

Chapter XI

Friday afternoon, just before four o'clock, I was paged on the office intercom. Rather than picking up the phone in the office of the art director, where I had just finished complaining about the layout of the upcoming issue, I walked the fifty feet back to my office. Before I reached my telephone, the intercom buzzed and the receptionist yelled, "Anne Fossicker! Anne Fossicker! Your daughter needs you!" I shut my office door, humiliated.

Patricia was hysterical, apparently talking to someone while she waited for me to answer. When I finally caught her attention, she was irate. "Where have you been? Sister Clare is really hurt. She had to break a window to get into the house. What? She says she's okay but I didn't mean to tie up the phone. Honest, Mom."

Before I could interrupt to ask a question or calm Patricia, Sister Clare spoke to me, apparently having given up hope that Patricia would convey the essential, still mysterious message. "Get home, Anne. This is Clare Messina. I have to see you immediately."

"You're hurt?" I was beginning to invent a physical fight that had just ended between my daughter and this nun.

"Get home. Something is very wrong. Sarah didn't call you, did she?"

"What is today? Friday? She's at Brownies. Why aren't you there? What the hell is going on at my house?"

"Get home. I will call your husband. Patricia, do you have the number? She does. Drive safely. Hurry."

Uncertain when Clare was speaking to me and when she was speaking to my daughter, I failed to register the fact that she

had cut our connection. When I finally did, I telephoned my home and was relieved, I think, to hear a busy signal. Clare was calling Ted. That much was easy to comprehend. I collected my bag and coat and headed for home, convinced that Patricia had been besieged at home because of involvement with drugs or a boy; in advance I decided that Clare had overreacted. I prepared to castigate her for abandoning the Brownies, regardless of the severity of Patricia's alleged crime. Why couldn't one of the high school teachers have chased her down?

It is a fact, or nearly a fact, that all mothers have compulsive imaginations where their children are involved. As I pulled into the driveway, already able to see the shattered glass of the front door, I calmed myself by imagining how frightened Patricia would be after being caught doing something she was not licensed to do, and under such dramatic circumstances.

Sister Clare greeted me at the door, a makeshift gauze bandage wrapped around her left hand. Her usually calm, sallow face was sweaty, her dark curly hair matted against her head. Her white blouse and pleated blue skirt showed small stains from dripping blood. The sight of her unnerved me completely.

I screamed. "What the hell is happening here? What hell did you break down the door? What are you trying to prove here? What is the matter with you?"

This brought Patricia to Clare's side. She had clearly maintained the hysterical pitch she'd achieved during our abortive conversation. "I was on the phone. I couldn't hear anything cause the radio was on. Loud. Maybe it's not too late. Hurry up. Sarah is missing."

Oddly, I can describe what I felt on receiving the news. My heart performed an unprecedented function. It ceased pumping and simply sucked blood from my head and the rest of my body. It expanded, and I experienced its stress as chest cramps. I turned

my head to the base of the house, feeling that I was about to vomit. Clare ran to my side, anticipating this. Of course, I only heaved violently and unsuccessfully; my bloated heart muscle was too large to be forced through my throat. Clare put her arm over my shoulder and roughly escorted me into the house, impatient with my weakness. Patricia began to speak to me and I closed my eyes, hoping that she and Clare and the shattered glass might disappear. Clare seized the moment of my recovery as the time to call the police. Once that was done she would not tolerate inaction. Ted arrived within fifteen minutes and, finally, the few facts available to us were organized and examined.