

CHAPTER TWO

While Jake Carlson was contemplating the disappearance of his wife, Dana and Bruno were watching the Bears game at Bob and Cynthia Farrell's house. Bob worked with Dana at the newspaper as one of her investigative staff. Cynthia's brother, Greg, was there with Marianne who also worked at the newspaper.

Bob had acted as a matchmaker between his wife's brother and his gorgeous red-haired co-worker. That had been over a year ago and although it was not yet official, Bob was sure Greg and Marianne would soon be engaged.

As Dana had told Jake earlier, she worked for *The Globe*, but she was not a regular staff reporter. Dana Sloan headed a division of the newspaper called, Globe Investigations. It had been established a few years back by The Globe's editor, Sam McGowan, who believed a city's newspaper should do more than report the news. Sam believed that the newspaper should reach out into the community and be of service to people in need of advice or help with problems. The city of Crescent Hills, Illinois was fifty miles south of Chicago and was a growing, thriving metropolis. With the growth and prosperity had come more crime and other problems so Globe Investigations had plenty of work to handle.

Requests for assistance came into Dana's office on a daily basis, by mail, telephone, and e-mail. Over the years, Dana and her staff had investigated thousands of cases. Fraud, missing pets, petty thefts, complaints about business practices, politicians, the school board and other matters were handled by Globe Investigations.

Dana tried to stay out of more serious police cases but there had been times when that was impossible. It was those times that caused problems in her relationship with Bruno. It was those times that had come close to ending her relationship with Bruno.

Detective Al Bruno thought that Dana should be attending PTA meetings and Little League games, not chasing down thieves and murderers.

While Dana admitted that she loved Bruno and would probably marry him someday, she was not quite ready to give up her career

for him. Some men might have walked away from the relationship by now, but Bruno was as stubborn as he was tall and broad. He was determined to marry the girl with golden brown curls and hazel eyes who had captured his heart the first moment she had stuck her dainty nose into one of his cases.

At half-time, the game was tied. Bruno, Bob, and Greg were rehashing the plays and discussing the way the coaches should handle the second half of the game.

Cynthia was in the kitchen replenishing the snack bowls. Dana and Marianne both escaped the armchair quarterback session to join her.

“Where are the kids?” Dana asked Cynthia.

“At my mom’s house. She’ll bring them home when the game is over. I thought Casey was coming, has anyone heard from her?”

Casey Jordan was the other investigator on Dana’s staff. Casey was putting her life back together after a marriage to a man who had become a murder victim shortly after their wedding. Her friends were still concerned about her mental state.

“Oh, sorry,” Dana said quickly. “She called my cell phone and said she feels like she’s catching a cold and decided to stay home and rest.”

“I hope it’s not just an excuse to avoid another social event with couples,” Marianne said.

“Please don’t repeat that in front of my husband,” Cynthia warned. “He’s been driving me crazy trying to get me to think of someone wonderful to fix her up with.”

Dana laughed. “His success with Greg and Marianne has gone to his head.”

Cynthia nodded. “One good match out of hundreds of attempts is not a good track record, but he’s a hopeless romantic.”

“What about his mechanic friend?” Marianne asked. “I thought he was interested in Casey.”

“He was, but Casey refused to go out with him.”

“Casey needs more time to heal,” Dana said. “That whole business with Tony was a tragedy. Anyway, I’m sorry I forgot to tell you she wasn’t coming. She called right before Bruno and I got to the convenience store and ran into my neighbor who was looking for his wife.”

“I think that sounds a little weird,” Marianne said. “Maybe his wife was deliberately trying to ditch him. How well do you know them?”

Dana had related the incident to everyone when she and Bruno had arrived at the house, but then the game started and they hadn't really discussed it.

"We sat with them at a block party last summer. She was very nice. Her name is Beth and she works at the law firm that handles a lot of *The Globe's* legal matters. Her husband is one of those tough guys with an attitude. He might have jumped the counter and punched the clerk at the convenience store if Bruno hadn't been there and intervened."

Bruno entered the kitchen in time to hear Dana's remark. "The guy's a punk and I'm pretty sure he's a bag man for Marko Senese."

"What's a bag man?" Cynthia asked.

"The guy that goes around and picks up the money from the various enterprises Marko runs for his father. All of them are strictly cash operations. Jake picks up the cash several times a week and delivers it to Marko."

Marianne raised her perfectly formed eyebrows. "Nice job."

"How interesting," Dana said, looking at Bruno with a frown. "Why didn't you tell me that earlier?"

"I just thought of it now. I knew his name rang a bell, but I wasn't sure why. Jack's been keeping a file on all the guys that work for Senese and company and now I remember seeing Carlson's name in it."

"Do you think his wife knows what he does for a living?"

"Yes."

"Can you look him up tomorrow and see if he's got a record?"

"Why?"

"Because I like his wife and now I'm worried about her."

Bruno shook his full head of black curly hair that women itched to run their fingers through. "The game is starting again." He reached for a bowl of chips and hurried out of the kitchen.

Dana turned back to Cynthia and Marianne. "He always makes me beg for information."

"Don't do it during the game," Marianne warned.

"Hey, girls," Bob yelled from the living room. "What happened to the rest of the snacks? I'm wasting away in here."

The truth was that Bob could stop eating for a week and still be as plump as the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

"I wish!" Cynthia yelled back, picking up the pretzels and tortilla chips. "He's starting another diet tomorrow," she said. "I'm counting on you two to monitor him at work."

Dana and Marianne exchanged glances as Cynthia left the room.

“Is she kidding?” Marianne whispered. “We’d have to tie him up and gag him to keep him from snacking.”

“We’ll give the assignment to Casey,” Dana replied as they gathered up bowls of salsa, dips, and a plate of homemade fudge. “That’ll give her a new goal to focus on.”

On the way home that evening, Dana decided not to broach the subject of Jake Carlson again. Bruno was already in a bad mood over the Bear’s loss to San Diego.

As they pulled into the parking lot of Dana’s apartment building, Bruno’s cell phone rang.

“Detective Bruno,” he said into the phone that looked like a toy in his large hand. He listened and nodded as the station relayed information to him. “Okay. I’ll be there in five minutes.” He clicked off the phone and turned to Dana. “Give me a kiss that’ll last all night. Someone just called in an apparent homicide.”

“Is it a woman?” Dana asked, thinking about Beth Carlson.

Bruno nodded. “I’ll call you when I have some details.”

Dana kissed Bruno and got out of the car to enter her building and climb the stairs to her apartment unescorted. Once upstairs, she made herself a cup of tea and drank it standing in the alcove of windows in her living room. Her easel with a partially finished painting occupied one end of the alcove along with a small table that held her paints and brushes. Dana’s dreams of being an artist someday were buried behind the excitement and challenges of her investigative work, but they were not forgotten.

The painting she was currently working on was the trees she could see from her window, their leaves now turning beautiful shades of red and gold from the early unexpected chill of September.

The phone rang and Dana rushed to answer it. It was Bruno reporting that the dead woman was not Beth Carlson. “Who is it?” Dana asked.

“We don’t know. No identification on her, but it’s definitely not your friend, so you can stop worrying.”

“Thanks for calling. I was worried.”

“I know. I have to run. The lab boys just arrived. I’ll call you in the morning.”

Dana hung up the phone and went back to stand at the windows again. She looked past the trees she had been trying to capture on

her canvas to the parking lot of the building across the street. The lights in the lot allowed her to see the truck that belonged to Jake Carlson. Apparently, he was home. The big question in Dana's mind was whether Beth Carlson was there with him.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, Jake awoke half-expecting to find Beth in bed next to him, or crashed on the living room sofa. Now that she was pregnant, she claimed the sofa was more comfortable than the bed. When Beth was still missing, Jake showered and left the apartment. He stopped and got himself a cup of coffee.

He arrived at his mother-in-law's modest ranch style home before eight and banged on the front door. He had to knock three more times before Greta finally came to the door.

She opened it with the chain in place and glared at him through the small opening. "What do you want, Jake?"

"I want my wife. Tell her to get her ass out here now."

"I told you last night. Beth isn't here."

"Then where the hell is she?"

Concern appeared in Greta's eyes. "What happened, Jake? Did you hit her again?"

"No. I haven't laid a hand on her in months. That's all over. She's carrying my son for pete's sake."

Greta undid the chain and opened the door all the way. Jake walked into the house. It smelled like rotten eggs. Greta wasn't much of a housekeeper.

"Tell me what happened." Greta said softly with fear in her eyes. "Did you have a fight?"

"No. Nothing like that. Beth said she had a craving for a chocolate bar so I drove her down to the convenience store. She went inside and never came out again."

"That's crazy," Greta shouted. "Did you look for her?"

"Of course I looked for her. I went inside and searched the john and even got a cop to take me in the back room and check the back door and stuff. There were boxes piled all over the place, but the cop wouldn't let me look through them. I think she was hiding in one of them."

"Why would she do that?"

"That's the same question the cop asked me. I don't know. Maybe because she's nuts."

“Or maybe because she was afraid to face you,” Greta shouted. “I’m calling the police.”

Greta turned to go to the phone, but Jake grabbed her arm. “Wait. Spenser’s missing too.” Greta stared at him. “You know Beth wouldn’t leave that mangy cat. He’s got to be with her. And I think you know where they are.”

Greta wrenched her arm free and ran to the telephone.

Jake stood there silently while she dialed 911 and told the dispatcher that her daughter had disappeared.

Greta looked up at Jake. “He wants to know how long she’s been gone.”

“Since yesterday afternoon when she went into the store,” Jake answered sullenly.

Greta repeated the information to the 911 operator and then nodded and hung up. “He said we should file a missing persons report,” she told Jake.

“That’s the same thing the cop at the store told me.”

“Have you called her friends?” Greta asked anxiously. “Talked to the neighbors? How about that girl that Beth pals around with, the blond upstairs from you?”

“I ain’t talked to no one but you,” Jake said, clenching his fists into a tight ball. “I figured if Beth left me again, this would be the first place she’d run to.”

“Well, she’s not here.”

“So you say.”

“You don’t believe me,” Greta replied. “Fine. Search the house. See for yourself she’s not here.”

Jake thought maybe Greta was bluffing, so he decided to call her on it. He walked out of the living room and began looking through the house. His search uncovered nothing but dirty laundry, dust and clutter. When he got back to the living room, Greta was on the phone again.

“Thanks, Marsha, I’ll call you as soon as I hear anything.” Greta quickly dialed another number to inquire about her daughter’s whereabouts. After the fourth call, Greta burst into tears. “No one’s heard from her,” she croaked. “What happened, Jake? Tell me the truth.”

“I swear to God, I told you the truth. She went into the convenience store to get a candy bar and a six-pack for me and never came out again.”

“What store was it? I’m going over there myself.”

“The one on Ashland, near our apartment. You go and look for your nutty daughter and her stupid cat. I’m going over to the pool hall. Call me there when you find her.”

Greta’s eyes filled with anger. She moved menacingly towards him. “You go to the pool hall, Jake. I’m going to find my daughter. And when I do, you’ll be the last person I tell. Now get out of here.”

“With pleasure,” Jake shouted back.

Jake got into his truck and started the engine. His special cell phone rang. “Damn it,” Jake muttered as he opened the small phone and pushed the button. He knew who was calling.

“Where the hell are you?” Marko Senese demanded. No hello, just the question shouted into the phone.

“Sorry, Marko,” Jake said quickly. “I got delayed.”

“How long are you going to be?”

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

The phone clicked in Jake’s ear as Marko disconnected without any further discussion.

Jake closed the phone and dropped it back into his pocket. Now thanks to Beth, Jake was in trouble with Marko. He put the truck in gear and sped back to the apartment. Jake wasn’t supposed to be at the pool hall until ten, but Marko often called him and told him to get there earlier.

Jake was letting himself into the apartment when Beth’s friend came clomping down the stairs in her thick-soled shoes. She was dressed in her waitress’ uniform.

“Hey, Millie,” Jake said. “You seen Beth today?”

“No. Why?” Millie was a bleached blond who always wore her hair in a ponytail. Today it was pulled back so tight, her eyes looked slanted. She was in her forties with a good figure and a face that was always caked with too much makeup. Millie and Beth were friends, two dizzy blonds, Jake always said, only Beth’s hair was natural and fell in soft waves around a face that was pretty with or without makeup.

“No reason. Just thought maybe you two were going to hang out today.”

“I have to work.”

“Right. Okay. See you later then.”

Millie shrugged and hurried out of the building. Jake pushed

the door open to the apartment and looked around again. Still no sign of Beth or the cat. Well, he didn't have time to worry about that now. Marko would be freaking out as it was.

Jake went into the bathroom and knelt on the floor next to the toilet. He removed one of the floor tiles. Built into the floor was a safe, the same size as the tile that covered it. He put his key into the lock and opened the door. Inside was a small duffel bag. Jake pulled out the bag, locked the safe, and replaced the floor tile.

The pool hall was a ten-minute drive from the apartment. Jake walked in exactly thirty-five minutes after his phone call from Marko.

The pool hall didn't officially open until noon, but some of the regulars were already there drinking at the bar. Jake ignored the few people who called out to him and hurried to the back where the office was located.

Marko opened the door and gave Jake a little shove as he came into the room. "About time," Marko whispered.

"Hey, I'm not late. I'm not supposed to be here until ten. You're just spoiled because I show up early most of the time."

"Give me the bag. Vinnie's waiting to verify the take."

Jake handed the bag to Marko and watched him walk through another door to the official counting room. Marko was back in a minute and nodded for Jake to have a seat in one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"Where's everyone at?" Jake asked.

"Harry's got a cold and Turk went out to get some breakfast."

Harry and Turk were Marko's enforcers, big and ugly as bulls and twice as mean. Marko needed every ounce of muscle they provided because Beth could have decked Marko with one punch. Of course that didn't make Marko any less dangerous. He had worked his way up in the Chicago organization with his wits and total lack of conscience and patience. Everyone knew that Marko would shoot you for passing wind in his presence.

Jake smiled and nodded, trying not to show his impatience. He wanted to get out of there and have a beer and shoot some pool with the guys out front, but the delivery procedure had to be done Marko's way.

"So, how's that pretty little wife of yours?" Marko said. His voice always got softer when he asked about Beth. Marko liked Beth. Of course Beth had the kind of looks that most men liked.

She wasn't movie-star gorgeous, but Beth had a real sweet face and before she was pregnant a figure to match.

Jake considered telling Marko that Beth had disappeared and that's why he had been late, but decided against it. "She's okay. The pregnancy has her pretty tired out these days."

"Is she still working for that lawyer?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"They wouldn't let her work past six months. She's on a leave of absence now."

"Makes sense."

The door to the back office was suddenly flung open and all three hundred pounds of Vinnie, the accountant, filled the doorway. "Marko, Jake, come in here."

Jake rose from his chair. He didn't like the sound of Vinnie's voice and his fat face was all flushed like he was upset over something.

"What's wrong?" Jake asked, trying to sound casual.

"Just get in here," Vinnie said.

Marko stood at the door and motioned for Jake to enter Vinnie's office in front of him. Jake shrugged and walked through the door ignoring the prickles of fear that were racing down his spine.

Marko closed the door quietly behind them and looked at Vinnie who had moved back behind his massive metal desk.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Vinnie asked, directing his question to Jake.

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't, huh? Well, The Silver Moon took in a hundred grand and change Saturday. Barney's had some high rollers that stayed all night Friday and half the day Saturday, so their take was twice that much and Maury booked ten g's on Saturday night.

"Yeah," Jake said, feeling the sweat beginning to drip down into his shoes.

"How much is missing?" Marko asked before Jake could say anything else.

"All of it."

"Shit!" Jake shouted moving forward to the desk. "That's impossible. It was all there when I put it in the safe yesterday."

Vinnie took the duffel bag and turned it upside down on the

desk. Scraps of newspaper fell out.

“Beth.” Jake spat out her name like it was a morsel of spoiled food. “Beth took it.”

Marko moved next to Jake. “Beth?”

“She disappeared yesterday, a few hours after I put the bag in the safe.”

“I just asked you about her and you said she was fine,” Marko said as he reached under his jacket and removed a shiny black gun.

“I know. I didn’t want to burden you with my trouble. But the truth is she went into a convenience store and never came out again. I’ve been going crazy looking for her.”

“You knock her around again?” Vinnie asked.

“No. Honest to God. I haven’t laid a hand on her. She’s pregnant for God’s sake. I wouldn’t take a chance on hurting my kid.”

“Too bad the kid’s going to grow up without a father,” Marko said softly, leveling his gun at Jake.