

The Woman Left Behind

A Misted Pines Novel

By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTERS

Prologue

Gut

Harry

Shitty police work was one of the ugliest stains on society.

This was the thought Sheriff Harry Moran had as he sat in his ergonomic chair behind his desk at the sheriff's department.

He was staring at the two files in front of him trying to ignore the email that was up on the monitor of his computer.

Those files were two of fifteen stacked on his desk.

Each of those files had one thing in common: the shoddy, lazy or corrupt investigation overseen by Fret County's last sheriff, Leland Dern.

Dern was the man who came before Harry.

Which meant Harry was the man who had to clean up Dern's mess.

Due to recent circumstances—the latest being a double murder that wasn't properly investigated and an innocent man served prison time—a full and exhaustive, time-consuming and resource-heavy audit of every investigation under Dern's tenure had been done.

There were shambolic cases they'd had no choice but to file away. The police work hadn't been up to Harry's expectations of his department, but there was nothing that pointed to an injustice being done.

Now, he and his team had to go back over those fifteen cases and hope what Harry expected—Dern playing favorites, taking bribes, looking the other way or preferring to go hunting rather than working—wouldn't land them in lawsuits.

He was starting with these two.

He glanced at his monitor and felt his neck muscles tighten, which meant he again looked to the files and refocused.

They were the two cases that intrigued Harry the most, because the woman who had connections with both lived a block away from his department, only a five-minute walk from where he sat right there at his desk.

Lillian Rainier.

He'd lived in the town of Misted Pines his entire life, and because of his job, he knew or knew of a great many people in all of Fret County, and he'd never heard of her.

But Dern suspected, and investigated, her parents of a robbery sixteen years ago.

The investigation stalled, because Sonny and Avery Rainier had disappeared. And then, the case had simply died. Nothing else had been done. Not an interview, not a single follow-up of a lead.

A year later, Lillian married Willie Zowkower, a man Harry *did* know well.

Willie was a low-level gentleman dealer and a high-level charming asshole who currently had three outstanding arrest warrants in Fret County.

Recently, Willie had also disappeared.

And Lillian hadn't reported her parents, or her husband, missing.

Harry's gut was telling him something was up with Lillian Rainier.

And what was on Harry's computer monitor was telling him whatever that was, it was something bad.

So, no. His gut wasn't telling him anything. It was practically screaming at him to get off his ass, walk to her house and have a word.

Since Harry wasn't lazy, and he thought of law enforcement not as a job but as a calling, he got off his ass in order to walk to her house and have a word.

It would be a good bet Harry had passed Lillian Rainier's house thousands of times in his life, and he never noticed it.

Standing outside it now, he wondered why.

A small cracker box painted a pale yellow with white trim, sporting a green roof and a shocking-red door, there were profuse plantings of bronze, butterscotch and yellow button mums in appealing but mismatched terracotta pots dotted up the front steps and all over porch. An

attractive fall wreath of leaves, berries and pinecones was on the door. A white picket fence rounded the property, and he could see the numerous rose bushes that likely ornamented that fence in the summer had been cut back in preparation for winter.

There were two Adirondack chairs on the porch. They were painted white and had yellow, brown and green plaid lumbar pillows upstanding against the back of the seats, a wooden table with a lantern resting on top between them.

No kitschy SWEATER WEATHER! Or HAPPY FALL Y'ALL or FALL IN LOVE! signs marred the neat, well-kept property.

As he opened the gate on the fence and stepped foot on her front walk, that feeling in Harry's gut intensified.

Something was up.

Something was about to happen.

Something big.

He walked up the steps to that bright-red door.

He knocked.

He stood in his uniform and looked through the box of six square-paned windows at the top of the door, when he sensed movement inside.

And then there she was.

She opened the door.

The instant she did, the moment his eyes caught hers, Harry's chest caved in, and his stomach curled up.

Yeah.

Something was about to happen.

Something big.

And he wasn't ready for it.

Chapter One

Fresh-Cut Flowers

Lillian

I stared up and into the chocolate brown eyes of Sheriff Harry Moran, my heart in my throat, even though, when he'd made the announcement at the town council meeting that they were auditing Leland Dern's files, I knew this day would come.

I had answers to his questions.

I doubted he had any answers to mine.

But what was rendering me speechless, to the point I could feel gooseflesh raising on my arms, was that, from afar, he was an intensely handsome man.

Up close, he was taller than I expected, his shoulders were broader, his jaw was sharper, his cheekbones higher, his dark brown hair more lustrous, and after whatever was going to happen with him being on my doorstep happened, I might construct a shrine so I could worship his thick, long, curling eyelashes.

"Lillian Rainier?" he asked.

I had to clear my throat because...because...

He was just that beautiful.

But now I had his voice, which was deep and imposing. An authoritative cop voice. A man's-man voice.

Further, it was saying my name, deep, imposing and authoritative. And the sound of it wrapped around something that was only mine made me have a highly inappropriate response.

"Yes," I forced myself to answer.

"I have a few questions..."

He hesitated, but I could fill in the blanks.

He filled them in for me.

"About your parents. And about Willie Zowkower."

Willie?

That was a surprise, even when it wasn't.

"What's Willie done now?" I asked.

"Can I come in?"

Sheriff Harry Moran...in my house?

Every available woman (and some unavailable ones) from the age of eighteen (probably younger) to eighty (probably older) wanted Harry Moran in their house.

"Ms. Rainier?"

I jolted at his prompt, then I felt my cheeks heat because I was pretty sure I'd been staring at his mouth (I forgot to mention he had great lips, deliciously ridged, the bottom one full, the top one perfectly formed).

I shuffled out of the way, keeping a hold on the door and sweeping my arm out in front of me as an added invitation.

He came in.

I tried not to mentally inventory my living room in an effort to decipher how a man I did not know would react to it.

This was hard, because it was perfect. I'd worked my butt off to make it so.

I just wondered what Sheriff Moran would think of it at the same time I wondered why I cared so much (and I did, I cared *a lot*).

I didn't have a ton of space to work with, but in my humble opinion, I'd done a great job.

I closed the door behind Sheriff Moran and watched with unfathomable anxiety as he scanned the room.

Cream sectional, not huge, but it fit great in the space and was ultra comfortable. Cream and brown checked curtains. White walls. Exposed wood beams on the ceiling. Wooden chests instead of tables so I had extra storage. An inspired (again, my humble opinion) array of toss pillows. Heavy-bottomed ceramic lamps sprinkling surfaces.

This, along with the rest of the house, was accomplished through hours of trolling Target and World Market with splurges at places like West Elm and CB2. Not to mention, even more hours of painting, sanding, laying tile and all the rest.

I considered my house—and my garden—my finest achievements.

And as I stood there, stressed out waiting for a reaction, like Handsome Harry Moran would turn and give me a thumbs up for my endeavors, I realized he was having a reaction.

His entire long, muscled frame had grown tight.

“Sheriff?” I called.

He jerked to face me, and full disclosure, over the years, I (and every available woman in Fret County, be they eighteen or eighty) had paid a lot of attention to our local official. We'd grieved for him when he'd lost his wife way too soon. We'd championed him when he'd gone head-to-head with Leland Dern. And we'd commiserated with him when all hell broke loose in Misted

Pines (more than once), and all of that—serial killers (times two!) and deranged, homicidal fans—had fallen into his lap.

And in that copious attention, I'd never seen him move awkwardly. He was a man who had command of his body, knew what it could do, and put it to use regularly.

Something about that movement was both alarming and endearing.

"You have a nice place," he said.

If feelings could bloom a flower, at his comment, my space would be covered with roses.

I smiled at him. "Thanks."

His eyes dropped to my smile.

My stomach dropped to my feet.

He lifted his gaze swiftly, and I pulled myself together.

"Would you like to sit down?" I asked. "And can I get you something to drink? I have coffee. Also tea. Some Crystal Light, the cherry pomegranate one. Fresca. I think I have a few La Croix, but I don't know the flavors. Then I have boba. Green apple. It's yummy."

Oh, my lord.

Did I just run down every non-alcoholic beverage in my house and call boba yummy?

His (yes, delightfully thick and arched) dark brows stitched together. "Boba?"

"It's tea. Bubble tea. From Taiwan. I mean, I don't think the kind I have is from Taiwan, per se. But it originated in Taiwan. I think. It has tapioca pearls in it. That's the bubble part. It sounds weird, but trust me, it's super good."

Dang it.

I was blathering again.

At least I didn't repeat the word yummy.

"Tapioca in tea?"

He looked revolted, and since that was definitely endearing, it made me smile, which made his gaze fall to my lips again. This time my stomach warmed and other places south clenched, but he quickly jerked his attention back up to my eyes.

"I know, it sounds strange." I shrugged. "There's a lot in this world that's strange to us, until we give it a go. Like anything else, once we try it, sometimes it's awesome, sometimes, not so much. Trust me, boba is awesome."

"I'll have coffee."

With that, he looked beyond me to my kitchen.

I'd had a wall taken down, but if I wanted my house to remain standing, there were some supports I had to work around even if the great room I was after would never be all that great because of the strictures of space.

However, I was noticing another reaction from Sheriff Moran. As he stared at my kitchen, he seemed to have frozen again, though his expression had changed.

I didn't know him, I couldn't be sure, but I could swear it looked like...

Longing.

Startled, I turned to take in my kitchen.

For the full front room, I'd gone heavy with the cottage-y, cozy farmhouse vibe.

The kitchen had wood cabinets. A Belfast sink. The beams on the ceiling continued from the living room. I'd had another window cut in on the side of the house so there was lots of light. The back edges of the counters were lined with pots growing fresh herbs. Crocks and glass jars and canisters abounded (we could just say I wasn't a minimalist—and fresh herbs made whatever you cooked taste a whole lot better).

And there was a beautiful French pottery pitcher resting dead center on the farm table that sat in the middle of the kitchen space. The pitcher was filled with the fresh-cut autumn flowers I'd picked up on my way back from getting my morning coffee at Aromacobana. Dahlias and goldenrod and hare's tail with some fountain grass (Jenna at Mistery Flowers and Gifts was an artiste, said me).

I swung back to the sheriff, who still seemed in the thralls of that odd stupor.

"Are you okay?"

At my question, he visibly pulled himself out of whatever trance he was in and cleared his throat. That was a very masculine sound too.

Man, I had it bad for Sheriff Moran. I knew this in a way, since it didn't escape me the many times I saw him in passing, I had a crush on him (and it didn't escape me because that crush was *huge*). But having him right there in my house was showing me just how bad I had it.

"Fine," he answered.

I hustled to the coffee maker.

"How do you take it?" I asked, opening the top of the Nespresso to drop a pod into it.

"Isn't that coffee expensive?" he asked in return.

I glanced over my shoulder at him on another shrug. “I allow myself a few splurges.”

Like the Nespresso. And a walk to Aromacobana nearly every day. And fresh-cut flowers.

Seeing me in my environment, you wouldn’t know I didn’t have a lot. I’d learned to make it stretch. But everything around me, all that was me, had been the result of sixteen years of hard work, sacrifice, and penny-pinching.

I was good now. Comfortable, not rolling in it.

But it had been one very long row to hoe.

“Right,” he grunted, giving me the impression he approved of me allowing myself a few splurges, just as long as they were a few, as in, within my means, at the same time he really hated the fact he approved of that.

Yes, I read all of that in a one-syllable grunt.

I just didn’t know what to make of it.

“Just a little bit of cream,” he belatedly answered my question.

I nodded and grabbed a mug, then went to the fridge to get some cream.

I’d dolloped “just a little bit of cream” in his mug, and when the Nespresso started chugging, I turned back to him.

He was standing by my farmhouse table, contemplating Jenna’s flowers.

“I got those from Jenna’s,” I told him.

His head pitched up like he was surprised anyone was there and his regard returned to me.

“At Mistery Flowers and Gifts,” I went on.

“They’re pretty,” he replied, again begrudgingly, like he didn’t want to admit it.

“She has an incredible garden and greenhouse. Most of her flowers come from her own grows,” I informed him.

“Mm,” he hummed, provoking another improper physical reaction from me.

I was thinking that I shouldn’t be talking about Jenna and her greenhouse, considering he’d agreed to a cup of coffee, which meant he expected to be here for a while on whatever business he had (and yeah, I was in deep denial about part of that business, then again, I had a ton of practice putting myself in that space).

I also suspected he was a busy guy and didn’t have a lot of time to chat about flowers with a strange woman.

So I decided to help him get on with it.

“You mentioned Willie?”

After I voiced this question, I watched with some fascination as his entire being morphed from whatever he was experiencing in my house, back to something it was easy to read was far more comfortable to him.

Law enforcement officer.

“Your husband has several warrants out for his arrest.”

I nearly rolled my eyes because this did not surprise me about Willie.

However, more pertinently, I had to share, “Willie isn’t my husband.”

He blinked.

“We married when I was twenty. When I was twenty and three-quarters, I kicked him out.”

The sheriff’s brows shot up. “But you didn’t divorce him?”

“I tried. And then I tried. And I tried again. He dodged, and then he dodged and, of course, dodged again. Eventually, he disappeared altogether. I finally got one *in absentia* about a month ago after fifteen years of dealing with that mess.”

“He disappeared, but you didn’t report him missing?”

I heard the Nespresso stop, so I turned to it, stirred his cream, rested the spoon on the little spoon holder by the machine and walked the coffee to him.

It appeared he took great pains not to touch my fingers when he relieved me of the mug.

That kind of hurt, but I powered through it, mostly because it shouldn’t. I was nothing to him but an open case I hoped I could help him close (for more than one reason), and the idiot who married a felonious moron.

“I said he disappeared,” I reiterated after he took a sip of the coffee (and I was pleased to register his expression of enjoyment on that first sip, but I buried how pleased I felt because again, it wasn’t mine to feel). “I didn’t say he went missing. Willie isn’t missing.”

That got the sheriff’s full attention. “You know where he is?”

I nodded. “He’s in Vancouver. He’s on his third wife, regardless of the fact he never legally divorced his first one. He was here last Christmas, and I think he’s been back since. I can’t know, because he avoids me like the plague, something I don’t get since he’s already moved on, illegally, but I suspect he keeps his visits home on the down-low because he has arrest warrants. Though I thought it was to avoid me. I also suspect he’s living up in Canada for the same reasons.”

“That makes sense,” he muttered.

“Obviously, his family doesn’t invite me to his welcome back parties, but I have friends who keep an eye out for him, due to all that divorce stuff. If I hear he’s back, I can tell you, if you like.”

“Yes, Ms. Rainier, I’d like that.”

“You can call me Lillian,” I offered.

His beautiful chocolate eyes locked with mine.

“Lillian,” he murmured.

My skin tingled.

I powered through that as well.

“I don’t hear much,” I warned him. “The Zowkowers also weren’t helpful in my bid for divorce.”

“That family closes ranks.”

“Tell me about it,” I mumbled.

That’s when those beautiful chocolate eyes hardened. “Have they been inappropriate with you?”

“If you mean evasive, unhelpful, doing everything they can to make sure Willie isn’t found or papers go unserved, all to keep me tied to a man who has since married two other women, all for reasons I cannot begin to unravel, yes. They’ve definitely been inappropriate. If you mean something else, like being threatening or hostile, no.”

“It’s likely they think, if you knew where he was, you’d turn him in.”

I smiled at him. “That’s why you’re the sheriff and I’m not. You unraveled it in a second. Though, I didn’t know about the arrest warrants.”

He took another sip of coffee.

Moving on.

I emotionally steadied myself.

Because I could mentally avoid it like a pro, considering I’d been doing that for over a decade and a half.

But the time was nigh.

And I knew this was going to be the hard part.

Strike that.

The *excruciating* part.

“You wanted to talk about my parents?”

He studied me over the rim of his mug (that was just plain sexy, God, did I have it *bad*) before he lowered it, took a beat, then in a voice that was still deep and gorgeous, but now I didn’t like it, he suggested, “Maybe we should sit down.”

I felt my heart squeeze as I stared at him, but I didn’t move a muscle.

“Please,” he said softly, his voice even more gorgeous, and more terrible, “come sit down, Lillian.”

I didn’t want to.

I really didn’t want to.

But I led the way to my living room.

And we sat down.

***The Woman Left Behind* will be released April 15, 2025**

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