

For Katie
by Deborah J Ledford

“I’m here. You talk to me all the time. You look, but you don’t see.” The twelve-year-old windmills her arms and jumps on the balls of her feet. *“I’m over here!”* Out of breath, she stops and looks from one adult to the other. *“You all just stare off. Cry. Grandmama moans, Mommy sobs. Uncle Todd clenches his teeth so hard I’m afraid his jaw’ll snap in his head.”*

She turns to watch the old man standing at the window staring out at the black night.

“I heard Grandpapa say over and over, ‘Storm nearly washed away the gravesite. That angel always hated the rain.’ I think he misses me the most.”

The young girl pats the man on his arm as she passes, then settles on the floor at the feet of the weeping woman. She looks up and says, *“Don’t be sad, Mommy.”*

Clara Salinski shot up in her bed, trembling. Though grateful to see her daughter so vividly again, the dreams always opened fresh wounds, just as old ones healed.

She fumbled the cap off a prescription bottle from her bedside table. Dry swallowing the Valium, she counted the heartbeats it took for the drug to take effect.

As dawn crept under the window shade, Clara lifted herself wearily from the bed. She crossed the room and pulled sweat pants and a threadbare T-shirt from the bureau. She dressed and ran a brush through her shoulder-length, thin and colorless hair, on the edge of gray.

Knowing the fears she would have to face now, Clara padded into the living room.

She had clicked off the television last night when the first Amber Alert crawled across the news ticker. Clara hoped the dream was not a premonition as it always had been before. That they had found the little girl merely wandering, or off with friends. Safe from harm, heedless of the worry she caused those who loved her.

Kneeling in front of the television, Clara said a silent prayer. She pressed the power button.

The face of her beautiful daughter filled the screen and caused Clara to startle. The smile captured in the seventh grade school picture her little girl had been so proud of, stared back at her.

Clara’s breath caught in her chest. She held it until her lungs screamed nearly as loud as the voice in her head.

The pastor’s words rang in her ears remembering her daughter’s funeral. *“Forever the age of twelve, Kate Eva Simms will never be forgotten.”*

“Baby,” Clara mumbled. She leaned in, closed her eyes, and kissed the television screen.

When she pulled back the shot had changed to that of a man dressed in a suit and conservative tie. Clara stared, stunned by the sight of her former husband. He appeared freshly shaven, hair neatly trimmed. His eyes glistened with tears.

“Paul Simms is with us via our affiliate in Oklahoma City. Mr. Simms, thank you for joining us under these unfortunate circumstances.”

The man gave a solemn smile. *“Thank you, Everett. I’m happy to provide any assistance I can to the family of the missing girl, as well as to anyone whose lives she has touched. I only pray they find her, safe.”*

Insistent knocking drew Clara from the television’s trance. She backed to the front door, her eyes remaining on the monitor. Unlocking three deadbolts, she opened the steel door to the mesh-covered vision of her dad staring at her with wide eyes. His bulk filling the opening, he clutched the molding as she fumbled for the latches on the screen door.

Clara let him in and hurried back to perch on the edge of the couch.

Slamming the door shut, then shoving the bolts home, Marcus Salinski hissed, *“Dimmit! I hoped you*

didn't know."

"I always know."

Marcus dropped to the couch. He sat so close to his daughter, their shoulders touched. "You okay, honey?"

Clara shrugged.

"Why's Paul doing this again? I thought I was perfectly clear the last time."

"He keeps calling her Katie," Clara mumbled.

"What?"

"He keeps calling her Katie. She never let us to call her Katie. Since she turned nine." Clara turned to her father for the first time. "Remember? On her birthday. Cutting the cake. I called her Katie, and she said, 'I'm not a baby anymore, Mommy. Call me Kate'."

Marcus nodded toward the television. "About the last time he saw her, wasn't it?"

They listened to the news anchor for a moment. ". . . to remind our viewers, Paul Simms is the founder of the Simms International Foundation for Missing Children. His daughter Katie's body was found ten days after she disappeared . . ."

Clara pointed to the screen. "Look." The shot cut back to the photograph of Clara's daughter. The title card read: KATIE EVA SIMMS. "She'd be so embarrassed."

"He's got no right putting you through this again."

Clara, her gaze fused to the television, did not respond.

"If he was really trying to help people, he'd talk about how he hadn't even seen *Katie* for three years before she died. Why isn't he urging dads out there to cherish every day with their kids? That's the lesson he should be preaching. Not fairy tales about how much pain he's suffered."

"He did suffer, Dad."

"Why does he keep doing this to you?"

Clara lowered her head. *Regret.*

The phone rang, interrupting their silent thoughts. Clara crossed the room and picked it up.

"Mrs. Simms, do you have a comment about the missing girl—"

Clara shouted at the caller. "My name is *Ms. Salinski*. Don't call here again." She slammed the receiver onto the table, her fists clenched into white balls, and returned to her father.

"I have to change my number every time this happens. Somehow they always find me."

"How many times?"

"Seventeen."

Marcus gasped. "In eight years?"

Clara nodded. Gnawing on a thumbnail, she focused on the television again.

"That's a lot of kids."

"How did this one happen?" Clara asked in a small voice.

"Someone took her from her bed. No forced entry."

Just like Kate.

The talking-heads coverage broke to a photograph of the missing girl.

Marcus whispered, "She looks a lot like Kate."

Clara's vision clouded with tears.

They both listened in silence. Marcus bristled when the camera cut to another tight shot of Paul Simms. "Does he really think this display is helping anyone?"

"Yes," Clara said.

Paul Simms shook his head insistently. "I have to believe Kate didn't feel any pain."

Clara's mouth dropped open. *No pain? Twelve stab wounds, vaginal tear, bruises over sixty percent of her body?*

Marcus shot from the couch. "That's it!" he said, storming to the phone.

"What are you doing?"

“Booking a flight to Oklahoma. I’m going to have a little face time with your putz of an ex-husband.” Although he hadn’t flown in thirty years, Clara knew her father wasn’t bluffing. She rushed to stop him.

“Dad, no. Just let it go.”

“It kills me to see you in pain every time this happens. It *did* kill your mama. And, my granddaughter’s died seventeen deaths just to ease this guy’s pain? No. It stops now.”

“Try to understand what he’s doing. Paul believes that if the little girl is personalized, she’ll be saved. That the monster who took her will see some of Paul’s pain and find mercy.”

Marcus clutched the phone to his chest. “How you can still love that man is a mystery to me.”

Clara stared deep into the set of eyes bloodshot as her own. “He gave me Kate.”

Marcus’s eyes welled with tears. Voice cracking, he said, “Kate’s gone, honey.”

“She’ll never be gone.”

The news anchor’s voice cut into their silence. “Joining us now from Viola, Kansas, are the parents of the missing ten-year-old, Jim and Eloise Perkins—”

The screen filled with a woman, clearly distraught, mangling a tissue, bottom lip trembling. The man sitting beside her parked the trucker’s cap low on his head covering much of his face. What could be seen of his eyes, darted around an out-of-view crowd. He avoided looking directly at the camera. Shoulders slumped, his left leg bobbed wildly up and down.

Clara shook her head. “Those poor people.”

“God, he looks rough. Everyone’s going to think he did it.”

“They always do.”

“It was awful what they put you through.”

“You too, Dad.”

A look of embarrassment flushed Marcus’s cheeks.

Clara whispered, “They had no right digging up your past that way.”

“No right at all,” Marcus mumbled.

Looking back at the screen, Clara recognized the expression on the stricken mother’s face. Dazed, amazed, crazed. An involuntary shudder coursed through Clara’s body.

She took the phone from her father’s hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Going to Kansas. Where’s Viola?”

“Outside of Wichita, I think they said.”

She grabbed a pad of paper and pen from the counter.

“Clara, are you sure?”

“Did you see that poor woman? Who’s going to stand up for her? Her husband? I think not. Look at him.”

Marcus turned to the television, now a tight shot on the little girl’s father. The man oozed anger. “Yeah, you’re right. He’s done. Given up before they even find her little body.”

Clara snapped her attention to her father. “She may not be dead!”

Marcus lowered his head and let out a deep sigh. “It’s just that you’ve never gotten involved before.”

“Maybe that’s why Kate keeps coming back to me in my dreams every time this happens. I think she’s telling me to get involved.”

“Oh, baby, I’d hate to see you get hurt.”

Clara pointed to the mother who had broken down in silent sobs. “And I’d hate for her to go through what I did. What we all did. If nothing else, I can be there for her.”

Marcus laid a tender hand on her shoulder. “Want me to come with you?”

“No, Dad. I need to do this alone.”

Marcus sighed, then nodded. “I’ll get your suitcase.”

* * *

Four hours later, Clara drove a compact rental and followed directions provided by the Wichita, Kansas police department. Two miles outside Viola, she tucked behind a van with the letters KTVW emblazoned on every panel and followed it into town. Soon, she found herself in the throngs of satellite trucks and hundreds of people milling around the tiny neighborhood Clara recognized from the television coverage.

Grateful for the small car, she squeezed into a spot and made her way toward the yard illuminated by the bright lights, a sight she knew all too well. A flashback of her own nightmare registered in her mind, identical to the vision before her.

A circle of plastic yellow caution tape surrounded a small group of people. *The crime scene.* Her heart pounded as she fought her fear of the familiar sight.

Shouldering to the front of the wall of reporters and curious neighbors, Clara thought she recognized a man standing with his back to her. His arms were crossed at his chest. As he listened to one reporter ask a question to the mother, he shook his head slowly. When he turned his profile to Clara she did a double take. She waved her arms wildly over her head until her ex-husband, Paul Simms, whirled toward the motion.

With a smile he zigzagged to her until only the yellow tape separated them.

Clara leaned in close and breathed in deep.

“You don’t have to sniff at me, Clara. I’ve been sober for eight years.”

Clara blushed and dropped her gaze. “I thought you were in Oklahoma.”

“I heard you were coming here.”

“You did? From whom?”

“My biggest fan.”

“Dad?”

Paul nodded. “First time he’s spoken to me in years. Almost dropped the phone I was so shocked.”

Clara smiled, grateful for her father’s efforts. Motioning to the couple, she said, “This has been going on for hours. Why are they still answering questions?”

“They’ve been told that the more they keep talking, the better the chance to reach someone who knows something.”

“But in front of the press?”

Paul shrugged. “They’re the ones who suggested it.”

“They must be exhausted. We’ve got to get them out of there.” Clara gave him a nudge.

“You sure you want to get in the middle of this?”

Clara nodded.

Paul lifted the yellow crime tape. “Come with me.”

Clara stared at Paul with moist eyes. Then, taking a deep breath, she ducked under the tape and joined him. Grasping his hand, she was grateful he returned her squeeze.

Paul and Clara made a barrier in front of the missing child’s parents. Paul waved his hands and said, “That’s all for now.”

A man wearing a headset bounded from behind the cameraman. “Wait a minute. You can’t just barge in here right now, we haven’t gone to break yet.”

Paul strode to the man and hissed in a calculated tone, “You’ve got enough for now.”

The man retreated, and barked a few words into the headset’s microphone.

With glazed-over eyes, the mother looked up at Clara.

Clara held out her hand. “Come with me, Eloise.”

She took Clara’s hand, slid off the stool, and followed like a sheepish child. They rushed away from the grumbling crowd toward the house.

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Kate Eva Simms crosses the room and settles on the floor at Clara's feet. She looks up and says, *"Thank you, Mommy."*

Clara startled awake. She looked around the unfamiliar room. Disoriented at first, reality came back in snapshots until she finally recognized her surroundings and her circumstances. She had fallen asleep curled into a tight ball in a recliner. Wincing, she unfolded her pins-and-needle legs and glanced over at Eloise's motionless body on the bed. The woman snored lightly, patchwork quilt under her chin, in exactly the same position Clara had tucked her into, hours earlier.

There was a light knock at the bedroom door. Clara crept to the door and opened it, careful not to wake Eloise.

Paul stood in the doorway hair slicked back, still wet, wearing a crisp shirt. The expression on his face was stoic, somber.

She put a finger to her lips then whispered, "Did you sleep?"

He took Clara's hands in his own. "They found her."

"Alive?"

Paul tipped his forehead to rest on hers. He shook his head slowly.

Clara turned to the woman in the bed. "No."

"Should we wake her?"

"Not yet. It's the last sleep she'll get in a long time."

Paul ushered Clara into the hallway and eased the door shut. "I've unpacked your toiletries and laid out your clothes in the bathroom, there on the left."

Clara gave him a puzzled look.

"You ready to go to work?"

Clara crossed her arms tight against her chest. Her voice quivered when she finally spoke. "I don't know what to do."

"Unfortunately, you know better than anybody what that woman is going to need." Paul tucked a lock of hair behind Clara's ear. "Just be there for her. And, prepare yourself for when she's told."

"I don't think I can."

"You're strong, Clara. This family needs that now."

"How have you done this so many times?"

"It's what my life has become."

"But why? Why would you choose this . . . pain?"

With a tender touch, Paul lifted Clara's chin up to meet his gaze. "For Katie. I do it for Katie."

Clara nodded in understanding. She slipped her arm in the crook of his, let out a deep breath, and said in an unwavering voice, "I'm ready."