



## *Caught Redhanded*

By Gayle Roper

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### Chapter 1

“I need to get in shape,” I said one summer day as I sat at my desk at The News: The Voice of Amherst and Chester County where I was a general reporter. “For the wedding.”

I didn’t mean for anyone to take me up on the comment, certainly not for anyone to challenge me to actually do something about it. It was merely one of those rhetorical statements I tend to make and neither expect nor want a response. Besides it was less than three weeks until the wedding. How much toning and firming to say nothing of weight loss could I expect in that short a time frame?

“You need to take up jogging.” Jolene Luray Meister Samson looked me up and down from her desk across the aisle. “You could use it.”

Just because she was beautiful and had a figure to die for was no reason to give me that condescending look of hers. I might not be up to her standard of pulchritude, but I was hardly ugly. Curt, my one true love, seemed satisfied, and what more did I need?

“Thanks, Jo,” I said dryly. “Just the encouragement I need.”

She nodded, taking my words at face value. “I’ll meet you in the parking lot at Bushay’s tomorrow morning at six-thirty. In spite of the August heat it’s still cool enough to run at that hour. We’ll take the path they have through the woods. It’s pretty, too. Goes beside a creek.”

I’m pretty sure my mouth dropped open, making me look like a fish out of water and gasping for air. I couldn’t decide which threw me more, the hour or the fact that Jolene seemed to be saying she jogged. I wouldn’t have expected one scintilla of physical exertion from her, not even running for her life. And I was supposed to believe she jogged regularly?

“What?” she asked, somewhat huffily. “You think I got this figure by praying for it? I jog three or four times a week.”

“Even in winter?” I was overwhelmed at the picture of Jolene in sweats, breath pluming behind her.

“Then I use the track at the Y.”

“At 6:30 A.M.?” Edie Whatley stared. She was the editor of our family page and a general reporter. She looked as shocked as I did at the thought of Jolene jogging at that hour.

“What is the matter with you two?” Jolene demanded. “Just because you always see me when I’m beautiful...”

She let her voice die, not because she was embarrassed to have called herself beautiful. She was a strong proponent of truth in advertising, even when it was self-promotion. Rather she’d just had an idea. I could tell because she narrowed her eyes as she looked from me to Edie and back. The newsroom at The News was small and looking from desk to desk was not in the least difficult.

“I dare you both,” she said. “I dare you to run with me.”

Edie and I looked at each other with more than a touch of disbelief.

“You’ve got to stay looking good for Tom, Edie. And you.” Jolene skewered me with one of her lethal fingernails. “You need to keep Curt interested. You’re not married yet.”

But soon, I thought joyfully. Soon.

“Is that how you keep Reilly interested?” I asked, not willing to tell her that I didn’t think a few pounds would make Curt lose interest. He was too much a man of principle to be repelled by something as petty as a few pounds. Not that I planned on gaining any weight, but I was wise enough to know that life happened. After all, Mom had once been a size ten.

“Jolene,” Edie said kindly, “Tom is fine with me the way I am. And I must tell you that I gave up dares in junior high school.” Edie was well past junior high school, high school, and college. She had a son who was fifteen. “And I am quite satisfied with the amount of exercise I get already.”

“Yeah. Me too,” I said, though I didn’t get any more than running from story to story.

“You’re afraid,” Jolene taunted, her eyes on me. Apparently she recognized Edie as a lost cause.

“Get real.”

“You know I’ll whip you frontwards and backwards.”

Somehow I doubted that.

“Tomorrow morning,” Jo said. “6:30. I’ll be waiting.”

And that's how I ended up winded, trying my best to keep up with the lovely Jolene who was proving herself a more than capable jogger as we traced the trail through the woods behind Bushay Waste Management. She wasn't even huffing in her Lycra top and jogging shorts, her perfect, long legs eating up the distance, her iPod clipped to the waist, the wire to her ear buds swaying with each step.

I, on the other hand, expected to fall over momentarily. My feet had never felt so heavy. I pressed my hand against the pain spearing my side.

"Wait for me!" I managed to get the words out between puffs. Why I ever thought this romp in the woods would be a snap is beyond me. You'd think I'd have learned by now that just because Jo looked like a piece of beautiful fluff didn't mean she was. Edie had warned me.

"Merry, Jo never speaks from a position of weakness. If she thought she'd lose this dare, she'd never have made it."

I waved her wise words away.

Even Curt cautioned me when he called to say good night. "Don't be too cocky, sweetheart. Jolene likes to win. Always."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, not the least bit concerned.

The early morning humidity made everything blur around the edges as I ran. At least I thought it was the humidity and not failing eyesight due to physical over-exertion. I tried to ignore the pains shooting through my shins at every step.

"Slacker," Jolene yelled back at me over her shoulder.

And that moment of inattention to the path threw us both into the middle of another murder.

I watched in horror as Jolene tripped and went down flat.

"Jo!" I forced myself to go a bit faster. "Are you all right?"

Now she was gasping too, the wind knocked out of her. "Fine," she finally managed in a raspy voice.

I knelt beside her as she pushed herself onto her hands and knees, still struggling for oxygen, head hanging. She held out one bleeding palm, and we inspected it carefully. She turned it over and breathed a sigh of relief. "No broken nails."

I'd been more concerned about broken limbs myself.

She sank back on her heels and held out her other palm. Scraped and slowly oozing blood too. She flipped the hand over. A broken nail, the middle finger. She said a few of the words that Edie and I were trying to convince her weren't ladylike. Obviously we had more work to do.

She climbed slowly to her feet, looking down at her knees. More oozing scrapes.

“Now how am I supposed to wear skirts with scabs all over my legs?” she demanded.

I thought of suggesting that she wear longer ones that covered her knees, but I knew a useless argument when I saw one. Fashion dictated short, scabs or not.

“Wear pants,” I said with an appalling lack of sympathy.

She gave her typical snort, always so surprising from someone who looked like her. Clearly she felt a mandate to share her beautiful limbs with the world. How she had become one of my best friends was still a mystery to me.

“I tripped over something.” She sounded as if whatever she had stumbled over had deliberately attacked her. She pushed to her feet with me helping by taking her elbow.

We turned together to see what had brought her low, and stared wide eyed at the foot clad in a gray and white running shoe protruding from the high weeds lining the path.

My pulse accelerated to a rate that far outstripped the hammering I’d experienced when jogging. I knew that where there was a foot, there had to be a body attached.

Oh, God, I prayed, unable to articulate all the thoughts that raced through my mind. I don’t want to look. I must look. What should I do if she needs help? If she needs help? Of course she needs help. She’s lying on the ground, and I doubt she’s just taking a nap.

Carefully I leaned over the weeds, following the line of the woman’s body, for it was obvious from the size of her foot and the shape of her ankle that it was a woman. She was lying on her stomach, face turned toward the left, away from us, sleeveless pink shirt twisted about her torso.

It was the gaping wound and the bloody weeds that made my stomach heave.

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