

MILLS & BOON



**Vintage Cherish**

# Man of the Hour

PATRICIA KAY

**Patricia Kay**  
**Man of the Hour**

**Аннотация**

**KIDNAPPED!**It was every mother's worst nightmare come to life. After her daughter's abduction from a shopping mall, Glynnis March didn't know where to turn. Fortunately, quick-thinking Dan O'Neill was in charge of the investigation, and he was determined that Glynnis get her child back, no matter what. But this wasn't just another case for the handsome, dedicated detective. Dan couldn't get the beautiful single mom, or her splintered family, out of his mind. He was racing against the clock—and the ghosts of his past—to save little Livvy. Could he solve the case...and, in the process, repair his shattered heart?

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## **“I’m okay,” Glynnis said.**

She didn’t look okay. She looked like hell. Tired, pale, and worried. Despite this, she looked younger than she had the day before, beautiful in no makeup, her hair tied back in a ponytail.

“I’m just so scared,” she said.

“I know you are,” Dan said. “That’s one of the reasons I came by—to tell you that it may take a while, but we’ll find your daughter.”

Impulsively he got up and walked over to where she sat. Reaching down, he took her hand and pulled her to her feet. Then he did something he knew he shouldn’t. He put his arms around Glynnis and held her while she cried.

Holding her trembling body, Dan silently repeated his pledge. He would find this woman’s daughter and bring her safely home...if it was the last thing he ever did.

Dear Reader,

Well, the lazy days of summer are winding to an end, so what better way to celebrate those last long beach afternoons than with a good book? We here at Silhouette Special Edition are always happy to oblige! We begin with *Diamonds and Deceptions* by Marie Ferrarella, the next in our continuity series, *THE PARKS EMPIRE*. When a mesmerizing man walks into her father’s bookstore, sheltered Brooke Moss believes he’s her dream come true. But he’s about to challenge everything she thought she knew

about her own family.

Victoria Pade continues her **NORTHBRIDGE NUPTIALS** with *Wedding Willies*, in which a runaway bride with an aversion to both small towns and matrimony finds herself falling for both, along with Northbridge's most eligible bachelor! In Patricia Kay's *Man of the Hour*, a woman finds her gratitude to the detective who found her missing child turning quickly to...love. In *Charlie's Angels* by Cheryl St. John, a single father is stymied when his little girl is convinced that finding a new mommy is as simple as having an angel sprinkle him with her "miracle dust"—until he meets the beautiful blonde who drives a rig called "Silver Angel." In *It Takes Three* by Teresa Southwick, a pregnant caterer sets her sights on the handsome single dad who swears his fatherhood days are behind him. Sure they are! And the **MEN OF THE CHEROKEE ROSE** series by Janis Reams Hudson concludes with *The Cowboy on Her Trail*, in which one night of passion with the man she's always wanted results in a baby on the way. Can marriage be far behind?

Enjoy all six of these wonderful novels, and please do come back next month for six more new selections, only from Silhouette Special Edition.

Gail Chasan  
Senior Editor

# Man of the Hour

## Patricia Kay

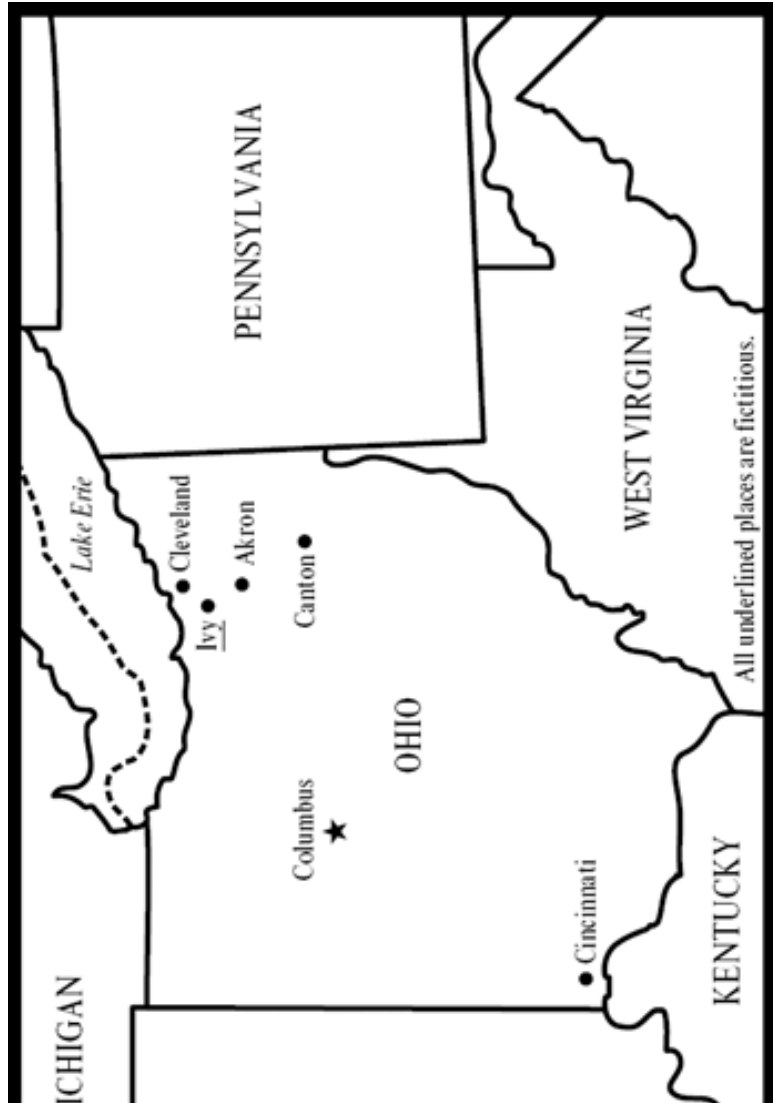


[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

This book is dedicated, with many thanks, to Colleen Thompson—terrific writer, knowledgeable reader and great friend.

# **PATRICIA KAY,**

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MICHIGAN

PENNSYLVANIA

WEST VIRGINIA

KENTUCKY

*Lake Erie*

● Cleveland

● Ivy

● Akron

● Canton

★ Columbus

OHIO

● Cincinnati

All underlined places are fictitious.



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# Chapter One

“Mommy, I thirsty!”

“Me, too! I wanna go home.”

Glynnis March glanced down at her tired children. Michael, her seven-year-old, and Olivia, her three-year-old, looked mutinous.

“I’m sorry,” she said as patiently as she could, considering the fact her head was pounding and all she wanted to do was to go home, too. “I know you’re both tired. Five more minutes, okay? Mommy just needs to buy one more Christmas present, then we’ll go to the food court.”

“And get french fries?” Michael said.

Normally, Glynnis didn’t allow the children to eat fast food, but desperate times called for desperate measures. “Yes, french fries and a soft drink you can take to the car and have while we’re driving home, all right?”

Michael, skeptical, frowned. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

With an expression that pierced her because it was one she’d seen on his father’s face many times, Michael looked down at his sister and said, “Just five minutes, Livvy. Mommy promised.”

“Fibe minutes?” Olivia frowned in concentration, putting out four fingers one by one.

Glynnis couldn’t help it; she chuckled and pulled out Olivia’s

thumb. “Five, honey. One, two, three, four, five.”

Olivia counted along with her mother and then grinned, her dimples deep and adorable. “Fibe.”

Michael didn’t smile. He was too old to be distracted. Glynnis knew she was pushing her luck. But Corinne’s Closet had cashmere sweaters at half price—something she hadn’t known until she’d seen the sign in the window—and she knew if she didn’t go in and get one now, they’d be gone by the time she was able to come back to the mall. And a green cashmere sweater would be the perfect gift for her sister-in-law, Sabrina.

Praying the children would last long enough for her to snag the sweater, Glynnis—children in tow—entered the shop. She nearly turned around and walked out when she saw how many women were ahead of her. It was a mob scene. But she wanted that sweater for Sabrina.

Maneuvering through the crowd, she spied the sweater section. It wasn’t easy, but she managed to work her way to the table where the sale sweaters were stacked. Oh, good, she thought, seeing that there were several different shades of green. She especially liked the mossy shade, which would be a perfect complement to Sabrina’s eyes.

“Glynnis! Fancy seeing you here.”

Glynnis whirled at the sound of the Scottish accent. As she’d thought, Isabel McNabb, head of the creative writing program at Ivy Community College, where Glynnis taught art and art history, stood grinning at her. “Hi, Isabel. Yeah, I’m braving the

madding crowd.”

“Isn’t it just.” Isabel pushed back a strand of wayward blond hair. “But my mum is coming tomorrow, and I still haven’t bought anything for her. So here I am.”

“Mommy! Come on!” Michael tugged his hand away from Glynnis’s grip.

Glynnis looked down at her unhappy son. His dark eyes, another reminder of his father, were accusatory. “Honey,” she began.

“I wanna go. You promised.”

“You pomised,” Olivia echoed, her tongue not able to navigate her Rs very well. She, too, started trying to release herself.

Glynnis hefted Olivia into her arms. “Isabel, I’m sorry. I can’t talk. I’ve got to get one of those sweaters and get out of here or my kids are going to have a meltdown.”

Isabel nodded. Lowering her voice, she said, “See why I have no desire for the little darlings?”

Glynnis grinned. Isabel’s dry humor and fearlessness about expressing an unpopular opinion never failed to amuse her. “Have a wonderful Christmas,” she said as Isabel waved goodbye.

“You, too.”

Turning to the table with the sweaters, Glynnis began a one-handed search for a mossy-green one in a size small. Olivia, held in the other arm, began sucking her thumb. On another day, Glynnis would have tried to distract her and gently pull the thumb out of her mouth, but right now she was too frazzled. If the

thumb gave Livvy some comfort and allowed Glynnis to get her sweater and get out of there quickly, so be it. She'd deal with her daughter's insecurities some other time.

Just when Glynnis found the size she was looking for, there was a huge crash as one of the nearby circular racks holding leather jackets collapsed onto the floor. Glancing over, she spied the unmistakable red sneakers of her son protruding from underneath the fallen rack.

"Michael!" Putting Olivia down, Glynnis rushed over to help one of the sales clerks right the rack. A dazed-looking Michael stared up at her. There was a bloody cut on his cheek. "Oh, Michael, honey," Glynnis said, reaching down to help him up. "Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh."

Glynnis took a deep breath. Her heart was racing. She gathered Michael into a hug. "I'm so sorry," she said to the clerk.

The sales clerk just rolled her eyes. "Hey, he's a kid. We're used to it."

Glynnis smiled thankfully. Reaching into her pocket, she extracted a tissue and gently wiped away the blood from Michael's cheek. Grateful to see the injury was only a surface scratch, she mentally dismissed the green sweater and said, "C'mon, honey, let's go."

"Okay," he said.

"Livvy, sweetie, we're going home." Glynnis turned, then frowned as she realized Olivia wasn't behind her. Remembering

that she'd put Olivia down when the rack fell, she called out, "Livvy? Livvy, honey, where are you?" She made a quick sweep of the store, but she didn't see her daughter or the bright yellow jacket she was wearing anywhere. "Livvy!" she called louder, the first small seeds of panic beginning to take hold. "Stop hiding. This isn't funny."

"What is it?" the clerk who'd helped her with Michael said.

"My little girl. I can't see her. She...oh, God." Fear caused her voice to shake. "I—I had her in my arms, and I put her down when I saw Michael under the rack." Glynnis was practically crying now. "She's gone! I don't see her anywhere."

Holding on to Michael tightly, Glynnis raced through the store. Livvy had to be here somewhere! Maybe she was hiding under one of the racks. The kids loved to do that. Once, Michael had scared her half to death by hiding and not answering when she called. When she'd finally found him, he giggled, completely unaware of the fact he'd taken a few years off her life expectancy.

By now, many of the customers and all the clerks realized what had happened and they were clustered in worried-looking groups.

"Ma'am, ma'am, slow down. Tell me what your daughter looks like," the clerk said.

"She...she's only three. Th-three and a half. She's small with reddish-gold hair like mine, hazel eyes, dimples, sh-she's wearing a bright yellow down jacket with a hood. Um, navy blue corduroy pants and white sneakers." Glynnis fought her fear, telling herself

Olivia was tired, and she'd probably just curled up somewhere.

"Anything else, ma'am?"

"Sh-she was sucking her thumb." The mention of the thumb caused something inside Glynnis to splinter. "She's probably just hiding somewhere." Please, God, let her just be playing hide-and-seek.

"I'll get security," the clerk said. Calling to a coworker, she added, "Help her look."

The other clerk organized the staff and remaining customers, all of whom seemed to have stopped whatever they'd been doing to commiserate. Systematically, they began searching under and behind racks and counters.

Soon they'd exhausted all possibilities, and Livvy was nowhere to be seen.

Glynnis, holding on to Michael as if her life depended upon it, raced to the door and out into the mall. Her gaze darted around. Livvy, Livvy, Livvy, where are you? But no matter how hard she looked, she saw no yellow jacket. She saw no Olivia. Biting her lip to keep from crying, Glynnis stood numbly. She had never felt so helpless in her life.

"Mommy? Where's Livvy?" Michael's voice trembled.

Looking down into his worried eyes, Glynnis could see he was on the verge of tears. She tried to make her own voice reassuring. "We'll find her, honey. Don't worry. We'll find her. M-maybe she just wanted to get some french fries." But even as Glynnis said the words, the fear she'd been trying to keep tamped down

erupted, threatening to totally overwhelm her.

A few seconds later, two black-uniformed security guards—one an older man, the other, a plump young woman—converged on the store.

The sales clerk who had been so helpful took Glynnis by the arm. “Come back inside,” she said. “We’ve got a security camera. Let’s look at the tape and see if your daughter wandered outside.”

“What happened, ma’am?” the female guard said.

By now, Glynnis was so panicked, she could hardly talk, so the clerk hastily filled in. As soon as the vital information was imparted, the male guard got out his walkie-talkie. Within minutes, the background music that was so much a part of the mall went silent and the public address system blared into life.

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” the male guard said. “We’re closing off every exit. If your little girl wandered off by herself, she won’t be able to get out. We’ll find her.”

“Lucy,” called one of the clerks.

The clerk, who had been so helpful from the beginning, turned.

“We’ve got the security tape rewound.”

“Let’s go look at that tape, ma’am,” the female guard said.

In the store’s office, Glynnis, with Michael, the store manager, the two guards and Lucy, the helpful clerk, stood and watched the security tape.

“Oh, God!” Glynnis gasped. “There! There! That’s her!” She began to cry, for there, on the now-stopped tape, was Olivia. But

she wasn't wandering out the door alone. She was being held in the arms of a young woman, and she was crying. "That woman is taking my baby!"

The male guard grabbed the phone and punched in some numbers. "I'm calling the police," he said. Inclining his head toward the female guard, he said, "Alert everyone. Be on the lookout for a female, teens or twenties, wearing a short jacket and jeans, spiked hairdo, probably streaked blond, carrying a female youngster. Give them a description of Mrs. March's little girl. Tell them not to try to apprehend, just to watch and follow. The doors are all locked now, so she can't leave. Call me the minute you see them."

His eyes met Glynnis's and, unknowingly, he parroted almost the exact words she'd used to reassure Michael. "We'll find her, ma'am. Don't worry. We'll find her."

Please God, Glynnis prayed, please let him be right. Please let them find her. Don't let her be hurt. Just bring her back to me, and I'll never ask you for anything again.

Dan O'Neill's shift began at three, but he'd been bored at home and decided to come in to the station early. Although you'd think the opposite would be true—that perps would take a break during the Christmas holidays—crime seemed to increase at this time of year.

Even Ivy, Ohio, with its population of less than 35,000, wasn't immune. Of course, instead of non-stop homicides, drug deals gone bad and armed robbery—which had been the menu in

Chicago—the majority of crime in Ivy was confined to domestic disputes and vandalism, with a few drunk drivers thrown in.

Not exactly exciting, he thought wryly.

But then he hadn't moved to Ivy for excitement. In his years with the Chicago PD, he'd had enough excitement to last him a lifetime.

Remembering Chicago and the reasons behind his leaving, he felt a familiar mantle of depression settling onto his shoulders. Quickly, before it could gain a firm hold, he shook it off. He was tired of feeling bad. Tired of feeling guilty. Tired of the old Dan.

Soon it would be a new year.

A new year.

He repeated the phrase mentally several times. New years meant changes. Resolutions. Getting rid of bad habits and adopting new ones.

"It's a new life," he muttered.

"You say something?"

Dan looked up. Romeo Navarro, aptly named because he considered himself God's gift to women, was looking at him curiously.

"Just talking to myself," Dan said.

"Gotta watch that. That's what old people do."

Dan shrugged.

Romeo started to say something else when the phone rang. Both men turned to look at Elena, the dispatcher. "Oh, that's awful!" she said, her dark eyes getting big as she listened.

“Someone will be right there.” She disconnected the call and then knocked on the glass window of the chief’s office. “Chief Crandall!”

Gabe Crandall—short, bald, paunchy, and counting the months until retirement—looked up.

“A little kid disappeared from one of the stores at the mall,” Elena said.

Dan and Romeo were on their feet before Chief Crandall barked out their names. Dan reached for his suit coat. Putting it on, he checked to make sure it didn’t catch on his .40 caliber Glock, holstered on his belt. The change from a shoulder holster was a welcome one, although he knew some police departments were still debating its merits, mainly because old-timers were resistant to any kind of change, no matter how much proof there was that a cop’s range of motion was too limited with the shoulder holster.

By the time Dan had put on his overcoat, Romeo was ready.

Chief Crandall stood in the doorway of his office. “O’Neill, you’re in charge.”

Dan nodded. He wondered what Romeo was thinking. Until Dan joined the department three months earlier, Romeo had been the senior officer on the force.

“You need more backup, call Elena. She’ll round up everyone she can find,” the chief added.

Elena gave them the particulars and five minutes later they were on their way in a department Malibu, with Romeo driving.

As they sped toward the mall, which was located on the west side of town, they went over the meager information they'd been provided.

The victim was a three-year-old girl. She'd been picked up and carried off by an unknown woman. Dan swore under his breath.

Three years old.

Luckily, the snatch had been caught on the store's security tape. Maybe they'd keep being lucky. Maybe by the time they reached the mall, the little girl would be found, and there'd be nothing for him and Romeo to do but go back to the station. Holding on to that thought, he tried to not to think about the alternative.

When they arrived at the Ivy Mall, Dan was glad to see the outside doors had been secured. He just hoped they'd been secured in time.

He and Romeo showed their badges, and a tall, dark-haired civilian unlocked the doors to let them in.

"I'm Jack Robertson," he said, "the mall manager." His gray eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses reflected his concern. "Thanks for getting here so fast."

Dan and Romeo introduced themselves and then followed Robertson through the crowded mall to a spot near the center, where the mall's Santa was enthroned. Dan didn't have to be told that the shop labeled Corinne's Closet was the scene of the snatch, not just because there were so many people congregated outside the store, but because the air fairly hummed

with excitement. The tension was a dead giveaway that here was the unusual, here something had happened that was outside the norm.

Inside, the crowd parted, and he and Romeo were taken to the back of the store where there was a small office. Dan immediately knew the pretty redhead seated in the corner was the mother of the three-year-old. Her haunted eyes and strained, pale face told the whole story. Standing beside her was a small, dark-haired boy who looked tired and frightened. Dan nodded to the woman, and their eyes met briefly. He could feel the weight of her fear. He wished he could tell her there was no reason to worry, but experience had taught him the opposite.

Also crowded into the office was a middle-aged male security guard with a name tag that read Harold Fury, and two women who wore name tags identifying them as store personnel.

Dan held out his hand to the security guard. "Lieutenant Dan O'Neill. Ivy Police Department."

Romeo stepped forward. "Sergeant Romeo Navarro."

The security guard introduced himself, then gestured toward the woman. "This here is Mrs. March, the missing child's mother."

Dan looked at the mother again. "We'll talk in a minute."

She bit her lip and drew the boy—Dan imagined it was her son—closer to her.

Addressing the guard again, Dan said, "I understand there's a security tape."

“Yes.”

“May we see it, please?”

When the tape reached the point where it showed the abduction, Dan asked that the tape be stopped so he could study the woman. She was distinctive, even though they couldn't see her face. That punk hairdo alone would make her stand out in a crowd.

“Did anyone see this woman in the store?” he asked.

“I did,” said the younger-looking clerk, a pretty blonde.

Dan glanced at her name tag. “Tell me what you saw, Lucy.”

“I only saw her briefly. She was at the counter in the front where we have a display of turquoise jewelry. I was going to go ask if I could help her, but another customer asked me a question and I forgot about her.”

“Was there anything unusual about her? Other than her hair?”

“I'm sorry. I just didn't notice anything in particular. She was young, in her teens or early twenties, maybe, that's about all I remember. And her jacket was black. I did notice that. Black leather. It was nice. Oh, and I think she had on blue jeans.”

Dan smiled. “Good. That's good. Most people remember more than they think.”

The girl smiled, obviously proud of herself.

“Has the entire mall been secured?” Dan asked the guard.

“Yes. All the outside doors are locked.”

“In all the stores?”

“Yes.”

“You checked them all?” Dan said dubiously.

“No, but the order went out.” For the first time, the guard showed hesitation. “Everyone was told to lock their doors.”

“How many security people do you have on duty?”

“Four, counting me.”

“And how many stores are in this mall?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Including the big anchor stores?”

“Yes.”

Dan realized they would need all the police and security personnel they could round up if they were going to conduct the kind of search that needed to be conducted.

While Romeo and the security guard called for backup, Dan turned his attention to the mother.

“Mrs. March, I want to assure you that we’ll do everything in our power to find your little girl.”

She swallowed. “Thank you.”

“Do you have a picture of her?”

“Yes, yes, I do.” Reaching down, she picked up a handbag from the floor and opened it. A moment later, she held out a photograph. Her hand was trembling.

Dan knew there was no place for emotion during an investigation. The mother’s naked fear and silent plea for him to accomplish a miracle was bad enough. But the sight of the beautiful child in the photo was the ultimate test of his ability to stay objective and professional. She was a real cutie, with a

dimpled smile, laughing hazel eyes and curly red-gold hair the same shade as her mother's.

Although he fought them, he couldn't stop the memories as the image of another beautiful little girl assaulted him. Pain, as fresh as if the death of his beloved daughter had taken place yesterday instead of nine years ago, punched him in the gut.

For a moment, he stood paralyzed. Then from somewhere he found the strength to push those agonizing memories away so he could concentrate all of his attention and skill on finding this child.

"May I keep this picture?" His voice was more brusque than he'd intended. Softening it, he added, "In case we need it."

"Y-yes, of course."

"I just have a few more questions."

"All right."

"Is there any chance someone you know could be behind this abduction?"

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "Someone I know? No one I know would ever do anything like this."

"There's no ex-husband? Nobody who might wish you harm?"

Her look of outrage faded. She shook her head. "No. I—I'm a...widow."

"I'm sorry. Look, finding your daughter might take a while. Is there anyone you can call to come and be here with you?"

"I...yes. My brother." The relief on her face was palpable. She dug a cell phone out of her handbag.

While she placed her phone call, Dan walked over to see how Romeo and the security guard had fared.

“Elena rounded up all ten patrolmen,” Romeo said, “as well as DeChurch, Nichols, Richardson and Cavelli.” The last four were the other detectives in the department.

“And I’ve called in as many of our security guards as I could find,” the guard said.

“Which is how many?” Dan asked.

“Six.”

Dan thought fast. “Okay. Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll divide up the anchor stores first. All customers and clerks will be asked to leave by one of the outside doors where one patrolman and one guard will be stationed. Everyone’s ID will be checked before they’re allowed to leave, and everyone will be quizzed about whether they might have seen the woman and child. Anyone with a small child will get extra attention. While this is proceeding, a team will start on the second floor of each store and systematically search each area. After each area is searched, we’ll cordon it off and put a security guard there to make sure no one tries to go back into that particular area to hide.”

“This might take more manpower than we’ve got,” Romeo said in an aside.

Ignoring the remark—which was true, but unproductive—Dan went on to say that all the people in the other stores or in the public areas would be asked to leave from the north entrance, where two police officers would check each person’s

identification.

“Sergeant Navarro will be in charge of the north entrance, which is also where we’ll admit anyone who’s coming to help.” Turning to the mall manager, Dan said, “Can we use your office as our command post?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Romeo, send all additional help there.”

“What do you want me to do?” This question came from Harold Fury.

“Mr. Fury, you round up all your security guards and bring them to the management office, too. I’ll brief them and give them their individual assignments.”

Once Romeo and Fury were dispatched, he looked over at the mother. She was no longer on the phone. “Is someone coming?” he asked her.

She nodded. “My best friend. I—I couldn’t find my brother.”

“Okay, good. I’m glad you’ll have someone to stay with you.” He tried to make his smile reassuring. “I want you to stay here for the time being, okay?”

“All right. You...” She took a deep breath. “You’re going to find her, aren’t you?”

He hesitated, torn between the brutal truth and something else, something that would give this woman the strength to endure. He nodded grimly. “Yes. We’re going to find her.”

Seeing the blind trust in her eyes, he vowed he would keep his promise if it was the last thing he ever did.

## Chapter Two

Glynnis sat in stunned silence.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed since that detective left, but it seemed like hours. She couldn't remember his name, either. All she knew was that he had kind eyes, and they made her want to believe him when he said they'd find Olivia.

Please, God, she prayed over and over again. Please let them find her, and let her be okay. Please.

She kept seeing the way Livvy's face had looked in the video, all crumpled and scared. By now, she must be terrified. Glynnis bit her lip and clenched her hands to keep them from shaking uncontrollably.

My baby.

How could she have put Livvy down without grabbing on to her hand? Making sure something like this couldn't happen? What kind of mother was she, anyway? All my life I've been making terrible choices. What is wrong with me?

Although she knew it did no good to dwell on the past, she couldn't seem to stop herself today. Was God punishing her for her bad judgment? For all the mistakes she'd made, especially the worst one nineteen years ago? Was he telling her to be more careful in the future?

Glynnis jumped up and began to pace around the store.

Gregg, where are you? I need you...

In all of her life, her brother was the only one she'd ever been able to depend upon. Everyone else had let her down, but Gregg never had.

They'd always been close, and after their parents died when they were sixteen, they'd become even closer.

But she hadn't been able to find Gregg today. There was no answer at the house, he wasn't at the restaurant and when she tried his cell phone, she got his voice mail. She'd left a message, then another with Janine, the hostess at Antonelli's, the restaurant Gregg had owned for the past six years.

Poor Janine. She'd been so upset. She'd kept apologizing and saying she wasn't sure where Gregg had gone, only that he'd left at noon and said he wouldn't be back today.

"If he calls, I'll be sure and tell him what happened. Do you have your cell phone with you? Is there anything anyone else can do? Do you want Steve to come?"

Steve was Glynnis's and Gregg's cousin, and for nearly two years he'd been Gregg's right-hand man at the restaurant.

"No," Glynnis said, "that's okay. You need him there."

"What about Kat? I could call her for you."

Kat Sherman was Glynnis's best friend, and everyone at the restaurant knew her.

"Thanks. I—I'll call her myself."

Kat hadn't let her down. "You just hold on," she said when Glynnis told her what had happened. "I'll be there in thirty minutes."

That had been twenty-five minutes ago, so Kat should arrive at any time.

“Mommy?”

Startled, Glynnis blinked.

“Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry.” What was wrong with her? She’d almost forgotten her son was there, he’d been so quiet. “There’s a bathroom right there.” She turned and pointed to the door behind them.

“Okay.”

“Do I need to come with you?”

Michael shook his head. “Nuh-uh.”

“Be sure to wash your hands when you’re done.”

“I know.”

She watched him as he walked inside. He was such a good kid. So was Livvy. They were wonderful children. They were the reason she could never regret her relationship with their father, for if she hadn’t married Ben March, she wouldn’t have had Michael and Olivia. They were worth any amount of humiliation she had suffered over her gullibility and misplaced trust in their father.

When Michael came out of the bathroom, he said, “Mom, where did Livvy go?”

The look in his eyes almost broke her heart, and she drew him into a hug. The feel of his warm body, the trusting way he wrapped his arms around her neck, was nearly her undoing. “I

don't know, honey, but I don't want you to worry. The policemen will find her."

"But why did she go? She knows she's not s'posed to go anywhere with strangers!"

"Oh, honey, I—" What could she say that wouldn't frighten him?

"Glynnis?"

"Aunt Kat!" Forgetting all about his question, Michael broke away from Glynnis and ran to Kat, who stood in the doorway of the small office. The children adored Kat, so much so that Glynnis had deemed her an honorary aunt. Kat bent down and gave Michael a hug. When she straightened, her eyes were suspiciously shiny.

Glynnis had never been so glad to see anyone in her life. She got up, and the two women hugged hard.

"Glynnis, this is just awful. I am so sorry."

Glynnis swallowed against the lump in her throat. "It's all my fault."

"Oh, hon, don't blame yourself. You can't watch them every second."

"Don't try to make me feel better, Kat. I'm a total screwup. I can't do anything right."

Kat took her by the shoulders. "Now you listen to me, Glynnis Antonelli." Fiercely loyal and outraged by Ben March's deceit and bigamous marriage to Glynnis, she never used the March name. In fact, Kat had tried to persuade Glynnis to change the

children's names. Glynnis had considered it, but in the end, she'd decided it would only hurt and confuse them, especially Michael, who was old enough to question the reason.

"You are not a screwup," Kat continued vehemently. "You've had some rotten breaks, that's all. None of what's happened has been your fault."

"I lost my child, Kat! What kind of mother loses her child? All for a sweater. For a stupid sweater! I knew they were tired and cranky, yet I had to push them. Why couldn't I have just taken them home when they wanted to go?" She could hear her voice rising and knew she was becoming hysterical, knew she was frightening Michael, yet she couldn't seem to stop. "Oh, Kat..." she cried.

"Ah, honey..."

This time when Kat put her arms around Glynnis, Glynnis broke down.

"Mommy?"

"Mom's okay," Kat assured Michael. Fiercely, she whispered in Glynnis's ear. "Get ahold of yourself. You're scaring Michael."

Drawing on every ounce of strength she possessed, Glynnis got herself under control again.

"Okay, now calmly tell me everything," Kat said. She put her arm around Michael and drew him close.

When Glynnis finished, Kat wore her determined look, the one that meant she was going to take charge. "What're the police doing? Besides checking people at the exit? Are they searching

all the stores? Did they put out an Amber Alert? Contact the TV stations? Who's in charge? Do you know? Is my brother here?" The questions tumbled out in a rapid-fire barrage.

"I don't know who's in charge," Glynnis said. "I can't remember his name. I was in such a fog when he got here, I didn't hear what he said. He seemed to know what he was doing, though."

"I hope so. You do know my brother moved back and is now working for the Ivy Police Department, right? I told you, didn't I?"

"Yes." But until now, Glynnis had forgotten.

"Well, we need to get him out here if he's not here already. He's got all kinds of experience that these small-town cops don't have."

"For all I know, he might be here. The two officers who came initially sent for more backup."

"I'll call him just to make sure." Kat whipped out her cell phone and punched in a few numbers. She tapped her small, booted foot impatiently as she waited. "He's not home. I'll call the station."

Glynnis watched her. If she hadn't been so worried and frightened she might have been amused. Kat was never unsure of herself; she never hesitated. She saw a problem, she decided on a course of action and she jumped in with both feet. Glynnis wished she could be like that. Anytime she'd made a quick decision, it had turned out to be a bad mistake. Now caution was

her watchword. Except for today. Today you weren't cautious at all.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Oh, really?" Kat grinned at Glynnis and made an O with her thumb and forefinger. A few seconds later, she switched the phone off. "Dan is here. He's the detective in charge of the case."

"You're kidding." Glynnis pictured the detective who had been so kind—the dark, unruly hair, the world-weary blue eyes, the tall, athletic body. Now that she knew he was Kat's brother Dan, she immediately saw the resemblance. "He was so nice."

"Does he know who you are?" Kat asked. "And by the way, where is he?"

"I don't know. To both questions. He said he was setting up a command post in the management office, so he could be there."

"Is the management office down by the food court?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm sure I've seen a sign when I've used those rest rooms down there."

"Want to walk down and see if we can find him?"

"I don't think I should. He told me to stay here... just in case."

"In case what?"

"You know." Glynnis realized they'd already said too much in front of Michael, but what could she do? He was avidly listening. "In case Livvy should come back here looking for me."

"But..." Kat stopped at the expression on Glynnis's face. She glanced down at Michael. "Of course. That was silly of me. All right. I'll go down and see if Dan's at the management office and

try to find out what I can. Want me to get you guys anything to eat or drink while I'm there?"

Glynnis looked at Michael. "Do you want something to eat from the food court, honey?"

He nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Yes, please," Glynnis corrected automatically.

"Yes, please," he echoed.

"What would you like?" Kat asked.

"Chicken nuggets and a Coke?" he said hopefully, eyeing Glynnis.

"Whatever you want," she said.

"Some french fries, too?" Kat said.

"Okay. And will you get me lots of ketchup?" He turned to Glynnis. "Mom, can we get some for Livvy, too? 'Cause when she comes back, she'll be hungry." The worried look was back in his eyes.

"Livvy will probably want to pick out her own food." It was all Glynnis could think to say.

"I know what she likes," he said stubbornly.

"Tell you what," Kat said. "Why don't you come with me, Michael? That way you can see everything they have and if you decide you want something else, you can get it. You can also tell Livvy everything they have, since she can't read yet."

Glynnis shot Kat a grateful look. "That's a good idea." She opened her handbag to get her wallet.

"Put that money away," Kat said in her I-won't-tolerate-

any-argument voice. “What can I get you, Glynnis? Sandwich? Coffee? A Coke? A bottle of water?”

“Just coffee.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Okay. We’ll be back. See you later.” Kat took Michael’s hand. “Let’s go, slugger.”

Glynnis followed them outside and watched as they walked away. The ache in her chest was so huge that it was hard to breathe. Michael looked so little and so vulnerable. Every instinct told her to run after them and snatch Michael back. She knew that was crazy. Nothing bad would happen to him in Kat’s care. After all, Kat was not a screwup. She’d never lost a child.

Unlike you, who’ve now lost two.

The dark thought, which had been trying to surface for hours, slammed into Glynnis with the force of a hurricane.

Shaking, she stumbled back into the shop.

Dan was halfway back to Corinne’s Closet when he saw his sister Kat and the March woman’s little boy walking toward him.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“Glynnis called me.”

“Glynnis?”

“Have you met Michael, Dan? Michael, honey, this is my brother, Lieutenant O’Neill. And Dan, this is Michael. His mom is Glynnis Antonelli, my best friend. Michael, why don’t you go look at the puppies?” There was a pet store a few feet away. “I’ll

just be a minute.” To Dan she said, “It’s okay if he goes over there, isn’t it?”

If there had been people around, Dan would have said no. He sure didn’t want another kid going missing. But all the pedestrian traffic had been cleared out of the inner part of the mall, so there was no danger to Michael. “Sure, it’s okay.” Dan would keep one eye on him anyway. Once Michael was out of ear-shot, Dan said, “I thought her name was March.”

“She goes by March. See, she married this March guy and it turned out he was already married. A fact he conveniently didn’t tell her. Which means they were never legally married at all.” Kat’s expression left no room for doubt about her feelings.

“Why do you call her Antonelli if she goes by March?”

“Because I refuse to acknowledge that bastard,” Kat said with that look he knew well, the obstinate one that said she’d made up her mind and nothing anyone else said was going to make a bit of difference. Of all his siblings, Kat was the most unbending when she felt she was right.

“How’s she doing?” he asked.

“She’s hanging in there. More important, how are you doing?”

“The investigation’s moving along. We’re searching all the stores. If we find her here, great. In the meantime, we’ll call in an Amber Alert, which will broadcast the details nationwide and alert all appropriate authorities.”

“Do you think there’s any chance the woman is still here somewhere?”

Dan shrugged. “That’s impossible to know. I hope she is, but if she isn’t, it’ll be hours before we know for sure, because it’s going to take time to do a complete search of all the stores. Hell, there are five anchor stores here. That alone is a massive job.”

“Oh, Dan, you’ve got to find Olivia. You’ve just got to. Glynnis has already been through so much. If something has happened to Olivia, it...it would destroy her.”

“Believe me, I want to find that child just as much as you do.”

Just then, the boy walked back to them. “I’m hungry, Aunt Kat.”

“I’m sorry, Michael.” Turning back to Dan, she said, “I promised Michael some food. That’s where we were headed.”

“You go on. And after you get your food, you can take it to the management office. They’ve got a waiting room there that’s a lot more comfortable than the little office at Corinne’s Closet.”

“But Glynnis is waiting for us at the store.”

“I’m going there now. I’ll get her and bring her to where you are.”

“Okay. See you in a little while.”

When Dan got to the store, he saw Glynnis March out front.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t stand sitting back in that office one minute longer.”

Now that Dan knew more about her situation, he felt even worse for her. She was showing the strain of the past hour. It hurt to see the plea in her eyes, because he had no good news for her. “That’s okay. I actually came back to tell you that I thought it

would be okay for you to come to the management office now.”

She looked stricken. “Oh.”

“That doesn’t mean you should give up hope. Or that we have. It only means that I don’t think your little girl will be brought back here. Just to be sure, though, that guard—” he inclined his head in the direction of the security guard standing nearby “—will stay here, even after the store is locked up.”

She nodded. “All right. Thank you.”

“Wait for me here. I’ll go in and tell the manager she can lock up.”

When Dan came back outside, she said, “Kat told me you’re her brother. When you introduced yourself, I was so frightened, I don’t think I even heard your name.”

He smiled. “It’s Dan. Dan O’Neill.”

“And I’m Glynnis, but you already knew that.”

“I wish we could have met under happier circumstances.”

“Me, too.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Dan wondered what was going through her mind. He hoped she wasn’t blaming herself, but he was afraid she was. He wanted to tell her that no matter how careful a parent was, things like this happened. He also wanted to tell her he understood how helpless she was feeling. But he knew neither would be a comfort to her, so he said nothing.

When they reached the management office, he ushered her inside, where Kat and the boy were already seated around the

coffee table. The smell of french fries made Dan's stomach grumble, and he realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He glanced at his watch. Almost five-thirty. Soon everyone would be getting hungry and they would have to be fed. Dan had been prepared for this contingency and had asked several of the food venues to stay open for just that purpose. The men could eat in shifts; that way, the search could continue without interruption.

Dan left the women and the boy in the outer waiting area and walked back into the manager's office, which he'd commandeered for his own. It was time to call each of his men to get a progress report.

After that, he would decide if they needed to call in any neighboring law enforcement personnel to speed things along.

He picked up the phone.

At eight o'clock, when the search for Olivia had been going on for more than four hours with no good news, Gregg and Sabrina finally arrived at the mall.

Glynnis broke down when she saw them. "Thank God you're here." She tried not to cry, but one look at her brother's worried face and she couldn't hold back the tears.

"I'm sorry, Glynnie. We went to Columbus," Gregg said, folding her into his arms. "I wanted to meet with this possible new vendor and Sabrina wanted to finish up her shopping there."

"We were just sick when we heard what happened," Sabrina said.

"I'm just glad you're here now."

When she was calm, she filled them in on everything she hadn't been able to say in her message. Throughout, Sabrina held her hand.

Glynnis loved Sabrina. Their relationship had been awkward in the beginning, because Sabrina was Ben's daughter, and Glynnis hadn't found out about her existence until Ben had died.

In fact, Sabrina was the one who came to Ivy to break the news—something Ben had asked her to do in a letter he'd left with his lawyer. That was tough on her. Her mother, Isabel—Ben's only legal wife—was hysterical over Ben's double life and mortified by the scandal it had caused in their little town. She would have felt completely betrayed by Sabrina if she'd known of her daughter's involvement with her husband's other family.

Sabrina had been put in a horrible position, which only became more difficult as she got to know Glynnis and the children, whom she'd immediately loved.

And then, complicating matters even further, she fell in love with Gregg. For a while, no one who knew the story thought it could possibly have a happy ending, but it did. In fact, Gregg and Sabrina were one of the happiest couples Glynnis had ever known. And not long ago, their happiness had become complete when, on their daughter Samantha's christening day, Sabrina's mother had forgiven Sabrina and the two had reconciled.

Isabel was remarried now, which was a whole other story.

Thinking back over the rocky road they'd all traveled, Glynnis knew they were lucky to have ended up a loving family unit.

Glynnis would have loved Sabrina under any circumstances, simply because she made Gregg so happy. It was a bonus that she was such a wonderful person and someone Glynnis would have enjoyed having as a friend even if they hadn't been related.

When Glynnis finished explaining everything, Gregg said he'd like to talk to the cop in charge.

"That's the other thing I wanted to tell you," Glynnis said. "He's Kat's brother."

Gregg turned to Kat. "I didn't know you had a brother on the police force."

"Dan's six years older than me and he's lived in Chicago since he was twenty. He was with the Chicago PD for more than seventeen years. Three months ago he decided he needed a change, so he moved back to Ivy, and now he's a lieutenant with the Ivy Police Department."

"That's good news," Gregg said. "He's probably got a lot more experience than most of the cops on the force."

"Yes," Kat said. "He does. And believe me, he'll do everything possible to find Olivia. Everything."

"I'd still like to talk to him."

"Then let's go see if we can find him," Kat said.

"I'll stay here with Glynnis and Michael," Sabrina said. She smiled down at Michael, who hadn't left her side since she'd arrived.

After Kat and Gregg left them, Sabrina said, "Are you doing okay? Is there anything I can get you? Something to eat?"

Glynnis shook her head. The thought of food made her feel sick.

“What about you, Michael?” Sabrina said.

“He ate earlier,” Glynnis said.

“A cookie, maybe?”

Glynnis knew Sabrina just needed to feel she was doing something useful, even if it was only feeding them. God knows Glynnis understood. She’d felt totally useless for hours. She looked down at Michael, who gave her a hopeful smile. “Are the shops in the food court still open?”

“Not all of them, but the cookie place was when we came in.”

“I’ll walk out with you,” Glynnis said.

They bought Michael his cookie and then slowly walked back to the management office. Gregg and Kat rejoined them a bit later. Gregg sat next to Glynnis and squeezed her hand. “Lieutenant O’Neill knows what he’s doing, Glynnie. He’ll find her.”

But as the clock moved inexorably forward, Glynnis’s hopes began to fade. If Livvy had been in the mall, surely they would have found her by now.

Finally Sabrina rose. “Glynnis, Gregg is going to stay with you, but I’ve got to go. I told Mrs. Phillips I’d be back for Samantha by ten-thirty, and it’s almost that now.”

Glynnis looked at her sister-in-law. “It’s okay. I understand.”

“How about if I take Michael with me? He can spend the night with us.” Michael, head leaning against Glynnis’s shoulder, had

fallen asleep an hour ago. “In fact, you can spend the night with us, too. I don’t think you should be alone if…” Sabrina, looking stricken, let her voice trail off.

“If they don’t find Olivia tonight,” Glynnis finished for her. Her eyes filled with tears. “I don’t think they’re going to.”

“Oh, honey,” Kat said. “They might. They haven’t finished searching everywhere yet. That woman might have found a hiding place.”

Glynnis shook her head. She knew Olivia was not in the mall, because if she had been, that woman—whoever she was—would not have been able to keep her quiet. Livvy was nothing if not vocal. If she was anywhere within hearing distance, the police would have discovered them.

Gregg, who’d been out front talking to the security people, walked back into the office. “You going to leave now?” he said to Sabrina.

“Yes. And if it’s okay with Glynnis, I’ll take Michael home with me.”

“Yes, I think that’s a good idea,” Glynnis said. “But I won’t be coming. When they finish here, I’m going home.”

“You shouldn’t be alone,” Sabrina said. She looked at Kat. “Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, I do.”

“But what if Livvy or that woman who took her should call? I have to be there.”

“How could they call? You said you didn’t know the woman.

Do you think she knows you?” This question came from Dan O’Neill, who had walked in behind Gregg.

“No, I don’t think she knows me, although I can’t be sure. But Olivia has an ID tag inside her jacket, sewed on to the lining in front. It’s required at her day care center. The tag lists her name and our phone number.”

“You’re right, then. You should be at home,” Kat said. “Don’t worry, Sabrina. I’ll stay with her. In fact, I’ll call Bill right now and tell him.” Out came her cell phone before Glynnis could even think of protesting. Not that she wanted to. She had no desire to be at home alone.

“I just came back to give you a status report,” Lieutenant O’Neill said. “We’ve finished searching all the stores and the areas behind each store, as well as all the places in the inside of the mall. Everything is locked up now, and the mall’s been emptied of all the shoppers and most of the store employees. The only ones left are a few maintenance people, the mall manager and his assistant, and the security personnel.”

Glynnis’s shoulders sagged. Even though she’d been afraid the woman who took Olivia was long gone, it was one thing to fear something and another thing entirely to know it for sure.

“Now that we’re sure your daughter isn’t in the mall,” the lieutenant continued, “I called Chief Crandall, and he’ll take care of issuing an Amber Alert. Do you know what that is?”

“It’s a nationwide alert system, isn’t it?” Gregg asked.

“Yes. A description of Olivia, along with her photo and

the photo of the woman from the security tape will be faxed to primary radio stations under the Emergency Alert System. In turn, that information will be sent by them to area TV stations and radio stations. The radio stations will interrupt their programming to broadcast the information and TV and cable stations will run a 'crawl' on the screen along with the photos. In some places, the authorities will even incorporate electronic highway billboards. Every possible avenue will be covered. We're also setting up an 800-number hotline for people to call."

Glynnis nodded, unable to speak.

"Chief Crandall said to tell you we'll work on this night and day until we find your daughter."

"Th-thank you," Glynnis managed.

"Yes, thank you," Gregg and Sabrina echoed.

"Now I think you should go home and try to get some sleep," Dan O'Neill said.

But everyone in the room knew Glynnis wouldn't sleep tonight.

Not until Olivia was home again and safe in her own bed, would Glynnis be able to sleep again.

## Chapter Three

“What if they don’t find her?”

Gregg looked at his wife, who was in the process of undressing for bed. She’d voiced the question he’d tried not to think about, yet it had hovered at the back of his mind like a poisonous snake waiting to strike. “They’ll find her.”

“But Gregg,” Sabrina insisted, her green eyes clouded with worry, “what if they don’t?” She lowered her voice, although no one could possibly hear her. Samantha, their one-year-old, and Michael had been asleep for hours, and Glynnis was at her own home with Kat. “It would destroy Glynnis. I’m not sure she could survive.” She shook her head. “God. Hasn’t she been through enough? I know other people think she’s really strong, and she is, but everyone has a breaking point.” She unfastened her bra and tossed it on the bed.

“Let’s not talk about this, okay?”

“I think we have to talk about it, because if the unthinkable happens and they don’t find Livvy...or they find her—” Sabrina swallowed “—they...find her body...we have to be prepared. Glynnis will need us more than ever before.” She reached for her nightgown.

Gregg knew Sabrina was right, but he didn’t want to say the words out loud. To do so would give them a reality he couldn’t acknowledge. “I’m sorry, I can’t talk about this.” He put the shoes

he had just removed back on. “I know I won’t sleep. I’m going for a walk. I need fresh air.”

“Gregg, it’s midnight.”

“I won’t be gone long.”

“Gregg...”

“What?” He didn’t look at her, although under normal circumstances he would rather look at Sabrina than anyone else in the world.

“Running away won’t solve anything,” she said gently.

“I’m not running away.”

She didn’t answer for a long moment. When she did, her voice was resigned. “All right, I’m sorry I pushed you. If you don’t want to talk about it, I won’t make you.” She climbed into bed and reached for her reading glasses.

“Don’t wait up,” he said and then went out to the entryway closet, where he donned his heavy jacket and gloves. After letting himself quietly out the back door, he headed down the driveway, all the while reassuring himself that he was right not to consider the worst.

The police would find Olivia. Dan O’Neill was a good cop. He was doing all the right things.

They had to find her. Nothing less was acceptable.

Sabrina was right about one thing, though. His sister had suffered enough. For a long time, Gregg had been furious with Ben March. If the older man hadn’t already been dead, Gregg would have cheerfully strangled him with his bare hands for what

he'd done to Glynnis.

But in the past year—mainly since Samantha was born—he'd gotten past his anger and started moving toward some semblance of understanding.

Gregg knew it couldn't have been easy for Ben to live with Sabrina's mother all those years. Even now, when she was supposedly happily married to her longtime love, she was a hard woman to be around.

It always amazed Gregg that Sabrina—who was one of the warmest women he'd ever known—could have been born to Isabel March, who, on her warmest day, was closer to the Arctic Circle than to the equator.

For Sabrina's sake, he was friendly to Isabel, but he'd never love her, although he was glad she and Sabrina had a decent relationship again.

But even though he understood Ben better now, he still couldn't completely forgive him for what he'd put Glynnis through. Those days after he'd died, when Glynnis had found out she was not legally married to him and that he had another wife and an adult daughter, had been tough. But the worst days had come later, when all the well-wishers were gone and Glynnis had to face everyday life with two small children on her own. At least Ben had left the children well provided for.

As Sabrina had said, Glynnis was a strong woman. She'd proven that by everything she'd overcome: their parents' death, a disastrous relationship when she'd been in college, having to

give up the baby that resulted from it, and then Ben's death and the truth about their marriage. A weaker woman might have broken. Glynnis hadn't. Throughout, no matter how much she was hurting, she'd gone on and made the best life she could.

This, though, could destroy her.

Gregg was so lost in his thoughts he didn't realize a car had pulled alongside him until he heard his name called. Turning, he recognized his cousin Steve's dark blue Ford Explorer.

"What're you doing out walking this late?" Steve said when Gregg came around to the driver's side to talk to him.

"I needed some air. You just coming home from the restaurant?" Steve had been Gregg's assistant for the past two and a half years and Gregg now wondered how he had ever managed without him.

"Yeah."

"We have a good night?"

"Real good. From seven-thirty on, all the tables stayed filled."

Gregg nodded. The first few years he'd owned Antonelli's, it had been touch and go as to whether he'd make it. The odds were against him; he'd always known that. Start-up restaurants didn't have a good track record. But with a combination of hard work and luck, he'd made Antonelli's into one of the most successful restaurants in the area.

"I take it there's no news," Steve said.

"No."

"Geez, Gregg, I'm sorry. Is there anything Maggie and I can

do?” Maggie also worked for Gregg as first assistant to the chef. She and Steve had met at the restaurant, fallen in love and married a little over a year ago. Now she was pregnant with their first child.

Gregg didn't answer for a moment. He couldn't. He was all too aware of just how bad the situation was and how much worse it might get. “Pray,” he finally said. “Pray hard.”

“Yeah,” Steve said softly. Then, “You want a ride back to the house?”

“Thanks, but I'm not ready to go back yet.”

“Okay. You sure you're all right?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. You go on. Maggie'll be waiting.”

Steve smiled. “All right. You comin' in tomorrow?”

“I don't know. We'll see.”

“Well, don't worry about us. We can manage if you want to stay with Glynnis. Everybody's torn up about this, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Glynnis had spent a lot of time at the restaurant since Ben had died, and the employees had pretty much adopted the kids. He smiled thinking how Jeff, their pastry chef, always let the kids roll out leftover dough and Trish, who was training to take Maggie's place as their sous-chef, taught Michael to chop carrots.

Gregg watched as Steve drove off, then he headed toward the park. Since he didn't normally go to the restaurant before ten, in nice weather he always took Samantha to the park in the morning before he left for work. Many times, he'd included Olivia in

their excursions, picking her up before Glynnis left for the school and then dropping her at her day care center on his way to the restaurant.

Samantha adored her older cousin. The two little girls always had a great time together, and Gregg enjoyed watching them. From the time of their birth, he'd been a surrogate father to Glynnis's children, and he knew they'd always occupy a special place in his heart.

Reaching the park, he walked down the main path to the pond and his favorite bench. As he'd known it would be, the park was deserted. It was too cold for lovers and too late for joggers. There weren't even any homeless people there, because last year, in cooperation with half a dozen businesses, the city had opened a shelter.

Locating the bench he'd come to think of as his, Gregg sat and pensively looked out over the pond. Moonlight shimmered across its dark, quiet surface. None of the lily pads or ducks that dotted the pond during the daytime were visible. He smiled, thinking how the girls loved those ducks. Whenever they came, they brought bread or crackers or popcorn to feed them. Samantha would squeal whenever one of them came too close, but Olivia wasn't afraid of them. She'd let them eat out of her hand if Gregg would allow it, but he was always afraid they might accidentally bite her, so he insisted that she put the food on the ground.

Soon the pond would freeze and the ducks would migrate somewhere warmer, but they always came back in the spring.

From somewhere across the pond, he heard the low, mournful who-who of an owl. The sound caused his chest to tighten.

Livvy. Where are you?

He felt so completely useless. If only he could do something to help. But what? What?

He thought about Samantha sleeping peacefully in her crib. Sabrina, probably lying awake in their bed worrying about him. Glynnis, frightened and sleepless in her house.

All of them needing him.

So what was he doing here?

He should be home with his wife and child. He should try to get some sleep so that he'd be better able to help Glynnis tomorrow.

Getting up, he began to run and didn't stop until he saw the welcoming lights of home.

Glynnis never did go to bed. Kat tried to make her, but she refused. She did change into an old pair of green velour sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt and put thick socks on her feet so she wouldn't be cold. But she spent the night curled up under an afghan on one of the love seats in the living room, and Kat spent the night on the other one.

As the night passed, Glynnis was aware of every sound. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the entryway. The hum of the refrigerator and the occasional clunk as the ice maker spit out its new supply of cubes. The distant drone of traffic on the interstate that cut through downtown. The wail of a siren somewhere in the

distance. The rattle of the overhanging branches of the big maple tree in the side yard against the roof.

All so ordinary. The sounds of a normal night in a normal world. Only this wasn't a normal night or a normal world. Any world where some stranger could grab a child and walk off with her was a nightmare world.

Glynnis just prayed the nightmare would be over soon. That Olivia would be restored to her, safe and sound.

Where was she tonight? Was she warm? Safe? Was that woman taking care of her?

Glynnis's eyes filled with tears.

Please, God, watch over her. Watch over my baby.

"Glynnis?" Kat said softly. "You feel like talking?"

Glynnis surreptitiously wiped away the tears. "I thought you were sleeping."

"I tried, but too many thoughts are spinning around in my head."

"I know."

"If you want a sleeping pill, I've got some in my purse. They're just over the counter, nothing too strong."

"You carry sleeping pills around with you?"

"I grabbed them when I stopped at the house for my nightgown."

"No, I don't want one." How could she sleep when Olivia was out there somewhere, probably scared, probably crying for her?

"You want some hot chocolate or something? I could go make

us some.”

“No.” All I want is Olivia. “But if you want some, go ahead.”

“No. I just thought...” Her voice trailed off.

After that, Kat fell silent, and when another half hour went by, Glynnis thought she'd probably fallen asleep. Glynnis knew she should try to sleep, too, otherwise she'd be a zombie tomorrow, which would help no one.

But sleep wouldn't come.

At four-thirty Glynnis gave up. Quietly, so as not to wake Kat, she headed for the kitchen, where she put on a pot of coffee. She also took some frozen cinnamon rolls from the freezer so they'd be thawed by the time Kat awakened. Then she headed for her bathroom, where she splashed water on her face and brushed her teeth and hair. When she returned to the kitchen, the coffee was ready, its rich aroma filling the air.

Glynnis poured herself a cup, added powdered creamer and a packet of sweetener, then sat at the table. Slowly, she drank. She was just about finished when Kat, rubbing her eyes, padded into the kitchen.

“Did I wake you?” Glynnis said.

“The smell of coffee did.” Kat walked over to the counter, yawned, got a mug out of the cupboard and poured herself a cup. She pulled a chair out and joined Glynnis at the table. “Did you get any sleep at all?”

Glynnis shrugged. “I dozed a little.”

“You know, I was thinking. Maybe you should offer a reward

for information.”

For the first time since Olivia’s disappearance, Glynnis felt a spark of excitement. “Kat, that’s a great idea!”

“We could even take up a collection.”

“That would take too long. Besides, it’s not necessary. I can sell some of the stock Ben left the children. How much do you think I should offer? Would five thousand be enough? Or do you think I should offer ten thousand?”

“Ten thousand would probably get you more attention. But you know, we should probably ask Dan if this is a good idea. Maybe a reward will just muddy the waters.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, bring the nuts out of the woodwork with a lot of false leads.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that. What time do you think it would be okay to call him?”

“What about right now?”

“Now? Kat, it’s not even five o’clock. Won’t he be sleeping?”

“Hon, Dan has probably been at work all night. I doubt he’d go home and sleep when Olivia is out there somewhere.” So saying, Kat got up and went in search of her handbag. A few minutes later, she came back into the kitchen with her cell phone in hand. Quickly, she punched in some numbers.

“Hello? May I speak with Lieutenant O’Neill, please? Thank you.” Grinning at Glynnis, she handed her the phone. “What’d I tell you? He’s there. Here. You talk to him.”

It warmed Glynnis to know he was there working in her behalf. A moment later, he came on the line.

“Lieutenant O’Neill.”

“Dan? This is Glynnis. Glynnis March.”

“Yeah. Hi, Glynnis. How you holding up?”

“I’m okay.”

“Kat there with you?”

“Yes, sitting right across the table from me. Neither one of us could sleep.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“Um, Kat’s the reason I’m calling. She had an idea, and we wanted to know what you thought about it.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, we thought it might be helpful for me to offer a reward. You know, for information.”

For a few seconds, he didn’t answer, and Glynnis’s heart sank. He didn’t think it was a good idea.

Then he surprised her by saying, “You know, that’s a pretty good idea. A reward might jog someone into remembering something they wouldn’t ordinarily notice.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, I do. But to be enough incentive, the reward should be substantial, I’m afraid.”

“I was thinking of ten thousand dollars.”

He gave a low whistle. “That’s substantial.” Unspoken was a question. Could she afford that much money?

“Don’t worry. I have the money. Thing is, how do we publicize this for maximum benefit?”

“Leave that to me. We’ll call the TV and radio stations and the newspaper office. By tonight, everyone around here will have heard about it. And I wouldn’t be surprised if the wire services pick it up.”

“Okay.” Glynnis actually smiled. Kat, who was watching and listening to the one-sided conversation, smiled back at her.

After hanging up, Glynnis said, “I think I’ll go take a shower and get dressed.”

“Good. I’ll take mine when you’re done.”

As Glynnis headed for her bedroom, she felt ten times better than she’d felt just an hour earlier. She had a good feeling about this reward. And God willing, by tonight maybe Olivia would once again be sleeping in her own bed.

True to his word, Dan notified everyone he could think of about the reward Glynnis was offering. He spent the rest of the day questioning people and following what slim leads they were able to unearth. A couple of times he thought he was on to something, but nothing panned out. He was beginning to fear the woman who’d taken Olivia March had gotten away clean. No one had seen her leave the mall and so far, no one seemed to know who she was.

The bus station and cab companies were long shots, and Dan knew it. In all likelihood, the woman had come to the mall in her own car and left the same way. Without knowing what kind of

car she drove, there was no way to trace her. Trouble was, the mall had been really busy the day before. A woman and child—even if the child were crying—would not stand out. Hell, Dan had seen half a dozen crying kids when he'd arrived at the mall yesterday. Crying kids were the norm, not the exception.

No one else had any luck, either. All in all, it was a damned frustrating day. Their only hope was the reward Glynnis was offering. News of it would reach the majority of people tonight, on the evening news.

At five o'clock, Chief Crandall walked out to Dan's desk. "Go home, Dan. You've been at it for what, twenty-four, twenty-five straight hours? You need to get some sleep."

"Not sure I can sleep, Chief."

"Well, try. You're no good to me if you're punchy, and without sleep, you're gonna be. Don't worry. I'll call you if anything happens."

Dan didn't want to go, but he could see by the expression on the chief's face that he wasn't going to take no for an answer, so reluctantly Dan stood and put on his coat. "You've got my cell phone number? In case I'm not home?"

"Dan..."

"I just thought I might stop by the mother's house on my way home, that's all."

"Fine. But make sure you get some sleep after that, you hear? And yes, I've got your cell phone number."

Dan knew Glynnis's neighborhood. One of his best friends

from high school had lived one street away from where she lived now. It was the kind of neighborhood working class families aspired to, near Whitney Park and the public golf course. It wasn't far from downtown, so it only took him a few minutes to get there, locate her home and park in front. She lived in an attractive red-brick-and-frame, one-story bungalow. A giant blue spruce tree stood on one side of the house. A black Honda Passport sat in the driveway. Dan had wondered if his sister was still there, but he didn't see her red Accord anywhere.

Dan took note of the Christmas welcome mat on the front stoop. It was going to be one helluva lousy holiday for Glynnis and her family if they didn't find her little girl. On that somber thought, he walked to the door and rang the doorbell.

Only a few seconds went by before the door opened. He wanted to kick himself when he saw the expectant light in her eyes. He should have called first.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There's nothing new. I just stopped by to see how you're doing."

"Oh." The light died. She shrugged. "I'm okay."

She didn't look okay. She looked like hell. Tired, pale and worried. Despite this, she looked younger than she had the day before, probably because today she wore no makeup and was dressed in jeans and a sweater, with her hair tied back in a ponytail. The sweater, in some kind of reddish-brown shade, complemented her eyes and hair.

"I also thought I'd give you an update of what we've done so

far.”

“Come on in, then.”

He followed her into the house, his eye—trained to notice even minute details—taking in the warm colors and hominess of the interior, from the beautiful wood floors to the comfortable-looking furniture to the family photos on the walls.

He stopped in front of an eleven-by-fourteen framed photo of a chunky infant with a dimpled smile. “This is Livvy.”

Her eyes widened. “How can you tell? She’s only eleven months old in that picture.”

“The dimples gave it away.”

She made a brave attempt at a smile. “I love her dimples,” she said softly. “They reflect her mischievous personality.”

Next to that photograph was another, this time of her son, who looked to be about three. He, too, was grinning, but even with the wide smile on his face, it was easy to see this child was much more serious than his younger sister.

As if she’d read his mind, she said, “Michael bears the weight of the world on his shoulders.”

Dan looked at her. “Like his mother?”

She blinked. “How did you know that?”

“I’m pretty good at reading people.” Once he hadn’t been.

She nodded. “I guess you have to be in your line of work.”

“It helps.”

For a moment, she didn’t say anything. Then, so softly, he had to strain to hear her, she whispered, “I’m so scared.”

“I know you are. That’s one of the reasons I came by. I wanted to assure you that every law enforcement officer in the county, maybe even in the state, is out there looking for your daughter. It may take awhile, but we’ll find her.”

She nodded.

Just then the grandfather clock standing in the corner of the foyer began to chime. Dan realized the local news would be starting now. “You have a TV set, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Want to watch the news? See what they say about the reward?”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

He followed her into the living room and sat on one of the green print love seats, while she picked up a remote from the coffee table and aimed it at the television set. A moment later, the local NBC news-room flared into life. Bill Mendoza, the male anchor, was giving an update on the national budget crisis and the headway made that day by a resolution being debated in the House of Representatives. When he finished, Sherry Hudson, the pretty blond coanchor, held up the photo of Olivia that Glynnis had given him yesterday. Talking rapidly but succinctly, she recapped yesterday’s events, then said, “Olivia’s family is offering a reward of ten thousand dollars to anyone with information leading to the girl’s recovery.”

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