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SILENCE CAN BE DEADLY

Trouble in Pleasant Valley • Book Three



Deborah Sprinkle



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*To all the beautiful souls who support, encourage, and pray me through
each book. I couldn't do it without you!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How many times have you heard the phrase “it takes a village?” In my writing, as in so many other aspects of my life, I’ve found this to be true. Google is great, but it only gets me so far, and then I find myself in need of the wisdom and experience that can only come from people who have lived through an experience or worked a job.

People like CW3 Larry Myers, US Army (Ret) who helped me put together Peter’s backstory in Afghanistan. His experience in the Army CID proved invaluable. I’m blessed to call him and his wonderful wife, Nancy, friends.

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My village is growing, and all I can say is—I can use all the help I can get!

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to make my book as good as it can be. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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Above all else, I thank God who determines our steps and brought my village together—especially me and my husband, Les, my biggest fan, the love of my life.

And all the people said Amen!



Peter Grace angled his taxicab into the curb as skillfully as he once traversed the streets of Kabul. His cell phone lit up and skittered across the seat next to him. A number appeared he hadn't seen in three years, and his hands curled around the steering wheel, the muscles in his arms straining against his T-shirt. His last conversation with Lawrence Merton brought him nothing but misery.

He stared at the text box.

In town. Need to see you. Urgent. Call me. L

Memories from Afghanistan flooded his brain, threatening to wreck his hard-won peace. No way. His life may not be the greatest, but it was his, and he wanted to keep it. Lawrence was not going to get another chance to turn his world upside down.

"Peter, are you all right?" a soft voice said from the back seat.

He blinked. "Yes, Mrs. G. I'm fine." He jogged around the taxi and helped the frail woman onto the sidewalk.

"What do I owe you?" She opened her small purse.

Peter laid a hand on her slim fingers. "We'll settle up later. Okay?"

She raised blue eyes, cloudy with cataracts. “If you don’t mind. I can’t seem to find my wallet.”

“Not a problem.”

She patted his arm. “You’re a kind soul, Peter. Be sure to tell your grandmother hello for me.”

“I will. Now go inside. I’ll see you next week.” Peter returned to his taxi and checked his mirrors. He caught sight of Mrs. G as her front door closed behind her. This was his life now—driving taxi and helping people when he could. Nobody was going to mess it up for him.

Especially Lawrence Merton.

“Fifty-two. Come in.” Peter’s radio squawked.

“Go ahead.”

“Got time for one more?”

He looked at the time. “Where?”

“The airport.”

PETER PICKED the man up at Lambert airport and, after a brief exchange, headed for downtown St. Louis. Ex-military, judging by the man’s physique and haircut. Flat dark eyes. Streetlights glinted off a large gold watch. Right wrist. Heavy gold ring. Left ring finger.

Details. A habit honed in Army Intelligence.

They rode in silence through Friday night traffic on Highway 70. He lowered his visor and glanced at the photograph of a cabin in the woods clipped to the underside. Someday, when he had enough money saved.

“What is that?” the man said.

“Nothing important.” Peter flipped the picture out of sight.

“It must be important to you. You keep it where other men keep pictures of their children.”

Peter eyed the shadowed face in the rearview mirror. A hint of an accent. “It’s a place I used to go.”

“And?”

And none of your business. “I’d like to go back. That’s all.”

Peter divided his time between glancing in the mirror and watching the traffic. Something about the man and his questions made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

The man’s cell phone rang. He pulled it from his coat pocket and spoke in low tones.

The sooner he got this guy to his hotel, the better.

His controlled movements and expressionless face set off alarm bells. He’d seen guys like him before in—

Screeching tires jerked Peter’s attention forward. Red lights blazed. Horns blared. Cars on both sides. No escape. He stomped the brakes and braced for impact. “Hang on back there.”

No bang of colliding cars, but Peter cringed as his passenger hit the Plexiglas shield between the front and back seats. Judging by the colorful language, Peter could kiss a tip goodbye.

Peter swiveled in his seat. “Sorry. You okay?”

“Nothing a good plastic surgeon cannot fix.”

Slavic?

The man gathered papers from the floor and placed them in his open briefcase. “What happened?”

Peter’s skin prickled. No anger from the man. Tight control.

“Who knows? Friday night in the big city.” Peter returned his attention to the road.

After a few miles, he flipped on his right turn signal. “First time in St. Louis?”

“Yes.”

“There’s a lot to do here. If you get a chance.” He merged into traffic on Broadway. Almost there.

“Maybe next time.” The man clipped his words.

Possibly Russian?

Peter turned right onto Pine Street. Four blocks later, he pulled into the circle drive of the Omni Hotel. The muscles in his jaw relaxed.

“Here you go.” Peter hurried to open the passenger’s door. “Again, I apologize for the sudden stop.”

“No problem.” The man stepped out.

Agile. Athletic.

The hotel doorman appeared from nowhere and reached for the briefcase, but the man tucked it under his arm. “I will take this one.”

“Of course. I’ll just check to be sure you haven’t forgotten anything.” He ducked inside the open taxi door.

Peter retrieved his fare’s suitcase from the trunk.

The passenger moved to the rear of the taxi. He glanced at the uniformed man waiting on the curb. “Are hotel personnel usually this eager in St. Louis?”

“Must be new.” Peter shrugged. “Never seen him before.”

“If my calculations are correct, this should be enough—plus a little extra.” The man handed Peter a thick wad of folded bills.

“Thank you.”

“Do you have a card?”

“In case you need to see a plastic surgeon?” A joke that could become a nightmare.

“Right.” The man grinned.

Peter pulled one from a small stack held together with a rubber band.

“I will need a ride to the airport tomorrow after my business is concluded.”

His teeth gleamed in the bright lights of the entrance to the hotel, but his eyes remained devoid of warmth. Like a snake.

Peter handed the suitcase off to the doorman and slammed the trunk lid. He watched his passenger cross the hotel lobby. The man moved like he owned the place.

Peter kneaded the back of his neck. Something told him he would see this man again.

But not to give him a ride.