

SWIFT JUSTICE
by Laura DiSilverio

Chapter One

(Monday)

The bear had toppled my birdfeeder again, the two aspirin I'd gulped with a swig of Pepsi weren't making a dent in my headache (note to self: don't try to match Father Dan drink for drink ever again), and I was late for my first appointment of the week. As the owner and currently sole employee of a private investigation business teetering on the edge of solvency, I couldn't afford to piss off potential clients by being tardy. And the woman tapping her foot outside the door of Swift Investigations did not look like a happy camper when I screeched to a stop in my Subaru Outback.

I assessed the waiting woman through the windshield as I gathered my purse and laptop. She was taller than my five-foot-three and rangy, dressed in a spiffy red suit and low-heeled pumps. Mid-thirties, at a guess. Everything about her said "wound too tight" from the French-braided hair pulling the skin of her face taut, to the way her eyes skittered to her watch, to me, and to the infant car seat at her feet. Shit. Who brings a baby to a business meeting?

I got out of the car and offered her my hand. "I got tied up with a burglary," I said in lieu of an apology. I'd bet the burglar had snarfed down at least fifteen dollars' worth of the primo seed blend I put out to attract song birds. "You must be Melissa Lloyd. C'mon in."

She bent to pick up the baby carrier as I unlocked the door and flicked the light switch. The illuminated space was simple, clean and organized, just the way I liked it. Off-white walls made the office look larger than it was. My desk filled the back right corner by a window with wooden blinds. A matching desk, currently unoccupied since my last assistant left to become an aroma-therapist, sat with the long side making an L with the door. A closed door led to the small bathroom in the back left corner.

"You are Charlotte Swift, the investigator?" Ms. Lloyd paused just inside the door.

"Last I looked." I crossed the nubby, green-flecked carpet and sat behind my desk, stowing my stuff beneath it. Swiveling my chair, I pulled a Pepsi from the mini-fridge against the wall and popped the flip-top. I offered one to Ms. Lloyd with a gesture but she shook her head, looking repulsed. I could see the word "coffee" hovering in her mind but she didn't speak it. Just as well because I don't even have a coffee maker; I don't want to encourage people to linger. There's a cafe two doors down if they're that desperate to feed their addiction.

She wasn't. She settled the baby on top of the empty desk, tucked a yellow blanket around it, and seated herself in one of the uncomfortable chairs.

“Cute kid,” I said perfunctorily, barely able to make out a wisp of dark hair poking from beneath the blanket. “How old?”

“A little over a week.”

Melissa Lloyd looked damned trim for someone who’d just popped out a baby. Maybe she was into Pilates. I drew a legal pad toward me. “You said on the phone you need to find someone?”

“Yes. Your Yellow Pages ad said Missing Persons is your specialty, right?”

Since her furrowed brow seemed to indicate she needed reassurance, I said, “I’ve been in business here for almost six years. For the past four, I’ve specialized in finding missing persons. Before becoming a PI, I was in the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, the OSI. You’ve seen NCIS, about the Navy investigators? Like that, only without Mark Harmon. Overall, I have more than thirteen years experience as an investigator. You can check with these people if you want.” I slid a piece of paper containing the names of clients who’d agreed to provide references across the desk.

She took it, creased it in half, and tucked it into the envelope purse on her lap. “That’s okay,” she said, sounding as if references were no big deal.

She’d be dialing one of those numbers before her car was out of the parking lot.

“What can I do for you?”

She leaned forward, her uncertainty replaced by a business-like air. I knew she owned an interior design business in Monument--I’d checked her out after she called--and I could suddenly see her bossing wallpaper hangers around, coaxing homeowners into replacing their mauve shag carpet, and trolling furniture stores until she found just the right lamp or ottoman. I figured this air of command was more natural to her than the earlier indecisiveness. It matched the suit, too.

She took a deep breath and said, “The baby’s not mine.”

“You’re babysitting?”

“No. Well, sort of.” She bit down on her lower lip.

Oookay. Not her baby. Not babysitting. If she was going to confess to kidnapping, I needed to get it on tape. And I’d have to hope there was a reward for the child’s safe return because clearly Ms. Lloyd wouldn’t be handing over a retainer check. I surreptitiously pushed the button on the underside of my desk that started a voice-activated recorder.

“So, if the baby’s not yours, whose is it?”

She laughed, an unmirthful sound. "God, I'm screwing this up. Someone left the baby on my porch a week ago."

The stork, maybe. That sounded about as likely as Father Dan converting to Buddhism. I know my clients don't always tell me the truth; in fact, most of them probably pitch me lies like Nolan Ryan throwing heat, but I like them to have some glancing acquaintance with reality.

"Why would someone do that?" I tried to keep my skepticism out of my voice.

She half rose, glaring. "Look, if you're not going to take me seriously--"

I threw up my hands in a surrender gesture. If she'd kidnapped the baby, I needed to keep her calm, convince her to tell me where the baby belonged. "I'm listening. Really. Why don't you just start at the beginning?" I put on an Oprah face: non-judgmental and encouraging.

She glanced at the sleeping baby and sank back into the chair. "This is confidential, right? I mean, discretion is very important to me."

"I'll keep what you tell me confidential unless I think there's a good reason to tell someone--something about a crime, say--or the courts compel me to tell. PI-client relationships aren't protected like lawyer-client communications." There. If she confessed to kidnapping, I could blab all to the cops with a clear conscience.

Ms. Lloyd looked marginally reassured. At any rate, she continued with her story. "Like I said, someone left the baby at my front door last Monday. I found her when I was leaving for work. She was in that car seat, screaming her head off. At first, I thought it was a mistake of some kind, or a joke, but there was a note. It was addressed to me and when I read it I knew it wasn't a joke. My daughter had abandoned her baby on my doorstep." She stopped to take a deep breath.

I leaned forward, my forearms on the desk. "Your daughter? You mean the baby's your grand-kid?" I mentally revised my assessment of her age up a few years. Damn, she looked a year or two younger than my thirty-seven.

"Yes, she's my grand-daughter. I had her DNA-tested."

"You what?" This woman looked like a normal Colorado Springs professional woman, maybe a bit more successful than most, but she was a certifiable loon.

"I thought it was necessary," she said. She reached into her purse and I stiffened, but her hand came out with nothing more threatening than a manila envelope. "I got the lab results yesterday--money produces fast results. Olivia's definitely my grand-daughter." She didn't sound happy about it.

“Okay, then, and you want me to . . .?”

“Find my daughter.”

At last, a note of sanity in this bizarre discussion. Her daughter, obviously a teenager, had a baby, panicked, dumped it on dear old mom, and ran away. Runaways were my thing. This, I could handle. I offered her a sympathetic smile. “Right. How old’s your daughter?”

“Seventeen.”

I jotted a note. “Did you bring a photo?”

“No, I--”

“I’ll need one. Her name?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met her.”

Wham! Right back to la-la land. I drained my Pepsi and clunked the can onto the desk. “Ms. Lloyd--”

“I know!” She held up a hand to stop me. “I know it sounds crazy. Just hear me out.”

Her eyes pled with me and a note in her voice gave me pause. I arched my brows, inviting her to continue.

A wave of red washed up her neck and mottled her jaw. “This is hard for me. I haven’t talked about it in--. I had a baby. When I was sixteen, almost seventeen. I gave it--her--up for adoption. I hadn’t heard of her, or from her, since the day I signed the adoption papers until a week ago.”

I pushed across my handy box of tissues, but her eyes remained dry, her voice tightly controlled.

“I know what you must think of me--”

“No, you don’t.”

She stopped, mouth open in mid-word. After a second’s thought, she said, “You’re right. I don’t. I guess I’m projecting. My husband says I do that a lot. Sometimes I feel so bad about giving up that baby, so guilty, that I worry everyone thinks I’m a horrible person. Un-natural. Like I have a scarlet ‘A’ on my chest for ‘Abandoner.’ But I was only sixteen! I just didn’t have what it takes to be a mother. I still don’t. And my parents . . . well, let’s just say my daughter’s better off wherever she ended up than she’d’ve been with my folks.”

The bitterness in her voice would give unsweetened chocolate a run for its money. Her remark about abandonment hit too close to home and I said the first thing that came to mind. "You're married?"

"Yes. He doesn't know."

"Hello?"

She almost smiled at the incredulity in my voice. "I mean he doesn't know I had a baby and gave it up. Of course he knows about Olivia, but he thinks I'm babysitting for a friend. He's not a kid person; he just about freaked when I called him to tell him last Monday. He told me not to expect him to change any diapers. He's been away, in Arizona, troubleshooting some problem for a customer . . . he does software, something to do with personnel systems. He'll probably be gone another two or three weeks and I need to have this resolved before he comes home."

"The note says the mom is coming back. Why not just wait?"

"It could be months! I can't take care of a baby that long." She shook her head vehemently.

"Well, you could turn her over to Child Protective Services and let them find the mother."

"If she weren't my grand-daughter that's exactly what I'd do. But . . . well, part of me feels like that would be giving my daughter away a second time and I just can't do that either. Hiring someone to find Olivia's mother quickly seemed like the best solution."

Olivia's mother, I noted, not "my daughter." I studied her, the resolute line of her thin lips, the dark smudges under her eyes, the tension in her shoulders. The faintest trace of freckles dusted her nose and the tops of her cheeks, and I imagined her as a kid, playing hide and seek and tag in the Colorado sunshine. The baby stirred in her sleep and we both looked over at her. One little fist now hung over the edge of the car seat.

"Okay," I told her. "I'll find your daughter. Since you don't know her name, or where she lives, or what she looks like, let's start with what you do know. When and where was she born?"

"There's just one more thing." Melissa Lloyd looked down at her fingers pleating a fold of skirt and I could hardly hear her. "I don't want to meet her."

"What?"

She looked up at me, her blue eyes fixed unwaveringly on mine. "I don't want to see her. Olivia's mother. When you find her, I want you to meet up with her, hand over Olivia. I can let you have some money to give her if she looks like she needs help. Then tell her I don't want to meet her or hear from her ever again. She's not part of my life."

