

Prologue

Little Falls

The call came at three in the morning. Dan O'Keefe rushed into his uniform and drove out to the Clyde house, not because Darden Clyde demanded it or because it was Dan's job, though both were true, but because he was worried about Jenny.

He should have been used to worrying about Jenny. He had been doing it since signing on as his father's deputy eight years before, when she had been a bruised sixteen-year-old who always kept a distance from her peers and could never quite look you in the eye. He had worried when she was eighteen, when her mother died and her father went to prison, and he had worried in the six years since then, watching her become more and more of a pariah in town. He hadn't done much to help her. So he felt guilt.

That guilt was compounded now. He didn't want Darden out of prison any more than Jenny did, but he hadn't fought against it. So he felt guilty *and* he worried.

And then there was his shoulder. It always ached when bad things were in store. His father blamed that on his being a lousy football player, but those old injuries were long healed. Tension needled the scars, that was all. The shoulder had burned when Darden Clyde stepped from that bus onto Little Falls dirt at 6:12 the evening before. Now it ached something fierce.

He sped through a drizzle out from the center of town, straight down West Main, past houses so dark he wouldn't have known they were there if he hadn't memorized every inch of the town. A mile out, and the houses grew farther apart. Turning in at the only one with a light, he held the wheel tightly as the Jeep bounced through puddles down the Clydes' rutted drive. He parked near the kitchen door, which was ajar, took a pair of mud-streaked steps in a single stride, and pulled open the screen.

The kitchen was a tired pine — cabinets, table, and chairs -- with pink Formica counters and linoleum so compulsively scrubbed clean as to be the color of flesh, which at that moment was the most human element in the room. Darden sat on the floor at the end of a trail of mud. He was propped against the wall under the phone, looking like a wet rat, with his hair and clothes sodden and gray. His face was streaked with blood. He was cradling his right arm, favoring his entire right side. He raised only his eyes, as if he didn't have more strength than that. Even then, those eyes held evil.

'She ran me down,' he charged in an angry growl, 'knocked me right out. I was lying in the rain for hours. It took more hours to crawl in here. My hip's killing me.'

Dan couldn't have cared less about Darden's hip. He went to the door that led to the hall and listened. The house was dead still. 'Where is she?'

'How the hell do I know? That's why I called you. She ran me down with my own friggin' car and took off. That's hit-and-run, theft, and driving without a license.'

Dan knew that the Buick was gone. His headlights had lit up the empty garage when he had turned in off the street. But he figured Jenny might have ditched the car somewhere and come back. Yes, she told him she was leaving town and, yes, she mentioned a friend, but no one had ever seen the guy. Alone, Jenny Clyde was shy and insecure. Dan couldn't see her suddenly wandering off after all this time. Easier to see her crouched in the dark on the roof, taking her life in her hands on the rain-slick slate.

He headed that way.

'Hey!' Darden hollered after him. 'Where do you think you're goin'?'

Ignoring him, Dan made a fast check of the house. He braced himself against finding the kind of gruesome scene he had found there six years before, but he saw neither Jenny nor any sign of violence. Other than a wet dress on the bedroom floor and a nest of pillows, quilts, and newspaper clippings in the attic, everything was neat. The roof was deserted, as was, mercifully, the ground far below.

He returned to the kitchen.

'I could a told you she wasn't here,' Darden grouched. 'She took my car. Want me to say it again? She took *my* car. You have to look out *there*.'

Dan intended to do that. He knew Jenny wasn't much of a driver. He had caught her behind the wheel more than once and had given her a talking-to each time, but what more could he do? Ticket her for weaving across the road? Take away her keys? Haul her in for driving without a license and send her over to the county jail to be locked up with cokeheads and hookers?

What worried him was the possibility that she'd had an accident. There were many places around Little Falls where a car could go off the road and not be seen for days. He planned to check out those places. First, though, he wanted Darden to talk.

He pulled out a chair and sat. The remains of dinner, dried-up beef stew and half-eaten rolls, were still on the kitchen table. An upset bottle reeked of warm spilled beer. 'What happened here?'

Darden put his head to the wall. 'I told you. She ran me down and left.'

'Why?'

'How the hell should I know? I was having supper. She said she was leaving. When I tried to stop her, she ran me down.' His eyes were cold and hard. 'Find her, O'Keefe. That's your job. If you have to charge her, charge her. Just get her back.'

'Why? She's twenty-four and the farthest she's ever been from here was visiting you in prison. Maybe it's time.'

'The hell it is. It's time she was *here*,' the man argued, jabbing a rigid finger at the floor. 'She's had six friggin' years —'

'To do what?' the deputy cut in loudly. 'Escape? How could she? You busied her here keeping things up the way you wanted, and you told her how much she owed you each time she went to visit, and that's not counting phone calls. I can't begin to imagine what you said to her in those.'

'She's my daughter. She did what she did because she loves me.'

Dan came to his feet. He figured that if he didn't use his legs to get out of there, they'd soon be kicking Darden Clyde. He wasn't one for police brutality — actually he detested it, which was only one of the points he and his father argued about — but he was coming close to it now himself. He was that angry.

'Let's get one thing straight, scumbag,' he said. 'Jenny did what she did all these years because you scared the living daylights out of her. She should have sold the house after what happened here, but you wouldn't let her. She should have sold it or burned it or just left it and took off. I kept telling her to, but you kept telling her not to. You wanted her tied to those memories, you and your perverted mind. That poor thing suffered for a whole lot more years than you spent in jail, and you're the one to blame.' He leaned in, feeling a hatred so raw he could have spit. 'So listen to me and listen good. If I find that girl harmed by your hand, you'll wish you died in jail. Got that?'

Darden sputtered dismissively. 'You don't have the guts to touch me. Your daddy does, maybe. Not you.'

Dan straightened. 'And I've had more'n thirty-two years of watching him,' he warned, 'so don't you underestimate me. If she's harmed, you'll see just how deep my guts run. I got no use for you.'

Darden's face said the feeling was mutual. His eyes could have killed. The deputy rubbed his shoulder. 'Did she say where she was going?'

'No.'

'Do you have any *idea* where she was going?'

'She mentioned someone named Pete.'

'Do you know him?'

'How would I know him? I haven't even been back here twelve hours!'

'Maybe she met him up at the prison?'

Darden stared at him in silence, and, not for the first time, Dan wished he had pushed the issue of Pete with Jenny. He had let it be, because she had seemed happy enough, and Jenny happy was such a rare thing. Given the turn of events, though, he would have liked to know she had run off with someone good. He would have taken great pleasure in telling Darden that.

'Did she ever mention him to you before?' Dan asked. 'Did she ever mention any guy before?'

Darden grunted a no.

'So what'd you say when she told you about him?'

'I told her,' Darden snarled, 'she wasn't going anywhere.'

The deputy was willing to bet he'd said a hell of a lot more than that. 'What did she say?'

'She said she was.'

'So you went back and forth on it. Was that all?'

'What do you mean, 'was that all?'

'Did you hit her?'

'I don't hit her. I love her. She's my daughter. I came back here to take care of her.'

Oh yeah. Dan knew how *that* worked, and told Darden so with a look. 'Did you touch her?'

'I didn't go *near* her. Go *after* her, O'Keefe. Every minute you sit here asking your blasted questions, she's getting farther away.'

That was Dan's point, assuming Jenny was alive and well and escaping Darden like she should have done years before. If that was the case, he wanted to give her as much of a lead as he could.

If she'd been in an accident, though, he needed to find her.

He went to the phone and called the community hospital two towns over for an ambulance to come for Darden. Trusting that the man wasn't going far, he left him sitting alone on the floor, took the flashlight from the Jeep, and went out searching for Jenny on the grounds near the house and in the woods. While he was at it, he looked for something to suggest that a motorcycle had been around. Jenny had said her Pete drove one of those. But Dan came up empty on both counts. So he set off to search for her in the Jeep.

By the time the sun rose, he had covered every mile of road in Little Falls, but he hadn't come across the Buick either parked, stalled, or crashed. He stopped at his parents' place to fill in his

father, who was too busy standing in front of the radio talking back to Imus to pay Dan much heed, and was quite content to leave the search for Jenny in his hands — which pleased Dan. He knew he would do a better job of it simply because he cared. His father had been the chief of police in Little Falls for nearly forty years; he was bored, blase, hardened.

Dan was none of those things. Feeling a growing urgency, he returned to the garage that housed the police station and made a handful of calls. Once he had the neighboring police chiefs on alert for the Buick, he headed out again himself.

By his figuring, he was one of only three people in whom Jenny might have confided about her plans to leave town. The other two were Miriam Goodman, who did catering throughout the state from her little kitchen here in town, and the Congregational Church's own Reverend Putty. Dan talked with both. Neither could shed any light on where she might be.

He covered the roads again, in daylight this time, but the end result was the same. So he returned to town for coffee and eggs at the luncheonette. He guessed that if anyone knew anything, he would pick it up there.

The only thing he picked up was the extent of the ill will the townsfolk held toward Darden Clyde. No one seemed pleased that he hadn't suffered a broken hip after all, but only a lot of scrapes and bruises, or that all the while he'd been treated at the emergency room, he had been cursing Dan O'Keefe.

'He says you're aiding and abetting a felon.'

'Says you don't know diddly about proper police work.'

'Says if you had anything but you-know-what for brains you'd bring in the FBI.'

So reported Dan's friends with offense neither intended nor taken. In truth, he listened with only half an ear. Odds and ends of things were nagging at him. His shoulder was tight. His insides were shaky. His worry for Jenny was growing.

He hit the road again, stopping to search every gully and turnoff, thinking that the higher the sun went, the greater the chance that it might throw light on something he hadn't seen on one of his earlier passes. By mid-morning, he still hadn't found a thing.

So he went to the quarry. He had already been there twice that day, but this time he did it just for himself. Pulling into a parking spot at its base, he climbed out of the Jeep. Clear as it was in town, it was foggy here, which was one of the reasons he had come. Fog freed the mind. It blurred truth and allowed for hope. The quarry was a place of dreams under any condition. The thicker the fog, the richer the dream.

His own dream? To do something good. To *do* something good.

Naive as that sounded, it was one of the reasons he had taken the job. A second was that back then he had tried but hadn't found his feet yet as an artist, and he needed the money. A third reason? His mother had begged him to take it, because his father couldn't get anyone else to do the work. Law enforcement in Little Falls was not inspiring. It consisted of delivering truants to school, drunks to jail, and addicts to the treatment center three valleys west. It entailed settling petty spats among the townsfolk and refereeing domestic disputes. It called for cruising the roads of Little Falls for hours on end, letting people think that they were safe.

Were they? It sure felt it right here, right now. Hard to believe evil existed in this place, what with the whisper of water against granite, the rustle of pine needles drying out from the rains, the scurry of creatures in the underbrush, and everything smelling moist and new. Fog left no shadows for demons to lurk in. On a day like this, the quarry had the feel of a church, a waystation on a path to heaven.

It was a fanciful thought — just the kind that his father would call the waste of a big-city college education — but it stuck in Dan's mind. There was something peaceful, even sacred about this place. He felt calmer standing here. Hopeful. Even his shoulder felt better, which was odd given the dampness.

He rubbed the shoulder. Definitely better. He breathed in a lungful of fog and looked around. Definitely hopeful.

How to explain it?

The quarry was a giant ladle, its bottom a granite bowl filled with spring water from high up the mountain, its top the dirt ledge that capped a twenty-foot handle and was a springboard for the town's fancy. Dan walked around the bottom of the bowl, stepping cautiously on granite still wet from last night's rain. He crossed the planked bridge over the runoff of the bowl, which gurgled rapidly downstream, and found himself on the far side, looking off through trees that came and went as the fog drifted, shifted, and bunched.

He had no idea what he was looking for.

Then again, he did. Following a hunch, he left the granite for a narrow path that wove through the trees. His sense of certainty grew as he worked his way over pine needles and tree roots, past snarled evergreen thickets, under overhanging boughs.

Even before he reached it, he knew what he would find. Darden Clyde's old Buick was hidden in the trees in a spot that few in town knew existed. He hadn't dreamed Jenny knew of it. He had underestimated her.

The Buick was empty. He knew that even before he looked. It was part of his certainty, as was the sudden knowledge of what she had done.

He bowed his head. A spasm of sorrow worked its way up from his gut and forced his head back with a moan. It was a minute before the sorrow gave way to guilt, and another minute before the guilt let him move.

Retracing his steps to the granite pool, he picked his watchful way around its edge, but there was no sorrow here. There was nothing heavy or tragic or dark. The air was lighter, brighter. His shoulder felt fine here.

It made no sense, of course. But there it was.

The fog danced over the water in playful little gusts. A thin spot in the mist caught his eye. He followed it from place to place, higher and higher, until his gaze rested on the dirt ledge above. That was when he saw the clothes.

He felt another spasm of guilt, but it didn't paralyze him. Fast now, he went to the far side of the quarry and began to climb. Boulder to boulder he went until he reached the ledge.

He recognized the dress right away as the one Jenny had bought at Miss Jane's and worn to the dance the Friday before. It lay neatly folded next to her underthings and the worn sneakers that had taken her many miles into town and back. Her footprints were small and delicate, which few people thought of Jenny as being because delicacy suggested fragility, which suggested vulnerability, which suggested innocence, which should have inspired protectiveness. But Little Falls hadn't protected Jenny Clyde any more than Dan had. He would live with that knowledge for the rest of his life.

Small, delicate, lonely footprints were the sole markings on dirt that earlier had been washed smooth by the rain. If she had been with a fellow, he hadn't accompanied her here. The map was clear, a trail from the spot where Dan stood, to the one where she had removed her clothes, to the very edge where she had let her heels take her weight while her toes went ahead. Then nothing.

The odds and ends that had nagged at him earlier now fit into a single piece. All the little things Jenny had done that had unsettled him over the past months, even more so over the last few days, made sense. Had he been sharper, he might have seen the emerging picture.

No. Sharpness had nothing to do with it. He hadn't added up the signs in Jenny, because he hadn't wanted to know the sum. Knowing it would have meant acting on it, and he was a party of one in this town, at least where feeling bad for Jenny Clyde was concerned.

He studied the water. It was calm, still, smug in its silence. They would dredge it, but her body might well have drifted downstream in the rush of water that had followed the storm. They would track the shores in case the body had washed up, but most never did. The annals of Little Falls contained other such suicides, and in none of those had a body ever appeared. According to popular lore, what the quarry swallowed never came back up.

Seeing nothing in the water, Dan ran his eye slowly around the rim of the bowl and into the edge of the woods. The fog played games with him now, creating the semblance of something alive, something human, before clearing and leaving nothing but stone, trees, moss.

Suicide was a sin. Dan couldn't condone what Jenny had done. But he knew how narrow her world had been. Within that narrow world, she had chosen what she had seen to be the lesser of two evils. He couldn't find it in himself to condemn her for that.

Darden Clyde was another matter. It struck Dan that Jenny had exacted the purest form of justice. In killing herself, she had robbed Darden of what he had most perversely wanted. She had left him alone in a hell of his own making.

That pleased Dan. He wanted Darden tormented, and he wanted Jenny free. Though he grieved for her, he felt content. He guessed that was why the ache in his shoulder was gone.

Suddenly tired, he drew in a deep breath. Exhaling, he hooked his hands on the waistband of his trousers. There was work to do. He should call in the report and get help here for the more focused search that would have to be done. But not yet. Not for another minute. There was something about this place, something peaceful, something at odds with the idea that a life had been lost here last night. Dan wanted to think that it was the spirit of Jenny Clyde wafting through the woods — Jenny Clyde free at last, and happy.

Then the fog shifted. A flash of red, far below, caught his eye. He grew alert. The flash of red moved only the smallest bit, but it was enough to get him going.

Unexpectedly, as he hurried back down, he felt a stab of disappointment. He had wanted Jenny to escape. There was no life for her here, not with Darden back. On the heels of that thought, the germ of another took root. If doing good was what mattered, there was possibility here.

He raced down the boulder trail, sliding part of the way in his rush and not minding the sting in the least. At the bottom, he jogged into the woods toward the spot where the flash of red had appeared. He slowed as he neared, fearing that she would be spooked and would run away. But Jenny Clyde wasn't moving. She was huddled over herself, a pitiful little bundle of shivering flesh with her face buried in her knees and her red hair shockingly vivid against all that pale skin.

As he trotted the last few steps, he removed his jacket. He knelt by her side, covered her, and scooped her up. Without a word, he headed back to the Jeep. Once there, he tucked her inside, curled low enough in the passenger's seat that she would not be seen. Then he slid behind the wheel and drove off.

He took the back road out of town, the one he knew he would have to himself. When Jenny continued to shiver, he turned up the heat. She kept her head buried and didn't say a word. He drove on.

When he was well past the town limits and into a zone where his car phone reception was strong, he called information, got the number he wanted, and spent three minutes talking with an old college friend, who was perfectly happy to take two hours from work and meet him halfway.

His father would have been livid. 'Obstruction of justice!' he would bellow, ever the stickler about following the letter of the law. 'You're in big trouble, Dan-O, and so's your friend. Is this what I sent you to college for?'

But his father would never know. Nor would anyone else in town. The quarry would be dredged and the streambed searched. The consensus would be that her body had either been carried into the deeper, rougher whitewater of the river and wedged under a bed of rock, or lost to whatever mysterious force ruled the quarry.

The cause didn't matter, only the effect. For all practical purposes, Jenny Clyde was dead.

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