

Whispers At Midnight

June 28

"I hear you two had a fight."

Matt Converse watched the boyfriend's eyes. They flicked away, came back almost immediately. The guy -- Keith Kenan, thirty-six years old, one divorce, employed on the line at Honda for five years and resident of Benton for that same period, clean police record except for one brawl over in Savannah two years back and a couple of old DUIs -- was nervous. Nervous didn't always equal guilt, but it bore watching.

"Who told you that?"

Matt shrugged noncommittally.

"So what if we did? That don't mean anything. Everybody has fights." Kenan's tone was defensive. He was getting agitated. Matt observed the quickening of his breathing, the tightening of his jaw, the narrowing of his eyes, with clinical detachment. Kenan was a big, burly guy with a dark blond buzz cut, smallish pale blue eyes, and a tattoo of a heart pierced by a dagger on one pumped-up biceps, which was bared by the ratty tank top he was wearing with black nylon gym shorts. The two of them were standing in the combination living/dining room of the apartment Kenan shared with Marsha Hughes.

Correction: had shared. Marsha Hughes had been missing for just over a week. This was Matt's second conversation with Kenan. He'd first talked to him five days ago, after one of Marsha's friends at work had become concerned enough about her unexplained absence to report it to the sheriff's department.

"Everybody has fights," Matt conceded. Kenan started to pace. Matt took advantage of his distraction to glance around. Except for a single meal's worth of dishes on the dining-room table -- apparently the previous night's supper because, upon answering the door, Kenan had complained about being roused from bed -- the apartment was neat. Furniture by Sam's Club or Wal-Mart. Worn green carpet. Gold drapes drawn against the bright morning sun. Walls painted white, hung with a few nondescript prints. As far as he could tell, nothing out of the ordinary. No telltale brown stains on the carpet. No suspicious dark spatters on the walls. No corpse sticking out from under the couch.

Matt's mouth quirked wryly. If it were only that easy.

"Look, Sheriff, I ain't stupid. I know what you're getting at," Kenan burst out, turning to face him. "I didn't lay a hand on Marsha, I swear."

"Nobody's saying you did." Matt's voice was calm, his demeanor non-confrontational. No point in provoking Kenan by escalating the discussion into more than it needed to be at this stage of the investigation. It was still quite possible that Marsha had left on her own; she could turn up alive and well somewhere at any minute. On the other hand, he didn't like the feel of things. Call it instinct, call it applied common sense, call it whatever you wanted, but he didn't think that a woman who'd lived in the area most of her life, who'd shown up like clockwork since she'd started at the Winn-Dixie eight years ago, who had regular habits and a good number of friends, would light out to parts unknown without letting somebody know.

"She just took off," Kenan said. "She got in her car and took off. That's what happened. That's it."

Matt took his time. "Mind telling me what the fight was about?" Kenan looked harassed. "Baloney, all right? I had some baloney in the refrigerator and it was gone when I got home from work and went to make a sandwich. Turns out she'd fed it to a damned dog." He took a deep breath. "It was stupid. Just one of those stupid things."

Over Kenan's shoulder, Matt watched his deputy, Antonio Johnson, emerge from the bathroom down the hall. Antonio would turn fifty in two weeks. He was black, a little less than six feet tall and nearly as wide, built like a linebacker gone to seed. He had a bulldog's pugnacious face, a more or less permanent scowl, and basically looked like a thug in deputy's uniform. He had asked to use the john right after Kenan had let them in, as a way of getting a look at the areas of the apartment the sheriff or his deputy were not normally allowed to see without benefit of a search warrant. It was a ploy they had used before, and would use again. Sometimes it netted them valuable information. Today, apparently, they weren't going to be so lucky. Antonio replied to his questioning look with a negative jerk of the head.

"Thanks," Antonio said to Kenan as he joined them in the living room. Kenan nodded, then glanced back at Matt.

"I didn't do nothing to her," he said, wetting his lips. "I swear to God."

Matt looked at him. Kenan held his gaze.

"You mean besides yell at her," Matt said agreeably. "And chase her down the stairs and out of the building. Isn't that what happened that night?"

Kenan didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The breath he sucked in through his teeth was as much confirmation as Matt needed this side of the courtroom.

"Might as well give it up," Antonio said, folding his arms across his massive chest and glowering at Kenan. "*We know.*"

Matt barely stopped himself from casting his deputy a wry glance. What they knew was basically what Kenan and the neighbors had already told them: Marsha Hughes had had a fight with him, had left or been chased from the apartment and had not been seen by anyone important to her since. Without any kind of solid evidence that Marsha had come to harm, what they knew didn't amount to a hill of beans. There was no case. But Antonio was an optimist. He was always thinking that if he applied enough pressure, potential suspects would crack, confessing all and saving everybody concerned a boatload of time and trouble.

Sometimes it even worked.

Kenan's expression changed. His lip curled angrily as his eyes slashed to Matt. "I saw you talking to that damned Myer woman the other day. Stayin' home all the time, claiming she hurt her back and can't work, getting her kicks butting into other people's business." His voice was tight with resentment. "She's the one who told you that, right?"

"Actually, everybody in the building who was home that night pretty much says the same thing." Matt's demeanor was still mild, still neutral, although he made a mental note to keep an eye on Audrey Myer, who had indeed been the primary source of his information, in case Kenan should live up to his hair color and try something stupid. Reaching for a brass-framed picture of Kenan with Marsha, whom he recognized from a photo he'd collected for identification purposes on his first visit to the apartment, Matt paused and glanced at Kenan before picking it up. "Do you mind?"

"Help yourself." The tension in his voice was still palpable.

Matt picked up the picture and made a show of examining it. It was a snapshot rather than a formal portrait, obviously taken at a fair or amusement park, showing the two of them dressed up in old-fashioned clothes, including a big picture hat for Marsha that hid most of her red hair. They were grinning at the camera, their arms around each other, clearly on good terms at that moment.

At another moment, had Kenan killed her?

"Good-looking woman," he said, putting the picture back down on the end table. His gaze slid to Kenan again. "You must be worried sick about her."

The point being that so far Kenan had shown no sign of being unduly concerned over Marsha's fate. Chalk up one more red flag. Of course, it was possible that Kenan was a still-waters-run-deep type, with a lot more going on beneath the surface than Matt had been able to discern. It was also possible that Kenan simply wasn't all that sorry she was gone, which still didn't make him guilty of a crime.

The thing about it was, Matt wasn't even a hundred percent sure that a crime had been committed here. His gut instinct said that Marsha Hughes's prospects for turning up unharmed did not look good, but then, his gut instinct had steered him wrong before.

"I am," Kenan said. Belligerently.

Matt took note of the tone, of the clenching of Kenan's fists, the reddening of his face.

"You've been known to hit her." Matt's voice was almost gentle. His purpose was to uncover information, not to accuse.

"Who told you that?" Kenan responded. He was breathing heavily even though he was no longer pacing.

Matt shrugged.

"Goddamned nosy-ass neighbors." A muscle in his jaw worked. His stance had shifted, become aggressive, with legs braced apart, shoulders rigid, fists clenched into tight bunches by his sides. His eyes were hard as they met Matt's. "Look, like I said, we had fights. Marsha's no angel, either. Anything I did to her, believe me, she gave as good as she got."

"Did you hit her the night she disappeared?"

"No! No. I didn't touch her. She left, all right? We had a fight and she left. She got in her car and I watched her drive away. That's the last time I saw her."

Antonio made a skeptical sound that was not quite under his breath. Kenan's gaze swung around to him. The look Kenan gave him was tense, angry. The interview was teetering on the brink of turning ugly, Matt realized. Pushing Kenan to the point of clamming up and calling a lawyer would be counterproductive. Time to hang it up for now.

"Well, thanks for your cooperation. We'll be in touch," Matt said, offering his hand before the encounter deteriorated irredeemably. After the briefest of hesitations, Kenan shook it. Antonio shook hands, too. It was clear from the expression on his face that he did so with reluctance. Making nice with those he considered bad guys was not one of Antonio's strong suits.

Antonio tended to take crime personally. Matt had spent a considerable amount of time in the two years since he'd been elected Screven County Sheriff dissuading Antonio from breaking people's arms and legs. Figuratively speaking, of course. At least, most of the time it was figurative.

Suppressing a sigh, Matt turned to the door, then glanced back over his shoulder with his hand on the knob as if he'd just remembered something.

"Just so you know: we've got an APB out on her car, and her picture and stats have been sent to every law enforcement agency in the Southeast. Plus we're still running down a few leads locally. We'll find her."

His tone was deliberately confident; if Kenan really was concerned about his girlfriend's fate, it should provide some small degree of reassurance.

On the other hand, if he wasn't revealing any concern because he knew very well where Marsha was, having personally put her there, it should worry him.

Either way worked.

"Yeah, we'll find her." Antonio turned it into a threat as he followed Matt out into the stuffy upstairs hallway.

Kenan closed the door behind them without another word. The sound, louder than it needed to be, echoed off the concrete-block walls.

"Think you could tone the hostility down a notch?" Matt asked as they took the stairs.

"We got him. That's our man right there. The guy's an asshole."

It was hot in the stairwell; the sound of their shoes hitting the metal treads echoed around their ears.

"Last time I checked, being an asshole wasn't a crime. As for any evidence against him, we don't have diddly-squat."

"He has a history of beating up on her. She was scared enough of him the night she disappeared to run out of their apartment. He chased her outside. We've got half a dozen witnesses ready to swear to that. Nobody's seen her since. What more do you want?"

"A lot," Matt said dryly, pushing open the door and walking out into the sweltering heat. There'd been a whole string of hellishly hot days like this, nine or ten together. It was ninety-nine in the shade, and humid. He'd seen it before -- the heat made people crazy. There'd been more crimes, petty and otherwise, in the last two weeks than there had been in the previous six months. His eight-man department was swamped. They were all working pretty much around the clock, himself included. Today he'd been fighting crime since five A.M., when Anson Jarboe had tried to sneak into his house after an all-night bender and been surprised by his wife, who'd been waiting in their darkened living room with a baseball bat. Anson's shrieks as she'd given him what for had roused the neighbors, and the neighbors had called the sheriff. It was now five past eleven, and he knew from experience that the day -- a Friday -- was just getting underway. After people got off work, the county would really start to hop.

All he wanted to do tonight was sit in his air-conditioned house in front of the TV set with a cold beer in one hand and the remote in the other; there was a baseball game he was dying to catch.

Fat chance of that.

"Well, I -- " Antonio began, then broke off, a grin splitting his homely face from ear to

ear. Alarmed, Matt glanced around to see what had prompted such an uncharacteristic display of glee from his typically stone-faced deputy. When his gaze lit on the cause, he barely managed to swallow a groan. He'd known it had to be bad to wrest that kind of grin out of Antonio, but this wasn't just bad -- it was awful.

"Oh, Matt, there you are!" Shelby Holcomb's face brightened as she spotted him. Waving, her face wreathed in smiles, she straightened up from peering into the window of his official car and headed toward him.

"Hey, Shelby," he answered, his pace slowing.

Undeterred by his clear lack of enthusiasm, she kept on coming. Slim and attractive at thirty-two, a Benton native who had moved back to town four years before to take over the local Century 21 franchise, Shelby had twisted her honey-blond hair up in some kind of fancy-looking roll at the back of her head as her sole nod to the heat. Her makeup was on in full force, down to the bright red lipstick that gleamed as the sun hit it. She even had on a suit, for crying out loud, a powder blue number with a short skirt and elbow-length sleeves, which he guessed was no big deal for Shelby despite the soaring temperature because the woman never seemed to break a sweat. Buttoned up the front, it exposed what Shelby no doubt considered an effective but tasteful amount of cleavage. She had on hose, and heels, and was carrying that damned notebook she was using as her latest weapon in the war of conquest she was waging. Not that he was about to fall anytime soon.

She'd been chasing him for years. Last summer, in what was one of the many brain-dead episodes that continued to distinguish his existence, he'd made the mistake of letting her catch him for a while. They'd hung out, had fun, gone to some parties, the movies, Savannah for dinner a couple of times. All in all, they'd had a good time. Then Shelby had started reading magazines with titles like *June Bride* and dragging him into jewelry stores and otherwise giving off all kinds of vibes that she was starting to pair him with "forever" in her mind.

Forever gave him nightmares. Forever wasn't in his game plan.

Forever and a woman? Not happening. At least, not anytime in the foreseeable future. Just the idea of being tied down to a wife and kids and a mortgage made him break out in a cold sweat.

He'd had enough responsibility in his thirty-three years to last him the rest of his life. No way was he taking on more when he was right on the brink of working his way free.

He'd come out with some lame speech in which not rushing things and her being way too good for him and his needing space had been the dominant themes. Then he'd run for the hills. She'd been gunning for him ever since.

"Matt!"

That voice was even more familiar than Shelby's, and came with its own set of worries. It belonged to Erin, the oldest of his responsibilities. He turned his head and spotted his

sister as she popped out of the passenger seat of Shelby's red Honda, which was parked behind his cruiser. A recent graduate of the University of Georgia, she was twenty-two, petite and pretty with short, tousled black hair and a mischievous grin, which at the moment beamed full-wattage at him. As their eyes met over the roof of the car, he couldn't help grinning back at her, albeit a little ruefully. Erin, blast her sweet but troublemaking little hide, had gone and gotten herself engaged to Shelby's younger brother, Collin, who had set up a law practice in Benton the previous year. As Matt was paying for the wedding as well as giving the bride away and Shelby had taken upon herself the task of organizing the event, the opportunities for Shelby to hound him had multiplied exponentially. It seemed like everywhere he went lately she turned up.

"Yo, Erin," he said with a touch of reproof. His sister knew Shelby was after him, and like the rest of his family -- along with half the damned county -- seemed determined to do her bit to help shoo him into the trap.

"I just wanted to get your opinion before I ordered the flowers." Shelby smiled at him with determined charm. Matt obediently stopped walking as she reached him and looked down at the notebook, which she was flipping open practically under his nose. He'd been through this drill before: she showed him something -- a picture, an estimate, a list -- and he nodded and said, "Looks great." Then she did what she wanted -- with his money.

It was expensive, but easier and safer than arguing.

This time, however, the amount in question was so high that he protested before he thought.

"Fifteen hundred dollars? For *flowers*?" He met Shelby's eyes. They smiled meltingly into his. Her lips parted. Her lashes fluttered. Alarmed, he dropped his gaze back down to the price list.

"I told her it was too much." Apology in her voice, Erin joined them. She was wearing short white shorts that showed way too much of her tanned legs, in Matt's opinion, and a lime green halter top that molded her ample breasts. Looking her up and down with a gathering frown, he made a mental note to have a chat with her sometime in the near future about the advantages of leaving something to the imagination. She apparently read his mind, or his expression, because as she met his gaze her grin returned and she gave a teasing little wriggle that set her breasts to jiggling.

He frowned at her, she wrinkled her nose at him, and they engaged in a potent but silent exchange of opinions as visions of convents filled his head. Then the sheer ridiculousness of the situation occurred to him. Somewhere, he thought, angels must be snickering at the idea that *he*, of all people, had wound up with three increasingly babelicious girls to shepherd into womanhood. It had to have been the cosmic joke of the century.

"It *is* a lot." Shelby sounded apologetic too as she curled surprisingly strong fingers around his elbow. "But I don't think the florist is being unreasonable. You have to

consider that besides the bride's bouquet, we need nosegays for the bridesmaids, and boutonnieres for Collin and the groomsmen, and flowers for the church and centerpieces for the tables at the reception and -- "

"Whatever you think," Matt interrupted, feeling hunted. His uniform was khaki, long pants, short-sleeved shirt, and Shelby was taking full advantage of the looseness of his shirt sleeve to slip her hand right up under there to caress his biceps. The feel of her soft, meticulously manicured hand sliding across his overheated skin was enough to make him remember that he hadn't gotten laid since he'd fled her bed at the end of March. Which was exactly what she had intended, he was pretty sure.

Antonio crossed his arms over his chest, looking thoughtful. "When Rose got married" -- Rose was the younger of his two daughters -- "I told her that she could choose between the flowers she wanted or the down payment on a new car. That's how much the flowers were."

"So what did she choose?" Matt asked, slightly interested.

"The flowers. Can you believe it?" Antonio shook his head at the folly of women.

"My idea is that we should just do the flowers ourselves," Erin said, giving Matt a wicked smile that told him she knew where Shelby's hand was. "We could get the cost down to five hundred dollars and still have practically the same thing."

"Whatever you think," Matt said again, desperate to end the conversation. The only thing worse than being kept abreast of every little detail of his sister's wedding plans was being stalked by Shelby at the same time. He hadn't realized it while they'd been seeing each other, but the woman had the tenacity of a bulldog; once she got her teeth into something, she never willingly let go.

More fool he for letting her sink her teeth into him in the first place.

The cell phone clipped to Matt's belt began to ring. He had a pager, but it could only be accessed by an employee of the sheriff's department. Many of his friends, neighbors, relatives and other assorted county residents preferred to bypass the whole official process and call him on his personal line. At least answering it provided an excuse for him to step away from Shelby without making his discomfort with what she was doing obvious. She looked after him in transparent disappointment as her discreetly dislodged hand dropped to her side.

Thank God Erin's wedding was only a little over three weeks away, Matt thought. He was starting to feel harassed to the max. On top of everything else, playing cat and mouse with Shelby without saying or doing something that would hurt Erin's relationship with her new family was getting old fast. It was no damn fun being the mouse.

"Got to go," Matt said as he hung up, feeling relieved and doing his best to hide it. He looked at Antonio. "Mrs. Hayden's out walking her dog down Route 1 again."

Antonio made a face.

"So what's wrong with that?" Erin looked from one to the other of them with a mystified frown.

"All she's wearing are her shoes and a big sun hat," Matt clarified. Mrs. Hayden was ninety if she was a day, and growing increasingly forgetful. Lately she had tended to forget to put on her clothes. This was the fourth time since the weather had turned nice in March that they'd gotten a call from a scandalized driver reporting that she was strolling naked alongside the road as her equally ancient shih tzu snuffled at grass clumps from the end of a leash.

"Can't somebody else deal with it?" Shelby asked with a hint of impatience, tapping her fingers against the cover of the notebook as if that were the most important thing in the world.

"She likes Matt," Antonio said, grinning again. Matt was beginning to realize that lately a great many of his deputy's rare grins were being had at his expense. "If any of the rest of us come near her, she clobbers us with her hat. She lets Matt take her home." Erin chortled. Shelby looked disgusted.

"See ya," said Matt, taking full advantage of what he could only regard as a heaven-sent opportunity to escape. He never would have thought it possible, but he found as he retreated in good order to his cruiser that today he was actually grateful for having been personally notified that Mrs. Hayden was having one of her more bizarre senior moments again. He'd rather deal with a naked nonagenarian than a love-thwarted thirty-something any day of the week.

With Antonio riding shotgun, he lifted a hand in farewell to his sister and his ex-girlfriend, then drove out of the parking lot.

The question of Marsha Hughes's whereabouts was temporarily put on the back burner as he sped off to make the county safe from the hazards posed by dotty old ladies.