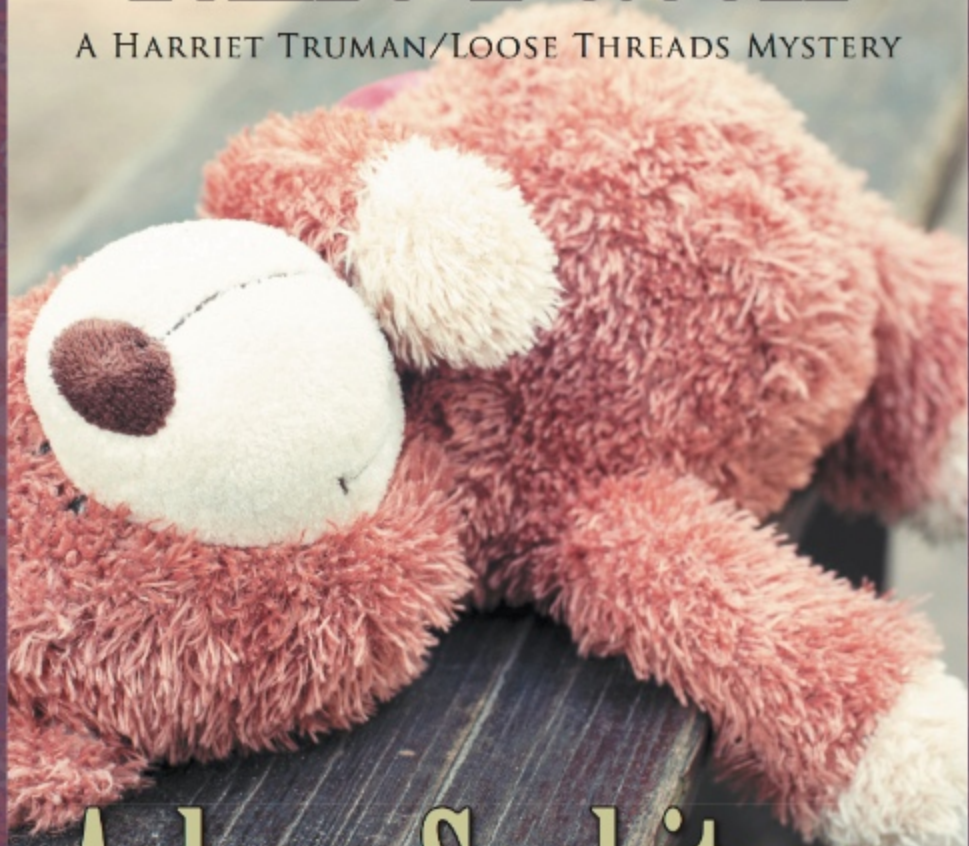


Disappearing Nine Patch

A HARRIET TRUMAN/LOOSE THREADS MYSTERY



Arlene Sachitano



Night Had Fallen...

...by the time Lauren turned onto Harriet's hill.

"Did you see that?" She pointed out the windshield. "Blue flashing lights. Looks like they're on your street."

Harriet craned her neck to see up the hill from the side window, but they'd reached a section of the road that had mature trees and shrubs on both sides, obscuring the view.

"Something's going on at your house," Lauren said as she slowed to make the turn into the driveway.

She pointed, and Harriet could now clearly see two Foggy Point police cars parked behind a red fire truck. She threw her door open and jumped out before Lauren had fully stopped, causing her to slam on the brakes, and began running toward the house. She stopped when James grabbed her around the waist.

"Let me go," she shouted.

"You can't go up there right now. The fire is out, but they have to check before anyone is allowed back in."

"Fire? My house was on fire?" She slumped, and he held her tighter, preventing her from falling to her knees.

Also By Arlene Sachitano

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DISAPPEARING NINE PATCH

A Harriet Truman/Loose Threads
Mystery



ARLENE SACHITANO



ZUMAYA ENIGMA

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AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

DISAPPEARING NINE PATCH

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For Vern And Betty

Chapter 1

Harriet heard the customer entrance of her long-arm quilting studio open as she came downstairs into her kitchen. She paused. She wasn't expecting anyone, but her quilting group, The Loose Threads, met in her studio often enough that most of them had keys.

As if to prove her right, her aunt, Beth Carlson came into the kitchen through the connecting door, followed by Beth's best friend Mavis Willis.

"Honey..." Beth said then paused while she set a glass baking dish on the kitchen counter.

Harriet crossed behind her, opened the coat closet and began rummaging around, her back to her unexpected guests.

Mavis set her worn black leather purse on a kitchen chair and slid out of her jacket.

"I know you've been a little down these last couple of weeks since Aiden left," she said. "But you can't mope around the whole time he's gone. He's probably not coming home for another two months, and he may decide to stay and visit when his friend gets back to Africa, so it could be the end of summer before he comes back. You can't stay holed up in your studio all that time."

Beth turned toward Harriet.

"You haven't come to any Threads meetings down at the quilt shop, and you've refused everyone's invitations to dinner or anything else, so we decided to have a potluck here. The rest of the group will be here in half an hour."

Harriet grabbed her jacket and purse.

“Can you take Scooter out in a little while? I’ve got to go. I don’t know how soon I’ll be back. I’ll call when I know more.”

She exited into the garage, leaving her aunt and Mavis standing in her kitchen.



She drove to Smuggler’s Cove in record time, turned her car into the driveway of her friend James’s restaurant, and braked to a stop. James met her at the back door, dressed in his white chef’s coat and hat.

“Thank you for coming so fast—I didn’t know who else to call. Cyrano was in his kennel when I checked him fifteen minutes ago. I’m sure I closed the latch—I always double-check. I went back in the kitchen and set some water on to boil, and when I went out to get him and put him back in the office, he was gone. I’ve got twenty-five women coming for a special lunch in the private dining room, so I can’t leave to go search for him.”

“Do you think one of the other racing wiener dog owners could have taken him?”

“I doubt it. None of our local group is that competitive. We’re all in it for the fun.”

“Let me go walk the neighborhood, talk to a few neighbors and find out if anyone’s seen him.”

“He’s wearing his green ‘wiener-in-training’ T-shirt.”

She put her hand on his arm. “Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

She hoped she wasn’t lying.

She set out across the parking lot, pausing where the gravel thinned around a mud puddle. She bent to look and pulled out her phone to take a picture of the faint paw prints on one side of the puddle. Closer examination revealed a child-sized tennis shoe impression.

Harriet clicked a few more pictures before continuing to the sidewalk then to the nearest house. The neighborhood was made up of homes built in the Folk Victorian style. They tended to have simpler floor plans and were less ornate than the classic Victorians in her own neighborhood—the affordable homes of their era.

She stepped onto the porch and pressed the doorbell. Moments later, a short woman with white hair opened the door.

“Hi, I’m looking for a missing wiener dog. He disappeared from his kennel in back of the restaurant...” She pointed back toward James’s place. “...about thirty minutes ago.”

“Oh, you mean little Cyrano? I can’t believe he’d run off. He adores James. And he knows which side his bread is buttered on.”

“Have you seen any unusual activity in the neighborhood this morning?”

The woman thought a moment. She pressed her lips together and looked up at a spot on the doorjamb.

“I don’t know as it’s unusual, but the school bus didn’t come today, and I saw a couple of kids playing down the street. Must be some sort of in-service day or something.”

“Thank you, that helps a lot.” Harriet turned to go.

“Will you let me know if you find him?” the woman asked.

Harriet gave her a half-smile. “Sure.”

She walked down the sidewalk, scanning the driveways as she went. Three doors down and on the other side of the street, a child-sized bike lay in the grass. She crossed the street and was heading in that direction when she heard a familiar bark. She picked up her pace, taking the steps two at a time to reach the porch.

The barking increased as she rang the doorbell and then, when no one answered, pounded on the door. Finally, the barking became muffled, and a childish voice called out, “Nobody’s home, so you can go away.”

“You aren’t in trouble,” she called back. “Just give me the dog.”

“We’re not allowed to open the door to strangers,” the child replied.

“You’re also not allowed to steal dogs. Either send the dog out, or I’m calling the police....” She paused for dramatic effect. “...and your mother.”

“What’s going on here,” a dark-haired young woman in running clothes asked as she crossed the yard and stepped onto the porch.

“I’m looking for a lost dog, and I can hear him barking inside your house.”

The woman slid a key into the door lock and opened the door.

“We don’t have your dog. I’m allergic to dogs—the kids know that. Liam, Sophie?”

There was a muffled noise, and then James’s dachshund Cyrano burst into the entry hall. He ran over to Harriet, jumping up and down and barking. Liam and Sophie stood side-by-side, unable to make eye contact with their mother.

The young woman sneezed.

“You two are in trouble, big time. Not only did you take this woman’s dog, but you left the house. I told you to stay in the playroom while I ran around the block. You promised me you would.”

Sophie, looking like an orphan in her faded pink unicorn pajamas and purple rubber boots, still refused to look at her mother.

“I wanted to watch a show, and Liam wouldn’t give me the channel changer. I went out to find you.”

“I thought you’d be mad if I let her go out by herself. She’s only seven.” Liam was similarly attired in too-short jeans over blue-and-red rocket ship pajamas.

“So you went along to...what? Protect her? How noble of you. Maybe if you’d been that selfless about the show, you wouldn’t be in this predicament,” their mom told them in a stern voice. “And what are you two doing running around the neighborhood in your pajamas?”

She turned to Harriet.

“These two hoodlums are going to be grounded for weeks. When they’re finished with house arrest, would you be agreeable to having them do some sort of restitution?”

Harriet had to try hard to maintain her stern look.

“Cyrano belongs to the man who owns the restaurant down the street.”

“You two went all the way to the restaurant?” Mom all but shouted, fear leaking into her voice.

Sophie began to cry, and Liam’s lower lip quivered.

Cyrano began wriggling.

“I’d better get this little guy home,” Harriet said. “James is very worried about him. He’s got a restaurant full of people, or he’d be here himself. You can stop by the restaurant and talk to him about whatever penance you think is appropriate.”

“You two go up to your rooms.” She turned back to Harriet when the little dog-nappers were out of sight. “I’m Melanie, by the way. I’m so sorry my kids took your friend’s dog. Can I do anything for him? Does he need to go see the vet or anything?”

Harriet squeezed the wriggling canine.

“He seems fine to me, but James can let you know if any follow-up is needed.”

Melanie put her hand over her heart.

“I can’t believe they left the house. It’s an in-service day at school. They were engrossed in a game and still in their jammies. I thought I could get a quick run in and be back before they finished. Clearly, that was a mistake. Oh, my gosh, you aren’t going to turn me in to Children’s Services, are you?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. I assume you aren’t going to go out and leave them alone again.”

“Never,” she promised.

“I’ll just take this little guy and get him home.”

“Tell your friend how sorry I am.”

“I will,” Harriet said and went out the door.



She carried Cyrano in through the back door of the restaurant. She peeked through the kitchen door and saw James, up to his elbows in julienned carrots.

“You, little man, are going into your kennel in your daddy’s office for now.”

She put him in the wire crate and made sure there was water in the dish before returning to the kitchen.

“I put Cyrano in his kennel in your office. Your neighbor up the street, Melanie, is hoping you’ll let her two junior criminals do restitution of some sort after she grounds them for a while.”

James looked over his shoulder at her.

“I can’t thank you enough for finding my little rat. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m happy to help.” She looked at the arrangement of vegetables he was doing on chilled salad plates. “That looks good.”

He held a couple of carrot sticks over his shoulder, and she took them.

“How do you get these so crisp?”

“Chef’s secret,” he said and laughed.

Harriet sighed. “I better leave you alone so you can get your work done. Besides, my aunt and Mavis arrived at my house as I was leaving. I think they’re staging some kind of intervention. Since I’m their subject, I better go let them do their thing.”

He glanced up at her. “I can’t wait to hear the story behind that.”

“All in due time,” she told him and grinned.



Cars lined her drive when she arrived back at her house. She parked in the garage then took a deep breath before going in to face her friends.

“Hey, looks like the gang’s all here,” she said, trying to sound cheerful as she came into the kitchen and found her aunt filling the tea kettle. “Did I miss the meeting notice?”

Mavis joined them.

“Honey, why don’t you come into your studio. We have double chocolate brownies and salted caramel blondies.”

Harriet set her purse on the counter and hung her jacket in the closet then turned to Mavis and Aunt Beth.

“If you put it that way, I guess I could hear what you have to say.”

“Who said we have anything to say? Can’t we just drop in for tea?” Aunt Beth said sweetly.

“Oh, please. You and Mavis could drop by, or even you guys and Connie, but the whole bunch of you all at one time? Never happen. You’re here to ambush me about something. If you’re willing to give me a brownie and a blondie, I’m putty in your hands.” She brushed past her aunt and went on into her studio.

“Harriet, we’ve missed you,” Connie Escorcia said from her seat by Harriet’s big table. “You’ve missed the last three Tuesday Threads meetings.”

Leave it to Connie to take roll, Harriet thought. As Foggy Point’s former favorite kindergarten and first grade teacher, she couldn’t let go of her old habits.

“We were getting worried about you,” Robin McLeod added. “I know it’s been rough having Aiden gone for so long.”

“You look like you’ve lost weight,” DeAnn Gault told her. “Have you been eating?”

Harriet held her hands up.

“Everybody—stop, already. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. I’ve asked you out to dinner five times, and you’ve turned me down flat,” Aunt Beth, who had followed her from the kitchen, complained.

“And I’ve called you each night before our Tuesday meeting,” Mavis added.

“If any of you would have let me get a word in edgewise, I could have explained. As soon as I say I can’t go do something, you launch into how sorry you are that Aiden is gone for three months and how bad he must feel, and how I must feel, etc. etc. etc.”

She reached across her large cutting table and picked up a brownie, putting it on a napkin before she sat down on a wheeled chair.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t go out to dinner, I said I *couldn’t* go. Likewise, I wasn’t able to take the time to go to a meeting. If anyone had bothered to ask why, I’d have told them.”

She was interrupted by Lauren Sawyer coming into the studio from the porch.

“Sorry I’m late, I just got the message. What did I miss?”

“We’re having an intervention,” Harriet said. “Grab a brownie and join the fun.”

Lauren did as instructed and sat down.

“What are we intervening about?”

“I was about to explain why I’ve missed the last three meetings.”

Lauren took a bite of her brownie.

“You were working on that big order, what’s the big mystery?” she said when she’d swallowed. She looked around the table at her friends. “*I* could have told you. Harriet got a big job and was working night and day to finish it.”

“Thanks for telling us,” Mavis scolded her.

“Don’t get mad at me. I missed the last meeting, too.” She turned to Harriet. “Why didn’t you tell me you were MIA when I brought dinner over? I could have filled them in.”

“Geez, enough,” Harriet said and laughed. “I was just saying—everyone is so busy being sympathetic about Aiden they haven’t given me a chance to tell them what I’ve been doing, and frankly I haven’t had a lot of time to spend on the phone waiting for a chance to talk.”

Mavis looked at Beth. “I think we’ve been insulted.”

Harriet ignored them.

“As Lauren said, I’ve had a big stitching job for the last couple of weeks. A woman in Port Ludlow is planning a ninetieth birthday celebration for her mother. Mom was a big-time quilter in her day, but like lots of people, she’d made many more tops than she could ever quilt, especially since she was a hand quilter and now has arthritis so bad she can’t really do any hand-work.

“Mom has always wanted to get enough quilts finished that she could give one to each of her seventeen grand- and great-grandchildren. The daughter has a long-arm quilter she uses in PL, but given the tight schedule, she needed to spread the quilts around to several of us hired needles. I agreed to take six, and I’ve been stitching my fingers to the bone getting them finished and off to the women in her quilt group for binding. They rented a hotel ballroom and are having a big bash complete with news people from Seattle.”

Aunt Beth put her mug down on the table hard.

“Why didn’t you say so?”

Harriet laughed.

“And before you ask, yes, I’ve heard from Aiden. His research group has a satellite phone the doctors get to use once a week. He’s called me a couple of times.”

Mavis and Beth exchanged a glance, and Harriet knew her aunt and her aunt’s best friend were calculating how many weeks Aiden had been gone and counting how many weeks must have gone by without a call. She could have saved them the trouble—she’d done the math herself. He’d been gone seven weeks and called twice; once to say he’d safely arrived in-country. So, really, he’d only called once. That was fourteen-point-two percent of the times he had a phone available.

She raised her chin, silently daring anyone to press the issue.

“He’s keeping busy doing the project work and taking care of the domestic animals and pets in the village near their research station. He said they spend a fair amount of time each day hauling water and boiling it.”

Carla’s cheeks reddened, but she didn’t say anything.

Harriet didn’t want to think about why that was. She was pretty sure she didn’t want to know the answer.

Connie stirred her tea and set her spoon down.

“In a way, it’s probably good that he’s keeping too busy to think too much, but it will catch up with him. He’s going to have to deal with what his sister did at some point.”

Mavis tapped her teaspoon idly on her napkin.

“Denial is a pretty potent coping mechanism.”

Harriet reached across the table and took a blondie.

“As to your point, Robin...” She took a bite, chewed and swallowed before continuing. “...I’d actually rather have Aiden off sorting himself out. Having him either no-showing for our dates or showing up and being so down that we can’t enjoy ourselves was getting old. I know that sounds harsh, but I’m tired of all the drama. Speaking of which, what’s been going on in Loose Thread-ville while I’ve had my nose to the grindstone?”

“I finished two more blocks of my crazy quilt,” Connie announced.

Carla twisted her napkin between her fingers.

“I started a baby quilt for one of the mothers in Wendy’s play group at church. She has four-year-old twin boys, a girl Wendy’s age, and she’s having twins again in August. One of the other moms is making a quilt, too.”

Connie patted her hand. “That’s very nice of you to make her something new for the babies.”

The talk went around the table, with each quilter reporting on progress or problems on their current project. It stopped when they got to DeAnn.

“I have a mission for us, should we choose to accept.”

Lauren leaned forward. “Oooh, tell us more.”

“Most of you know I have a younger half-sister,” DeAnn continued. “She runs a non-profit that’s an umbrella organization for the various smaller missing and exploited children’s groups around the state.”

“I heard something about that,” Mavis said. “Aren’t they doing some kind of an event in Port Angeles in a couple of weeks?”

DeAnn took a sip of her tea.

“That’s what I was going to ask you guys about. Molly is doing a dinner and auction, and she has two donors who have pledged ten thousand dollars each already.”

“Here it comes,” Lauren said. “And she wants us to make a...”

DeAnn's shoulders slumped, and she looked at Lauren.

"She was trying to think of a special thank-you present, and we were talking. It was my idea."

"Spit it out," Lauren said.

"Since they deal with missing children, I was thinking it would be cool to give them each a disappearing nine-patch quilt."

Carla, the youngest member of the group, looked confused.

"What's a disappearing nine-patch?"

Aunt Beth explained. "It's a simple pattern that ends up looking complicated. You make a basic nine-patch, kind of big, and then you cut it into four parts. You rearrange the four parts and sew them back together."

"Which direction do you cut it?" Carla asked.

"That's a very good question. You can cut it evenly in half and then cut those halves in half or you can cut corner to corner," Aunt Beth said.

"Cutting four small squares is a lot easier than working with the triangles, if you ask me." Mavis added.

"I'm willing to buy all the fabric," DeAnn continued. "That could be my donation. I mean, besides working on the quilt."

"I can quilt them on the machine," Harriet offered. "I'll sew blocks, too."

"I'm willing to do anything," Robin said.

Mavis and Connie nodded their agreement.

"Me, too," Carla said.

Harriet got up and went to her desk, where she picked up a box of colored pencils and a large sheet of grid paper. She brought them back to the big table.

"Okay, let's see if we can map this out and figure out what we need fabric-wise then decide who will do what."

Chapter 2

The crunch of tires on gravel drew Harriet to her studio window. When she saw James getting out of his white catering van, she went to the door and threw it open.

“What are you doing here?”

He handed her two plastic cold-bins.

“Take those to your kitchen.” He skipped back down the porch steps and leaned into the back of his van, coming out with a large cardboard box. “I told you I’d make it up to you for finding Cyrano. And this is nothing. Consider it a down payment.” He followed her into the kitchen, carried his box to the dining room and returned. “Do you have a deviled egg plate?”

“Probably. Aunt Beth left a hutch full of dishes in there.” She pointed back toward the dining room.

“I made eggs, a fruit salad, and an assortment of pastries for you ladies. Just a light snack,” he said and went back to the dining room to fetch the desired serving dish.

“How did you even know I was hosting a meeting this morning?”

“I ran into your aunt at the grocery store last night. She was at the meat counter buying chicken breasts. She told me she was making salad for a work day at your house, and I asked if I could bring breakfast.”

“Well, this looks delicious, but you really don’t owe me anything.”

“I can’t begin to describe how shocked I was when I went out to check on Cyrano and discovered he wasn’t there. I couldn’t breathe, my heart started racing...man...” He ran his hand through his short hair. “If the gate had been open, or if he’d dug a tunnel under the fence, I’d have been

upset, but it wouldn't have been so shocking. He was there one minute and gone the next with no indication of what had happened."

"I'm glad it all turned out okay. Melanie thought she could trust her kids to stay in the house while she ran around the block. She knows better now."

James's face became serious. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to him. My dream for a lot of years has been to own my own restaurant, and I know that means I don't have time for a committed relationship. If the restaurant is my wife, Cyrano is our child. Until the business is more established, he's all I've got."

"Well, I was happy to help you both. I know I'd be heartbroken if either of my boys disappeared."

"Speaking of that, how are you doing with Doc being gone?"

"I meant my dog and cat, but since you mention it, I'm doing fine. It's actually a bit of a relief. Aiden's life has been in such turmoil since he returned from Africa last year that he wasn't really in a position to be in a relationship—with me or anyone else. Now, instead of being emotionally unavailable but physically present, he's not present on either count."

"I guess that makes sense. It just seemed like you two fit together. Even when things were tough, you seemed like a team."

"Looks can be deceiving, I guess. I always felt like I was on the outside looking in."

"Let's hope that's all behind you and things will be good when he gets back."

"Yeah, let's hope. In the meantime, I have a meeting to get ready for."

He unboxed the pastries, which were on stacked baking sheets.

"Preheat your oven to four hundred and then pop these in for about five or six minutes—just enough to crisp them up—then serve them warm." He looked out the kitchen window. "Your aunt just arrived. I better get back to the restaurant. I can stop by tomorrow and pick up my pans, or if Lauren is coming to your meeting, you could send them with her, since it's not that far out of her way."

"Thanks again for all this, and give your boy a hug from his auntie Harriet."

He picked up his empty boxes.

"Will do. Enjoy." He went out through the studio; Harriet could hear him greet her aunt as they passed at the outer doorway.

When she reached the kitchen, Beth looked around at the pastries lined up on the counters waiting for their turn in the oven.

"He's a useful one to have around." She shrugged out of her coat and hung it in the closet.

“He’s grateful that I found his dog even though I’m pretty sure his neighbor would have returned Cyrano as soon as she realized her kids had kidnapped him. I was lucky enough to get there first, hence...” Harriet spread her hands and gestured around the kitchen. “...this bounty.”



Connie led the way from the dining room to Harriet’s studio.

“I don’t think I’ll be hungry again until sometime tomorrow.”

“Me, either,” Mavis agreed.

DeAnn set her bag on the cutting table and pulled out several folds of fabric. She divided the pieces into two groups and pushed one pile to each end of the table.

“I tried to get colors that were close to what we drew up on the plan. I hope it’s okay with everyone, but I saw a nice Civil War reproduction fabric in lavender, and I realized that might be a good way to make the quilts slightly different but essentially the same.”

“Oh, honey, that’s a great idea,” Mavis said.

Connie spread out the fabric in front of her.

“How shall we do this? Should we have several big work days, or should we each make a few blocks?”

Robin, true to her background as a lawyer, pulled out a yellow legal tablet and a pen, ready to document whatever the group decided.

“We should be able to each take some of the fabric. Everyone here cuts and sews accurately enough it should all match up.”

Mavis felt the edge of the fabric in front of her.

“I agree that we all know how to cut and sew accurately, but that isn’t always enough. Remember that black-and-red quilt I made a few years back? I cut a bunch of the pieces at our meeting at the quilt store. My ruler had fallen out of my bag at home, so I used one of the ones Marjorie keeps on hand for people to borrow. It was a different brand than mine, and that quilt had a one hundred and twenty-two pieces in each block.

“You wouldn’t think it would make that much of a difference, but the blocks I made from the pieces I measured with Marjorie’s ruler were almost a half-inch smaller than the ones I’d made at home. Needless to say, I had to do them all over again.”

“Even if we do a work day together, we would need to make sure we were using the same brand of ruler, and even then compare them to each other,” Harriet pointed out.

The Threads began pulling out their calendars to figure out when they could meet again.

“Is your friend going to cook for us again?” DeAnn asked Harriet. “His pastries are—” She suddenly leaned sideways in her chair, looking past Connie and out the bow window. “I wonder what my sister is doing here.”

Harriet got up and went to the door.

“One way to find out.” She opened it just as a slender auburn-haired young woman reached the porch.

“Hi, I’m Harriet. You must be Molly, come on in.”

DeAnn stood up as they approached the table.

“Molly, what are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“No. I mean, yes. I...”

Mavis got up as well and went to the new arrival, leading her to a chair next to DeAnn.

“Why don’t you come in and sit down. We’ll get you a nice cup of tea and a pastry. Then you can tell us what’s troubling you.”

Aunt Beth went into the kitchen while Mavis was talking. Connie went to the instant-hot-water pot Harriet kept in her reception area, made a cup of tea and brought it back to Molly. Beth returned with one of James’s pastries on a plate and set it on the table in front of her.

DeAnn was ripping the edge of her notepaper into little shreds, her foot tapping a silent rhythm on the floor.

“Are you comfy?” she asked glaring at Aunt Beth. “Is everything okay? How did you get that bruise on your jaw?”

Molly sipped her tea and set her mug down.

“My ex-boyfriend Josh clocked me.”

“I’ll kill him,” DeAnn said.

“Did you hear me?” Molly said a little too loud. “He’s my *ex*-boyfriend. He hit me, I called the police, they took him away, I took out a domestic violence order of protection, and the next day he was out and trying to make up with me.”

“I’ll kill him,” DeAnn muttered again.

Lauren put her hand on DeAnn’s arm.

“I don’t think you’re helping.”

“He follows me to my office, I call the police. They warn him away, and two days later, he’s sitting in his car across from my apartment, just beyond the three-hundred-yard requirement with a telephoto lens on his camera.”

“Can’t the police put him in jail?” Harriet asked.

Molly looked at her. “I wish it were that simple. It seems like the only penalty for breaking the order is being chased away by the police. As long as he doesn’t hit me again, they don’t want to put him in jail.”

DeAnn started to speak. Molly held her hand up.

“That’s why I’m here. I decided since I need to be here for the event in a couple of weeks, I might as well come now. I can work from anywhere. I’m either on the computer and phone, or I’m traveling to other cities, so it doesn’t matter where home base is.”

Carla twirled a strand of hair around her finger.

“Won’t he just follow you here?” Her cheeks turned pink, but she maintained eye-contact with Molly.

Molly chewed a bite of her croissant thoughtfully.

“He could. But so far, he does his stalking around his work hours, and since he works in Seattle, it will be harder for him. He may show up a time or two, but I’m staying at my parents’. I did stop by the Foggy Point Police Department on my way into town. I gave them a copy of the order and told them where I was staying as well as a description of his car and his license number.”

“We know a good domestic violence shelter,” Connie said.

“I’m nowhere near needing a shelter,” Molly told her. “I promise you, he hit me once, and I told him it was one too many. We broke up on the spot, and the police hauled him away. I really think it will be okay. He’s too lazy to drive all this way just to get back at me, anyway. He thinks he’s irresistible to women. He’ll have another girlfriend by the end of the week.”

DeAnn’s face brightened.

“I don’t like the reason, but I’m glad you’re here. The kids will be thrilled.”

Molly finished her tea and pastry and stood up.

“I better go, I need to go get settled at Mom and Dad’s.” She gathered her purse and jacket and left.

“I need to leave early, too,” Robin said. “Can we pick a date to meet again?”

After comparing schedules, the group decided they would meet on Thursday, three days hence, at Pins and Needles Quilt Shop, and Robin left. The remaining group began the process of pressing the fabrics and comparing their rulers before they began to cut the first fabric into five-inch-wide strips.



Aunt Beth, Mavis and Lauren retreated to the kitchen while Harriet saw the rest of the Threads out. When she joined them, Lauren handed Harriet her purse and fleece jacket.

“We made an executive decision. Your aunt was pointing out that you haven’t been out for lunch or coffee or anything else since you started your big job, so we thought we’d take you to the Steaming Cup for a hot cocoa or iced tea or something.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?” Lauren asked.

“Okay, I’ll come out. My project is done, and I don’t have to start my next job until tomorrow, at least.”

Lauren looked at Mavis and Beth.

“That seemed way too simple.”

Harriet laughed. “I’m tired of me being home, too. In spite of the drama you all imagined, I really was just working hard.” She looked at her aunt. “You should be proud of me for being so industrious. I got paid double my normal fee for rearranging my schedule and for accommodating their tight deadline.”

“Oh, honey, we *are* proud of you,” Mavis said. “We should have known you wouldn’t shut us out if you were upset about Aiden.”

“Shall I drive?” Harriet asked before another discussion about her relationship got started.

The Steaming Cup wasn’t very busy when they arrived, so the barista waved them to a table after they’d ordered and delivered the drinks when they were ready.

Aunt Beth took her mug of black tea and sipped it.

“I don’t know how you can drink cocoa after all the sweets we had this morning.”

Harriet took her spoon and scooped a bite of whipped cream from her cocoa, licking it slowly, her eyes closed.

“Mmmmm, this is so good. I’ve been living on tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for weeks. I’ve got a lot of lost ground to cover.”

Lauren looked up from her own cup of cocoa.

“I have no excuse.”

“So, what’s the deal with DeAnn’s sister?” Harriet asked.

“I didn’t even know she *had* a sister,” Lauren said.

Mavis twirled her spoon.

“No reason you would. Molly left home for college and didn’t live here again from that point on. That would have been ten or fifteen years ago.”

“I don’t remember seeing her around here for holidays or anything,” Lauren persisted.

Mavis and Aunt Beth exchanged a look.

“What?” Harriet asked.

Aunt Beth pressed her lips together before speaking.

“Something happened when Molly was a little girl. She wasn’t more than five or six.” She looked at Mavis for confirmation. Her friend nodded, and she continued, “She was playing with a neighbor girl...”

“Amber Price,” Mavis supplied.

“No one knows what really happened. Molly was found wandering in Fogg Park by someone from the homeless camp.”

“And Amber was never found,” Mavis finished.

“Not ever?” Harriet asked in a hushed tone.

Beth and Mavis shook their heads.

Lauren pulled her tablet computer from her bag and tapped it awake. She entered Amber’s name and read the results.

“Wow, looks like they’ve done a lot to try to find her. They even had that horse search group Texas EquuSearch come and everything.” She was silent as she read more. “Looks like Molly has been pretty involved over the years in these searches.”

Mavis and Aunt Beth looked at each other again.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Harriet demanded.

Aunt Beth sipped her tea, stalling.

“Molly became pretty obsessed,” she finally said. “After DeAnn and her brother went away to college, her parents moved the family to her stepdad’s parents’ farm in eastern Washington. The story was the grandparents were getting old and needed help. We all knew they were trying to get that little girl out of town and away from her obsession about Amber.”

Aunt Beth picked up her tea again, and Mavis took up the story.

“The problem was, Molly couldn’t remember anything. She didn’t even remember that she went to Amber’s house that day. She was sure if she could just recall what happened, they could find Amber and bring her home.”

“Wow,” Harriet murmured.

“No one was happy when she graduated college with a degree in social work and went to work for that missing children place.” Mavis picked her mug up and held it to her lips. She set it down without taking a drink. “And now she’s running the whole place.”

“Don’t DeAnn’s parents own the video and game store here in town?” Harriet asked.

“They came back after Molly graduated college and went to work in Seattle. DeAnn had come back here and gotten married, and they figured they’d be having grandchildren, which, of course, they did,” Beth explained.

“DeAnn’s parents never wanted to be wheat farmers. They only went because Molly needed to be away from here,” Mavis added. “And they really hoped she would study something that would take her away permanently when she got out of college.”

“Wow,” Harriet repeated.

Lauren leaned back in her chair.

“I wonder what happened to Amber Price.”

“She seems to have vanished without a trace. I remember reading about it in the paper at the time,” Beth said. “The police didn’t have much to go

on. One of the neighbors was a man who had been in some kind of trouble with the law. He was crucified in the press and everywhere else.”

Mavis set her mug down again.

“Leo Tabor. That was the man’s name.”

Aunt Beth nodded.

“Back then, Foggy Point didn’t have crime like we do now. We also didn’t have as many police officers, and in any case, they never came up with anything. But Leo lost his job anyway. He proclaimed his innocence to anyone who would listen, but eventually, he left town, and that was the end of it.”

Lauren tapped a note into her tablet.

“Just out of curiosity, I think I’ll see what he’s been up to for the last few decades.”

“Seems like Molly has turned her tragedy into something positive with her work finding missing and exploited children,” Harriet said.

Beth lifted her mug, but it was empty.

“Do you want a refill?” Lauren asked.

“No, I better get going. If I’m going to be working on these quilt blocks, I need to go home and finish the mailer I’m working on for the hospice fundraiser.”

Mavis stood and picked up her purse.

“I’ve got a few loose ends to tie up myself.”

Harriet looked at her aunt.

“Before you go, do you know why Carla was so red-faced during the meeting earlier when we were talking about Aiden?”

Beth stared down at the table before she spoke.

“Oh, honey, I’d hoped you didn’t notice that.”

“Not much gets by our Harriet,” Lauren said, and Mavis glared at her.

“What?” Harriet asked.

Beth reached out and patted Harriet’s hand.

“I think she was feeling awkward because she told us last week that Aiden calls home every week. He’s checking on his dog and making sure there’s enough money in the household accounts to pay the gardener and take care of whatever else upkeep needs to be done.”

Harriet put on her jacket, grabbed her purse then picked up their empty mugs.

“I figured it was something like that.” She carried the dishes to the bus-tub and went out to the car.

Chapter 3

Did I miss anything?" Lauren asked as she breezed into the large classroom at Pins and Needles three days later.

Harriet emerged from the shop kitchen carrying a tray with mugs and a basket of mixed tea bags on it.

"We all just got here ourselves. Do you want tea or coffee?"

Lauren set her quilting bag on the table at her customary spot.

"Tea would be great."

Connie followed Harriet into the room with a carafe of coffee in one hand and a kettle of hot water in the other.

Two ironing boards were set up at the back of the room, and Mavis and Beth were busy re-pressing the fabrics they would be cutting.

"We'll be a minute more," Beth said without turning around. "Drink your tea and entertain yourselves."

Lauren pulled her tablet from her bag.

"I've assembled a list of facts about human trafficking for us."

"Why?" Harriet asked.

"I figured since we're making quilts as prizes for the big donors at a fundraiser to make money for the missing-and-exploited organization, we should know whereof we stitch."

"Isn't that 'whereof we speak'?" Robin asked.

"Whatever. I wanted to know what we're supporting."

Mavis turned from her ironing board.

"We're supporting DeAnn and through her, her sister. That's enough for me."

Lauren looked at DeAnn.

“Of course I’m doing my share, no matter what, but since we have to kill some time...” She turned to look at Mavis and Beth. “...I thought you all might like to know a few fun facts about human trafficking.”

“I’m interested,” Carla said.

“Thank you. Question number one—Does anyone know which state was the first to criminalize human trafficking?” Lauren looked around the table. “DeAnn, you don’t get to play because your sister probably told you already.”

DeAnn rolled her eyes. “You have no idea.”

“Anyone?”

Harriet raised her hand.

“Since you’re asking, I’m going to guess Washington.”

“Give that girl a Kewpie Doll. Now, a harder one—Which West Coast city ranks third highest in the country for sex trafficking?”

Robin twirled her pen between her fingers.

“The way you stated that question, I’m guessing it is a trick question.”

“It’s not Foggy Point,” Connie said.

Lauren and Harriet laughed.

“I’m going to guess Seattle,” Robin said.

“Correct you are,” Lauren said. “With its international port and proximity to Canada and Asia, it’s not surprising.”

“Molly has told me a lot about missing and exploited children,” DeAnn said. “And all kidding aside, I was shocked the first time she told me there are something like three hundred thousand young girls working in the sex trade each year.”

Carla tapped on the front of her phone, opening the calculator function.

“Wow, if they were evenly spread over all fifty states that would be six thousand per state.”

Mavis carried her pieces of fabric to the big table and laid them carefully across one end.

“Now that we’ve established it’s a worthy cause, shall we begin working?”

Robin pulled out her legal pad.

“I think this might work better if we divide up into two teams, one for each quilt.”

Harriet picked her bag up from the floor beside her chair.

“I’ll vote for that. I think that will help prevent us from mixing up the fabrics when we get to the sewing stage.”

“I like the idea, too.” Lauren agreed. “The lavenders are pretty similar, and so are the dark greens. I know one set is Civil War reproduction fabric and the other is contemporary floral, but their colors are close.”

Robin wrote *Team One* and *Team Two* across the top of her paper.

“Does anyone care which team they’re on?”

No one did, so she began writing names under the headings.

“Okay. How about Harriet, Lauren, Carla and Mavis on team one, and Beth, DeAnn, Connie and me on team two?”

“Sounds good to me,” Harriet said.

The rest nodded agreement.

“Let’s finish all the cutting today,” Mavis said. “I brought gallon zip bags to put the strip sets into. That way, everyone can take a few bags home to start work on.”

Aunt Beth held up a handful of three-by-five index cards.

“I marked these cards with a quarter-inch line. Each person should take one home and line the edge of the card up with the quarter-inch seam guide on your sewing machine. Lower your presser foot, and then the needle, and if the needle doesn’t go through the line on the card, adjust your needle position until it does. This should insure that all our seams are the same.”

Connie took her card and smiled at Beth.

“Thank you so much for doing this.”

DeAnn picked up the pile of strips she’d cut and carried them to Connie, where they would be matched up with the other colors. She stopped and pressed her lips together before speaking.

“I apologize in advance for my sister. Beth and Connie and Mavis probably already know, but for any of you who don’t, she’s obsessed with figuring out something that happened to her and a friend when they were little.

“The friend disappeared when the two of them were playing and was never found. Lauren, she’s likely to ask you for help with computer searches, Beth, Connie, and Mavis, she’ll probably grill you guys about what was going on in Foggy Point all those years ago. Carla, I can only imagine what she might ask you, but believe me, she will ask.”

“Don’t worry, honey,” Mavis told her. “We all understand about family.”

“Anyone here hungry?” Jorge Perez, owner and head chef of Tico’s Tacos, stood in the hall outside the classroom with two large insulated carry bags. “Señora Beth told me you were working so hard you wouldn’t have time to take a lunch break. I decided to bring the food to you.”

“Bless you,” Connie said.

Lauren got up and went to the door.

“What do you have for us?”

She took one of the bags and carried it to the table. Jorge followed, set his bag beside hers, and they began taking foil-wrapped paper plates from the warm interiors.

“Just for variety, I made you chimichangas served on a bed of lettuce with a side of Mexican rice. The sauce is a mild red sauce, except for Señora Connie, who can take the heat.” He said this last with a wicked smile. Connie had lived most of her life in Washington, but she’d been born in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

“I have a boneless, skinless chicken breast on a bed of vegetables for Robin, and extra guacamole for Lauren.” He looked at the women seated around the table. “Have I missed anything?”

“Sounds like you’ve covered everything,” Beth said with a smile. “As usual.”

He smiled at her with a warmth reserved for her and her alone.



Connie closed the box of gallon bags and handed it back to Mavis.

“The fabric is cut and bagged. Does everyone understand Beth’s instructions about setting your quarter-inch seam?”

Heads nodded as everyone stood and began gathering their tools and fabric and stuffing them into their bags.

“Shall we meet again at our regular time on Tuesday?” Robin asked, pen and paper in hand.

DeAnn’s phone rang before anyone could reply. She held it to her ear, listening.

“Okay, got it,” she finally said and turned to the group.

“I hesitate to tell you what that was.” She sighed deeply. “They’ve got a late entry to the ten-thousand-dollar-donation club.”

Lauren sat back down.

“Oh, geez.”

“I take it we’re making another quilt,” Harriet said.

Mavis sat down again, too.

“Well, if we can figure out the fabrics, we can each take some home and use the pieces we cut today as a guide to keep them the same size.”

Marjory Swain, the owner of Pins and Needles, walked into the room.

“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help but hear your dilemma. I might have a solution. Given the color scheme you already have going on, I was thinking you could do nineteen-thirties reproduction fabrics. I have the solids that go along with them. I think there’s a green that is dark enough for you, and there are multiple lavender prints, and prints with cream or white backgrounds. Would you like me to bring a few bolts in for you to look at?”

They did want, and within a few minutes, they had selected colors and Marjory had taken them into the store to cut. Lauren and Harriet followed her out to the front counter to wait for the fabrics.

“I guess it’s good that more people are donating that much money to Molly’s cause, but I’m going to be hard-pressed to get three quilts stitched in time for the event with the rest of my workload. I’ll be back on tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“Oh, wa-wa-wa,” Lauren told her with a laugh. “You’re not the only one with a real job. I can come help you do prep work, if that would help.”

“Moral support will help,” Harriet told her then took the stack of cut fabric from Marjory.

It took them another hour, but they cut the additional fabric and divided it between the two teams before they left for the day.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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