

Detours

Chapter One

The bell, ringing over the door at Mountain High Coffee Company, caught Callie's attention. Though her hands did not stop moving, she glanced up to see a Washington State Patrolman remove his gray Stetson and step inside. In the early morning light his tall, broad body threw a dark shadow over the dining room, his massive frame obscuring the light from the glass door behind him. He stomped his feet and slapped the hat against his thigh, dropping snow onto the dark green floor mat. Taking a step forward, he paused to brush the remaining snow from the shoulders of his jacket.

He stopped to look around, clearly inspecting the room.

Callie took a deep breath and savored the gust of cold air that blew across the coffee shop. After hours of steaming milk and dense humidity, she relished the cool relief as it blew across her cheeks. She nodded at the officer, and smiled briefly.

He did not smile back. One more, she thought with weariness. On most mornings, by now the rush would be over. Callie would have restocked the beans, and filled the pastry counter. The tables in the dining area would be clean, and she would have mopped the mud from the tiles in front of the door. On most mornings, by now, she would have had a moment with the morning paper before heading home to the upholstery shop in her garage.

Not today, she thought, shaking her head as she shook wet grounds into the garbage pail. Today she would not get a single break between the two businesses that claimed most of her waking hours. At home in her shop, Callie had a newly recovered chair waiting to be delivered to its owners. She was already a week late delivering that project. And, behind the chair, a loveseat with a damaged frame waited for her to strip away its rotting fabric. The new fabric had been delivered yesterday. She sighed.

Today she would barely finish her chores before her shift ended. Then, she would jump in her car – but here, her planning suddenly ended in mid-thought. There would be no jumping in her car this morning. Callie didn't have her own car at work.

Callie forced her attention back to the coffee counter, wishing for the fifth time that morning that she had help for the early shift. Faint pink streaks tinted the tape that spiraled

out of the cash register. The grinder sang the high-pitched sound of near emptiness; she could see all the way to the street through its cylindrical glass sides. The dining room floors needed moping. The paper towel dispenser was empty. The pitcher in the dining room needed cream.

But what did she expect with six inches of new snow, and temperatures dropping into the teens? This freak March storm had wreaked as much havoc in her coffee shop as it had on the roads outside. She hoped both the storm and the chaos inside would soon subside.

With one hand Callie tucked a stray hunk of black hair behind her ear, and turned her attention to the stainless steel pitcher in her right hand. With an experienced touch, she took the temperature of the milk steaming inside. Almost, she thought swirling the container around the steam spigot. Several seconds later, with the milk hovering at the perfect temperature, she poured it quickly into a paper cup, added espresso, ladled on foam, and stirred without disturbing the froth she had so perfectly swept over the drink's surface.

She added a double shot of amaretto flavoring and stirred again. "There you are Phil," she said, squeezing a lid onto the cup and dropping it into a cardboard heat shield. She held it out. "Just the way you like it."

"Thanks, Call," he said, accepting the steaming coffee. "By the way, you're out of straws here," he said, pointing to a dispenser on the other side of the counter.

Of course, what should I expect? Callie sighed. "Just a minute."

Bearded, flannel-clad, with denim dungarees and steel-toed boots, Philip Kenterman pointed to a pastry in the display. "No problem. I'll have a pumpkin scone too," he said.

Discreetly, she glanced over Phil's shoulder to the patrolman, who now fingered the plastic cover of his huge gray hat.

To Phil, she teased, "I thought you were dieting." She bent down and opened the case. Removing a scone, she dropped it into a pastry bag and offered it to him.

He grinned. "I am," he said taking the bag. "I skipped breakfast." Callie accepted the four one-dollar bills he'd tucked between his fingers. "Keep the change," he said, waving as he turned toward the door.

"Tomorrow Phil," Callie said, adding, "And, hey, be careful." She smiled to herself as she rang up the sale and dropped the change into her tip cup.

Without answering, Phil pulled the door closed behind him, waving through the front window as he turned toward his company truck. Callie shook her head. *Phil will have to skip more than breakfast to make any real progress on a diet.*

Before turning to her next customer, Callie glanced again at the officer standing quietly near the center of the store. "What can I get you this morning, Louise?" she asked the woman pacing in front of the counter. The policeman hadn't gotten in line for service. He didn't seem the least interested in the menu board on the wall behind her. Strange.

"I'm eating in the car today," Louise said. "According to the radio, the road between here and town is a skating rink." She shook her head. "I might as well buy lunch too. It'll probably be noon before I get to work." In her black wool suit and high-heeled boots, Louise paused in front of the deli case, finally adding a muffin and juice to her tall Americano.

Callie pulled a bottle of Ruby Red from the cooler, and dropped a poppy seed muffin into a paper bag. "There you are," she said. "That's four twenty-nine."

Louise pawed through her handbag for exact change. "Thanks, Callie," she said.

Stay warm, Louise” Callie countered, ringing up the sale. The pink on the cash register tape had turned bright red.

“Give me a break Lord,” Callie whispered toward the ceiling. As she dropped change into the till, she struggled to stay cheerfully professional, choosing to ignore the funny quivering she felt in her stomach. It seemed as though the worst of the rush had passed. Only two customers remained inside Mountain High. One sipped coffee as he read the morning newspaper from his seat near the front window.

The other, the mysterious police officer, approached the counter, still rolling the Stetson between his fingers. He seemed hesitant, uncomfortable somehow. Dark hair curled below his close-pressed crown. Hat hair, Callie called it. His dark eyes avoided hers.

“Are you Callie O’Brian?” he asked.

“Last time I checked,” she said, swiping at the counter with a bar towel. Somehow her humor fell flat, and Callie reached up to tuck away another stray hair, feeling a sudden need to look presentable. What did he want? She searched his face for some sign, pausing as she looked into his brown eyes. Was it trouble she recognized there? She tried again. “Can I get you something?”

He ignored the question. “Are you the owner of a green ‘97 Ford Explorer?”

“Yes,” Callie answered, feeling her stomach turn over as the flesh on her arms rose into bumps. She rubbed one elbow with the palm of her hand. “Why do you ask?”

“Can we sit down ma’am?” The policeman brushed his mustache with stocky fingers. With his hat, he gestured toward the tables in the dining area.

Callie shook her head. “There’s no need to sit down. I have work to do, and you have something to tell me. What is it exactly?”

“I’m Patrol Officer Moriarty, ma’am. I’ve come to talk to you about an accident.”

“What do you mean delayed?” Marcus demanded.

“Relax,” insisted the voice on the other end of the telephone. “It’s normal. The DA assigned new counsel. There was a shift in staffing, that’s all. It happens.”

Marcus slumped against the back wall of the phone booth, fighting a losing battle with the discouragement that threatened to consume him. “Not on a big case. Why would they change counsel before an important trial?” Taking a deep breath, he ran one hand over his close-cropped hair, letting his palm drift down to his neck where he wiped away a growing pool of sweat.

“I can’t read minds Marcus.”

He glanced out at a group of teens draped across a bench as they waited for a city bus. One of them held an enormous boom box on his shoulder. From inside the phone booth, Marcus heard bass notes pulsing, beating against his thoughts. He closed his eyes against the sound, concentrating instead on the conversation.

“I’m not saying it’s your fault.” Marcus looked up again, glancing beyond the boys to the empty building behind them. Letting his gaze sweep the windows, Marcus made certain that

no one watched from the second floor, A black sedan cruised toward him. Marcus spun away from the door of the phone booth, holding his hand up over the side of his face. "What about the trial?"

"Officially it hasn't started yet. They've had pre-trial arguments. Fought over what evidence would be admissible. The usual stuff."

Marcus sensed there was more. Too much time had passed. Something had gone wrong. He pushed harder. "When exactly?"

"The judge granted a three-month delay."

In spite of his determination to avoid such a display of temper, Marcus swore under his breath. Three more months. Three months in a one-room apartment with a rickety, unreliable steam heater. Three months cooking on a hot plate. Three months alone in a city he hated.

Could Marcus survive three more months in this place?

Then, a more frightening thought occurred to him. The crew had nearly finished this latest house. Marcus had not yet heard about the next job. Would they find one?

Through the depth of an Illinois winter, his boss had trouble keeping the crew busy. What if more snow came now? Would he lay Marcus off? Though he'd worked with this crew for seven months, Marcus was considered the newcomer.

"Are you still there?" the voice questioned.

"I'm here," Marcus sighed. "Something's gone wrong. You aren't telling me everything. Spill it."

This time, the sigh came from the other end of the line.

"Tell me," Marcus hissed. "I'm out here hiding for my life. You can't hold back."

"There's a complication."

"A complication?"

"Presario disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Marcus felt a kick to the gut. "That's crazy. He's in custody!"

"They brought him to the courthouse for an appearance, and somehow he just walked away. They think he had help. The guard swears he had a gun. Turned out to be a soap carving. They found it in a first floor bathroom."

Marcus gave a bitter laugh. "I'd expect that. The sheriff's department wouldn't admit that they screwed up. That wouldn't go over very well with the constituency, would it?"

Another pause. The voice continued. "Presario was never the brains of the operation. He doesn't have the smarts to come after you."

"He didn't need brains. He had more than enough guts to make up for an empty skull."

"True," the voice agreed. "He's got guts all right. No one else would be stupid enough to try to walk out of a county courthouse."

"No one else would succeed." Marcus pressed his fingers to his temples, trying to clear his thoughts. "So the prosecutor hopes the police will find Presario during the delay."

"It shouldn't be hard. There's no way he can disguise his face.."

Marcus shivered at the memory of his cock-eyed smile. Someone in his past had given Presario a little gift to remember him by. The scar dividing Presario's cheek into perfect halves had severed a facial nerve, leaving his mouth partially paralyzed. When Presario smiled only half his face participated. Presario was as mean as his face was ugly. The thought made Marcus shudder. He spoke urgently. "Listen. You heard him yourself. Presario said he'd kill me,

said it in front of a whole collection of witnesses. He's killed others. We know that. Why not come after me."

"He's focused on staying out of jail. He can't afford to surface looking for you. Let's not worry about Presario until we have to."

"Let's?" Marcus gave a derisive laugh. "I'm the only one who has anything to worry about here. I'm the one he'll come after."

The voice took on an urgent tone. "He's going to be worried about his own skin, Marcus. Trust me. He doesn't have time to worry about you. Is there anything you need?"

Though the man on the other end of the phone had trouble giving Marcus the whole truth, his kindness came through even across miles of phone lines. In spite of himself, Marcus smiled. "No. I'm fine. For now." He shook his head. "Just find Presario, will you?"

"It's my top priority. You keep in touch, you hear me?"

"I'll call."

"Maybe you should give me a number where I can reach you."

"I'll call."

"When?"

"Next time," Marcus said, hanging up. He pulled up the collar of his denim jacket, and opened the folding door. Ducking his head as he rounded the booth, he slipped on a pair of dark glasses. To this he added a navy stocking cap as he hurried away from the street via the alley behind the convenience store.



Callie eyed the police officer, still uncertain of his meaning. "An accident?"

"Did you loan your car to someone this morning?"

Her car? Callie remembered Celia as she had last seen her that morning, scraping frost from the windows of her rusting Civic. The engine running, clouds of exhaust blowing white into the frigid morning air, Celia had leaned over the windshield, struggling to clear the crusted glass with nothing more than a credit card in her gloved hands.

Callie pictured herself waving to Celia, and remembered the short walk to the guest-house to check on her friend. She remembered the sound of the snow squeaking as it compressed under her boots, and the smell of exhaust as it curled and bounced against the siding of the carport. The morning was dark and cold. Celia looked tired.

"Yes," she said, nodding at the officer. "Yes, I did. I gave mine to my roommate because it has four-wheel drive." Though she meant to sound strong, Callie heard the little quiver that found its way into her voice. Celia hadn't wanted to take her car. She'd objected, more than once, worried that the unfamiliar car might be more dangerous than her own.

Callie had insisted. She'd reassured Celia that the car was safe, insisted that Celia drop her off at work and drive into town in the Ford. In the end Celia agreed. Callie had carried the car seat from the old Honda to the four-wheel drive, and fastened it to the back seat. Celia brought Keeshan, her sleepy four-year-old, to Callie's car and buckled him inside.

"Ma'am?" the officer said, drawing her attention back to the present. "Who borrowed your car this morning?"

Without warning Callie's knees begin to tremble and she felt weak all over. She pressed her forearms onto the counter, desperate for additional stability. Even though he had not explained the details, the implications of the officer's questions drove themselves home. What could have caused an accident? And what about Celia?

"Maybe we should sit down," he said, his voice as soft as his brown eyes.

"Maybe we should." Callie agreed. She picked up a bar towel, and dried her trembling hands as she walked around the counter. Pulling out a wooden chair, she dropped down beside a round birch table. The officer sat directly across from her.

"Okay," she said. "We're sitting." This time, she made no effort to sound confident or controlled. She heard the high, frightened pitch of her voice and cleared her throat. "Tell me what's happened," she said, deliberately lowering her voice. "And I want the whole story,"

Officer Moriarty leaned forward, once again smoothing his mustache before he began to speak. "I'm not completely sure. It looks as though your car hit a patch of ice while braking. The car slid into oncoming traffic, and was hit by a small station wagon traveling eastbound. The impact threw your car off the road and over an embankment where it rolled several times."

"My car?" The quiver in her stomach had transformed itself into full-fledged trembling. Callie felt herself grow nauseas. "You're sure? I mean—there has to be a mistake."

"No ma'am." He nodded, his dark eyes fixed on hers. "I took the license and registration information myself."

"My car," her voice trailed off as Callie struggled to imagine an accident like the one he'd described. "But what about Celia? Where's Celia?"

The muscles around the officer's eyes tightened, the lines closing into a squint. Callie had her answer. "She's gone?"

He shook his head. "No ma'am. We airlifted her to Harborview."

"Oh no." Callie dropped her forehead into her hands, pushing her hair away from her face. "It can't be. I gave her the car because she would be safe. I mean, with four-wheel drive..." She left the thought unfinished, struggling to control an unexpected rush of tears.

"Ma'am, four-wheel drive adds traction. It helps a car move forward. But it doesn't help a car stop—especially not with ice on the road. It was snowing hard when the accident happened. The highway was crowded, and there was almost no visibility. Witnesses tell us traffic just piled up before she had a chance to slow down. No one could have predicted being hit by an oncoming car. These things just happen."

Callie fought rising panic. "I have to go," she said, standing.

"Actually ma'am," he said without moving, "I came to ask for your help. We traced the car to you. And your address matches hers. I assume the two of you share a residence?" He took a small leather notebook from his chest pocket, opened it and removed a pen from the elastic holder.

"She rents the guest house." Callie brushed at her hair again. "The guesthouse on the property where I live." She untied the strings of her apron and pulled it off over her head, pulling her baseball cap off with it. She crumpled the apron into a ball, pawing at it with her fingers.

He made notes on the small lined pad. Callie noticed that he was left-handed. He held his pen in the peculiar cramped position of those who struggle in a world made for the right-handed, his letters slanting tight and to the left. "How long have you known Ms. Hernandez?"

"I don't know exactly. A little over three years."

"What do you know about her family?"

Callie thought hard, trying to remember anything Celia might have said about family. Her mind drew a blank. Had Celia said anything? Did I even ask her about her past? She thought of the hours they'd spent together, watching movies, going for walks, riding bikes. For the life of her, Callie could not think of anything specific.

"I'm sorry. It seems so ridiculous. I just can't remember." Callie threw the apron onto the little table and collapsed back into the wooden seat across from the police officer. Putting her head in her hands, she let the tears flow. "I'm sorry. I just can't think right now. Give me a minute, will you?"

The officer nodded, "I understand," he said.

"You couldn't understand," Callie said, swiping her nose with the edge of her hand. "Celia is my closest friend."