



Caught in a Bind

By Gayle Roper

Excerpt provided courtesy of www.gayleroper.com

Chapter 1

This time the trouble I got myself into wasn't Jolene's fault. Not that she helped matters any, but at least she wasn't the cause. Edie was. Or rather, Edie's husband.

Edie Whatley is my co-worker at *The News: the voice of Amhearst and Chester County*, where she is editor of the family page and a features writer. I'm a general reporter and features writer.

"Edie," I called across the aisle that separated my desk from her desk in the newsroom. "Are we doing a house this week for the Great Homes of Chester County series? Can I do the iron monger's mansion at Hibernia Park?" I thought of the big orange colored home set on the knoll above the gently sloping lawn. It would be fun to write about it and its history. Since I'd moved to eastern Pennsylvania several months ago, I'd found local facts and trivia fascinating.

There was no response from Edie. In fact, she didn't seem to hear me at all.

"Edie!" I all but shouted.

Still nothing.

I frowned at her. Edie was the kindest and most thoughtful of people. It wasn't like her not to answer, especially since she was doing nothing but stare at her CRT screen.

Then spoke Jolene, Queen of Tact, with her usual insight and understanding into the difficulties of life. "Edie, what in the world's the matter with you? You've been a mess all day. Get a grip, woman."

She scowled at Edie, her beautiful face contorted with frustration.

"Jolene!" I was appalled not only at her words but her acid tone. Still I had to admit that she got Edie's attention. Edie sat wide-eyed and blinking, skewered by Jolene's accusing gaze.

"Spill it," Jolene demanded. "We know something's wrong. What is it? Is it Randy?" Randy was Edie's fifteen-year-old son whose life journey kept all of us glued for the next painful installment. Talk about *As the World Turns*.

“Randy’s fine,” Edie said.

Jolene and I looked at each other, then back at Edie.

“He is?” I said with more disbelief than was probably good for our friendship.

“Well,” she hedged. “Probably *fine* is too strong a word, but he’s not bad.”

“He’s not?” Jolene’s surprise was equally obvious.

Edie’s face scrunched momentarily in pain as she understood what we had inadvertently revealed about our opinions of her son. Then she got huffy Edie-style. “I said he’s fine.”

“Well, if it’s not Randy,” Jolene continued to probe, unabashed at having hurt Edie, “then what’s wrong? Is it Tom?”

Edie flinched and smiled brightly. “Tom?” False little laugh. “Of course not. He’s fine. What could possibly be wrong with him?”

I frowned. A good question. What *could* possibly be wrong with Tom? He and Edie were the perfect couple. Being around them was instant tooth decay due to the sweetness of their relationship. I don’t mean just lovey, which I happen to think is good, or considerate, which I happen to think is necessary. It was the touching, the patting, the unconscious back rubbing and collar adjusting. Quite simply, Tom and Edie doted on each other and didn’t care who knew.

Tom was Edie’s second husband, and therein lay part of Randy’s problems. He didn’t like his stepfather.

Not that Tom should take that lack of appreciation personally. Randy wouldn’t have liked any stepfather. In fact, Randy didn’t like any adults as far as I could see. He also didn’t like many kids, and I strongly suspected he didn’t care much for himself either.

But Tom took the brunt of all the boy’s angst, anxiety and anger. More than once, Edie had come to work teary-eyed, only to tell Jolene and me about Randy’s latest verbal abuse and disobedience.

I’d seen a picture of Randy’s original father once. He was a giant of a man, all muscles and good looks, broad shoulders and charming smiles. He was Hulk Hogan with short hair, an amiable manner and a dress shirt, a Certified Financial Planner who over the years had made a mint in the stock market both for himself and his clients. Randy resembled his father in size and coloring, a fact that gave him immense pride.

Tom on the other hand was a slight man, 5’8” in his hiking boots, gentle, pleasant and balding. Typically of teens, Randy looked at Tom’s unprepossessing appearance and refused to think of him as anything but a wimp.

“He’s a car salesman!” Randy would mock as if automotive retail was on a par with prostitution. “Give me a break!”

I looked at Randy’s mother as she sagged at her desk. She did indeed look upset, unsettled in spite of Randy doing “not bad” and Tom being fine.

“Is Tom sick?” I asked Edie. Surely something like a major illness would explain her melancholy.

Edie shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

Not yes or not. *Not that I know of.* What an unusual answer.

I nodded. “Good.” I had another thought. “He didn’t lose his job or anything, did he?”

Edie shook her head quickly, actually smiling at the thought of Tom losing his job. “Are you serious? Hamblin Motors would fall apart without him.”

I reached out and pulled a discolored leaf from the philodendron that sat on the edge of my desk. I wagged it in front of Jolene to show her she’d missed it when she did her daily Gertie the Gardener check on all the office greenery. “That’s true about Hamblin’s,” I agreed. Even I, relative newcomer to Amhearst that I was, knew that Tom was Hamblin’s mainstay. Of course, my major source for this information was Edie, and I recognized that she was a wee bit prejudiced.

“He’s the best salesman they have,” Edie said, unconsciously straightening her back with pride. “He just won a trip for two to Hawaii because of his winter doldrums sales. Only ten prizes were awarded in the whole country, and he won one.”

“Hawaii?” Jolene looked impressed. “When do you go?”

“In three weeks.” Edie looked uncertain, then nodded. “In three weeks.”

“Then what are you so upset about?” Jolene wouldn’t let well enough alone. “I mean, Hawaii.”

“I’m not upset.”

“And I’m not Eloise and Alvin Meister’s little girl.” Jolene’s chin took on that stubborn set that meant she was taking no prisoners. Poor Edie was about to be slaughtered on the altar of Jolene’s curiosity and need to know.

“Jo,” I said quickly, “I think your plants need watering.”

Jolene glanced around the newsroom at the lush greenery that threatened to make the place resemble a nursery. A giant grape ivy that had once tried to eat me alive sat on the soda machine. A huge jade plant graced the filing cabinet, and spectacularly healthy African violets sat in perpetually blooming splendor on the sill of the big picture window at the far end of the room.

She shook her head as she checked the soil of the spider plant on her desk. Baby spider plants erupted from the stems like little green and white explosions. “They’re all fine. I watered them yesterday.”

“But those little yellow daffodils and the tall white ones look like they’re drooping.” I pointed to a cluster of pots on top of the file cabinet where the poinsettias had been at Christmas. If anything would distract Jo from Edie, it would be her plants.

“They’re not drooping. They’re leaning toward the sun.” She rose and went to them. “And those white daffodils are not daffodils but narcissi.” She deftly twisted the pots until all were facing the room.

My plant ploy didn’t work. Jo returned to her desk undeterred.

“Come on, Edie. Give. Something’s wrong. I know it. Of all the people who work here, you’re the most stable.”

“What?” I turned to Jolene, wide-eyed and blinking myself, to say nothing of irritated.

Jolene saw my look of outrage and grinned. “We all know I’m an emotional wreck,” she said conversationally. “Though you’ve got to admit I’ve been getting better in recent weeks.”

She paused a minute, looking expectantly at Edie and me, waiting for us to agree. After a short pause, we realized what she expected.

“Right,” Edie said hastily. “You’re getting better.”

I nodded agreement. “It’s church,” I offered. “You’re listening to Pastor Hal.”

Jolene shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.” Church was new to her and still made her uncomfortable. She returned to her commentary on office personnel. “We all know our noble editor Mac is so on edge over the buyout of the paper that he can’t even sit still, let alone think straight.”

Edie and I nodded. Mac was certainly acting strangely though I thought maybe Dawn Trauber, Director of His House, had as much to do with his foul mood as the paper.

“And you, Merry,” Jolene continued, “are so bemused over Curt that you’re always on some far mental planet.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said, miffed. “I am very much in control, aware and on top of things.”

She gave her patented snort, the unfeminine sound always a surprise coming from someone as lovely as Jolene. “That control and awareness are why Mac has been waving at you for the past five minutes, I guess?”

“What?” I looked quickly over my shoulder toward the end of the room. Sure enough, Mac was staring at me, his scowl so intense that his eyebrows were one long line from temple to temple. It was a wonder I hadn’t felt the laser beam of his frustration cutting between my shoulder blades.

“You could have told me,” I muttered as I rose from my seat and made my way toward Mac. “And Edie, ignore her. You don’t have to answer any of her questions.”

“Right,” Jolene agreed. “At least not until Merry gets back. She wants to hear what’s got you in such a tizzy too.”

“Jolene!” The woman would never quit.

Eddie smiled weakly at me as I walked past her desk. "I'm okay," she said with all the independent spirit of a groveling puppy. I looked at her skeptically. "Really." She gave me a shaky smile. "I'm just fine."

Even if her eyes hadn't teared, I don't think I would have believed her. I might tend to be too accepting for my own good at times, but I'm not completely without perception. Unlike a certain gorgeous co-worker I could mention.

Suddenly Mac's bellow tore through the newsroom.

"Eddie, for Pete's sake. Get over here!"

I stopped and pivoted to return to my seat.

"Where are you going, Kramer?" Mac snarled.

"But you said Eddie."

"I want you both."

I turned back to him and continued between the worn desks until I was standing in front of him. He sat beside the great picture window on the second floor of *The News* building, his desk at right angles to the window. He loved to sit back in his ergonomically correct chair and stare down on Main Street, feeling the power that went with the editor's position.

Or acting editor.

Mac had been acting editor for the past several months while *The News* was for sale. Recently the paper had been purchased, and Mac was going slowly insane wondering whether he would have a job come next Monday when the new publisher, Jonathan Delaney Montgomery, took over officially. We all understood Mac's uncertainty and had been more than charming and forgiving of his grumps and harangues.

After all, Mac was a grouch in the best of times.

Still, he was going overboard with his testiness, and at times like now, I found my teeth grinding with repressed spleen. As I saw it, the greatest danger in waiting for Mr. Montgomery to decide whether Mac had a job wasn't Mac's career. It was the incipient development of ulcers in everyone in the newsroom.

"Mac," I said as I looked across his cluttered desk at him. "Please be easy with Eddie. She's upset about something, and if you yell at her, it won't be good."

"You mean she'll cry?" he asked in disgust.

"Could be."

Mac looked at me with barely concealed contempt, whether directed at me for interfering or Eddie for being a possible cry-er, I couldn't tell. "I am always considerate of my people," he barked as Eddie approached the desk.

I bit my tongue and said nothing.

He turned from me to Edie. “Now, Whatley, I’ve got a great assignment for you.

I want you to do an article on spousal abuse.”

Edie shuddered and actually swayed. She put out a hand to steady herself, gripping Mac’s desk hard enough to whiten her knuckles.

“Edie,” I said, grabbing her elbow. “Are you all right? Do you feel dizzy?

Sick?”

“And you, Kramer.” Mac plowed on as if he hadn’t noticed Edie’s distress, and he probably hadn’t. “You are to do a profile of Stephanie Bauer, director of that organization that helps abused wives. You know the one. It’s down a couple of blocks on Main Street.”

I kept hold of Edie while I turned back to Mac. “You mean Freedom House?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Find out how the place works, and see if you can interview some of the abused women. You know, tear jerker stuff like you did with those pregnant girls at Christmas.”

I nodded. Not a bad assignment.

“You two are to work together on this thing.” Mac looked from Edie to me and back. “Got that?”

I nodded. Edie just turned away, removing herself from my support.

“Edie!” Mac’s voice was abrupt.

She turned a white face to him, but he didn’t see. He was looking at something on his desk. “Yes?” Her voice was a whisper.

“Do you understand what I want?”

“Yes,” she whispered again. She turned and began walking back to her desk.

“But I hate it.” The last was under her breath.

“What?” Mac barked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

I blinked and looked at Edie. She hated the assignment? It was a great assignment with lots of potential for a very interesting couple of articles.

I stopped half way back to our desks and put my hand on Edie’s arm. She stopped too and looked at me.

“What’s wrong, Edie? And don’t tell me nothing,” I said as she opened her mouth to say just that. She even got the *noth* out.

I liked Edie. She was a genuinely nice lady, slightly plump but cute in a wholesome way. She wore all her clothes a size too small, not because she wanted to be sexy or provocative but because she always kept hoping she'd lose that ten to fifteen pounds. Her fine light brown hair was cut shoulder length and hung straight, swaying when she turned her head. Her blue eyes were often sad, but if Randy were my son, I'm sure I'd look sad a lot too. I hated to see her so upset.

She looked at me for a minute, then looked at the floor.

"I just want to help," I said.

She shook her head. "Let it go, Merry." Then to my surprise, she patted my hand. "But thanks for caring." She turned abruptly and almost ran to the woman's room, a one person operation where she could find privacy.

I watched her go and as I turned back to my desk, I saw Jolene watching too. "We've got to find out what's wrong," Jo said.

"No, Jo," I said. "If and when she wants to tell us about it, she will."

Jo looked at me in disgust. "You're no fun," she said, but when Edie finally returned red-eyed to her desk, Jo kept quiet.

I spent the balance of the day reading the clippings on Freedom House and talking to the director, Stephanie Bauer, on the phone. I learned that Freedom House was established five years ago and that Stephanie had been its only director. I learned that in addition to providing counseling and comfort to abused wives, Freedom House sponsored training workshops for churches who wanted to know how to help abused women in their congregations.

I studied the pictures of Ms. Bauer and saw a woman about forty, very slim and attractive with great dark eyes and dark curly hair.

"I was an abused wife," she was quoted as saying in one article. "I know what these women are going through. I know their fear and desperation. I know their feelings of being powerless. I also know God can help them deal with the overwhelming helplessness. I know they can live again."

How did she learn to live again, I wondered. What specifics marked her flight from her husband to her position at Freedom House? Or had he reformed and she was still married to him?

"May I come interview you some day soon?" I asked Stephanie when I finally reached her.

"I'd love to talk with you," Stephanie said. "Tomorrow? I know it's Saturday, but my schedule is crazy what with the ministry, the Easter holidays and my kids."

I checked my calendar. I had rehearsal with the bell choir tomorrow morning for the upcoming Easter services, but I was free Saturday afternoon. Curt was taking me to the reception tomorrow night that Mr. Montgomery was throwing for *The News* staff and invited guests – not, of course, the invited guests of *News* staffers but of Mr. Montgomery. The reception was being held in the Brennan Room at City Hall, a wonderful place with a huge chandelier, beautiful wood wainscoting and crown moldings, and atmosphere galore. I thought it was savvy of Mr.

Montgomery to use one of Amhearst's prime places of pride for his welcoming reception. Endear himself to the local community and all that.

But first Freedom House.

"Is two o'clock all right?" I asked Stephanie.

"Will we be finished by three?" she asked. "I have an appointment with my daughter at three. We're going shopping. She 'needs' some spring clothes."

"We'll be finished by then," I promised. Then thinking it might fit into the article, I asked, "How old is your daughter?"

"Fifteen."

Just like Randy, I thought. Poor Stephanie.

"A teenager at the mall," I said, sarcasm dripping a bit too freely. "It ought to be an interesting afternoon for you."

"It will be interesting," Stephanie said, ignoring my tone. "I enjoy anything I get to do with Sherrie. We're both so busy! And Rob is no better."

"Rob's your -?"

"My son," Stephanie said. "He's eighteen. We've been filling out financial information for colleges all year, and the hardest part is finding a night when we're both home!"

When I hung up from my conversation with Stephanie, I glanced at Edie. Stephanie's relationship with her children seemed the polar opposite of Edie's with Randy. What made the difference? Both women had had hard times in their marriages, but one had fun with her kids and the other cried. I couldn't help wonder why.

It was almost five o'clock when Jolene said, "Hey, Merry, Edie, let's go get dinner together."

"Not a bad idea," I said. I hadn't been looking forward to a lonely Friday night. Curt was away overnight on a men's retreat, and he'd talked Jo's husband into going along. Apparently Jo wasn't any more anxious to fritter the night away alone than I was.

"Thanks, but I can't," Edie said. "I need to get home."

"But Tom works on Friday nights, doesn't he?" Jolene asked.

"Well, yes," Edie admitted.

"And Randy's certainly big enough to feed himself."

I could tell Jolene had been thinking about this dinner for some time, probably all afternoon. She'd figured out all the angles, something for which she was justly famous.

“He won’t be home for dinner,” Edie said, then instantly regretted it. She had just thrown away her best excuse to decline, which was obviously what she was trying to do without much success. Bucking Jolene was never easy.

With a sigh that was part pain and part capitulation, Edie shrugged and said, “Okay. I’ll just call and leave a message for Randy telling him where I’m going.”

I’m sure it wasn’t the most gracious acceptance Jolene had ever received, but she seemed more than happy. After all, she’d now have Edie in close quarters for an hour.

More than enough time to turn the screws.

“Now you be good,” I whispered to her as we waited for a table to open up at Ferretti’s, Amhearth’s one and only decent restaurant. “Edie doesn’t need you badgering her.”

“Me? Badger?” Jolene looked at me aghast.

This time I was the one who snorted.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Edie said as she came to stand in line beside me upon her return from the ladies room. “Have you been taking lessons from Jolene? I’ve never met anyone who can snort as well as she can – and still look beautiful.”

Jolene, about to protest Edie’s jibe, mellowed immediately when she heard the beautiful comment. Edie might be upset about something, but she still knew her way around a backhanded compliment.

I grinned. “I’m afraid it comes naturally. But I’ve gotten much more expressive at it since I’ve gotten to know Jolene.”

“Well, I like that,” Jolene huffed as we followed Astrid, the hostess, to our booth.

“Eggplant parmigiana,” Jo told our waitress. “Raspberry viniagrette dressing on the salad. And lots of garlic bread.”

“Spaghetti and meatballs,” I said. “Parmesan peppercorn dressing and lots of garlic bread too.” I looked at Jolene and grinned. “There’s something to be said for not seeing the guys tonight.”

“A cup of chicken noodle soup,” Edie said. “And a roll.”

“A salad?” asked the waitress.

Edie shook her head. “Just the soup.”

“You’re on a diet! How wonderful!” Jolene said with her usual diplomacy.

“I’m just not hungry,” Edie said, tugging self-consciously at the gaping front on her shirt.

“You can tell Tom’s coming home tonight,” I said, winking at Jo. “No garlic bread.”

And just like that, Edie began to cry.

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