

## Chapter 2

Early Sunday morning, Birdie showed up at Sam Gowdy's bait shop, his two boys in tow. Although there was a "Closed" sign on the door, the door was not locked. Birdie and the boys went in. Sam was puttering in the back. He heard the three coming and looked up with an expression of surprise.

"I'm closed, Birdie," he said. "Don't you know it's Sunday."

"Oh, hell, Sam. You ain't never really closed. Everybody knows that."

"Well, I don't sell bait on Sunday. I probably ought to, 'cause I miss a lot of sales. But, heck, a man's got to have a day off once in a while."

"I didn't come to buy bait."

"Well, then, what can I do for you?" Sam put down the tackle box he'd been working on and walked closer.

"I wanted to talk to you about that little baby," Birdie said, his tone unusually serious. "I just cain't get over thinking that some- body might be looking for her. I'm wondering if you and me ought not to go up to Wheeling and nose around and see what we can find out."

"That'd take two or three days, Birdie. I couldn't close my shop for two or three days this time of the year. I'd lose way too much money."

"Couldn't Alma run things for a couple of days? She's better at the business end than you are, anyway."

"Maybe so," Sam responded. "But do you think that old Dodge of yours would get us to Wheeling and back? That truck must be damned near as old as I am, Birdie. How many miles on it?"

"It don't show the miles anymore. That part's been busted for a while now."

"You ever think of getting a new truck?"

"Well now, if I had even half of old Miss Quattlebaum's money, maybe I would. But I ain't got old Miss Quattlebaum's money, and I don't expect she's going to split her money with me."

“Can’t argue with you on that. Miss Quattlebaum didn’t get to be the richest woman in town by giving her money away. I was just worried about your truck making it all the way up to Wheeling, is all.”

“Oh, that old Dodge’s nowhere near used up. I wouldn’t worry about settin’ off for California, or Alaska, even, in that truck. It’s just about broke in good.”

“Are you sure you’re not just looking for an excuse to get away from Edna for a bit, maybe looking for some new stuff up in the city?”

“Don’t talk like that in front of the boys,” Birdie demanded, his eyes flashing rare anger.

“Yeah, I’m sorry for that,” Sam said quickly. “But they’re over there by the trophy case, too far to hear. Your boys are growing up pretty fast, Birdie. I can’t hardly keep track of which one is which. The tow-headed one, the oldest, that’s Ross?”

“That’s Ross. His brother’s Kyle.”

“Well, you’re lucky, Birdie. Those boys are going to make you proud someday.”

Birdie grinned with pleasure. “They’re good boys,” he said “But how about Wheeling? You wanna go or not? I sup’ose I could do it by myself if I had to. It just seems to me like we ought to be making some effort to find the little girl’s family if she has one. Just about anything that goes on up or down the river, they’d know about in Wheeling. Don’t you think?”

“I expect they would, Birdie. I expect they would.”

“Then you think we ought to go?”

Sam said, “Yes, I think maybe that would be the right thing to do. When you figurin’ to leave?”

The two men talked about their schedules, pretending to have a number of pressing matters to attend to. They would just have to put some of them aside for a while to make time for the trip to Wheeling. Hunting up Baby Angel’s mama should be their first priority, though, and they were willing to let a few other things slide. They arranged to leave first thing Monday morning.

Birdie called the boys. They loaded into the old truck and drove the four blocks home, after which Birdie summoned the courage to tell Edna what he and Sam Gowdy were about to do. To his astonishment, his wife had nothing negative to say. She thought it was a good idea, in fact, and she would start packing for him right away.

“How long do you plan to be gone?” Edna asked. “I don’t know how much to pack.”

This was the first time Birdie had had reason to consider that question. His visit to Sam had been a spur of the moment thing, something he did on a mere whim. He hadn't calculated how long it would take to drive to Wheeling or thought about what they were going to do when they got there.

"Sam said two or three days," he told Edna. "I'd say three to be on the safe side."

Back at the bait shop, Sam Gowdy had found his wife much less receptive.

"What in this world do you think you're going to find out in Wheeling?" Alma exclaimed. "And even if it was a good idea, it's about the dumbest thing I can think of to set off on a trip like that with Birdie Wilson. I'd be surprised if Birdie even knows the way to Wheeling!"

Sam protested that Birdie actually was a pretty reliable fellow. Said, "He's been around more than you'd think, Alma. I believe he lived in Wheeling for a time. That would have been way back, but he probably still knows his way around."

"Well, if you're set on going there's nothing I can do about it. Still seems to me like a big waste of time, though."

And on that note, Alma set about getting things ready for her husband to pack. After twenty years of marriage, she knew Sam well enough to be confident that he'd never take what he needed if she didn't sort it out for him and put it all in one place. And after that she would need to help him pack—or pack for him.

**While** Sam and Birdie were occupied with their serious plan-making, Molly Hearst was re-learning what it was like to have a baby in the house. Given that her youngest was now a strapping teenager, she'd found Baby Angel full of surprises—which in itself was a surprise. She had been sure that taking care of a little one, once you'd been through it a couple of times, was something you never forgot how to do. She was wrong.

Baby Angel, of course, was a special case. Molly was afraid to leave the baby unattended for more than a few minutes at a time. She had been handed an important responsibility by Mayor Johnny White. Everyone in Cambria was counting on her to take good care of this unfortunate little one and she was determined not to let them down.

Molly would have expected to be the last person in Cambria chosen as Baby Angel's caretaker. Not that she doubted her own competence, but she'd felt strongly for some time now that nothing good was going to happen in her life ever again. Whether or not having a strange

new baby in the house was a good thing—she still hadn't decided on that—being selected by Johnny White and her fellow Cambrians for the role they'd cast her in was a good thing. Yes it was.

Although Molly rarely missed church on Sunday, she wouldn't go today. Baby Angel had kept her awake most of the night and she was tired. She also didn't care to face all the curious churchgoers. They would be full of questions about the baby and want to see her and hold her and they'd pass hints among themselves that maybe Molly wasn't the best one to have been given charge of the newest Cambrian. Not the Molly of recent years, always glum and unsmiling.

Justine and Jay went. When they got home they told her that Pastor Mike was understanding, and sent his blessing to their mother and Baby Angel. Pastor Mike was never one to condemn. Alma Gowdy called in the early afternoon. Was Molly managing okay? she inquired, and was there anything she might need?

"I'm doing well enough, Alma," Molly said. "I will be needing some things, but so far I've not had time to think much about that. I'd forgot how much time a baby takes."

"You need to make a list, that's for sure."

"I know. But what am I supposed to do with it? Do you know?"

"I can't say I do. Maybe give it to Johnny White?"

"I guess so," Molly said. "And sooner or later I'm going to need some help."

Alma suddenly became defensive. "Goodness knows I wouldn't know what to do," she said. "Besides, I'll be tied down with running the shop for a while."

"Oh? Something going on with Sam?"

"You won't believe this, Molly, but Sam and Birdie Wilson are leaving in the morning for Wheeling to see if they can find out something about the baby's family. I might be worried that Sam was looking for a fling, but if he was I can't imagine he'd be making the trip with Birdie. Do you think?"

Molly laughed. "That seems like a safe assumption to me," she said. "But I've got to go now, Alma. Angel's crying."

Molly hurried to the baby. She lifted the child from the make-shift bassinet—an old wicker laundry basket lined with towels and blankets—and comforted her until the crying stopped. She stood in the middle of the room for a time, swaying back and forth with the baby cradled in her

arms, looking down on her little face. The baby smiled. Such a beautiful child! How could anyone have abandoned her?

She wished Roger were here beside her. Roger loved babies. And Molly missed him terribly.

Sometimes she had considered it a chore to wait up for Roger, always late getting home at the end of his long-haul road trip. She would wonder how she ever ended up married to an over-the-road truck driver, and feel sorry for herself. And then came that awful night when she got word of a massive pileup on an icy stretch of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. They said Roger heroically gave his life to save others, but the crash took him from her forever.

Raising Jay and Justine as a single mother had been hard. There was little money left from Roger's insurance after a few years, and Molly had worked anywhere she could find a local job and tried to be home when the children needed her. Thanks to the generosity of Tom Johnson, she was able to work at his Fish and Fries Café on a schedule that fit her needs. Not much money, but enough to keep her going and take care of her family.

Molly thought about Birdie Wilson's lament: "They'd call her Baby Jane Doe." That would be in the child welfare system, where little Angel wouldn't have a real name, much less a real family. Jay and Justine had lost their father, but they had always had her and they'd always had each other. No child should be left with less. For the first time, Molly felt a true tug at her heart when it came to this baby girl.

"Don't worry, little river angel," she whispered. "If you don't have a mama out there somewhere looking for you, you have one here. I swear to God I will care for you and protect you like you were my own flesh and blood."

Her communion with the child was interrupted as Jay banged in from the side-porch, where he'd been making her a plant stand. He had volunteered to do it. It pleased her when he knew she wanted something and set out to provide it if he could. Jay was a good son.

"Don't that baby cry a lot?" he said.

"*Doesn't*. And that's what babies do. But little Angel doesn't cry as much as you did—so far, at least."

"How do you know she's not sick or something?"

"She's not acting like there's something wrong, Jay. Babies cry when they wake up and want attention. It's normal."

"If you say so, Mom. I finished your plant stand. Want to see it?"

Yes, she did. He brought the stand inside and she praised his work. Jay was handy with tools. He had been great help around the house in the last couple of years.

Molly was proud of her children. Jay, who looked more like his father every day, and Justine, always the more sensitive of the two, both of them growing up faster than Molly was ready for. They'd be finished with school too soon and go off to the city where they could find jobs and be independent. She would worry plenty about Jay, but even more about Justine. The thought of her daughter, a pretty young woman, alone in the city was almost more than Molly could handle.

"Don't forget," Jay said. "you've got to come and see my teacher tomorrow."

"Oh, no. I had forgot it, Jay. It's a good thing you reminded me. I just wish I didn't have to drive half way across the county for it."

"But we have to ride half way across the county on the bus twice a day, every day, Mom," Jay reminded her pointedly. "It's not that bad."

"I'm sorry, honey. It's not bad at all. I'm always happy to talk to your teacher. You know that."

As soon as Jay left the house, Molly was on the phone again. She called Kelley Peterson and asked if Kelley could keep the baby during the afternoon Monday. Kelley said she would love to do it, but she also had to be out of town. And please do call the next time Molly needed a hand.

Molly tried Janet Rider and Marlene Johnson. No answer at either house.

Marylee Tipsworth answered on the second ring. Molly skipped the usual small talk and went straight to the point: "Marylee, I really need somebody to take Baby Angel tomorrow afternoon while I go meet with Jay's teacher. Do you think you could do it?"

Marylee cleared her throat a couple of times. "Well, I'd love to help," she said, "but I have my hands full right now, Molly. There's been so much going on lately. And now Duncan's sick."

"Duncan? I'm sorry, Maryann, who's Duncan?"

"Oh, of course you wouldn't know—Duncan's my cat."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Molly said. "I hope he gets well soon." Then she hung up the phone.

There was hardly anyone left to call. Edna Wilson most likely would keep Baby Angel, but she had no home phone and didn't drive. With Birdie and his cell phone off on some wild

goose chase with Sam Gowdy, Molly would hate to leave the baby there. What would Edna do in case of an emergency?

Not much choice, really. She'd just have to take Baby Angel with her. The trip wouldn't be necessary if we had enough children in Cambria to support our own school, Molly reasoned to herself. But she couldn't change circumstances she had no control over. She started looking for a warm blanket to wrap the baby in just in case tomorrow turned out to be a cool day.

That night, Jay deftly cut slots in the sides of the wicker basket so that it could be strapped in the back seat of the car with a seat belt. Baby Angel would ride safely.

**M**olly was nine miles out of Cambria when she saw the flashing red lights in her rear-view mirror. She eased her old Buick to the narrow shoulder of the road and stopped. A police cruiser pulled up close behind her, and in the side mirror she could see an officer checking her license plate. Then he stepped up to her window.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said politely, tipping his hat ever so slightly. "I'm deputy Lynn Swafford, ma'am, and Sheriff Higgins sent me out to patrol this area this morning because we've had so many complaints about speeders on these county roads. I don't know if you saw me back there at that intersection, but I was on the north side of the road with my radar gun and—"

"No, I didn't see you," Molly said. "I hope I wasn't speeding."

"Ma'am, you were going twenty-two miles an hour over the speed limit. That's—"

"You can't be serious! I never drive fast. Are you sure that radar gun is working right?"

"Yes, ma'am, they're checked regularly. Not much doubt that—"

This time it wasn't Molly who interrupted the deputy, but a long, loud wail from the back seat. Baby Angel had been awakened by the commotion and expressed her displeasure in terms too prominent to be missed by the adults up front.

"Ma'am, are you carrying a baby back there in that basket?" the deputy asked.

"Yes."

Deputy Swafford's astonishment was evident: "Didn't you know that's not legal? I mean, you have to have it in a safe child's seat. There are serious restrictions on that."

"The baby is safe," Molly insisted. "She's buckled in just like she would be in a child's seat. I wouldn't be driving around with her back there otherwise."

“Ma’am, I’m afraid this complicates things. I might have been able to let you off with only a warning on the speeding issue, but a child-seat violation is another matter. Sheriff Higgins gets his back up real fast over child-seat violations. If he found out I caught you in one and didn’t write it up, I’d be in trouble up to my ears.”

Molly could see that no amount of excuse-making or pleading for sympathy was going to bail her out. Deputy Swafford had impressed her as pretty nice man, and she might have talked her way out of the speeding ticket. But she had no choice now but to produce her driver’s license and sit by idly while he wrote a ticket.

“Now, ma’am—Molly—I’m going to ignore the speeding,” the deputy explained politely. “I have to give you a ticket on the child-seat violation, though, and the worst part is you have to make an appearance immediately.”

“What does that mean, exactly? I have to go to court or some- thing?”

“Well yes, in a way. I’m sorry, ma’am—Molly—but you’re going to have to follow me over to Judge Winkler’s house. Winkler is a semi-retired county judge who can set bond for you and let you be on your way. He lives right over yonder, just about a mile. I truly am sorry to have to put you through this, ma’am—Molly—but the judge will go easy on you. You’ll be on your way pretty quick.”

Molly was extremely irritated at herself. This was going to cost her money at best, and maybe even jeopardize her driver’s license. And she’d be lucky if she made it to Jay’s school on time. But she had no choice now except to follow the deputy as he led her to see the judge. As she drove, she considered Lynn Swafford. He was very nice, and also not bad looking. What she did not think about was the potential effect the visit to Judge Winkler might have if the topic of the baby’s identity came up.