

CHAPTER ONE

I must have been staring at the child. They were such an unlikely pair: the boy clean and neatly dressed, the man unkempt. For a moment our eyes met; his were frightened, seeking help. Or was it my old lady's imagination gone wild? No, I understood children. All those years of teaching elementary school, I knew this child was afraid. The man seated next to the boy nudged him and the child lowered his eyes.

As usual, the Broadway/Seventh Avenue local at Sheridan Square was crowded; I stood to one side to allow passengers to exit but the man pushed his way on, dragging the child behind him. A new rush of passengers hid them from my sight when the subway stopped at 14th Street.

Such a darling boy; why did he seem familiar? Of course! The child was the spitting image of that little tyke in the Cowboy Bob's Big, Bad Burger commercial. The commercial where the boy, dressed in chaps and a ten-gallon hat, twirls a rope and dances a hoedown with animated French-fried potatoes. Big blue eyes and a warm smile people returned. But this adorable child wasn't smiling.

The train stopped at several more stations. Where were we? I couldn't see a thing with that portly gentleman standing directly in front of me. I craned my neck to see around him but garish sprays of graffiti obscured the sign indicating the station; I could barely decipher the lettering. This stop was Columbus Circle; the next would be Lincoln Center. Folding my unread magazine, I clutched my purse and umbrella and murmured, "Excuse me. Pardon me," over and over again as I tried to make my way through the throng. I managed to reach the door just as the train announced its arrival at the 66th Street station with a nerve-jangling screech.

Two extremely rude teenagers blocked the door. One was lost in the cacophony of sound that leaked from his oversized earphones. The other was engrossed in paring his fingernails. A gentle thrust with the tip of my umbrella and I was able to make my exit.

The child and his companion were about fifteen feet ahead of me. When the boy looked back, I thought I could see his lower lip tremble. Impossible, he was too far away and my vision, though I hate to admit it, is not what it used to be. The man placed his hand on the child's shoulder; they picked up their pace, reached the stairway and melted into the crowd.

Was it the young actor who performed in the commercial or was it someone who looked very much like him? And why wasn't he attending class this morning? Today was Tuesday, a school day. A very special Tuesday for a retired gentlewoman like me; at 9:45, Alan Gilbert was scheduled to conduct the New York Philharmonic in an open rehearsal of Strauss "tunes" at Lincoln Center. The public was invited to attend. I eagerly awaited a morning spent with Mr. Gilbert and was pleased to have obtained a \$10 ticket. It wasn't often I could afford such a treat. My concern for the boy abated as I thought about the music, Maestro Gilbert and what was reputed to be the maestro's "*blazing heat and power.*"

The traffic light turned yellow, then green. Car horns blasted the air with impatience. I checked to see if the vehicles flowing past would obey the signal, since at my age the body slows a bit, and was about to step off the curb, when the little boy tugged at the sleeve of my jacket.

"Ma'am." The child gasped, then took a deep breath. "Help me."

"What is wrong, child?"

I never heard his answer. There was a sharp poke in the small of my back and the next thing I knew I lay sprawled flat in the gutter. A crowd gathered round-eyes staring, mouths jabbering.

“Should I call 911?” A stranger tucked his coat beneath my head. “Whatcha think, lady?” I was shaken but no bones seemed to be broken. The boy! I looked for the boy but he had disappeared.

A young girl handed me a wad of pink facial tissue. “They’re clean,” she half apologized, “just crumpled.”

A cab driver helped me to my feet and dropped some change into my palm. “Musta spilled out of ya pocket. Can I drive ya to the emergency?”

“May I drive you.” Oh, dear. I dabbed at the dirt that smudged my skirt, hoping I hadn’t embarrassed that thoughtful man with my automatic correction of his grammatical error.

“Thank you. No. I’m fine. Just fine,” I assured the crowd. A bruise or two would show up later—there was a red mark on my knee that would eventually turn yellow, then purple mixed with black—but except for the dirt and a ladder running down the left leg of my support hosiery, the only thing hurt was my dignity. The show was over.

A teenager handed me my purse, an old gentleman presented the umbrella and a button with a photograph of a dancing French fry. Where in the world had the button come from? The magazine was lost. The crowd dispersed and went about its business.

Ten minutes of tidying up in the ladies’ restroom at the Center and I decided I looked fairly presentable. I expected a morning spent listening to the Philharmonic would soothe my apprehension, and my expectations were met. Music is always a comfort and by the time the rehearsal ended, my uncertainties with regard to the man and the little boy had been rationalized and tucked away.

By early afternoon, I was sprinkling a bit of wheat germ on my yogurt when a bulletin interrupted the weather report on New York One. A photograph appeared on the screen with the caption Missing! A child was missing. Kevin Corcoran, age nine, the child I had first seen on the subway. He had never returned home from school. The reporter speculated—had the boy been abducted or had he run away from home? He was indeed the boy who played the part of Cowboy Bob in that hamburger commercial. In rapid succession, the commercial and an interview with the child’s mother, distraught—the poor soul begged for his return—appeared on the screen followed by a reporter interviewing the sponsor of the child’s commercial. The man had a distinguished appearance. His hair was gray at the temples, he sported a trim mustache and dressed in a conservative suit. There was something vaguely familiar and disturbing about his uncalled-for smirk. He mentioned the name of his company, Cowboy Bob’s Big, Bad Burger, an inordinate amount of times while offering a substantial monetary reward, in addition to a year’s supply of free hamburgers, French fries and milk shakes, to anyone supplying information that would lead to the capture of the perpetrator and the release of Kevin Corcoran unharmed.

“Then you believe Kevin was kidnapped?” the reporter asked.

“Kevin is not the sort of child who runs away. He enjoyed representing Cowboy Bob’s Big, Bad Burger.”

Past tense. Why had the man used past tense?

The voice of the announcer requested anyone having information regarding little Kevin Corcoran, age nine, call the hotline number that was now being superimposed over his photograph.

I made a mental note of the number and...no, definitely not...I would offer my help in person; a call might be overlooked by an inexperienced telephone operator.

Detective Lieutenant Timothy Brown’s precinct house, located in the East Village,

appeared to be as old as the neighborhood it served. I glanced at my watch, barely 2:00 o'clock but the smell of uncollected garbage permeated the atmosphere; I dared not breathe too deeply and held my handkerchief against my nose. It was unusually muggy for this time of year and I longed for a crisp fall day. Leaves changing color, apples in the greenmarket, vendors roasting chestnuts. Not in this section of the city. The entire district was in dire need of repair. The pavement, riddled with potholes and ruts, hadn't been resurfaced in years. There was hardly room for breathing space between the tightly parked cars and vans that lined the sidewalks. Police vehicles were parked, higgledy-piggledy, on the street in front of the station. I navigated this twenty-first century maze with some difficulty, finally reaching the worn cement steps where several police officers lounged, cigarettes and containers of coffee in hand, oblivious to their surroundings.

I approached the nearest officer. "My name is Augusta Weidenmaier. I have vital information regarding the Kevin Corcoran case and I wish to see the officer in charge."

"Detective Sergeant Marjorie Harris, Ms. Weidenmaier, I can help you."

"Young woman, I must insist on the officer in charge."

Detective Sergeant Marjorie Harris studied me for a moment. "I work with the lieutenant in charge of the case. Come with me, please."

I sensed a bit of mischief when the detective introduced me to Lieutenant Brown, a polite, though somewhat patronizing young man. He obviously entertained serious doubts about my statement; understandable, perhaps, from his point of view. There is an unjustifiable prejudice directed against mature women, I find it most frustrating.

"Ma'am, are you sure it was Kevin Corcoran? All that's been established is that the child is missing. Children run away from home. Kevin might be visiting a friend or relative. You could have mistaken another child for Kevin."

The lieutenant eased his strapping frame into a swivel chair patched with strips of friction tape. The chair, in need of lubrication, groaned in protest. The man's fingers tapped an impatient beat against the side of his archaic, metal desk. Except for a computer, everything inside and outside the station house was in need of refurbishment.

The button! I retrieved the button, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, from my purse and handed it to the lieutenant. He studied the picture of the dancing French fry.

"I'm sure Kevin dropped that as a clue," I said. "These buttons are used as promotions for Cowboy Bob's restaurants."

The lieutenant compared the button with cartoons imprinted on a cardboard tray holding a half-eaten Big, Bad Burger and a few leftover fries. He wiped his hands on an already crumpled napkin and asked Sergeant Harris to find the police artist.

"Thanks, honey," Lieutenant Brown said.

I pressed my lips together. It was, in my opinion, an overly familiar way for the lieutenant to address a subordinate.

The sergeant winced; she undoubtedly shared my view.

As the sergeant left the office, carrying a tray of dirty mugs, I caught the lieutenant eyeing the woman's lithe body. Lieutenant Brown, I surmised, was a rake.

"Lieutenant?"

"Excellent worker that girl—woman—sergeant," he mumbled. His ears turned crimson with well-deserved embarrassment. "A credit to her—the uniform."

When the police artist arrived, I began my description. "The perp, as they say on television, is a stocky man, muscles turning to fat, judging from the jowls of his lower jaw and

the pouches beneath his heavy-lidded eyes. His nose is veined, a condition caused by excessive drink, his hair dirty-blond in color and unruly. His teeth are discolored by the habitual use of tobacco. The man's best feature is his eyes—dark and hypnotic.”

The police artist listened intently to my description and, as the lieutenant and I hovered over his shoulder, produced an exact likeness.

“Your powers of observation are certainly acute, ma’am.”

I took that as a compliment. My impression of Detective Lieutenant Timothy Brown was, on the whole, favorable. A bit young for his position on the force but that, I believed, was a positive factor. No doubt he would prove steadfast and reliable.

“I believe the sketch will help you identify the villain, Lieutenant.”

“We’ll run it through the computer, ma’am.”

“Perhaps the child’s mother will recognize the man?”

“Unfortunately, Mrs. Weidenmaier, the ...”

“Miss Weidenmaier,” I corrected Lieutenant Brown.

“Yes, ma’am. Miss. Miss Weidenmaier.” He cleared his throat and shifted from foot to foot. “Ma’am, Kevin’s mother collapsed after being interviewed by reporters. She’s been hospitalized and is heavily sedated. We’re trying to locate other relations and we’re speaking with Kevin’s schoolmates and business associates. Of course, we’ll show them the sketch.”

“Perhaps it should be printed in the newspapers?”

“Not just yet, Miss Weidenmaier.”

“Oh, dear, Lieutenant, you mean it might make the malefactor nervous. No telling how he would react. We have to find his motivation, don’t we? I do understand. By all means, keep the sketch under wraps.”

“Under wraps. Yes, ma’am,” the lieutenant said and stared at his shoes.

“If I can be of any assistance with his schoolmates, Lieutenant Brown, please call. I had the pleasure of teaching youngsters for many years and they do respond to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lieutenant Brown said. “I could tell.” He promised to keep me informed, thanked me and escorted me to the front steps of his precinct house.

He had forgotten the television and newspaper reporters encamped there, hoping for a break in the story. When they saw the two of us together, they guessed correctly that I had relevant information concerning Kevin. Despite the lieutenant’s brusque, “No comment,” a microphone was thrust in my face and I was inundated with questions. A rather unsettling, though I must admit, exciting experience. Thankfully, I had enough sense to echo the lieutenant, but a photograph did appear in the late-afternoon edition of a tabloid better known for lurid headlines than content. The photograph bore the caption Mystery Witness! Needless to say my supper was interrupted several times by inquisitive acquaintances demanding to be told “all about it,” and refusing to believe I didn’t know more than I was willing to tell.

Just before retiring, I watched a television special on missing children. The children’s photographs, innocent and happy, contrasted with the faces of their families as they were interviewed. Children disappeared, never to be seen again, leaving loved ones to cope with guilt and despair the rest of their lives. Children stolen and sold, victims of sick minds or pawns in a game of love turned sour. I was witness to the kidnapping of one child. I should never have attended that concert; what had happened to my sense of responsibility? Never mind that I came forward; I must make up for my failure to contact the police immediately.

Sleep would not come. A large red welt had appeared on my right hip, one, slightly smaller, just below the knee. I would apply an ice pack in the morning. Vivid, unwelcome

images flashed before my closed eyelids. I dreamt of menacing French fries, hamburger rolls with the same smirk as the sponsor of Kevin's television commercial, milk shakes that rose and swept toward me in a tidal wave of froth.

The bedroom felt unusually hot and stuffy. My nightdress was damp with perspiration, necessitating a change. I decided to lower the window a bit more, then thought better of the idea. The apartment was on the second floor, a difficult climb but not impossible. I checked the lock; it had been purchased at a discount store and I wondered if it was adequate.

"You are behaving like a silly, old lady, Augusta Weidenmaier," I reprimanded myself, then plumped the bed pillows and ordered my mind and body to sleep.

I sat straight up in bed when the phone rang. The first call was a warning to keep my mouth shut. His crude language recalled threats sounded in the B gangster films so popular in the 1940s. I was fond of those films, tending to stay up long past my usual bedtime whenever a particular favorite was scheduled for showing on the motion picture channel. How would the caller have obtained my phone number? Of course, my missing magazine had my address clearly printed on the mailing label.

Heavy adenoidal breathing was added to the second and third calls. By the third call I was more angry than frightened, I set the receiver in its cradle with a heavy hand. There! That would give the scoundrel an earache he'd remember.

The shrill shriek of a car alarm disturbed the little that was left of my morning sleep. I awoke to find the bedding in disarray, the sheets wrinkled, a pillow thrown to the floor. Had I imagined the phone calls? The threats? Were they a sleep-produced fiction?

There were no reports relating to Kevin on the radio. I quickly scanned the pages of the morning newspaper; a gory murder occupied the first two pages, yesterday's story on Kevin had been relegated to the third. The child was still missing.

The theatrical page featured an article on fading Hollywood stars who had faked their own abduction to garner publicity to boost flagging careers. But Kevin's career was just beginning, and the boy truly frightened.

I washed the newsprint off my hands, then called the station house to check with Lieutenant Brown. He was unavailable. The clerk accepted my name and telephone number; the lieutenant would return my call. Fifteen minutes crawled by; the call was not forthcoming. Feelings of frustration overcame rational consideration. I wandered from room to room, stopping in front of Goldie's bowl. Who would have thought I could become so fond of a goldfish? The brassy creature was a gift from a former student's daughter. The seven-year-old had named him Goldie and Goldie remained his name. Perhaps he deserved something more original but when I received the present I was unaware of his distinct personality.

"Call me, Lieutenant, call me." I turned toward the telephone, willing it to ring.

Goldie stared at me as he swam round his watery world. No wonder. I was talking to myself. That would never do.

"Goldie." This time I spoke to the goldfish. "Goldie, I promise I'll find you a companion." I sprinkled his breakfast into the bowl. The sensible thing to do was enjoy my own.

I marched into the kitchen. A cup of Irish Breakfast tea and a slice of cinnamon toast and I would be ready to put on my thinking cap. A child had asked for my help, I would help that child.

What was the proper way to begin? The shelves of my bookcase were filled with mysteries; how would Miss Marple, Mr. Holmes or Jessica Fletcher investigate the child's abduction?

Who did it? How? When? Where? Why?

Suspects, of course. I composed a list of interviewees then a list of possible suspects. The criminal's motivation would be most important. Greed, power or perversion? Was the boy in danger? According to the news reports, Kevin had gone to school that morning, taken his first class. What happened next? Did any of Kevin's schoolmates see what transpired? Did he know the kidnapper? Was more than one person involved? Perhaps his classmates knew of someone. Heard something; a name mentioned? The boy might have confided in a chum. All boys and girls have a special friend. Yes. I would visit Kevin's school. I would begin with the children.