

MARY HIGGINS CLARK

THE QUEEN OF SUSPENSE

#1
NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER!



ON THE STREET
WHERE YOU LIVE

Acclaim for the
Queen of Suspense
MARY HIGGINS CLARK

ON THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE

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MARY
HIGGINS
CLARK

ON THE STREET
WHERE YOU LIVE

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For my nearest and dearest—
John Conheeny—Spouse Extraordinaire

The Clark offspring—
Marilyn, Warren and Sharon, David, Carol and Pat

The Clark grandchildren—
Liz, Andrew, Courtney, David, Justin and Jerry

The Conheeny children—
John and Debby, Barbara and Glenn, Trish, Nancy & David

The Conheeny grandchildren—
Robert, Ashley, Lauren, Megan, David, Kelly, Courtney, Johnny and Thomas

You're a grand bunch and I love you all.

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My daughter, fellow author Carol Higgins Clark, has been in the throes of writing her book as I write mine. This time our paths are parallel but separate but not our ability to communicate the highs and lows of creativity.

I have studied the writings of specialists in the fields of reincarnation and regression and with gratitude acknowledge the contributions I have gleaned from their writing. They are Robert G. Jarmon, M.D., Ian Stevenson and Karlis Osis.

For Fr. Stephen Fichter, many thanks for a last minute biblical confirmation.

I close with my thanks to my husband, John, and our wonderful combined families—children and grandchildren, who are named in the dedication.

And now my readers, past, present, and future, thank you for selecting this book. I truly hope you enjoy.

Tuesday, March 20

HE TURNED ONTO THE BOARDWALK and felt the full impact of the stinging blast from the ocean. Observing the shifting clouds, he decided it wouldn't be surprising if they had a snow flurry later on, even though tomorrow was the first day of spring. It had been a long winter, and everyone said how much they were looking forward to the warm weather ahead. He wasn't.

He enjoyed Spring Lake best once late autumn set in. By then the summer people had closed their houses, not appearing even for weekends.

He was chagrined, though, that with each passing year more and more people were selling their winter homes and settling here permanently. They had decided it was worth the seventy-mile commute into New York so that they could begin and end the day in this quietly beautiful New Jersey seaside community.

Spring Lake, with its Victorian houses that appeared unchanged from the way they had been in the 1890s, was worth the inconvenience of the trip, they explained.

Spring Lake, with the fresh, bracing scent of the ocean always present, revived the soul, they agreed.

Spring Lake, with its two-mile boardwalk, where one could revel in the silvery magnificence of the Atlantic, was a treasure, they pointed out.

All of these people shared so much—the summer visitors, the permanent dwellers—but none of them shared *his* secrets. He could stroll down Hayes Avenue and visualize Madeline Shapley as she had been in late afternoon on September 7, 1891, seated on the wicker sofa on the wraparound porch of her home, her wide-brimmed bonnet beside her. She had been nineteen years old then, brown-eyed, with dark brown hair, sedately beautiful in her starched white linen dress.

Only he knew why she had had to die an hour later.

St. Hilda Avenue, shaded with heavy oaks that had been mere saplings on August 5, 1893, when eighteen-year-old Letitia Gregg had failed to return home, brought other visions. She had been so frightened. Unlike Madeline, who had fought for her life, Letitia had begged for mercy.

The last one of the trio had been Ellen Swain, small and quiet, but far too inquisitive, far too anxious to document the last hours of Letitia's life.

And because of her curiosity, on March 31, 1896, she had followed her friend to the grave.

He knew every detail, every nuance of what had happened to her and to the others.

He had found the diary during one of those cold, rainy spells that sometimes occur in summer. Bored, he'd wandered into the old carriage house, which served as a garage.

He climbed the rickety steps to the stuffy, dusty loft, and for lack of something better to do began rummaging through the boxes he found there.

The first one was filled with utterly useless odds and ends: rusty old lamps; faded, outdated clothing; pots and pans and a scrub board; chipped vanity sets, the glass on the mirror cracked or blurred. They all were the sorts of items one shoves out of sight with the intention of fixing or giving away, and then forgets altogether.

Another box held thick albums, the pages crumbling, filled with pictures of stiffly posed, stern-faced people refusing to share their emotions with the camera.

A third contained books, dusty, swollen from humidity, the type faded. He'd always been a reader, but even though only fourteen at the time, he could glance through these titles and dismiss them. No hidden masterpieces in the lot.

A dozen more boxes proved to be filled with equally worthless junk.

In the process of throwing everything back into the boxes, he came across a rotted leather binder that had been hidden in what looked like another photo album. He opened it and found it stuffed with pages, every one of them covered with writing.

The first entry was dated, September 7, 1891. It began with the words "Madeline is dead by my hand."

He had taken the diary and told no one about it. Over the years, he'd read from it almost daily, until it became an integral part of his own memory. Along the way, he realized he had become one with the author, sharing his sense of supremacy over his victims, chuckling at his playacting as he grieved with the grieving.

What began as a fascination gradually grew to an absolute obsession, a need to relive the diary writer's journey of death on his own. Vicarious sharing was no longer enough.

Four and a half years ago he had taken the first life.

It was twenty-one-year-old Martha's fate that she had been present at the annual end-of-summer party her grandparents gave. The Lawrences were a prominent, long-established Spring Lake family. He was at the festive gathering and met her there. The next day, September 7th, she left for an early morning jog on the boardwalk. She never returned home.

Now, over four years later, the investigation into her disappearance was still ongoing. At a recent gathering, the prosecutor of Monmouth County had vowed there would be no diminution in the effort to learn the truth about what had happened to Martha Lawrence. Listening to the empty vows, he chuckled at the thought.

How he enjoyed participating in the somber discussions about Martha that came up from time to time over the dinner table.

I could tell you all about it, every detail, he said to himself, and I could tell you about Carla Harper too. Two years ago he had been strolling past the Warren Hotel and noticed her coming down the steps. Like Madeline, as described in the diary, she had been wearing a white dress, although hers was barely a slip, sleeveless, clinging, revealing every inch of her slender young body. He began following her.

When she disappeared three days later, everyone believed Carla had been accosted on the trip home to Philadelphia. Not even the prosecutor, so determined to solve the mystery of Martha's disappearance, suspected that Carla had never left Spring Lake.

Relishing the thought of his omniscience, he had lightheartedly joined the late afternoon strollers on the boardwalk and exchanged pleasantries with several good friends he met along the way, agreeing that winter was insisting on giving them one more blast on its way out.

But even as he bantered with them, he could feel the need stirring within him, the need to complete his trio of present-day victims. The final anniversary was coming up, and he had yet to choose her.

The word in town was that Emily Graham, the purchaser of the Shapley house, as it was still known, was a descendant of the original owners.

He had looked her up on the Internet. Thirty-two years old, divorced, a criminal defense attorney. She had come into money after she was given stock by the grateful owner of a fledgling wireless company whom she'd successfully defended pro bono. When the stock went

public and she was able to sell it, she made a fortune.

~~He learned that Graham had been stalked by the son of a murder victim after she won a~~
acquittal for the accused killer. The son, protesting his innocence, was now in a psychiatric
facility. Interesting.

More interesting still, Emily bore a striking resemblance to the picture he'd seen of his
great-great-grandaunt, Madeline Shapley. She had the same wide brown eyes and long, full
eyelashes. The same midnight-brown hair with hints of auburn. The same lovely mouth. The
same tall, slender body.

There were differences, of course. Madeline had been innocent, trusting, unworldly,
romantic. Emily Graham was obviously a sophisticated and smart woman. She would be more
of a challenge than the others, but then again, that made her so much more interesting. Maybe
she was the one destined to complete his special trio?

There was an orderliness, a rightness to the prospect that sent a shiver of pleasure through
him.

EMILY GAVE A SIGH OF RELIEF as she passed the sign indicating she was now in Spring Lake. “*Made it!*” she said aloud. “Hallelujah.”

The drive from Albany had taken nearly eight hours. She had left in what was supposed to have been “periods of light to moderate snow,” but which had turned into a near blizzard that only tapered off as she exited Rockland County. Along the way the number of fender benders on the New York State Thruway reminded her of the bumper cars she had loved as a child.

In a fairly clear stretch, she had picked up speed, but then witnessed a terrifying spinout. For a horrible moment it had seemed as though two vehicles were headed for a head-on collision. It was avoided only because the driver of one car had somehow managed to regain control and turn right with less than a nanosecond to spare.

Kind of reminds me of my life the last couple of years, she had thought as she slowed down—constantly in the fast lane, and sometimes almost getting clobbered. I needed a change of direction and a change of pace.

As her grandmother had put it, “Emily, you take that job in New York. I’ll feel a lot more secure about you when you’re living a couple of hundred miles away. A nasty ex-husband and a stalker at one time are a little too much on your plate for my taste.”

And then, being Gran, she continued, “On the bright side, you never should have married Gary White. The fact that three years after you’re divorced he’d have the gall to try to sue you because you have money now only proves what I always thought about him.”

Remembering her grandmother’s words, Emily smiled involuntarily as she drove slowly through the darkened streets. She glanced at the gauge on the dashboard. The outside temperature was a chilly thirty-eight degrees. The streets were wet—here the storm had produced only rain—and the windshield was becoming misted. The movement of the tree branches indicated sharp gusts of wind coming in from the ocean.

But the houses, the majority of them restored Victorians, looked secure and serene. As of tomorrow I’ll officially own a home here, Emily mused. March 21st. The equinox. Light and night equally divided. The world in balance.

It was a comforting thought. She had experienced enough turbulence of late to both want and need a period of complete and total peace. She’d had stunning good luck, but also frightening problems that had crashed like meteors into each other. But as the old saying went, everything that rises must converge, and God only knows she was living proof of that.

She considered, then rejected, the impulse to drive by the house. There was still something unreal about the knowledge that in only a matter of hours, it would be hers. Even before she saw the house for the first time three months ago, it had been a vivid presence in her childhood imaginings—half real, half blended with fairy tales. Then, when she stepped into it that first time, she had known immediately that for her the place held a feeling of coming home. The real estate agent had mentioned that it was still called the Shapley house.

Enough driving for now, she decided. It’s been a long, long day. Concord Reliable Movers in Albany were supposed to have arrived at eight. Most of the furniture she wanted to keep was already in her new Manhattan apartment, but when her grandmother downsized she had given her some fine antique pieces, so there was still a lot to move.

“First pickup, guaranteed,” the Concord scheduler had vehemently promised. “Count on me.”

The van had not made its appearance until noon. As a result she got a much later start than she'd expected, and it was now almost ten-thirty.

Check into the inn, she decided. A hot shower, she thought longingly. Watch the eleven o'clock news. Then, as Samuel Pepys wrote, “And so to bed.”

When she'd first come to Spring Lake, and impulsively put a deposit down on the house, she had stayed at the Candlelight Inn for a few days, to be absolutely sure she'd made the right decision. She and the inn's owner, Carrie Roberts, a septuagenarian, had immediately hit it off. On the drive down today, she'd phoned to say she'd be late, but Carrie had assured her that was no problem.

Turn right on Ocean Avenue, then four more blocks. A few moments later, with a grateful sigh, Emily turned off the ignition and reached in the backseat for the one suitcase she'd need overnight.

Carrie's greeting was warm and brief. “You look exhausted, Emily. The bed's turned down. You said you'd stopped for dinner, so there's a thermos of hot cocoa with a couple of biscuits on the night table. I'll see you in the morning.”

The hot shower. A nightshirt and her favorite old bathrobe. Sipping the cocoa, Emily watched the news and felt the stiffness in her muscles from the long drive begin to fade.

As she snapped off the television, her cell phone rang. Guessing who it was, she picked up.

“Hi, Emily.”

She smiled as she heard the worried-sounding voice of Eric Bailey, the shy genius who was the reason she was in Spring Lake now.

As she reassured him that she'd had a safe, relatively easy trip, she thought of the day she first met him, when he moved into the closet-sized office next to hers. The same age, their birthdays only a week apart, they'd become friendly, and she recognized that underneath his meek, little-boy-lost exterior, Eric had been gifted with massive intelligence.

One day, when she realized how depressed he seemed, she'd made him tell her the reason. It turned out that his fledgling dot-com company was being sued by a major software provider who knew he could not afford an expensive lawsuit.

She took the case without asking for a fee, expecting it to be a pro bono situation, and joked to herself that she would be papering the walls with the stock certificates Eric promised her.

But she won the case for him. He made a public offering of the stock, which immediately rose in value. When her shares were worth ten million dollars, she sold them.

Now Eric's name was on a handsome new office building. He loved the races and bought the lovely old home in Saratoga from which he commuted to Albany. Their friendship had continued, and he'd been a rock during the time she was being stalked. He even had a high-tech camera installed at her townhouse. The camera had caught the stalker on tape.

“Just wanted to see that you made it okay. Hope I didn't wake you up?”

They chatted for a few minutes and promised to talk again soon. When she put the cell phone down, Emily went to the window and opened it slightly. A rush of cold, salty air made her gasp, but then she deliberately inhaled slowly. It's crazy, she thought, but at this moment it seems to me that all my life I've been missing the smell of the ocean.

She turned and walked to the door to be absolutely sure it was double locked. Stop *doing* that, she snapped at herself. You already checked before you showered.

But in the year before the stalker was caught, despite her efforts to convince herself that the stalker wanted to hurt her he could have done so on many occasions, she had begun to feel fearful and apprehensive.

Carrie had told her that she was the only guest at the inn. "I'm booked full over the weekend," she'd said. "All six bedrooms. There's a wedding reception at the country club on Saturday. And after Memorial Day, forget it. I don't have a closet available."

The minute I heard that only the two of us were here, I started wondering if all the outside doors were locked and if the alarm was on, Emily thought, once again angry that she could not control her anxiety.

She slipped out of her bathrobe. Don't think about it now, she warned herself.

But her hands were suddenly clammy as she remembered the first time she had come home and realized he'd been there. She had found a picture of herself propped up against the lamp on her bedside table, a photograph showing her standing in the kitchen in her nightgown, a cup of coffee in her hand. She had never seen the picture before. That day she'd had the lock of the townhouse changed and a blind put on the window over the sink.

After that there'd been a number of other incidents involving photographs, pictures taken of her at home, on the street, in the office. Sometimes a silky-voiced predator would call to comment on what she was wearing. "You looked cute jogging this morning, Emily . . ." "With that dark hair, I didn't think I'd like you in black. But I do. . . ." "I love those red shorts. Your legs are really good . . ."

And then a picture would turn up of her wearing the described outfit. It would be in her mailbox at home, or stuck on the windshield of her car, or folded inside the morning newspaper that had been delivered to her doorstep.

The police had traced the telephone calls, but all had been made from different pay phones. Attempts to lift fingerprints from the items that she had received had been unsuccessful.

For over a year the police had been unable to apprehend the stalker. "You've gotten some people acquitted who were accused of vicious crimes, Miss Graham," Marty Browski, the senior detective, told her. "It could be someone in a victim's family. It could be someone who saw you in a restaurant and followed you home. It could be someone who knows you can get into a lot of money and got fixated on you."

And then they'd found Ned Koehler, the son of a woman whose accused killer she had successfully defended, lurking outside her townhouse. He's off the streets now, Emily reassured herself. There's no need to worry about him anymore. He'll get the care he needs.

He was in a secure psychiatric facility in upstate New York, and this was Spring Lake, not Albany. Out of sight, out of mind, Emily thought, prayerfully. She got into bed, pulled up the covers, and reached for the light switch.

Across Ocean Avenue, standing on the beach in the shadows of the deserted boardwalk, the wind from the ocean whipping his hair, a man watched as the room became dark.

"Sleep well, Emily," he whispered, his voice gentle.

Wednesday, March 21

HIS BRIEFCASE UNDER HIS ARM, Will Stafford walked with long, brisk strides from the side door of his home to the converted carriage house that, like most of those still existing in Spring Lake, now served as a garage. The rain had stopped sometime during the night and the wind diminished. Even so, the first day of spring had a sharp bite, and Will had the fleeting thought that maybe he should have grabbed a topcoat on the way out.

Shows what happens when the last birthday in your thirties is looming, he told himself ruefully. Keep it up and you'll be looking for your earmuffs in July.

A real estate attorney, he was meeting Emily Graham for breakfast at Who's on Third?, the whimsical Spring Lake corner café. From there they would go for a final walk-through of the house she was buying, then to his office for the closing.

As Will backed his aging Jeep down the driveway, he reflected that it had been a day not unlike this in late December when Emily Graham had walked into his office on Third Avenue. "I just put down a deposit on a house," she'd told him. "I asked the broker to recommend a real estate lawyer. She named three, but I'm a pretty good judge of witness testimony. You're the one she favored. Here's the binder."

She was so fired up about the house that she didn't even introduce herself, Will remembered with a smile. He got her name from her signature on the binder—"Emily S. Graham."

There weren't too many attractive young women who could pay two million dollars cash for a house. But when he'd suggested that she might want to consider taking a mortgage for at least half the amount, Emily had explained that she just couldn't imagine owing a million dollars to a bank.

He was ten minutes early, but she was already in the café, sipping coffee. One-upmanship? Will wondered, or is she compulsively early?

Then he wondered if she could read his mind.

"I'm not usually the one holding down the fort," she explained, "but I'm so darn excited about closing on the house that I'm running ahead of the clock."

At that first meeting in December, when he had learned that she'd only seen one house, he said, "I don't like to talk myself out of a job, but Ms. Graham, you're telling me that you just saw the house for the first time? You didn't look at any others? This is your first time in Spring Lake? You didn't make a counter offer but paid full price? I suggest you think this over carefully. By law you have three days to withdraw your offer."

That was when she'd told him that the house had been in her family, that the middle initial in her name was for Shapley.

Emily gave her order to the waitress. Grapefruit juice, a single scrambled egg, toast.

As Will Stafford studied the menu, she studied him, approving of what she saw. He was certainly an attractive man, a lean six-footer with broad shoulders and sandy hair. Dark blue eyes and a square jawline dominated his even-featured face.

At their first meeting she had liked his combination of easygoing warmth and cautious concern. Not every lawyer would practically try to talk himself out of a job, she thought. He really was worried that I was being too impulsive.

Except for that one day in January when she had flown down in the morning and back to

Albany in the afternoon, their communication had been either by phone or mail. Still, even contact with him confirmed that Stafford was indeed a meticulous attorney.

The Kiernans, who were selling the house, had owned it only three years and spent the entire time faithfully restoring it. They were in the final stage of the interior decoration when Wayne Kiernan was offered a prestigious and lucrative position which required permanent residence in London. It had been obvious to Emily that giving up the house had been a wrenching decision for them.

On that hurried visit in January, Emily went through every room with the Kiernans and bought the Victorian-era furniture, carpets, and artifacts they had lovingly purchased and were now willing to sell. The property was spacious, and a contractor had just completed a cabana and had just started excavating for a pool.

“The only thing I regret is the pool,” she told Stafford as the waitress refilled their cups. “Any swimming I do will be in the ocean. But as long as the cabana is already in place, it seems a little silly not to go ahead with the pool as well. Anyhow, my brothers’ kids will love it when they visit.”

Will Stafford had handled all the paperwork covering the various agreements. He was a good listener, she decided, as over breakfast she heard herself telling him about having grown up in Chicago. “My brothers call me ‘the afterthought,’” she said, smiling. “They’re ten and twelve years older than I am. My maternal grandmother lives in Albany. I went to Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, which is a stone’s throw away, and spent a lot of my free time with her. *Her* grandmother was the younger sister of Madeline, the nineteen-year-old who disappeared in 1891.”

Will Stafford noticed the shadow that came over Emily’s face, but then she sighed and continued, “Well, that was a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“A *very* long time,” he agreed. “I don’t think you’ve told me how much time you expect to spend down here. Are you planning to move in immediately, or use the house weekends, or what?”

Emily smiled. “I plan to move in as soon as we pass title this morning. All the basic stuff that I need is there, including pots and pans and linens. The moving van from Albany is scheduled to arrive tomorrow with the relatively few things I’m bringing here.”

“Do you still have a home in Albany?”

“Yesterday was my last day there. I’m still settling my apartment in Manhattan, so I’ll be back and forth between the apartment and this house until May 1st. That’s when I start my new job. After that I’ll be a weekend and vacation kind of resident.”

“You realize that there’s a great deal of curiosity in town about you,” Will cautioned. “I just want you to know that I’m not the one who leaked that you’re a descendant of the Shapley family.”

The waitress was putting their plates on the table. Emily did not wait for her to leave before she said, “Will, I’m not trying to keep that a secret. I mentioned it to the Kiernans, and to Joan Scotti, the real estate agent. She told me that there are families whose ancestors were here at the time that my great-great-grandaunt disappeared. I’d be interested to know what anything any of them have heard about her—other, of course, than the fact that she seemingly vanished from the face of the earth.

“They also know I’m divorced and that I’ll be working in New York, so I have no guilty secrets.”

He looked amused. “Somehow I don’t visualize you as harboring guilty secrets.”

Emily ~~hoped her smile did not look forced. I do intend to keep to myself the fact that I’ve~~ spent a fair amount of time in court this past year that had nothing to do with practicing law, she thought. She had been a defendant in her ex-husband’s suit, claiming he was entitled to half the money she had made on the stock, and also had been on the witness stand testifying against the stalker.

“As for myself,” Stafford continued, “you haven’t asked, but I’m going to tell you anyway. I was born and raised about an hour from here, in Princeton. My father was CEO and chairman of the board of Lionel Pharmaceuticals in Manhattan. He and my mother split when I was sixteen, and since my father traveled so much, I moved with my mother to Denver and finished high school and then college there.”

He ate the last of his sausage. “Every morning I tell myself I’ll have fruit and oatmeal, but about three mornings a week I succumb to the cholesterol urge. You obviously have more character than I do.”

“Not necessarily. I’ve already decided that the next time I come here for breakfast it will be to have exactly what you just finished.”

“I’d have given you a bite. My mother taught me to share.” He glanced at his watch and signaled for the check. “I don’t want to hurry you, Emily, but it’s nine-thirty. The Kiernans are the most reluctant sellers I’ve ever bumped into. Let’s not keep them waiting and give them a chance to change their minds about the house.”

While they waited for the check, he said, “To finish the not very thrilling story of my life, I married right after law school. Within the year we both knew it was a mistake.”

“You’re lucky,” Emily commented. “My life would have been a lot easier if I had been that smart.”

“I moved back East and signed on with the legal department of Canon and Rhodes, which you may know is a high-powered Manhattan real estate firm. It was a darn good job, but pretty demanding. I wanted a place for weekends and came looking down here, then bought an old house that needed a lot of work. I love to work with my hands.”

“Why Spring Lake?”

We used to stay at the Essex and Sussex Hotel for a couple of weeks every summer when I was a kid. It was a happy time.” He shrugged.

The waitress put the check on the table. Will glanced at it and got out his wallet. “The twelve years ago I realized I liked living here and didn’t like working in New York, so I opened this office. A lot of real estate work, both residential and commercial.

“And speaking of that, let’s get going to the Kiernans.” They got up together.

BUT THE KIERNANS had already left Spring Lake. Their lawyer explained he had power of attorney to execute the closing. Emily walked with him through every room, taking fresh delight in architectural details she had not fully appreciated before.

“Yes, I’m absolutely satisfied that everything I bought is here and the house is in perfect condition,” she told him. She tried to push back her increasing impatience to get the deed transferred, to be in the house alone, to wander through the rooms, to rearrange the living room furniture so that the couches faced each other at right angles to the fireplace.

She needed to put her own stamp on the house, to make it *hers*. She’d always thought of the townhouse in Albany as a stopgap place, although she had been in it three years—ever since

she'd returned from a visit to her parents in Chicago a day early and found her husband in an intimate embrace with her closest friend, Barbara Lyons. She picked up her suitcases, got back in the car, and checked into a hotel. A week later she rented the townhouse.

The house she had lived in with Gary was owned by his wealthy family. It had never felt like hers. But walking through this house seemed to evoke sensory memory. "I almost feel as though it's welcoming me," she told Will Stafford.

"I think it might be. You should see the expression on your face. Ready to go to my office and sign the papers?"

THREE HOURS LATER Emily returned to the house and once more pulled into the driveway. "Home sweet home," she said joyously as she got out of the car and opened the trunk to collect the groceries she'd purchased after the closing.

An area near the new cabana was being excavated for the pool. Three men were working on the site. After the walk-through she'd been introduced to Manny Dexter, the foreman. Now he caught her eye and waved.

The rumble of the backhoe drowned out her footsteps as she hurried along the blue flagstone walk to the back door. This I could do without, she thought, then reminded herself again that the pool would be nice to have when her brothers and their families came to visit.

She was wearing one of her favorite outfits, a dark green winter-weight pantsuit and white turtleneck sweater. Warm as they were, Emily shivered as she shifted the grocery bag from one arm to the other and put the key in the door. A gust of wind blew her hair in her face, and as she shook it away, she jostled the bag and a box of cereal dropped onto the flooring of the porch.

The extra moment it took to pick up the box meant that Emily was still outside when Manny Dexter shouted frantically to the operator of the backhoe. "Turn that thing off! Stop digging! *There's a skeleton down there!*"

DETECTIVE TOMMY DUGGAN did not always agree with his boss, Elliot Osborne, the Monmouth County prosecutor. Tommy knew Osborne considered his unceasing investigation into the disappearance of Martha Lawrence an obsession that might only succeed in keeping her killer in a state of high alert.

“That is unless the killer is a drive-through nut who grabbed her and dumped her body hundreds of miles from here,” Osborne would point out.

Tommy Duggan had been a detective for the last fifteen of his forty-two years. In that time he’d married, fathered two sons, and watched his hairline go south while his waistline traveled east and west. With his round, good-humored face and ready smile, he gave the impression of being an easygoing fellow who had never encountered a problem more serious than a flat tire.

In fact, he was a crackerjack investigator. In the department, he was admired and envied for his ability to pick up a seemingly useless piece of information and follow it until it proved to be the break in his case. Over the years, Tommy had turned down several generous offers to join private security firms. He loved the job.

All his life he had lived in Avon by the Sea, an oceanside town a few miles from Spring Lake. As a college student he had been a busboy and then a waiter at the Warren Hotel in Spring Lake. That was how he had come to know Martha Lawrence’s grandparents, who regularly dined there.

Again today, as he sat in his private cubbyhole, he spent the short lunch break he allotted himself glancing once more through the Lawrence file. He knew that Elliot Osborne wanted to nail Martha Lawrence’s killer as much as he did. The only thing that differed was their ideas of how to go about solving the crime.

Tommy stared at a picture of Martha that had been taken on the boardwalk in Spring Lake. She’d been wearing a tee shirt and shorts. Her long blond hair caressed her shoulders, her smile was sunny and confident. She had been a beautiful twenty-one-year-old who, when the picture was taken, should have had another fifty or sixty years of life. Instead she had had less than forty-eight hours.

Tommy shook his head and closed the file. He was convinced that by continuing to make the rounds of people in Spring Lake he eventually would stumble upon some crucial fact, some bit of information previously overlooked, that would lead him to the truth. As a result he was a familiar figure to the neighbors of the Lawrences and to all the people who had been in contact with Martha in those last hours of her life.

The staff of the caterer who had serviced the party at the Lawrence home the night before Martha disappeared were longtime employees. He had talked repeatedly to them, so far without garnering any helpful information.

Most of the guests who had attended the party were locals, or summer residents who kept their homes open year-round and would come down regularly for weekends. Tommy always kept a copy of the guest list folded in his wallet. It wasn’t a big effort for him to drive to Spring Lake and look up a couple of them just to chat.

Martha had disappeared while jogging. A few of the regular early morning joggers reported they had seen her near the North Pavilion. Each of them had been checked out thoroughly and

cleared.

Tommy Duggan sighed as he closed the file and put it back in his top drawer. He didn't believe that some drive-by had randomly stopped in Spring Lake and waylaid Martha. He was sure that whoever had abducted her was someone she trusted.

And I'm working on my own time, he thought sourly as he observed the contents of the lunch bag his wife had packed for him.

The doctor had told him to take off twenty pounds. As he unwrapped a tuna on whole wheat, he decided that Suzie was hell-bent on making the weight loss happen by starving him to death.

Then he smiled reluctantly and admitted that it was this lousy diet that was getting to him. What he really needed was a nice thick ham and cheese on rye, with potato salad on the side. And a pickle, he added.

As he bit into the tuna sandwich, he reminded himself that even if Osborne *had* just made another remark about him overdoing his efforts on the Lawrence case, Martha's family didn't see it that way.

In fact Martha's grandmother, a handsome and naturally elegant eighty-year-old, had looked happier than he'd have thought possible when he stopped in on her last week. Then she told him the good news: Martha's sister, Christine, just had a baby.

"George and Amanda are so thrilled," she told him. "It's the first time I've seen either one of them really smile in the last four and a half years. I know that having a grandchild will help them get over losing Martha."

George and Amanda were Martha's parents.

Then Mrs. Lawrence had added, "Tommy, on one level we all accept that Martha is gone. She never would have voluntarily disappeared. What haunts us is the terrible possibility that some psychotic person kidnapped her and is keeping her prisoner. It would be easier if we only knew for certain that she's gone."

"Gone," meaning dead, of course.

She had been seen last on the boardwalk at 6:30 A.M. on September 7, four-and-a-half years ago.

As Tommy unenthusiastically finished his sandwich, he made a decision. As of 6:00 A.M. tomorrow, he was going to become one of the joggers on the Spring Lake boardwalk.

It would help him to shed the twenty pounds, but there was something else. Like an itch he couldn't scratch, he was getting a feeling that sometimes came when he was working intensely on a homicide, and try as he might to escape it, it wouldn't go away.

He was closing in on the killer.

His phone rang. He picked it up as he bit into the apple that was supposed to pass for dessert. It was Osborne's secretary. "Tommy, meet the boss down at his car right away."

Elliot Osborne was just getting in the backseat when Tommy, puffing slightly, arrived at the reserved parking section. Osborne did not speak until the car pulled out and the driver turned on the siren.

"A skeleton has just been uncovered on Hayes Avenue in Spring Lake. Owner was excavating for a pool."

Before Osborne could continue, the phone in the squad car rang. The driver answered and handed it back to the prosecutor. "It's Newton, sir."

Osborne held up the phone so that Tommy could hear what the forensics chief was saying.

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