

CHAPTER ONE

Jake slammed out of the truck and marched towards the convenience store. The door closed silently behind him as he stood in the entrance scanning the store for a sign of Beth.

An older man with a bald head and rimless glasses stood behind the counter. "Can I help you, sir?" he asked.

"I'm looking for my wife," Jake told him. "Where the hell is she?"

"I don't know, sir. Did she come in here?"

"Hell, yes, she came in here," Jake replied. Without waiting for the clerk to say anything else, Jake began searching the store for Beth, muttering obscenities to himself as he walked up and down the narrow aisles.

In a few minutes, Jake was back at the checkout counter. His face was flushed with anger.

"I take it you didn't find her," the man behind the counter said. "Are you sure she came in here?"

Jake was about to grab the guy by his stupid bow tie and throttle the grin off his chubby face, when another customer approached the counter. She was a middle-aged woman, as wide as she was tall. Jake had seen her enter the store right behind Beth.

Jake stepped back and waited while the clerk rang up the woman's purchases. Then, the door opened and a group of teenagers came bursting in, laughing and shouting at one another.

The older woman left with Jake right behind her. "Excuse me, ma'm," Jake said, falling into step next to her. "My wife went into that store just before you did. Do you recall seeing her?"

"The pregnant girl?"

"Yeah."

"Never saw her," the woman said letting out a breath that smelled like she had recently consumed a clove of garlic.

"Then how did you know she was pregnant?" Jake yelled.

The woman shrugged. "Lucky guess."

"You stupid old bag," Jake whispered. "I should knock you on your fat ass."

The woman shoved Jake away with such force that his head bounced up against the store window. Surprised by her attack, Jake shook his head to clear it as the woman wobbled away down the street. Jake was about to chase after her when another car drove into the parking lot and pulled up directly in front of him.

Jake recognized the car and the couple inside of it. It was that newspaper reporter, Dana Sloan, and the big cop she dated. Dana lived in the nice apartment building across the street from Jake and Beth. They had all met at a block party a few months back.

Dana smiled and waved at him as she got out of the car. "Hi, how are you?"

"Not so good," Jake told her. "My wife went into this store a half hour ago and never came out."

"Women often get lost in stores," Detective Al Bruno said. "You have to go in with them."

"Maybe she's in the bathroom," Dana said.

"I didn't think they had one in this place," Jake replied.

"It's in the back by the canned goods," Dana told him.

Jake nodded and walked into the store with Dana and Bruno. *Maybe Beth was in the bathroom. Now that she was pregnant she spent a lot of time in the bathroom.*

The counter area was crowded with the kids who were still laughing and teasing each other as they paid for their sodas and candy bars.

Jake ignored them and strode to the back of the store. Sure enough, there was a door with a sign that said, "Restroom." Jake knocked on the door. "Beth, you in there?"

When there was no answer, Jake tried the doorknob and the door opened to reveal a room the size of a small closet with a sink and a commode. There was no place to hide in that room and no window to climb out of either. Jake pulled the door closed again and returned to the front of the store.

The teenagers were gone, but now Dana and Bruno were at the counter paying for a big bag of chips, a six-pack of beer and a few large bottles of soda. Jake didn't like cops. He'd had enough trouble with the law to last him the rest of his life and given his current profession, he had to be exceptionally cautious.

As the clerk was ringing up the sale, he looked past his customers and spoke to Jake. "You find your wife?" the old man asked.

Everyone looked at Jake as he shook his head in a negative reply. “Is there a back door to this place?”

“Sure, but it’s locked. No one can get out that way. An alarm sounds if it’s opened.”

“I want to see it.”

“Sorry, no one’s allowed back there.”

Jake’s face turned red. “Listen, jerk. My wife came in here and never came out again. I’m going to look in your back room.”

The clerk backed away from the counter as if he thought Jake was going to leap over it and attack him. Bruno held up his hands and stepped between them.

“No need to get excited here,” Bruno said calmly.

“I’m sorry,” Jake babbled quickly. “I’m worried sick about my wife. She’s pregnant for God’s sake. I just want to look in the back room for her.”

Bruno looked at the clerk. “Did you see his wife come in here?”

“No, I didn’t,” the man said moving forward again. “But there were a lot of people in and out so I could have just missed her.”

Bruno nodded and pulled his badge out of his pocket and showed it to the clerk. “Is it okay if I look in your back room?”

“Yeah, sure officer,” the clerk stammered.

“Okay, come on,” Bruno motioned for Jake to follow him. “We’ll take a look in the back room.”

“Thanks,” Jake said without a trace of gratitude in his voice.

Dana collected Bruno’s change while Jake followed Bruno to the back of the store and through a door marked private. It led into a room piled high with boxes of all sizes and shapes. They walked past them to the back door. It was indeed padlocked with a heavy metal bar across it. Jake didn’t think Beth was strong enough to lift the bar much less get the padlock opened.

He turned around and surveyed the boxes stacked everywhere. “Maybe she’s hiding among these boxes,” Jake said.

“Why would she do that?” Bruno asked pointedly. “Is there some reason she might want to get away from you?”

Jake forced a laugh. “Hell, no. Beth’s just a joker that’s all. Likes to give me a hard time.”

Bruno took Jake’s arm and led him out of the storage room. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you go home and look for your wife? If there were a lot of people in and out of here, she could have come out and slipped past you while you were daydreaming or

something. If she doesn't turn up there, call the police and file a missing persons report."

Dana was at the car waiting for Bruno when he escorted Jake out of the store. "Your wife's name is Beth," she said. "Pretty blond girl, right?"

"Yeah. Right," Jake said.

"I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"Jake. Jake Carlson."

"I'm Dana Sloan. I work at *The Globe*. This is Detective Al Bruno. Please let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

"I told him if he didn't find her, he should file a report," Bruno said. "Ask for Harrison in Missing Persons."

"Thanks. I'm sure you're right and she slipped past me while I was listening to the sports' news. She's pregnant and a little daffy sometimes. Probably forgot I drove her here and walked on home."

"I'm sure that's it," Dana agreed.

Jake opened the door to his truck and climbed inside. He started it up, and drove out of the parking lot. Not knowing what else to do, Jake headed for home. Maybe Beth was there. He didn't see how she could have gotten past him. She was supposed to go into the store, buy the beer he wanted and the candy bar she said she was craving and come right out again. *Where the hell did she go? She knew better than to play games with him. If she was at home, he was going to teach her a lesson. Pregnant or not, she was going to pay for what she had just put him through.*

Jake opened the door to the apartment and yelled for Beth. No answer. He slammed the door shut and began going from room to room looking for her. Since the apartment only had four rooms counting the bathroom, Jake's search didn't take long. Jake went into the kitchen and retrieved a beer from the refrigerator. He carried it into the living room, flopped down on the sofa and turned on the television set. The Bears were playing the San Diego Chargers and the game had just started.

Although Jake wasn't really a football fan, he did some of his best thinking in front of the television set. He drank his beer slowly trying to figure out what had happened to his wife. He had been sitting in the truck the whole time watching people come and go from the convenience store. The clerk had been right. It had been busy during the time Beth was inside. Several people came and went while he was waiting for her. Still, how could he miss his

own wife? Her stomach was sticking out a mile now. She couldn't have gotten past him.

"I'll bet she was hiding in the back room," Jake said aloud. "Damn cop should have let me look through those boxes." *Beth was probably still there hiding like her scruffy old cat.*

Suddenly, Jake jumped to his feet. Beth's cat. Where was he? Jake began to move around the apartment again.

"Hey, Spenser, where are you? Want a treat?" Jake called softly. He looked under the bed, in the cabinet under the kitchen sink and the one under the bathroom sink. Spenser was also missing.

Jake hurried back to the bedroom and opened the closet. Beth's meager wardrobe of maternity clothes was hanging there, pushed to the center in front of the regular clothes she could no longer fit into. He went to her dresser and opened the drawers. Everything was there, at least as far as he could tell.

Back in the kitchen he looked for her vitamins. They were there on the shelf where they always were. He shook the bottle and looked inside of it. It was half empty. There should have been more pills he thought, but he couldn't remember how long ago she had refilled her prescription.

Once again, Jake settled himself in front of the television set. Spenser was gone. Beth loved that cat. Jake often accused her of loving the cat more than she loved her husband. Maybe some of Beth's prenatal vitamins were gone too. Just maybe, Beth had left him.

"She'll be back," Jake said, talking aloud to himself again. "Where's she going to go?" The answer was obvious.

Jake grabbed the phone and punched in his mother-in-law's number. Greta answered on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Put Beth on," Jake said curtly.

"Beth's not here, Jake," Greta answered sharply.

"Don't lie to me, Greta. Put her on the phone now."

"Go to hell," Greta replied as she slammed down the phone.

She's lying, Jake thought sullenly. Beth's there all right, crying on mama's shoulder again. Well, let her stay there tonight. I'll go get her in the morning. Her and that damn cat both.