



The Survivor

Crime Scene:Houston

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Chapter 1

10:00 a.m. Wednesday

Miss Walker, Twenty-three years ago, I survived a killer. I must have my story told. Can you help me?

Amy Garrett, PhD

Freedom's Way Counseling

Finding suspense story ideas could be grueling, but the concept that just landed in Kariss's inbox could be her next bestseller. She'd been approached by enough eccentrics to recognize a sender who saw big bucks for a sensational slice of life. She felt sorry for most of them and wanted to help no matter how ludicrous their story. But none of those people had PhD after their name or a phone number listed in their signature.

The e-mail lured her to the place where words and emotion blended into a feverish dance. She'd survived a killer and knew the courage it took to tell anyone about the horror. She reread the message. Why would Amy Garrett seek her out? Why would she choose to tell a true story in a novel? One way to find out.

She pressed in the number, and a receptionist answered with a greeting from Freedom's Way. Hurdle number one — Amy Garrett was a real person who worked at an office. Kariss gave her name and waited for the call to be transferred.

"Dr. Garrett, here. Is this Kariss Walker?"

"It is. I just received your e-mail. Curiosity got the best of me."

"Thanks for responding so quickly. Are you currently online?"

"I am." "Go to the website listed in my e-mail. That tells you a little about me."

Kariss clicked on the site. Amy Garrett, founder of Freedom's Way, was a doctor of psychology who specialized in counseling women who'd been victims of violent crimes.

"Now click on 'About Freedom's Way.' That says it best." Powerful words drew her into Amy's world. "At the age of nine, I survived a brutal attempt on my life. I understand your pain and confusion, and I have felt the despair. Through caring counselors, I found healing. Now I want to offer you the same pathway to life. Freedom's Way cares about you. We are committed to helping every woman who has ever been traumatized by a vicious crime. Your first step is only a phone call away. Don't let finances stop you from overcoming emotional pain. If you cannot pay, we have scholarships. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." — Matthew 11:28

This was a Christian counseling service. "Why fiction?" Dr. Garrett's desire to relate her story in a novel seemed skewed with her profession.

"Can we meet in person and discuss this? I'm booked until three-thirty this afternoon, but I have an hour window then. Do you happen to have the time free?"

Kariss's mind spun in a flurry of whether she wanted to get involved. The woman was aggressive, but intrigue won out. "I'd be happy to talk to you — to gather more information. From your address, I see your office isn't far from me."

"I'd like to meet outside my practice. How about the Starbucks across the street from Crystal Point Mall?"

"Perfect."

"Miss Walker, it's important that we keep our discussion private."

"I plan to come alone."

"Good. But please don't tell anyone about this. I'll explain later."

Strange request, but maybe Dr. Garrett had approached other writers. "Okay. See you then."

Kariss stared at phone before placing it on her desk. She reread Amy's e-mail. Why had the woman contacted her? The answer would have to wait until three-thirty. If she could keep her inquisitive nature at a manageable level.

She continued to read through her e-mails.

A writers' group wanted her to give a workshop on character and plot. They had no budget to pay a speaker, but she could bring books to sell. Kariss sighed and agreed.

Her nephew had sent his latest poem. She took a peek and laughed. At age ten, he was in love with a red-headed girl who ignored him.

Mom confirmed Sunday dinner after church.

Two spam messages.

No one could use that much Viagra. She hit "junk."

Kariss studied Amy's words again and opened a new tab in her web browser. After googling the woman's name, several sites popped up. Many churches and community organizations had hosted Dr. Garrett as a keynote speaker. Kariss returned to Amy's website and continued reading.

Testimonies from those who'd been given the tools to live again after being shaken by violence followed Amy's excerpt. Survivors. Warriors in their own right. By the third one, Kariss was reaching for a tissue.

Her next stop was Facebook. Amy Garrett's posts were faithbased and compassionate. She recommended books and websites to help women achieve good emotional health. An upcoming Gulf Coast Christian Women's Conference, to be held at a large church in downtown Houston, featured Amy as the keynote speaker.

Dr. Amy Garrett was not only a survivor but a champion for abused women.

Unbidden memories surfaced about what had happened during the research of Kariss's previous novel. She'd made a few stupid choices and nearly botched an FBI investigation. If not for a loving family and renewed faith, Kariss would be in need of Freedom's Way to help her work through the nightmare of being stalked and caught.

She'd meet with Dr. Garrett, ask questions, and hear her story.

11:00 a.m. Wednesday

FBI Special Agent Tigo Harris knew he smelled like the thirteen-hour stakeout. The pizza eaten before dawn lay in his stomach like a sizzling grenade. But he was determined to help bring in the new self-proclaimed leader of a Houston gang called the Skulls that had ties to a Mexican cartel.

Pablo Martinez had entered an apartment on the southeast side of town shortly after ten o'clock last night with his girlfriend and another gang member. An informant said Martinez had stashed stolen assault rifles there and would be using them on a rival gang last night. Although Martinez had slipped by the authorities in the past by way of the legal system, that was about to end. So Tigo and his team waited. All the FBI needed to make the arrest was for Martinez to set foot outside the apartment with the stolen arms. Of course, if they'd known how long this would take, they would have obtained a search warrant.

"Something about this bothers me." Tigo lifted his binoculars to the curtaincovered windows. "Like we're the ones being setup."

Ryan Steadman, his partner, yawned. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear they'd left."

Tigo handed him the binoculars. "Makes me wonder what they're doing in there. Building a compound? I'm going in."

"Are you crazy?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"What are you going to do, deliver a pizza?"

Tigo reached for the empty box on the floor by Ryan's feet. "Who can refuse pepperoni and extra cheese?"

"You're sure?"

"I've got things to do and nailing Martinez is in my way." Tigo picked up his radio.

"A shower is at the top of my list."

"Mine too. Along with arresting anyone I can find who's involved with gangs. My personal war." Tigo smoothed out the dent in the empty pizza box from Ryan's sizeeleven foot. "This gang business has me in a bad mood."

"Or maybe it's because Kariss hasn't returned your phone calls."

Tigo scowled, wishing Ryan couldn't read him. "She's busy. Working. And that's not what I'm talking about. I have a gang leader to arrest."

"Never thought you'd make excuses for a woman." She wasn't just a woman. "Cover me. Martinez is mine."

"I'll be sure to write that on your epitaph." Ryan pointed to the second-story apartment. "Nothing is stirring. Maybe they got high and are sleeping it off."

Tigo chuckled. "That would make our job easier." He opened the door to his pickup and radioed backup of his intent.

"Hold on." Ryan pointed to three small children who played at the other end of the walkway near Martinez's apartment. "Let's get those kids out of there." He spoke into his radio, and shortly thereafter, the kids disappeared.

Stealing up the exterior metal steps to the apartment gave Tigo a few moments to scan the area. Martinez could have men posted inside another apartment. His fingers rested on his Glock, which was positioned under the pizza box. Uneasiness dripped into his brain. Thirteen hours in a one-bedroom apartment didn't make sense. No one in or out. No gunfire. No visitors. Only quiet.

Ryan covered him at the bottom of the steps along with two other agents on opposite ends of the building.

Tigo knocked on the door. "Pizza delivery." He counted to ten and repeated the knock and announcement. He set the pizza box on the concrete floor.

Ryan joined him, and they nodded the go-ahead.

"FBI, open up!" Tigo turned the knob. Unlocked. A chill swept up his arms. Glock raised, he swung open the door. Three mutilated bodies lay across a sofa and chair. Their throats were cut.

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