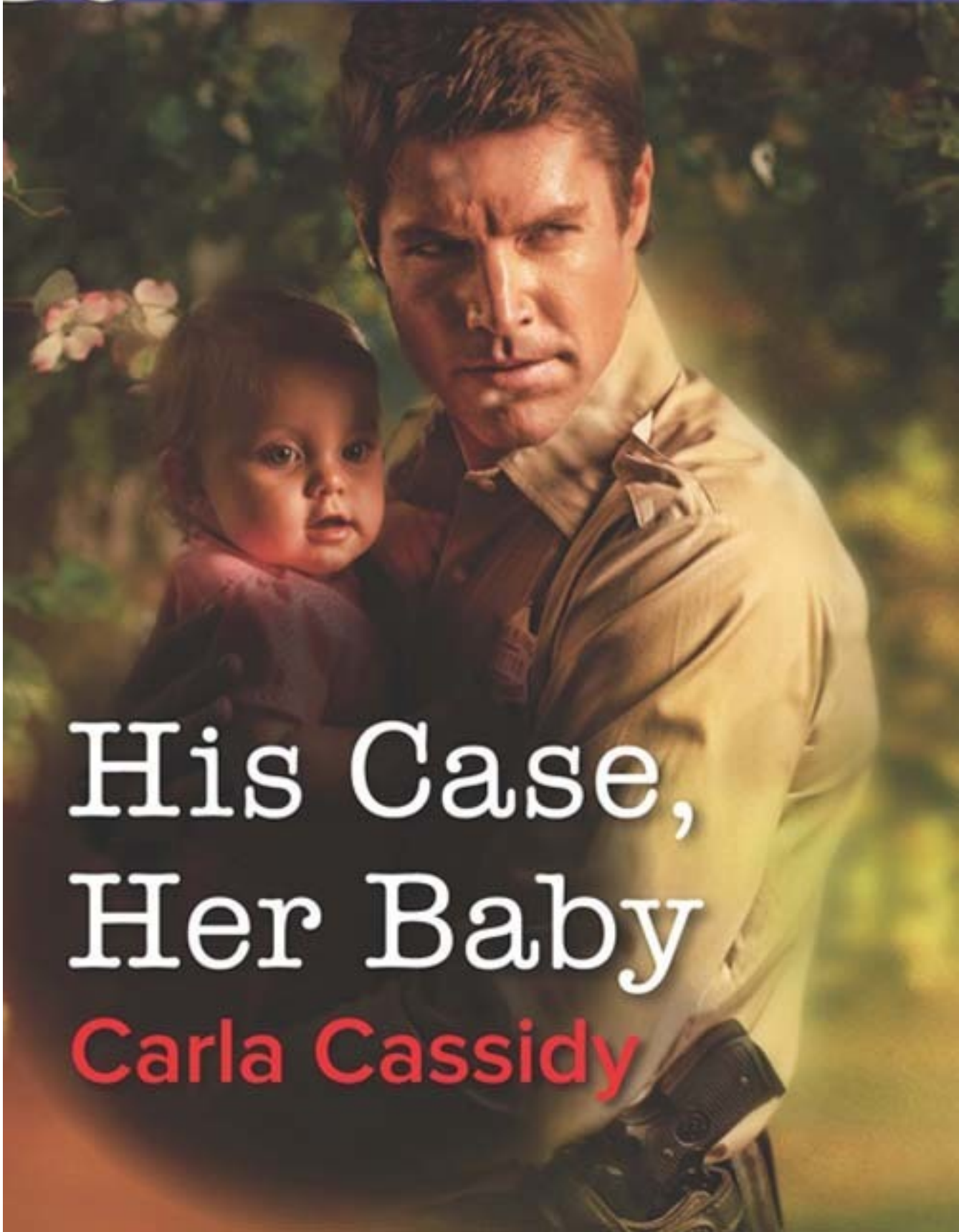




Romantic Suspense  
INTRIGUE

A man with short brown hair, wearing a tan button-down shirt, is holding a baby in a garden. The man has a serious expression and is looking directly at the camera. The baby is looking slightly to the side. The background is a soft-focus garden with green leaves and some pink flowers.

# His Case, Her Baby

Carla Cassidy



Carla Cassidy

**His Case, Her Baby**

«HarperCollins»



**Cassidy C.**

His Case, Her Baby / C. Cassidy — «HarperCollins»,



# Содержание

Table of Contents	6
About the Author	7
Chapter 1	8
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27



**His Case, Her Baby**

Carla Cassidy



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)



## Table of Contents

[Cover](#)  
[Title Page](#)  
[About the Author](#)  
[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[Chapter Eight](#)  
[Chapter Nine](#)  
[Chapter Ten](#)  
[Chapter Eleven](#)  
[Chapter Twelve](#)  
[Chapter Thirteen](#)  
[Epilogue](#)  
[Copyright](#)



## About the Author

**Carla Cassidy** is an award-winning author who has written over fifty books. In 1995, she won Best Silhouette Romance from *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* for *Anything for Danny*. In 1998, she also won a Career Achievement Award for Best Innovative Series from *Romantic Times BOOKreviews*.

Carla believes the only thing better than curling up with a good book to read is sitting down at the computer with a good story to write. She's looking forward to writing many more books and bringing hours of pleasure to readers.



## *Chapter 1*

Peyton Wilkerson finished mopping her kitchen floor, pleased by the shine on the tiles and the clean scent of bleach that hung in the air. She put the mop away and then went to the window of the cozy ranch house.

She stared outside, where the day before the concrete company had poured a beautiful new patio inside the six-foot privacy fence that surrounded the backyard.

Pride ballooned in her chest. It was all finally coming together for her. After years of working two and three jobs, of attending college nights and weekends, some of her dreams were beginning to come true.

She not only had her very own house, but she also had a brand-new patio where she could have a barbecue and invite neighbors who would hopefully soon be friends.

She turned from the window at the sound of a soft coo coming from the portable infant rocking seat in the center of the kitchen table. Her heart swelled as she smiled at her four-month-old little girl.

“Hey, Lilly girl,” Peyton said as she scooped the baby up in her arms. Lilly flailed her arms and cooed again, her rosebud little lips turning upward in a happy smile.

It almost frightened Peyton, how happy she’d become, how many of her dreams were beginning to blossom into fruition. In a month she would begin teaching first grade at the Black Rock Elementary School. And even though Lilly hadn’t been planned, she was the greatest gift Peyton had ever been given.

Although things hadn’t worked out between Peyton and Lilly’s father, Rick, Rick had promised to be there for his daughter, and Peyton knew he’d do just that. He was a good man, just not the man for Peyton.

“Are you hungry?” Peyton asked as she placed Lilly back in her seat.

Lilly bounced and wiggled and smiled, a faint trail of drool making its way from her mouth to her chin. Peyton laughed and grabbed a towel to wipe her mouth. “Or would you rather I just get your piggies?” She grabbed Lilly’s foot and tickled her toes. Lilly squealed and kicked her feet as Peyton laughed again.

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted the game. Making certain that Lilly was secure in the seat, Peyton left her and hurried to the door.

She peeked through the spy hole on the door and saw the tall redhead on the other side. She quickly unfastened the dead bolt and opened the door. “Kathy! I didn’t expect you to stop by today,” she said.

“I decided a little exercise would do me good, so I thought I’d walk over for a visit, but it’s hot as blazes out there.” She flipped her long red hair over her shoulder and smiled. “Hope you don’t mind a hot and thirsty friend dropping by unexpectedly.”

“Not at all. Come on into the kitchen. I was just about to make a bottle for Lilly, and I’ll get you something cold to drink.”

As they entered the kitchen, Kathy beelined to Lilly as Peyton got a bottle of soda out of the fridge and set it on the table.

Kathy baby-talked to Lilly for a moment, then sat at the table and watched as Peyton prepared Lilly’s bottle.

The two women had met two months earlier, right after Peyton had moved to the small western Kansas town. Kathy was new to town as well and the two had hit it off immediately.

“I see you got the patio poured,” Kathy said as Peyton sat in the chair next to her and began to feed Lilly.

“Yesterday. I can’t wait to have a real barbecue outside. I want to get one of those umbrella tables and invite all my new friends for burgers and hot dogs.”



“At least wait until it cools down. This heat is about to kill me,” Kathy exclaimed. “I’d forgotten how hot it gets in Kansas in July. Besides, you have to meet some new friends in order to invite them.”

“I know, and I will,” Peyton replied. “Now that I’m finally settled in and Lilly is getting older, I plan on getting out more.” Peyton had been reluctant to take Lilly outside and around strangers while she’d been so small, and she’d had the work of settling in to keep her from going out and socializing.

“Did Rick stop by last night? You mentioned that he was planning on driving out to visit with the baby.”

“No, he didn’t make it. He’s working some big trial and scarcely has time to breathe right now.” Rick Powell was an assistant D.A. Handsome and ambitious, he and Peyton had dated for six months, and ironically Lilly had been conceived on the night they mutually decided to break up.

“He could have married you,” Kathy said with a touch of censure.

Peyton laughed. “I didn’t want to marry him. We had a great time together, but I realized I wasn’t in love with him. Besides, Rick is already married to his work.”

Lilly finished her bottle and yawned around the nipple. Almost immediately she closed her eyes and fell asleep. Peyton put her back in the cushioned seat in the center of the table and brushed a strand of the pale blond hair away from her forehead.

“She’s such a doll baby,” Kathy said, then frowned and raised a hand to her temple. “You don’t happen to have anything for a headache, do you?”

“Nothing stronger than an aspirin,” Peyton replied.

“Could I have a couple? I have a killer headache.”

“Sure, hang on and I’ll be right back. I’ve got a bottle under the sink in the bathroom.”

“Great, thanks.”

As Peyton walked through her living room with its gleaming polished surfaces and simple furnishings, she thought of how far she’d come from her roots.

She’d done it. She’d climbed out of the filth and the fear of her childhood. She was in a place where she couldn’t get evicted, where filth would never exist again.

The guest bathroom in the hall was decorated in cool shades of mint-green and white. She straightened the hand towel next to the sink before she bent down to look for the aspirin bottle.

She was on her knees when she looked up and saw Kathy standing in the doorway. “Here you are,” she said as she grabbed the bottle and began to rise.

“And here you are,” Kathy said, and she slammed something into the side of Peyton’s head. Peyton reeled backward, unable to keep her balance. *What? Why?* These two words exploded in Peyton’s brain just before her head hit the edge of the bathtub and everything went black.

Consciousness came in bits and pieces. The faint scent of pine cleaner filled her nose and she winced from the nauseating pound of a headache. She opened her eyes and saw the mint-green bathroom rug beneath her face. She frowned in confusion. *What?* How did she get on the floor?

Kathy. Kathy had come into the bathroom and attacked her. Kathy had hit her. As she got to her feet it all came back to her. Why? Why had her friend attacked her? It didn’t make sense.

Lilly! She had to get to Lilly. The baby wasn’t crying. Maybe she was still napping. Peyton’s heart crashed against her ribs, like an off-balance washing machine on the spin cycle. Please, God, let her still be napping.

Woozy and unsteady on her feet, she stumbled down the hallway. She needed to call for help. She’d been attacked. But before she could do anything she needed her baby in her arms.

As she stepped into the kitchen she froze. The infant seat was in the center of the table, the receiving blanket a swath of rose color against the empty seat.

“No.” The word whispered out of her as her knees buckled. Horror pressed against her chest, making it difficult for her to draw breath. Where was Lilly?



She reeled out of the kitchen and ran down the hall to Lilly's bedroom. Kathy must have put her in her crib. Even though Peyton knew it made no sense, that nothing made sense, she clung to the hope that Kathy had tucked Lilly into her crib before she'd left the house.

She clung to that tenuous, fragile hope as she raced into the small bedroom she'd decorated with pink ruffles and teddy bears. She stopped in the doorway and stared at the empty crib.

And screamed.

Sheriff Tom Grayson pulled his car into the driveway of the neat little ranch house and got out before the engine had completely shut off. His youngest brother, Caleb, waited for him on the lawn, his khaki deputy uniform the same color as the sunburned dried grass beneath his feet.

"What's up?" Tom asked. The late July heat felt as if it seared his lungs with each breath he took.

Caleb's brown eyes were darker than usual, a sure sign that he was troubled. "A missing baby."

Tom's stomach flipped. In all his years as sheriff of Black Rock, Kansas, there had never been a child missing or murdered.

"Details," Tom demanded.

"The woman, Peyton Wilkerson, says she was entertaining a friend and she went to the bathroom. She says the woman attacked her and knocked her unconscious, then stole the baby. But, I got to tell you, Tom, it all seems pretty fishy. Her wounds look superficial, she just had a new patio poured yesterday, and the kitchen smells like bleach."

Bleach, the best thing to use to clean up traces of blood. Tom tried to keep his mind open as he nodded and went into the house.

He stepped into the living room, and his first impression was one of obsessive neatness and order. The furnishings were simple and the room smelled of lemon furniture polish and glass cleaner.

He heard the sound of his brother Benjamin coming from the kitchen. It didn't surprise him that Benjamin was the one in the kitchen with the potential victim while Caleb had been the one pacing the grass outside.

Benjamin had an affinity for anyone he thought might be a victim of a crime. Softhearted to a fault, he would be consoling Peyton Wilkerson. On the other hand, impulsive, impatient Caleb was always ready to believe the worst in a situation, always ready to investigate and arrest.

Before going to the kitchen, Tom turned down a hallway and stepped into the first bedroom he came to. It was obviously a nursery. Decorated in shades of pink, it was tidy and held the faintest scent of baby lotion.

He left that room and went farther down the hall, passing a bedroom and coming to the master bedroom. Decorated in yellow, white and green, it gave the aura of a peaceful garden with sunshine. As with all the other rooms, nothing appeared out of place. Even the nightstand held nothing more than an attractive reading lamp.

Tom frowned as he thought of his own nightstand, which often held the remainder of a bedtime snack, whatever book he was currently reading and little notes to himself of things he thought of just before drifting off to sleep.

He touched nothing; he was just trying to get a quick feel for the person who lived there. So far he learned that Peyton Wilkerson definitely took pride in her surroundings and probably had more than a touch of obsessive-compulsiveness.

The first thing Tom noticed as he stood in the doorway to the kitchen was the faint, underlying scent of bleach. The second thing he noticed was that Peyton Wilkerson was a stunner. Even red-rimmed eyes from crying and an angry gash on the side of her forehead couldn't detract from her fragile beauty.

Both she and Benjamin sat at the kitchen table. In the center of the table was an empty infant seat covered in pink material and ruffles.

Tom knew most of the people in the small town of Black Rock, but he'd never seen Peyton Wilkerson before. If he had, he definitely would have remembered.



As he stepped into the room she jumped up from her chair. “Thank God,” she said, tears shimmering in her already swollen eyes as she reached out and grabbed his hand. “Sheriff, you have to do something. You have to go get my Lilly.”

Her hand was fevered and trembled in his. The sense of urgency that he’d felt when Caleb had told him a baby was missing welled up inside him.

“Who took her?” Tom asked.

“Her name is Kathy Simon, and she lives in the Black Rock Apartments. Please, we have to get my baby back. She’s only four months old.” A sob escaped her as Tom led her back to the chair where she’d been seated.

“You know what apartment she lives in?” he asked, aware that Caleb had come into the room.

Peyton frowned. “No, not specifically. Whenever I’ve dropped her off, it’s always been at the front entrance.”

“What does she look like?” Tom asked.

“She has shoulder-length red hair and blue eyes. She’s taller than me and very thin. She told me she was twenty-nine, the same age as me.”

“Caleb, Benjamin, head over to the apartments and check it out,” Tom said. “Get out an AMBER Alert and have Sam run a check on a Kathy Simon. Tell Clay and Eric to set up roadblocks on both ends of town and to check every car leaving town.”

“I want to go to the apartments, too,” Peyton exclaimed.

“You and I are going to stay here so I can ask you some questions,” Tom said firmly. “My deputies will check things out.” He nodded in dismissal to his brothers, who immediately left.

He returned his attention to Peyton, who looked as if she were hanging onto her very sanity by a thread. “Tell me what happened this morning.”

For a moment he thought she was going to break down altogether. Her lips trembled and tears filled her eyes. “Please, Mrs. Wilkerson. I know this is difficult, but the more information I have the easier it will be to find your baby.”

She drew a deep breath and visibly pulled herself together. “I had just finished cleaning the kitchen when Kathy showed up.” She gripped a tissue in her hand so tightly her knuckles were white.

“I smell bleach. Is that what you were cleaning with?” he asked.

She nodded. “I always use a little bleach when I clean, especially when I mop the floor.”

Tom watched her carefully, trying to discern any deceit in the depths of her blue eyes. “You and this Kathy, you were friends?”

She nodded, a single curt nod. The sunshine streaming through the window sparkled in her pale blond hair. “We met about two months ago, right after I moved here. She was new to Black Rock, too, and we hit it off right away.”

Tom pulled a small notepad and a pen from his pocket.

“You have a phone number for her?”

“No, she told me she didn’t have a phone. She said she was short on money and had to cancel her cell phone and hadn’t yet gotten a landline.”

“What about a car? Do you know what kind she drove?”

She raised a trembling hand to her forehead and frowned. “I don’t know. She mentioned something about it being in the shop.”

“Do you know where she was from?”

Her frown deepened, the gesture doing nothing to detract from her attractiveness. “Chicago, I think.”

“Where’s your husband? Can I call him for you?”

She shook her head. “I’m not married. Lilly’s father lives in Wichita.”

“What’s his name?” Tom asked. Maybe this was some sort of parental kidnapping, he thought. God, he hoped so. At least then he’d know the baby was safe.



“Rick, Rick Powell,” she replied. Her eyes widened. “Surely you don’t think he had anything to do with this. He wouldn’t. He’s an assistant district attorney. He’d never be part of anything like this,” she exclaimed.

She scooted back from the table and jumped up, her slender body vibrating with energy. “We don’t have time to sit here and talk. I need to find Lilly.” She reached up and grabbed the back of her head and grimaced.

Tom wouldn’t have thought her face could get any paler, but it blanched of any lingering color. He jumped to his feet and grabbed her by the arm. “Are you all right? Do you need medical attention?”

She dropped her hand to her side, her body weaving slightly. “I sent the ambulance away. I’m all right. I just hit my head on the bathtub when she attacked me.”

She allowed Tom to guide her back into the chair at the table. He could smell her, a scent of fresh flowers and despair, and he tried to maintain emotional distance, knowing that it was possible that all was not what it seemed.

As he asked her about the particulars of the attack and listened to her answers, he assessed the kitchen which was now a crime scene.

Did she like things so neat and clean, or had she sanitized the house before calling for help? Had a terrible accident taken place here and now she was trying to cover it up?

Certainly the news was full of stories of babies who had been shaken to death or suffocated by an overwrought parent. Or was it as she said, and a kidnapping had really occurred? It was too early to know the truth.

As quickly as possible, Tom got the pertinent information from her, and then he called in two of his deputies to fingerprint and collect evidence from the bathroom and the kitchen. He called another deputy to check with the garage to see if Kathy Simon had a car being worked on there.

With the arrival of the two deputies, Tom moved Peyton into the living room, where she paced the floor and looked as if she were about ready to jump out of her skin.

Tom had placed a call to Rick Powell and had gotten in touch with his secretary, as Rick was in trial. She’d promised to pass a message to him as soon as possible for him to call Tom.

Peyton had been seated on the sofa, hands wringing and her delicate features taut with tension as Tom directed his deputies attempting to lift fingerprints from the surfaces Kathy might have touched.

Although she appeared calm, but stressed, Tom sensed an explosion coming. He saw it in the white of her knuckles as she folded her hands together, in the deepening hue of her blue eyes as she watched him.

So far she’d been patient and cooperative, but he had a feeling that that was coming to an end quickly. As if to prove his intuition, she sprang up from the sofa when the phone rang.

The tight composure she’d kept cracked as she tearfully told Rick what had happened. Rick promised to come as soon as possible, but it was a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Wichita to Black Rock.

“You have to do something,” she exclaimed after she’d hung up with Rick. For the first time there was an edge of frantic anger in her voice. “Why haven’t we heard something? What’s taking so long?”

Tom had been thinking the same thing. “We should hear something from them any minute. We have the AMBER Alert out and I have a deputy checking background on Kathy. At this point there’s nothing else we can do but wait here until we have more information.” He glanced toward her phone.

She followed his gaze, then looked back at him, her eyes widening slightly. “You think maybe she’ll call?” A half-hysterical sob escaped her. “She won’t call. This isn’t about a ransom. Kathy knows I don’t have any money.”

“Then what do you think this is about?”



“I don’t know,” she cried. “I feel like this is all some horrible joke, or a terrible nightmare. I can’t imagine why Kathy did this. I just can’t wrap my mind around all of this.”

She whirled around as the door opened and Caleb and Benjamin walked in. Caleb gave a small shake of his head.

“What does that mean?” Peyton asked. “Why are you shaking your head?”

“There’s no Kathy Simon living at the Black Rock Apartments,” he said.

“What do you mean? I know she lives there. I dropped her off there several times.” Peyton looked from Caleb to Tom, then back to Caleb again.

“We checked with the manager. There’s no Kathy Simon on a lease. We also knocked on every door and asked if anyone knew her. Nobody did,” Benjamin added.

Peyton’s eyes widened in horror as she looked at Tom. “Then where is she? And where has she taken my Lilly?”



## Chapter 2

Peyton felt as if the ground beneath her feet was no longer solid. The world was no longer as it should be, and she'd never felt such fear. *Lilly!* Her heart cried in anguish. Where was her baby?

Who was Kathy Simon, and why had she done this? Had anything she'd told Peyton about herself been true? One thing was certain: Peyton had wasted enough time sitting around waiting for something to happen.

She needed to find Lilly, and she wasn't going to find her sitting around and answering questions. Without saying a word to the sheriff or his deputies, she headed down the hall to her bedroom.

Sheriff Grayson followed just behind her, as if afraid to let her out of his sight for a minute. "What are you doing?" he asked as she grabbed her purse from the top of her dresser.

"I'm going to find my baby." She turned to face him. "If I have to knock on every door of this town, I'll find Kathy and my Lilly."

"I don't think that's a good idea," he protested.

She raised her chin and embraced the anger that was so much easier to tolerate than her pain. "The only way you're going to stop me, Sheriff Grayson, is to arrest me and lock me up."

Despite the fact that he was easily six inches taller than her and had shoulders as broad as mountains, she shoved roughly past him and headed for the front door.

She'd gone only a couple of steps when he grabbed her by the arm. "I'll take you wherever you want to go." His dark eyes held her gaze intently. "We don't know if this woman is dangerous. She might not harm your baby, but she would definitely be a threat to you."

She considered his words and gave him a curt nod. "Then let's go. I can't sit here another minute."

She was vaguely surprised to see that the sun was still high in the sky. It had been less than two hours since Kathy and Lilly had disappeared, but it felt like an eternity.

Even the intensity of the late afternoon sun overhead couldn't warm the glacier that had become Peyton's heart. She slid into the passenger seat of the sheriff's car and was instantly engulfed by the scent of leather and, more faintly, the spicy cologne he wore.

As he got in behind the steering wheel he turned to look at her. "Do you have a plan?"

She'd shot out of the house lit with the fire of a frantic mother seeking her child, but she realized with the question that she didn't have a plan; she just knew she couldn't sit still another minute.

"The pizza place on Main Street," she said suddenly. "Kathy told me she was working there until she could get something more permanent."

He nodded, started the car and pulled away from the curb. Peyton stared out the window, irrationally hoping that Kathy would suddenly appear on the sidewalk.

The only thing that kept Peyton from losing her mind altogether was the belief that Kathy wouldn't hurt Lilly. "She was good with Lilly," she finally said aloud. "She seemed to love her."

"Did she mention wanting children of her own, maybe not being able to have them?" Sheriff Grayson asked.

"No, nothing like that. I just know she was always very sweet to Lilly. Surely the pizza place will have her address on file."

"What I need you to do is think of all the conversations you had with her, any tidbit of information that might be helpful as to where she might go and who she might be with," he replied.

For a moment Peyton was overwhelmed. "Sheriff Grayson, we talked almost every day, about everything and nothing." She frowned and tried to ignore the headache that pounded in the back of her head, the continuous frantic race of her heart.



“Call me Tom,” he said. “There are four of us Graysons working law enforcement in Black Rock. First names make things easier.”

“Caleb and Benjamin are your brothers?” she asked.

He nodded. “My sister is also a deputy, then I have one other brother who doesn’t work for the town of Black Rock.” He frowned. “Did Kathy mention dating somebody here in town? Perhaps somebody she was interested in?”

“No, in fact just the opposite. I got the impression she was a bit shy and was having trouble meeting people.” She released a sigh of frustration. “God, what did I miss? What didn’t I see or hear in all those conversations, in all the time we spent together?”

“You can’t beat yourself up about that. How could you guess that something like this would happen?” He pulled into a parking space in front of the Canyon Pizzeria and cut the engine, then he turned and looked at her with his dark, intense eyes. “You let me ask the questions. I need to do my job.”

She nodded and unbuckled her seatbelt, butterflies like little kamikaze pilots hitting the sides of her stomach. *Please, let us get some answers*, she thought as she got out of the car.

It was nearing dinnertime and the air outside the restaurant smelled of tangy tomato sauce and baking crust. The food smells only upset Peyton’s stomach even more. The last thing she was interested in was food.

All she wanted was her sweet Lilly back in her arms. She needed to smell her baby scent, feel Lilly’s wiggly warmth against her chest.

She followed Sheriff Grayson through the front door. Inside, about a dozen people were seated at various tables and booths. Most of them raised a hand in greeting to the sheriff.

He went to the woman standing behind the cash register. “Hey, Linda, is Don in?” he asked.

“He’s in the back. You here to arrest him for spicy sauce?” The blonde gave him a saucy, flirtatious smile.

“I need to talk to him. Can you get him out here?”

Her smile faded as she apparently heard the seriousness in his voice. “Sure, I’ll go get him.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and a moment later a big burly man clad in a tomato-splattered apron walked out.

“Hey, Tom. What’s up?”

“You have a Kathy Simon working here for you?” Tom asked.

Peyton watched in horror as Don shook his head. “I’ve got a Stacy, a Katie and a Linda, but no Kathy,” he replied.

“Are you sure? Maybe she was going by another name,” Peyton said desperately. “She’s tall with red hair?”

“Sorry, nobody like that works for me,” Don replied.

Peyton staggered back outside where dusk was beginning to fall, vaguely aware of the sheriff right behind her. Nothing Kathy had told her had been true. She’d lied about where she worked, where she lived. Why?

She got back into the passenger seat and Tom slid in behind the wheel. “You okay?” he asked as he started the engine.

“Of course I’m not okay.” She reached for anger, knowing that if she didn’t hang on to something she’d lose it altogether. “Nothing she told me was the truth. Why would she lie to me about the most basic things? God, she was good. She had so many details. She told me about a man who had tipped her twenty dollars, about a little girl who wanted pizza crust and cheese but no sauce. She was so good with her lies.”

A sickness welled up inside her as she realized night was falling too quickly and she was no closer to finding Lilly than she’d been when she’d regained consciousness on her bathroom floor.



“Any other ideas?” Tom asked as he backed out of the parking space in front of the pizza place. “Or are you ready to go back to your place?”

“No, we can’t go back,” she exclaimed. She didn’t want to be there without her baby. “Just drive around. Maybe we’ll see something.”

For the next thirty minutes he drove up and down the streets of the small town. Peyton kept her gaze on the sidewalks, on the houses they passed, hoping for a glimpse of the woman she knew as Kathy Simon.

He received only one phone call during the drive. When he hung up he told her that there was no driver’s license matching what they knew about Kathy Simon.

“So that’s probably not her real name,” Peyton said flatly. She was numb; in a place where her fear was so great she couldn’t process it any longer.

“Probably not,” he agreed.

“How are we going to find her if we don’t even know her name?” Peyton wanted to scream.

“We’ll figure it all out,” he replied. “Have you had any problems with anyone here in town?”

“No, nobody. Oh, there was a young man who cussed me in the parking lot of the grocery store. I was getting Lilly into her car seat and my shopping cart accidentally rolled into his truck.”

“Did you exchange information?”

“No, nothing like that. It didn’t scratch or dent the truck. He cursed me, then got in his truck and roared off.”

“When did this happen?”

“About a week ago. Surely you don’t think that has anything to do with Lilly’s kidnapping,” she said.

“I’m not taking anything for granted at this point,” he replied. “What did this guy look like? What kind of a truck was he driving?”

“It was a black pickup, but I don’t know the year or model. He was tall with brown hair.” She sighed in frustration. “That doesn’t help much, does it?”

“Sounds like half the men around this area,” he replied.

As he once again drove down Main Street, Peyton knew this probably wasn’t standard operating procedure, that he was just indulging her need to be out looking. She also knew that there was no way she would see Kathy casually walking down the street with Lilly in her arms. She knew in her heart that Kathy had probably run out of town mere minutes after grabbing Lilly.

“I noticed you had a new patio in your backyard.”

Peyton shifted her gaze from the window to him. “It was poured yesterday. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just curious.”

She stared at him, her heart beating an unsteady rhythm. She had a feeling this man didn’t indulge in idle curiosity. There was a sharp intelligence in his sexy dark eyes that made her believe he was a man who didn’t miss much.

As the realization of what he might be thinking struck her, she gasped. “You can’t really believe that I had the patio poured to hide my baby’s body?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. I have to think of all possible scenarios,” he said without apology.

“Pull over,” she exclaimed. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

He whirled the car to the curb and she unbuckled her seat belt, opened the door and stumbled outside. She bent over, feeling the need to throw up. He thought she’d killed her baby. He thought she’d killed her Lilly and buried her beneath the patio.

She dry heaved, her stomach rolling as tears blurred her vision. She was vaguely aware of a big, broad hand on her back, and she shook it off, the need to be sick swallowed by a rage she’d never felt before.



Her rage wasn't directed at Sheriff Tom Grayson, who was just doing his job, but rather at the woman who had pretended to be her friend and support over the past two months. The woman who had hit her in the head and stolen her baby.

She finally straightened up and stared at the sheriff. "If and when we find her, if she's hurt Lilly in any way, I'll kill her." She didn't wait for his reply but instead turned and walked back to the car and got into the passenger seat.

It was at that moment, with the fire of rage burning in her eyes, that Tom believed her. He hadn't been one hundred percent sure what to believe up until that point. There had been far too many cases of murdered children when the mothers concocted a story to cover the fact that they'd either accidentally or purposely hurt or killed their child.

He liked to believe he was good at assessing people, at recognizing liars and criminals. He didn't believe Peyton was either, and that meant they had a missing baby on their hands.

When they pulled up to her house, a luxury sports car was parked in the driveway. "That's Rick's car," she said, emotion thick in her voice.

As she and Tom got out of his car, the front door of the house opened and a tall, well-dressed blond man stepped out.

Peyton ran toward him, and Tom would have expected Rick to open up his arms, to hug the woman who was the mother of his missing child. But she stopped just short of him and Rick shoved his hands in his expensive slacks pockets. "What exactly happened?" he asked.

Peyton began to cry as she explained to him what had occurred. When she was finished, Rick looked at Tom. "Sheriff, Rick Powell." He held out his hand to Tom. "What's being done to find my daughter?"

Tom gave his hand a perfunctory shake, then motioned toward the front door. "Why don't we all go inside and talk."

As he followed them inside he found himself wishing that Rick had hugged her. If anyone needed the security of strong arms around her, it was Peyton. The thought hit him from left field and he pushed it aside.

"We have an AMBER Alert in place, and several of my deputies are out knocking on doors and seeing if anyone knows this woman who called herself Kathy Simon," Tom explained once they were all seated at the table. "It would be helpful if we could get a picture or a drawing of this woman to send out across the state."

"Do you have a picture of her?" Rick asked Peyton.

"No, I never took her picture," Peyton said miserably.

"My brother Benjamin is a pretty good artist. Why don't I get him in here to work up a sketch, and Rick and I can go into the living room and talk," Tom said.

Peyton nodded as he and Rick stood. Within minutes, Benjamin was seated with her at the table, and Rick and Tom went into the living room, where Rick sat on the sofa and looked at Tom expectantly.

"Peyton told me you're an assistant D.A. in Wichita," Tom said.

"That's right." He leaned forward and ran a hand through his short hair. "I can't believe this has happened. Peyton's a terrific mother. She would never intentionally put Lilly at risk."

"You have no idea who this woman might be? You never met her?"

"No, but I have to confess that since Peyton moved here I've only been to visit a couple of times," Rick replied. "With my work schedule it's been difficult getting back and forth. In fact, I'm in the middle of a big trial now. I got the judge to call a continuance until day after tomorrow, but I've got to be back in Wichita first thing Thursday morning. Hopefully we'll have Lilly back long before then."

"Why did Peyton decide to move here?" Tom asked.



Rick leaned back in the chair and unfastened the buttons of his suit coat. “When our relationship fizzled out, she decided she wanted a new start someplace else. She started shooting out résumés, and when Black Rock Elementary School made an offer, she jumped at the opportunity.”

“Your breakup was amicable?”

Rick released a small sigh of impatience. “Look, Sheriff, I know how these things go. I understand that you have to look at all angles, but let me save you a little time. Peyton and I dated for six months. We had a good time together but eventually realized we wanted different things from life. The split was amicable. In fact, it was the night we decided to call it quits that Lilly was conceived. Even though we weren’t going to be together as a couple, we were both excited to be parents. We’ve had no problems, no issues since Lilly’s birth. Peyton is one of the greatest women I’ve ever known. She would never do anything to hurt Lilly, and neither would I.”

Tom fought back a sigh of frustration. He knew Rick was trying to be helpful, but there was nothing worse than investigating somebody who knew the system from the inside out. “You know I have to go through all this,” Tom said.

Rick nodded. “I was just trying to cut to the chase by letting you know that there’s nothing to investigate except the woman who stole my daughter. There’s no point in wasting time speculating about Peyton or myself.”

“I appreciate your help, but you know I’m going to do this investigation my way,” Tom said. He kept his voice friendly but firm.

“Understood,” Rick replied. “I just want my little girl back.” For the first time since he’d arrived, emotion cracked his voice.

“Is it possible this has something to do with a case you’re working on? An enemy you’ve made through your work?” Tom asked.

Rick frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t think so. Very few people knew about Peyton and the baby. I wanted it that way for their own protection.”

At that moment, Benjamin and Peyton came into the room. “We have a sketch,” Benjamin said. He handed the paper to Tom, who looked at it closely.

Benjamin was a talented sketch artist, a talent he’d kept hidden for many years. The sketch showed a woman with a slender face and long hair. Her eyes were slightly deep set and her chin square.

Tom looked up at Peyton. “This looks like Kathy Simon?”

“It could be a photograph of her.” For the first time her eyes shone with a hint of hope. Tom was struck again by her prettiness.

He handed the sketch to Rick. “Have you seen this woman?”

Rick studied the sketch with a frown, then shook his head. “No, I’ve never seen her before.”

Tom looked back at Peyton. “You have a recent picture of Lilly?”

“I do. I just had her pictures taken at that little studio on Main Street a couple of weeks ago.” She went to the desk in the corner of the room and opened a drawer. She withdrew a large envelope and from it pulled a 5×7 photograph.

She gazed at the picture for a long moment, her eyes filling with tears, then she handed it to Tom. Lilly was a doll, one of those exceptionally pretty babies with bright blue eyes and a tuft of curly blond hair.

Tom turned to his brother Caleb, who had returned to the house moments earlier after interviewing more of the people who lived in and around the apartment complex. “Take these to the office and get them over the wires,” he said as he handed the photo and sketch to him. “Make up flyers and get them distributed around town.”

When Caleb went out the front door, Tom turned back to Peyton. “Somebody will see them. Somebody will know where she is,” he said in encouragement.

“I hope so,” Peyton exclaimed.



The next couple of hours passed in agonizing slowness. Peyton sat on the sofa looking as if a loud noise might shatter her. Rick sat next to her, but at no time did the two touch in any way.

Tom found their relationship rather intriguing. Was their lack of physical touch an indication that their relationship hadn't had the mutual easy ending that both of them had implied? And what, if anything, might that have to do with the case?

Throughout the evening, Tom coordinated efforts to find the baby, speaking to his deputies by cell phone to keep updated. As night fell, Tom didn't expect anything to happen. People were in their homes, getting ready for bed, and wouldn't see the flyers until morning.

Rick must have recognized the same thing. At ten-thirty he stood. "I checked into the hotel downtown when I arrived. I think I'll head over there for the rest of the night. I'm in room 112. Somebody will let me know if anything happens?"

"Of course," Tom replied, vaguely surprised by his decision to leave.

Rick reached down and grabbed Peyton's hand. "Stay strong," he said. "I'm sure we'll have her back tomorrow." He dropped her hand and with a nod to Tom left the house.

Almost immediately, Peyton got up from the sofa and went to the front window. She stared out with her back to Tom, and he was struck by how alone, how achingly fragile, she looked.

"Do you have children, Tom?" She didn't turn to face him but remained staring out the window into the darkness of the night.

"No wife, no kids," he replied. He stepped closer to her, close enough that he could smell the pleasant scent of her perfume.

"So you can't know what this feels like." She turned to face him and raw pain radiated from her eyes.

"No, I can't know exactly what it feels like," he said softly.

"I feel like Kathy reached inside my chest and ripped my heart out." Tears slid down her cheeks. "Nothing matters except Lilly. I need her back, Tom. I need her back in my arms." A deep sob exploded out of her and she nearly crumpled to the floor.

Before she could, Tom reached out for her and pulled her tight against his chest. She sagged against him and buried her face in the front of his shirt while she cried.

He wrapped his arms around her and held tight, knowing it was the only comfort he could offer her at the moment. As he held her he went over it all in his mind, satisfying himself that everything that could be done was being done.

Now it became a waiting game. Hopefully somebody knew this woman who had called herself Kathy Simon, somebody who would call with information that would lead them to her and the baby.

But the last time Tom had held a weeping woman in his arms, everything had ended badly. Tragedy had pulled her away from him, and he'd nearly been destroyed.

He hoped at the end of all this that Peyton would have her baby safely back in her arms. He hadn't been strong enough to help one woman deal with grief, and he prayed he wouldn't have to help Peyton.



## *Chapter 3*

Peyton didn't realize how much she'd needed to be held until Tom's strong arms surrounded her. The fact that it was a relative stranger's arms that brought her some comfort wasn't lost on her. But his arms were solid and warm and the clean, slightly spicy scent of him was comforting, making her reluctant to leave his embrace.

She finally raised her face to look up at him. "Thank you. I needed somebody to hold me for just a minute or two." Reluctantly she dropped her hands from around his neck and stepped back from him. "As you probably noticed, Rick isn't very good in the hug department."

"Yeah, I noticed that. Why don't you make some coffee for us?" he asked as he took her by the elbow and led her back into the kitchen. "You should probably try to eat something, too," he said as he leaned against the counter.

She shook her head. "I can't even think about food right now, but if you're hungry I have some sandwich stuff."

"Sure, I'd take a sandwich," he replied.

As the coffee began to fill the air with its fragrance and Peyton got out the lunch meat and cheese to build a sandwich, she realized he was keeping her busy, trying to keep her mind off the reason he was here, the reason Lilly wasn't in her bouncy chair on the table.

When she finished making the sandwich she set it on the table in front of Tom. She poured them each a cup of coffee and joined him there.

She still wanted to weep and wail, to walk the streets and rip open each and every door she came to in order to find Lilly, but she knew in all likelihood that Kathy was long gone. She also knew Tom had set in place the means that would hopefully find her baby.

"It's going to be a long night," she said aloud as her gaze drifted toward the window where the darkness was profound. "I can't believe she's out there somewhere and not here with me."

"Tell me about your relationship with Rick," he said.

She looked back at him and knew he was once again trying to take her mind off Lilly—as if that were possible. Still, she wanted conversation. She wanted to talk about everything and anything so that she wouldn't hear the screaming voice inside her head that said her baby was gone.

She wrapped her cold fingers around the warmth of her coffee cup and frowned. "There isn't a whole lot to tell. I met Rick in a coffee shop where I was working near the courthouse in Wichita. He was handsome and charming, and when he asked me out I was thrilled. We got close really fast, but it didn't take me long to realize I would never be first in Rick's life. I'd always be a distant third behind his work and his colleagues. For a while I was okay with that. But toward the end I realized that for once in my life I wanted to be the first priority in somebody's life, and it wasn't going to happen with Rick."

She paused and took a sip of her coffee. "Anyway, we both agreed that we weren't right for each other and had one last fling that resulted in Lilly."

"A surprise?"

"Definitely," she replied. "But, the minute I saw the test result and knew that I was pregnant, I also knew I wanted the baby more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life."

"And what about Rick? How did he feel about it?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "Initially I think he was a little bit upset. Any man would be. Neither of us had planned to become parents so soon, but he quickly came around. He was one hundred percent supportive through the pregnancy and was right there with me when Lilly was born."

"What about support and visitation rights? Did you work those out legally?" His chocolate-brown eyes seemed to see everything that was inside her soul.



“No. I know Rick will do the right thing where Lilly is concerned, and if he doesn’t then I’ll be fine on my own.” For the first time since this horror had begun, she noticed that Sheriff Tom Grayson was a very handsome man. The warmth of his dark brown eyes tempered the stern, stark lines of his face.

She leaned back in her chair, slightly disconcerted by her spark of feminine interest. “Anyway, I figured if Rick wants to be a part of Lilly’s life he’ll make that happen. I didn’t want some legal form to bind him to us if he didn’t want that.”

“You said for once in your life you wanted to be somebody’s priority. What about your parents?” He took a bite of his sandwich and looked at her expectantly.

“I never knew my father, and I was always a distant third in my mother’s life, right behind her drugs and her newest boyfriend.” She couldn’t hide the touch of bitterness that crept into her voice.

“Doesn’t sound like the makings of a great childhood,” he said softly.

“It wasn’t.” She stared back out the window, tossed back into painful memories she tried never to access. “It was nothing but fear and uncertainty and one cheap, filthy motel room after another.” She looked back at him. “I promised myself then that if I survived eventually I’d have a place of my own that would never be dirty, a place where nobody could kick me out onto the streets.”

He took another bite of his sandwich and looked around. “Looks like you’ve succeeded.”

She nodded. “It’s taken a long time to get here, but I’m happy where I’m at,” she replied. “But now that somebody has taken my Lilly—”

Emotion clawed up the back of her throat, and she felt as if the darkness outside the window were seeping into her blood, taking over her heart. Just as she thought she’d be swallowed whole, Tom reached across the table and grabbed her hand tight in his.

“We’re doing everything that can be done to find them,” he said. “You have to stay strong. You said you didn’t think Kathy would hurt Lilly. You have to believe that, hang on to that.”

She squeezed his hand and nodded. “I do believe that. She was good with Lilly.” She released a sigh. “Maybe she can’t have children of her own. Maybe she only befriended me because she wanted Lilly.”

He released her hand and leaned back in his chair. “If that’s the case, then somebody in her life will realize she suddenly has a baby. She can’t stay underground forever. Somewhere somebody is going to see her and Lilly and make a phone call.”

“You sound so optimistic,” she said.

He smiled then. It was the first real smile she’d seen on his face, and it was a nice one. It softened the sternness and deepened the warmth of his eyes. “I’m generally an optimist. I’d rather think on the positive side unless I have a reason to think otherwise.”

“What’s positive about all this?” she asked, needing something, anything to hang on to.

“It’s encouraging to me that she didn’t kill you. According to you, you blacked out and you aren’t sure how long you were out. She would have had a perfect opportunity to kill you then, but she didn’t. I’d rather be chasing a kidnapper than a killer.”

He got up from the table and walked over to the coffeemaker. For a big man he moved with an innate grace, as if perfectly comfortable in his own skin. He picked up the coffee carafe and carried it to the table.

“No more for me,” she said. He filled his cup, then returned the pot to the machine and once again sat down across from her.

“Your brother doesn’t believe my story about Kathy, about anything I said,” she said. “He thinks I did something to Lilly.” The very idea threatened to squeeze the breath from her lungs.

Once again a small smile raced across his features. “Caleb is the cynic in the family. Half the time he doesn’t believe anything I tell him.”



“Tell me about the rest of your family.” She needed something to take her mind off the ticking of the clock, off the deepening of the night and the fact that her baby girl wasn’t in her crib where she belonged.

“I’m the eldest. I’m thirty-six. Jacob is next. He’s thirty-four. He’s the only one of us who didn’t hang around Black Rock. Instead of joining the sheriff’s department like all of us did, he became an FBI agent, working out of the Kansas City field office. A little over a month ago he quit his job and came back to Black Rock. He’s been staying in a little cottage we have on the ranch property.” A deep frown furrowed his forehead and he glanced out the window as if in deep thought.

“You’re worried about him,” Peyton said softly.

His gaze shot back to her. “Yeah, I guess I am. He hasn’t told any of us what brought him home. He refuses to leave the cottage and has become a recluse.” He shrugged. “I guess he’ll tell us what’s going on when the time is right.”

“And what about the others? Benjamin seemed very kind.”

“Benjamin is the softie of the family. Even when he was a kid he was trying to save the whales, adopt a pet, sponsor a starving child or whatever to help. Besides being a terrific deputy he also runs the family ranch on the northern edge of town.”

“And you mentioned a sister?”

This time his smile was full of fond indulgence. “Brittany, she’s twenty-four and the baby of the family. She’s also a deputy.”

“What about your parents? You haven’t mentioned them.”

“They died six years ago in a private plane crash. They were adventure junkies. The minute we were all old enough to take care of ourselves, they disappeared to one exotic location or another. The end result was that it made us kids closer than most big broods. What about your mother? Where is she now?”

“She died in prison when I was eighteen. I was thirteen when she was arrested for manufacturing meth. She went to prison and I went into the foster care system. Unfortunately, I wasn’t one of their success stories, and when I turned sixteen I ran away.”

She couldn’t believe she was telling him all this. Usually she was reticent to share the details of her ugly past with anyone. She hadn’t even told Rick much about her childhood.

Maybe it was because it was dark and the middle of the night and she was feeling especially vulnerable. Or perhaps it was because his eyes were soft and without judgment and there was a solidness about him that made her think she could tell him anything.

“Sounds like things haven’t been easy for you,” he said.

She shrugged. “They say what doesn’t kill you makes you strong.” The darkness that she’d tried to push away all night suddenly slammed into her. An unexpected sob caught in the back of her throat.

“If anything happens to Lilly, it won’t make me strong,” she exclaimed. “It will kill me, Tom. It will honestly kill me.”

As she began to cry once again he stood and pulled her back into his arms. This time his embrace not only felt welcomed, but familiar. She leaned into him, absorbing the strength she instinctively knew he possessed.

If she could just get through this night, then surely Lilly would come home. All she had to do was get through the agonizing long, dark night.

It was four in the morning when Peyton finally fell into an exhausted sleep in a chair in the living room. Tom considered moving her to her bedroom but was afraid in rousing her she would never go back to sleep, and she needed to sleep.

So did he.

When he was sure she was down for the count, he called Benjamin to come and sit with her so Tom could head home for a couple hours of sleep.



As he waited for Benjamin to arrive, he thought of everything that had been done so far in an effort to find Kathy Simon and the missing baby. Throughout the evening there had been a steady influx of deputies checking in to tell him what had been accomplished.

The sketch and picture of Lilly had gone over the wire services, the AMBER Alert was in effect and everything that could be done was being done. Now it was just a matter of time.

He met Benjamin at the front door and motioned him into the kitchen. “Hopefully she’ll sleep for a couple of hours.”

Benjamin nodded. “And hopefully in the next couple of hours we’ll start getting some phone calls that will lead us to the baby.”

“I’m going to catch an hour or two of sleep then head into the office and coordinate things. I’ll try to be back here by noon.”

“You okay?” Benjamin asked, his brow furrowed with concern. “I know this one must be tough for you.”

“No tougher than any other,” Tom replied curtly. There was no way he’d admit to his brother that for just a moment, as he’d looked at the photograph of Lilly, he’d remembered another little girl and an unexpected knife had pierced through his heart.

He shoved this thought away as he left Peyton’s house and got into his patrol car. A deep weariness gripped him as he drove the short drive home.

He hoped Peyton was right and this Kathy character wouldn’t harm the baby, and he hoped that when morning dawned phone calls would start flooding into the office, tips from people who either knew or had seen the woman calling herself Kathy Simon.

Tom’s house was a white two-story with a wrap-around porch and hunter green shutters at the windows. It was the second house he’d owned. The first had been sold five years ago after his divorce, when he realized the memories that resided there were too painful to avoid.

He’d bought this particular house for a song because of all the work it needed. He’d thought it would be a terrific project in his spare time, a hobby to keep painful thoughts at bay.

As always when he entered the foyer a faint sense of satisfaction swept over him. The wooden floor gleamed beneath his feet and the throw rug in shades of copper and brown emphasized the beauty of the wood beneath.

He tossed his keys on the small table in the hallway and went directly up the stairs to the master bedroom. He’d give himself a couple of hours of sleep and then head into the office to see if anything had popped.

It took him only minutes to place his gun and holster on the nightstand and undress and get into bed. Even though he was exhausted, his mind refused to turn off as it replayed the events of the day. He believed Peyton’s story of what had happened, but he’d still instructed Sam to run background checks on both Peyton and Rick. The last thing he wanted was for something unexpected to jump up and bite him on the butt.

Every base needed to be covered, and he was certain as he closed his eyes that he’d covered them all. They were a small town, with a small force of law enforcement officers, but Tom was confident in his team. They were all smart and committed to their work.

As sleep began to edge in, his thoughts turned to Peyton. She’d touched him on levels nobody had reached in a very long time. She had to be strong in order to have survived her childhood, and yet there was that frailty about her that made him want to take care of her.

If he were completely honest with himself, he had to acknowledge that as he’d held her in his arms he’d been stunned to realize that although his intent had been to comfort, there had been a part of him, a strictly male part, that had enjoyed the feel of her in his arms.

In fact, he had more than enjoyed it. A quick fire of desire had swept through him as he’d felt the press of her soft breasts against his chest, as he’d smelled the fresh scent of her hair. It had



stunned him, first because it was so unexpected and second because it was inappropriate, considering the circumstances.

He drifted asleep with thoughts of her in his head and awoke to his alarm clock ringing two hours later. He rolled over and punched it off, then bounded out of bed, eager to get to the office and find out how things had gone while he'd been sleeping. A sense of urgency chased him. Somewhere out there was a baby who needed to be brought home.

He was in the office by seven-thirty, and Sam greeted him as he walked through the door. Sam McCain was a big, burly black man who had come to Black Rock after working as a policeman in Chicago. He and his wife had moved there for the slower pace and a safer place to raise their kids.

Every day Tom was thankful that Sam had landed here working for him. "Hey, Sam. Please tell me the phone has been ringing off the wall with tips on Lilly Wilkerson's whereabouts."

Sam frowned and shook his head. "We've only had two calls so far this morning, and if you think real hard you'll be able to tell me who they were from."

"Sally Bernard called threatening to kill her husband, and Walt Toliver called to report that Lilly was probably taken into the spaceship that landed in his field last night," Tom replied.

"And the kewpie doll goes to the big fella with the gun on his hip," Sam exclaimed.

Tom grinned. "It wouldn't be a normal day without the two of them calling in." His grin flattened into a frown. "I was really hoping somebody would have seen this Kathy Simon."

"It's early yet, boss. It's possible she's holed up somewhere for the night, but eventually she'll have to get out and around, and somebody will see her."

"Where's Brittany?"

"She hasn't shown up yet," Sam replied.

Tom looked at his watch. She should have been in a half an hour ago. "Has she called in?" Sam shook his head. Tom sighed. "This is the third time in the last couple of weeks that she's been late. Guess I'm going to have to kick some sister butt."

Sam grinned. "Benjamin called earlier to tell you that everything is under control at the Wilkerson house and Caleb is waiting for you in your office."

"As soon as I check a few things here I'll be heading back over there," Tom said as he walked to his office.

Caleb sat in the chair in front of Tom's desk, his big feet propped up on the polished oak. Tom slapped Caleb's legs as he passed by and frowned in disapproval. His younger brother hurriedly straightened up.

"You heard from Brittany this morning?" he asked Caleb as he eased down into the chair at his desk.

"Why would I hear from her?" Caleb asked.

"She's late ... again."

"She's probably hung over. She's spending way too much time down at Harley's bar. I think she has a crush on the new bartender there."

"I don't care what she does in her time off, but I can't have her ambling into work whenever she feels like it." Tom definitely needed to have a stern conversation with his baby sister. "But in the meantime, I'm headed back over to the Wilkerson place to check on Peyton."

Caleb frowned. "Don't you find it odd that nobody saw this woman who supposedly stole her baby? She didn't know where this Kathy lived, doesn't have a picture of the woman and doesn't have any evidence to support that this woman even exists."

"Do you have pictures of your friends?" Tom countered. "Peyton only knew Kathy for two months, a span of time when Peyton wasn't taking her baby out much. Odd? Maybe. But impossible to believe? No."

"I think you should order that new patio ripped up," Caleb said. "I think if you want to find that baby then that's the first place you should look."



“I’ll tell you what you’re going to do today,” Tom said. “According to Peyton, this Kathy Simon has been in town for at least two months. During that time she had to eat, so I want you to spend the day taking a sketch to every grocery store and every restaurant in town and find out who saw her when.”

“Sounds like a waste of time,” Caleb exclaimed.

“Your time is mine as long as you wear that deputy badge, little brother. Oh, and another thing, apparently Peyton had a run-in with somebody in the parking lot of the grocery store last week. She said the guy was driving a black pickup and had shaggy brown hair. See if you can figure out who that might have been.”

“Now, that sounds like a bunch of busy work,” Caleb exclaimed.

Tom smiled. “So get out of here and get busy.”

As Caleb left, Tom called Sam into his office. “Coordinate with the others and start a door-to-door campaign to find somebody who knew Kathy Simon. I’m headed to the victim’s house. Keep me updated on any calls that come in, anything that smells just a little bit like a break.”

“Got it,” Sam replied and followed Tom out of his office.

“Oh, one more thing. Call Brittany and tell her to get her butt in here, and call the men off the roadblocks. My guess is that Kathy Simon scooted out of town as fast as she could and is probably long gone.”

Minutes later, as Tom drove toward Peyton’s house, he wondered what condition she’d be in when he arrived. Although he didn’t know personally what it was like to have a kidnapped child, he certainly knew personally how to grieve for a child.

His head filled with a vision of a baby face with merry brown eyes and chubby cheeks. Even though it had been five years since he’d lost her, his heart constricted with pain.

Nobody should have to suffer the loss of a child, and he certainly didn’t want Peyton to know that kind of pain. She was hurting now, but if her baby wasn’t returned to her and all hope was lost, she would be cast into a hollow darkness that Tom knew too well.

But he couldn’t think about his own loss. He needed to focus on making sure that everything was being done to bring baby Lilly home. He also needed to decide if the FBI needed to be called in. At the moment, his plan was to give himself and his deputies twenty-four more hours to find Kathy Simon. If they didn’t succeed, then they would have to proceed under the assumption that Kathy Simon had crossed state lines with the kidnapped infant.

Rick’s car was back in Peyton’s driveway as Tom parked at the curb. Benjamin’s car was also still there. It was Benjamin who opened the door to his knock. He looked tired.

“Heard anything?” he asked Tom.

“Nothing. How are things here?”

“A bit tense. She didn’t sleep much, hasn’t eaten at all. Rick showed up about an hour ago and they’re in the kitchen now.”

Tom clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Go home. Get some sleep.”

As Benjamin headed out the door Tom walked toward the kitchen where the murmurs of Peyton and Rick’s voices drifted out.

“Tom!” Peyton jumped up from the table as he entered the room, looking relieved to see him.

“I hope you’ve brought us some news,” Rick said. He started to rise as well, but Tom motioned him back into his chair.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have news,” Tom said, hating the way the hopeful expression on Peyton’s face fell away. “The roadblocks on either end of town yielded nothing.”

“She had plenty of time to get out of town before you put those roadblocks into effect,” Rick replied. “Peyton isn’t even sure how long she was unconscious. She might have had as much as a half an hour head start before Peyton called for help.”



“I’m aware of that,” Tom replied. He leaned against the kitchen counter and tried not to notice how Peyton’s jeans hugged the long length of her legs, how the blue T-shirt she wore perfectly matched her eyes and molded to the full breasts that had been against his chest the night before.

He focused his attention on Rick. “We’re starting door-to-door canvassing this morning, hoping somebody knows something about Kathy Simon. She was in town for at least two months. She had to be living somewhere, and if we can find out where that was, then maybe we can get some clue as to where she might have gone.”

Rick nodded. He looked tired, as if the night had been unkind to him and sleep had not come easy. “I just hope we get her back today. I hate to leave here without everything being resolved.”

Tom focused again on Peyton. “How are you holding up?” His heart squeezed in his chest as he saw the dark smudges beneath her eyes, the lines of strain on either side of her mouth.



## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.