"Tina screamed at the cop. Told him that's how the guy got in. The fireman. That he showed her his badge and she opened the door."

"It was the fireman who was inside her apartment? You knew, Coop?"

"That's why Mercer called me. We don't know who the man was, why he was using such an elaborate disguise, why he went inside, and what he did to this woman. Okay? Don't come any closer, Mike. Let me talk to her."

I walked the short corridor to the rear of the hallway, glass crunching under the soles of my shoes.

"Tina? It's Alex Cooper. We're all still here. The police officers

won't leave until I convince them that you're unharmed. I'll keep them outside the building if you'll let me in for just a few minutes."

"I'd rank that a toss-up," Mike said. "Ten minutes with you or the quick punch of a battering ram? Tough call."

"You think this helps? You think she can't hear you?" I threw up my arms in frustration as I turned to Mike. "Mercer, please take him upstairs."

The men marched back to the first floor as I made another attempt to persuade Tina Barr to let me in.

"I'm the only one in the basement now, Tina. The men are all outside. I don't want them to break down your door any more than you do. But they're worried that you've been injured. There was a lot of smoke down here. Can you just tell me if you're hurt?"

There was no answer for more than a minute. Then a soft voice spoke a word or two, which sounded as though the woman was still sitting or lying on the floor inside. I couldn't understand her, so I crouched beside the door and put my ear against it.

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"Not hurt. I'll be okay."

She spoke haltingly, her words caught in her throat.

"Tina, are you having trouble breathing?"

No answer.

"We can give you oxygen, Tina. Is it the smoke? Is there still smoke in your apartment?"

"No."

"The man who was dressed like a fireman, did you let him come into your apartment?"

She was crying again as she tried to speak. "No, no, I didn't let him in."

"But you told the police officer that—"

"I only opened the door because he showed me a gold badge and told me there was a fire. I could smell the smoke and then saw

it. I believed him." Tina Barr's words came out phrase by phrase, embedded in sobs. "He forced his way inside. I didn't *let* him in."

"You can trust us, Tina. Now you know that man wasn't actually a fireman. His badge wasn't real." Mercer had already checked that with the department and had been telling that to Barr before I got there. "The cops think the man started the fire himself in order to break in to your apartment."

She was taking deep breaths on the other side of the door.

I took one, too, and tried to get at what had so far been unspoken. "I work with victims of sex crimes, Tina. That's all I do. It's why the police thought I might be able to help. I deal with the most sensitive cases you can imagine," I said, closing my eyes, which burned from the lingering smoke. "Did this man assault you tonight?"

She coughed again.

I didn't know how long he'd been within the apartment before Billy Schultz saw him running from the building at twelve-thirty in the morning.

"Did he awaken you when he knocked, Tina?"

"No."

"Do you know what time it was when you first went to the door?"

"Five," she said.

"Five o'clock in the afternoon?" She must have been confused. "Look, I'm going to have to let the police work on your door, or the back window in your kitchen, Tina. You may be a little woozy. He couldn't have been inside there that long."

There was a noise before Tina Barr spoke next, as though she shifted her position. She had gotten to her feet, perhaps angered by my comment. I stood up, too, as she pounded on the door. "I know exactly what time it was when the man knocked, do you understand? It wasn't the middle of the night, Ms. Cooper. It was five o'clock."

All the cops and I had assumed the events had occurred within minutes of Schultz's arrival home. Fast, like most break-ins, and while the smoke bombs were steaming. We were wrong.

"I apologize, Tina. That's even more reason for me to know what he did to you." I didn't want to suggest the word *rape* to her. I needed *her* to reveal to me what had occurred.

"I don't want to talk to any cops, Ms. Cooper. I'll tell you what happened if that will make them go away."

"I'm alone down here now. The men won't come in." I paused before I spoke again. "I give you my word."

Tina Barr sniffled, then was quiet. I heard the dead bolt turn.

The door opened a few inches and I could see the young woman peering out from behind it, clutching the lapels of her white chenille robe with one hand. Her dark brown hair was disheveled, her eyes reddened from at least an hour of crying, and what looked to be remains of adhesive tape forming a rectangle on the skin around her mouth, where she had probably been gagged.

I reached out a hand to her, hoping to comfort her with a touch, but she recoiled at the movement in her direction.

"You're mistaken if you think this was about a sex crime, Ms. Cooper. He wanted to kill me," Tina Barr said. "That man left me for dead."

TWO

"I don't want to press charges."

Tina Barr was seated in an armchair in the cramped living room of her apartment, and I was opposite her on a small loveseat that was sorely in need of reupholstering.

"That's not even an issue right now, Tina. I'd like to know what happened to you. We don't have a suspect, so there's no one to prosecute."

"You told me you wanted to make sure I was all right. You see I'm not hurt, so now you can leave."

She was unnaturally pale and rested her forehead in her hand, as though she needed that support to keep it upright.

"A couple of minutes ago you told me a man tried to kill you. You told me he was with you in here for more than six hours. How can I walk away from this? You don't look well, Tina. You must be terribly frightened."

"I'm nauseous. I just want to lie down."

I tried to make eye contact with her, but she was staring at the floor.

"Who did this to you, Tina? Do you know that?"

Her entire body trembled. "No idea. There was some horrible black mask covering his face."

I didn't want to press her, to cross-examine her, but it seemed unlikely that her attacker had had the mask on for so many hours. "The whole time he was here? Didn't he ever take it off?"

"I don't know what he did. I don't remember."

I expected her to be a difficult interview after the experience

the cops had when they got to the building. But I hadn't thought she would stonewall me once she opened the door.

"You don't remember?"

"I was unconscious the entire time that man was here, Ms. Cooper." Tina lifted her head and looked at me. "He pushed his way in and threw me down. He put a cloth over my mouth and I couldn't breathe any longer. I just felt dizzy and watched the room turn upside down. I thought I was going to die. I don't have any idea what he did after that."

Now I had even more reason to be concerned, and greater need not to express it.

"How are you feeling?"

"I've told you already. I'd like to go to sleep."

"Do you know what he drugged you with?"

Tina rested her head on the back of the chair and snapped at me. "Now how could I possibly tell you that?"

"I didn't think you'd be able to. That's my point. All the more reason to let the doctors examine you, have them test your blood. You've undoubtedly still got something in your system."

"I don't want anyone else coming in here—can you understand that?"

"I'd like to take you to the emergency room. There's an excellent hospital less than ten blocks away."

Tina Barr started to cry again. There was a box of tissues on a desk behind her chair. I crossed the room to get a handful of them, glancing around for any obvious signs of a disturbance. Bookcases lined the walls. End tables, like the desk, were cluttered with a messy array of papers and journals.

"Why don't you take a minute to compose yourself?"

I handed her the tissues and reached out to stand the wastebasket upright. There was a large rag in it, and as I leaned over, it smelled sickeningly sweet. I used a tissue to remove the cloth from the basket and put it in the pocket of my jeans.

"Would you like some water, Tina?"

"I'm too nauseous to drink. I'm very thirsty, but I doubt I can hold anything down."

I retraced my steps to the loveseat. I could get more facts later. I wanted to talk to her about medical treatment. "I just have a couple more questions, okay? When you regained consciousness, were you still here, on the floor?"

She searched out another spot in the dark pattern of the cheap Oriental rug and stared at it. "I was on my bed, Ms. Cooper. I was naked. Completely naked. There was some kind of tape over my mouth, and my hands were tied to the headboard with a pair of my stockings. Loose knots, they were. I was able to work them off easily."

"While the man was still here?"

"No," she said, breathing deeply. "I came around just a few minutes before he left. I could hear him in this room, so I just played dead and didn't move till the door shut."

"Tina, you've got to see a doctor." I was on the edge of the seat cushion, pleading with her to let me take her to Mount Sinai Hospital. "They've got a wonderful advocacy program for victims of violence. I just have to call ahead and someone knowledgeable about the process will be with you through the entire exam."

"I told you before I wasn't raped." Tina got to her feet and steadied herself before she started walking toward the back of the apartment. "I'm going to be sick."

I stood up to follow her. "Let me—"

"Please don't come inside. I'd like some privacy."

A door slammed and I couldn't hear anything until the toilet flushed and water ran in the sink. The dozens of questions I had would be answered, I knew, when she was made comfortable and felt safe. I needed to get her to the ER as fast as possible. Once crime scene investigators had access to her bedroom, the trace ev-

idence on the linens and clothing might tell us more about what occurred than Tina Barr could.

About ten minutes later, Tina emerged from what must have been her bedroom and bath area. She was dressed in khaki slacks and a cable-knit sweater.

"If I go with you to the hospital, does it mean I'm pressing charges?"

"Not at all. You have weeks to make that decision, if we catch the guy. This is all about your health, about trying to figure out what he did to you. If you aren't examined now, the tests will never yield the same results in two or three days, when you might have second thoughts about all this." I knew that if she had been penetrated by her assailant, the natural forces of gravity would eliminate any fluids that could be tested for DNA. Whatever she had been drugged with would be gone from her bloodstream, too. "It's your own best protection."

"I'd prefer to take a cab, Ms. Cooper. I can do this myself."

"There's an ambulance waiting near the building. We were all so worried about you. I can cut through a lot of administrative red tape if I'm along."

She hesitated again, then went back inside and returned with a small tote. "I'll go with you. Just don't ask me any more questions, okay?"

"Let me call the detectives, so the ambulance is right in front." I pressed Mercer's speed dial on my cell.

"You need me?"

"Ms. Barr and I are coming out. I'm going to ride to Sinai with her in the bus. Maybe you can meet us at the ER. And get rid of the guys with the heavy equipment."

"Done, Alex. Will she let crime scene in to process the apartment?"

I turned to ask her. I wanted the bed linens and bathrobe, the tape and the pantyhose, as soon as possible. I wanted to know if

there were any more rags inside, whether he had applied the substance to her face more than once. "Tina, would you mind if the detectives got to work on looking for evidence in your bedroom? Fingerprints, possible DNA sources—"

"Nobody comes in here while I'm gone," she said. "I don't want any other strangers inside my home tonight. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do." I knew Mercer had heard it, too. I shut off the phone.

Tina walked behind me on the staircase, bracing her hands against the wall. When we reached the stoop, I was relieved to see the police cars and trucks were all gone, and that two EMTs were standing at the rear door of the ambulance, with the gurney between them.

I offered her my arm and she accepted it for the short walk. I introduced us to the EMTs, and they asked Tina to sit down so they could lift her inside after I climbed up and wedged myself into a jump seat.

"How you doin'?" the medic asked Tina as his partner got into the driver's seat. "You okay?"

"I'm sick to my stomach, actually."

"Take it slow, Howie. Don't bounce in any potholes," he called out to the driver. "My name is Jorge Vasquez. I'm just gonna get your vitals, miss. Gotta do that."

Tina reclined on the gurney and pushed up her sleeve for the blood pressure cuff.

"How old are you, Ms. Barr?"

"Thirty-three."

"Date of birth?"

She gave the year first, then told him March 14.

"Your height and weight?"

"Five-four." She was six inches shorter than I, and weighed almost the same. "One thirty-five."

"What kind of insurance you got?"

Tina covered her mouth with her hand, as though she was going to be sick again.

"You got insurance?"

"No."

The EMT looked over her head at me and I nodded. The hospital would get its money from the crime victims compensation board if Barr didn't pay. This wasn't the time or place to dicker about who'd foot the bill for the expensive sexual assault examination.

"How about your occupation?"

"I'm—uh—I'm a librarian."

"Nice. You like books. Me, I don't have time to read." Vasquez was filling in the blank spaces on his form. "Who's your employer? Would that be the city?"

"I'm not working at the moment. I quit my last job just a week ago."

"City's got good benefits. You should think about it. Which branch, Ms. Barr? It's regulations. I gotta put something in this box."

"No, it wasn't the city. It was private. It's over."

The driver made the turn onto Madison Avenue and we headed north. Vasquez put his clipboard on his lap, took Tina's pressure, and recorded the numbers.

"You mind if I check your eyes?"

The young woman shook her head from side to side and Vasquez leaned in, studying her pupils and making a note, I guessed, about how dilated they were.

"You want to start with what happened to you, miss?"

"I'm not really sure. I know I was drugged, but that's all I can tell you," Tina said. "And I've got a terrible headache now."

"Any idea what kind of drug?"

"Like I told Ms. Cooper, I don't know. But I'm really thirsty," she said, licking her lips.

"Sorry. You're dehydrated, but the triage nurse will see you in a few minutes. No point giving you anything before that. She may want to start an IV."

We were at the hospital in less than five minutes. It was background information about Tina Barr that I wanted—something to lead me to why she was victimized this way—but Jorge Vasquez had as much pedigree as he needed.

When he opened the rear doors of the ambulance at the hospital receiving bay, Mercer was waiting for me. I stepped around the gurney and jumped down, holding on to his hand.

"I think we're better off keeping Ms. Barr right here till she's called in for triage. It's kind of zooey in there," Mercer said.

"We can hold," Vasquez said. "I could use the break."

"They got a gunshot wound in the chest. Fifteen-year-old kid caught in the crossfire of two dealers. A bad car crash on the FDR Drive—three passengers with head trauma—and the typical assortment of fractures and bellyaches. You know a possible rape won't be seen till daybreak unless you can pull some strings, Alexandra."

Most victims of sexual assault presented to treating physicians without any external physical injury. To an emergency specialist, the trauma had occurred when the crime was committed. The survivor who presented at the hospital was not in need of life-saving treatment like the other medical patients, but rather was there for evidence collection and psychological counseling. Without advocates or forensic examiners on call, these women were often the most neglected emergency room visitors, waiting hours to be evaluated.

"We'll try to get you in as quickly as we can," I said to Tina, leaving her in the care of Vasquez and his partner as I turned to follow Mercer into the ER.

The security guard stood back as Mercer flashed his gold shield and the automatic double doors swung open to admit us. A dozen curtained cubicles—all seemingly occupied—formed a semicircle around the nurses' station, where Mike had settled in with his feet on the counter, eating chocolates from a box on the desk.

"Have you spoken to the head nurse?"

"Yeah, we're somewhere between the heart attack in that corner and the domestic dispute racheted up till the missus settled it by hurling a meat cleaver at the bum's neck," Mike said.

One of the nurses emerged from behind the thin curtains of the first treatment area, and Mike waved him over. "This is Ms. Cooper, Joe. You any good at splinter removal? She's had a stick up her ass for the last couple of months, and I was hoping—"

"We're waiting for one of the SAVI volunteers, Ms. Cooper," Joe said, stripping his bloodied gloves off and dropping them in the hazardous-waste bin along with the syringe in his hand. He was the size of a fullback, a black man with skin as dark as Mercer's, and not in the mood for Mike's humor. "Get you in here as soon as we can. I've got one going up to X-ray and another for admission, just waiting on a room."

"This may not have seemed urgent when the detectives first called," I said, knowing that it might take half an hour for a sexual assault violence intervention program advocate to reach the ER, "but Tina's in worse shape than we thought."

I pulled the rag from my pocket, pinching it on a corner to hold it up. "The perp soaked this in something and knocked her out by putting it over her nose and mouth."

"Nice save, Coop." Mike stood and bent over the counter, sniffing at the rag. "What's your guess, Joe? Ether of some kind? Not so noxious as that. Maybe chloroform?"

Joe didn't want to come closer. "If that's what it was, it's enough to cause a fatal cardiac arrhythmia."

"That baby's going straight to the lab, Coop."

"Tell the EMTs to bring her right in," Joe said. "Let's get your girl worked up."

The three of us headed for the exit, past the waiting area filled with anxious family members and friends, down the driveway and onto the street. The driver had backed out of the bay to leave room for the next arrival and double-parked on Madison Avenue.

Jorge Vasquez was leaning against the side of the red-and-white ambulance. Mercer waved at him as we approached, telling him to move it in and unload the patient.

Vasquez shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't give me that 'not my job' crap," Mike said. "Roll it."

"I'm empty, man," Vasquez said, brushing his hands against each other like he was dusting off crumbs. "The broad took off."

"Took off where?" I asked.

"RMA, Ms. Cooper. I can't be holding nobody against her will."

Tina Barr had refused medical attention, despite the ordeal she'd survived.

"Which way'd she go?"

"No sé," Vasquez said. "She told me she never wanted the cops called in the first place. Jumped out the bus and said to tell you to leave her alone."