

Behind the Scenes:

A Reason for Hope

After I finished *A Healing Justice*, I was thinking about what story to write next. My time between novels is stressful because hanging in limbo is scary, and I'm never sure if I'll find my right direction again. Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long. From several directions, the idea for *A Reason for Hope* came to me.

Over tea one afternoon, a neighbor told me about a yoga workshop she'd attended with a woman who'd gone out for coffee with a man she'd met online. A well-spoken, attractive attorney, he'd dazzled her, and she eagerly accepted his invitation to dinner at his house. A tragic mistake. That night he drugged and raped her.

A few weeks later, I brought up that woman's plight at dinner with Amy and Carol, two of my best friends. For the first time I can remember, we talked about sexual assault. To our amazement, we discovered that we'd all been assaulted in one way or another, yet as close as we were, we'd never discussed it with each other.

In her college dorm, Amy had been the victim of what's called a "completed rape." Carol had once gotten into her car, and a man had risen from the back seat and put a knife to her throat, clearly intending to rape her. Though she escaped, years later her two daughters did not. Both were raped.

I've been the victim of "attempted rape" several horrifying times. In high school on a peaceful Sunday afternoon, for instance, I was walking home from

my best friend's house in our safe neighborhood when three thugs drove up beside me in a rusty, beat-up car. One jumped out and yanked me by the arm toward the back seat. I fought like a tigress and freed myself.

But he kept lunging at me as I ran in panicked zigzags across a lawn. He grabbed my ponytail—and then he grabbed me. When I kicked and clawed again to free myself, my mind flashed on my neighbor Bobby, whom I'd just seen playing basketball with boys I knew in his driveway up the hill. Screaming, I ran toward them, and they came running. My assailant tore back to the rusty, beat-up car, and the men sped away.

I have often thought of what might have happened to me if Bobby hadn't been there. I could never have outrun or fought off three men. When I got home, I was trembling so hard that I could barely call my best friend and tell her what had happened. I never told my parents or anyone else—until my dinner years later with Amy and Carol.

Why had I kept silent for so long? I'm still not sure. I do know, though, that in those days, victims of sexual assault, whether completed or attempted, were stigmatized. Like me, many women swallowed their terror, went on with their lives, and felt ashamed, as if they'd done something wrong. Of course, they hadn't. Still, they kept their traumas to themselves.

I find the secrecy amazing when in the U.S. today, an estimated one in five women has been the victim of attempted or completed rape. That means that most of us have either experienced it ourselves or known someone who has. After the dinner with Amy and Carol, I decided that our self-imposed silence was

wrong—and that I should write about sexual assault. I hope that survivors can share their experiences with each other. Though no rape is dramatized in *A Reason for Hope*, the main character's fight for justice is meant to inspire and to shine light on a shadowy subject.