

# Sarah's Last Visit

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# Chapter 1

Monday morning and Sarah Charvonce did not check out.

Guests not checking out on time upset Ed Morrow to no end. This one forced him to drive all the way out to the cabin to find out why. He parked at the bottom of the driveway, preferring not to drive onto the fresh snow. At the base of the driveway, he stopped to look at the snow gathered there, glanced at his dress shoes and became more annoyed, but continued and marched up the stairs to the front door. A touch of composure for a moment, he resisted the temptation to anger knock on the door, instead knocked soft, but forceful and yelled hello.

After the third knock he fumbled for his keys, But tried the door knob first. The door unlocked. A tad anxious, he stepped inside, left the door open behind him and again yelled hello. The scene inside obvious someone still occupied the cabin. Ever more annoyed, he stepped further into the great room to discover woman's clothes strewn about the sofa.

Morrow called out again louder and directed his focus toward the bedrooms, but did not go any further into the room. He did a throat clear sound next in an attempt to gain someone's attention. But still no response.

The wind crashed against the great room's giant windows, caught his attention and forced him to look. The vision he saw caused him to stiffen up.

Outside the center window someone appeared to look in.

A quick walk toward the person at the window, quite angered by the audacity of a person there, but came to an abrupt stop. Hesitated as he realized the person did not move. Or react to his approach. The person stood fast, hands pressed flat against the glass. He took a couple more steps to get a better look, only then did he realize the person outside the large center window was a woman. And naked. Fresh snow gathered on her head, shoulders, the top of her breasts and arms. She stared back at him.

He suspected something very, very wrong and in an instant backed away.

As he backed his way through the room, he bumped into the sofa. Stopped a moment to look down, but continued to work his way around before he reached the phone. He retrieved the receiver and punched in the numbers.

Two rings later he heard the familiar voice answer.

"Yeah, Sheriff's office, Joe Redfield speaking."

## Chapter 2

Hugo — after his grandfather — "Joe" Redfield sat in the chair behind the desk. The chair with its ever present squeak. He surveyed the office. Quiet. His deputy, Pete Matson out on patrol. The coffee in his hand lukewarm. He thought back to why he sat there.

Retired and pensioned from an inner city police force after he received a career ending wound, he moved to the mountains and took a one-bedroom apartment in town. And where he still lived two years later. The previous sheriff had been on the job for some twenty-odd years and desperate to retire. Joe Redfield recruited to run. A year into the job still created new challenges.

After he stood and stretched, he paced across the office. His six-foot frame fit nice into the uniform. He patted his stomach. Not as small and tight as when he was on the force. But he had only put on fifteen pounds so far. Isn't that the trademark of every town sheriff, an enlarged gut. He nodded and moved his hand away. Across the office he opened the front door to look out. Snow sat on the ground. But the sky clear. He looked up anyway.

The phone rang on his desk.

He closed the door and stepped back to the deputy's desk.

"Yeah, Sheriff's office, Joe Redfield speaking."

"Yeah, I know where."

"Yeah, I can come out."

"Yeah, twenty or so."

"Sorry, you'll have to wait until I get there."

Redfield hung up the phone. He knew how pushy Ed Morrow could be. With a smile, he grabbed his ten-gallon hat, fitted it into place, nodded to no one and stepped from the office the door locked behind him. He climbed into his cruiser and drove out of town. As he passed the outskirts he called the deputy on the two-way, instructed him to meet him at the cabin and gave him the address.

Upon his arrival and before he exited the cruiser, Ed Morrow began to rant and rave, authorized to go in when a renter late to check out. And on and on about what he saw once inside the cabin and on and on and on. Joe Redfield raised his hand in the air to stop Morrow's near hysterical rant. He walked up the stairs and found the door already open. Redfield looked back at Morrow who motioned to go.

The cold air filled the great room inside the cabin, which had the appearance of not used in a day or so. As he stood in the center of the room he looked out the large windows and marveled at the view.

There were three windows, an oversized center window and one on each side which formed a one hundred-eighty degree view. The view would have been spectacular, if not for the woman who stood outside the center window.

Hands flat, pressed against the glass, stood a young woman, naked and appeared frozen in place. The eyes were focused as she stared into the once heated, sun-lit great room. But, only the dark and the cold greeted those eyes. Anger, or maybe a touch of fear, appeared to form the facial features.

To get a clearer look, Redfield knelt closer to the window. Her hands were flat on the glass. Not fisted or set to pound. More like a lean to look in posture. He shifted to the other knee to look over and past the woman. Footprints led back up to the top of the ridge where a snowmobile sat. The lights dim. He traced the footprints back down the snow and focused in on the woman. A layer of frost or light snow gathered on the head, shoulders and tops of her breasts. Frost, or snow appeared to gather on the outstretched arms, but not as thick.

A female for sure and quite naked. A scan of the body revealed the legs disappeared into the snow. Her feet buried. Young, mid-twenties maybe would be a reasonable guess. How long had she been there? More important, how did she stand there? As he looked at her face through the glass for another moment the scene gave him more questions than answers.

Redfield stood back up and rubbed his knees. To bend down for any length of time hurt a little more than it used too.

In the doorway, Fred Randall, the coroner, patiently waited for the sheriff to finish. The sheriff turned around to face him. Fred motioned.

"Well Joe, shall we go get her?"

Joe Redfield nodded and walked toward him. But, stopped before he reached the door and turned to look back into the room. The light from the windows illuminated the open area. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. No signs of a struggle. No real explanation yet. The sheriff turned back to the door.

"Yeah Fred, let's go get her."

The two men left the cabin and closed the front door behind them. Redfield glanced at Morrow as if to remind him not to go in. Fred had the gurney outside the wagon ready to be put to use.

"Think we can get the gurney back there?" Redfield asked.

Fred shrugged his shoulders.

"Should be easier to carry the body out."

As they got into position, Joe stood on one end, while Fred closed the legs and together they carried the gurney around to the back of the cabin. Fred directed the gurney to one side of the body and set his end down into the snow. The sheriff let his end drop. Fred pointed.

"Let's tilt her back and see if we can place her on the gurney. With a little luck she will slide right on."

As the two men attempted to move the body, their warm hands hit the frost and cold flesh, which caused the body to slip right through and land on its back in the snow.

"Damn, that went well." Fred looked up at Joe. "Tell you what, I'll pull the lady toward me and you slide the gurney in underneath, maybe we can right the body on top and carry the gurney out."

Redfield stepped over to the gurney and pushed it across the snow toward the body. Fred used the stiff right arm to pull the frozen body towards him and waited for the sheriff to slide the gurney underneath. All this effort in two feet of snow.

As he positioned the gurney up against the body, Redfield held the gurney in place while Fred maneuvered the body toward the flat surface. They let the gurney drop back down and let the metal stretcher lay flat in the snow. The body slid and rocked into place on top face up. Much like a dead bug. The arms were still extended. The hands flat. The knees bent. Breasts protruded straight up frozen into place. Pubic hair so brittle it might break to the touch.

"She's been out here a long time."

Fred tapped on the feet and legs. He continued his probe across the abdomen and up the chest and looked up at Redfield.

"Joe, she's frozen deep."

"Yeah, maybe a couple of days at least." Redfield commented.

The coroner wrapped a strap around the body to keep it in place and motioned for the sheriff to grab his end. Together they lifted the gurney. The body slid back and forth. The cold wet flesh did not offer any chance of grip. Fred motioned for them to go as Joe turned and gripped his hands on the gurney, faced forward and began to trudge through the snow. It took some work, but they reached the front and stopped next to the wagon. Fred released the legs to let the gurney stand on its own. Nodded as he retrieved his clipboard.

While Fred made his notes, Redfield's eyes focused on the corpse face up on the gurney. Obvious a female. Naked and frozen solid. But held position as if she were still at the window. The eyes remained open and stared straight up. With the light beginning to fade, Redfield wanted to wrap this up.

As Redfield came back to the gurney, Fred motioned to help him load. Fred released the gurney legs as the two men slid the gurney into the back of the wagon. The extended arms almost did not fit in under the frame. As the gurney slid into place, Fred lowered and slammed the gate.

"See you back at the shop."

Redfield watched as Fred climbed into the driver's seat of the old dark blue wagon made in the days of the gas-guzzlers. The words CORONER painted in white on the side doors and back gate.

"Jesus Fred, how old is this beast?"

"Don't know. Came with the job. Still runs. Very few miles on it."  
Redfield nodded.

The vehicle moved forward out of the driveway onto the road as he continued to watch. The old wagon faded away as it disappeared down the road. An eerie glow against the fine powdered snow drew Redfield's attention away from the departed wagon. Cast by the red and blue mars lights on top of the sheriff's vehicle, they twisted back and forth in the faded light.

Stopped rather abrupt, the cruiser angled across the driveway rather than in it. The engine off, but the ignition still engaged to keep the accessories active. Evidenced by the occasional scrape of the wipers across dry glass. The snow had stopped sometime ago.

"Sheriff, need me for anything else?" Ed Morrow stood next to his car.

"Oh, sorry Ed. I did not realize you were still here." Redfield looked over at Morrow. "No, you can go. Stop by the office so we can get your statement."

"When can I have the cabin back?"

Redfield looked at him. A smile formed.

"Jesus Ed, give us a couple of days to wrap up our investigation. Will you already?"

"It's because. Well, this place rents quite often. I mean look at it. The cabin looks quite impressive. Well, let me know okay?"

Redfield nodded.

"Seems rather straight forward, shouldn't be more'n a couple of days I would suspect."

"Right. Thanks sheriff. Call if you need anything."

"Don't forget to stop by to give your statement. Otherwise, might take longer to wrap this up."

"Message received loud and clear." Morrow turned toward the sheriff.

At the top of the steps, Redfield realized how cold the outside air as a violent shiver racked his body, forced him to turn the collar of the jacket up and bury both hands deep into the side pockets as another gust of wind passed over him. He wondered if it would snow anymore tonight. His eyes glanced at the sky while another shiver attacked his body. This one caused him to swear. Someday he would forget his vanity and wear the heavier coat. Someday maybe. But for now, he would suffer as usual.

Once back inside the cabin, Redfield took stock of the rest of the room. The fireplace sat dark, which indicated the fire had been out for quite some time. The wall heaters had been set low to allow enough heat to keep the pipes from freezing. A standard practice for winter. He suspected the occupant had a fire at some point. The cabin air seemed musty, still acrid from something more than cigarette smoke permeated the air.

He took a casual glance around the room. Women's clothes gathered on the sofa. No doubt hers. Pants here, and a blouse there and other items of a delicate nature. As he looked around, the sheriff noticed various other personal

items about the room and began to reach out, but decided to leave those for the deputy to handle, since he did not bring any equipment. Everything stored in the deputy's cruiser. The deputy would arrive soon to tie everything up and log the evidence. The deputy's job now.

Redfield stood at the large window in the center of the big room long enough to look out and up to the ridge. Under normal circumstances, it would be footprint free snow. Pure white and intimidating. But there were fresh tracks. Well, somewhat fresh. Snow had fallen earlier. With the wind blowing the loose snow around he did not know for sure. But, the footprints were still distinguishable in the deep snow. His eyes followed the tracks back up to the top of the ridge. The snowmobile still sat there at the top. A flag flew in the wind and bent the antenna. The flag, he would find out later, were the woman's panties.

He tried to discover the events that led the woman to abandon the vehicle and make her way down the incline. All he knew at the moment. The snowmobile stopped at the top and for some reason the woman left it and made her way down to the window naked. Not sure why she was naked yet other than the fact her clothes were still inside. And for some reason she stood outside this window until she died and froze solid. His thoughts tried to reconcile why she would do that. Why she would stand there and wait for it to happen? Why not seek shelter. Or curl up. Or something?

He looked around the cabin some more, but could not tell if someone had been with her or not. Only her clothes appeared to be strewn on the sofa though. No sign of anyone else with her in the room yet.

Could this have been a stunt gone bad? Could she have been alone? Maybe she did it on a dare? Redfield shook his head. Too many maybes to consider. All he knew at the moment, a naked, dead and frozen woman stood outside the cabin's big center window and left more questions than answers. Perhaps the coroner could give him something more. He took one last look around the interior of the cabin.

Back inside the cruiser, he turned up the heater. After he rubbed his hands together, he grabbed his clipboard and proceeded to write up his notes while he waited for Pete Matson to arrive and take over the scene.

## Chapter 3

Redfield watched his deputy pull up, exited the cruiser and pulled the jacket tighter. Pete Matson climbed out of his cruiser and approached.

"Hi Joe, sure enough cold out here. What do we have?"

"We have a dead woman. Naked and frozen solid, found outside."

"Sounds ominous enough. What's your impression?" Matson asked.

Redfield looked at him. At the front door.

"At the moment looks accidental. We'll know more when Fred gets through. And maybe not."

"What do you need me to do, Joe?"

"Sorry Pete, you get the dirty work. Take pictures. Fred, took pictures of the body and the like. Shoot everything inside. Pack it up. Make notes. Bring it all back to the office. Let me know what you find. What you think happened. I've had a look already. But, let me know what you see."

Redfield ran his hands across his face and pulled the jacket tighter.

"Ed Morrow wants the cabin back. Said it rents often. He needs it. I told him I'd let him know. But, you clean it out and if Fred says okay, we'll give the cabin back. We found the body outside. Might be all we need."

"Will do, Joe. Only the one person?"

"Far as we can tell. You let me know you find anything says different. Need me to send Lori to help. I mean woman's clothing and all?"

"No, I can manage. I'll let you know I run into a problem."

"Thanks, Pete. See you back at the office."

Pete nodded. Redfield climbed back into his cruiser, but waited until Pete went inside. When he didn't come back out, Redfield drove away and headed back to the office.

The front door slammed. Joe Redfield looked up to see who came in ever watchful and spotted his deputy. Pete stood there for a moment, held a suitcase with a another bag under his arm and a purse in the other. He walked over to his own desk, set everything down and placed his snow covered ten gallon hat on the edge. He slipped off the coat and hung it over the chair in front. The two men looked at each other for a long time, each tried to sort the other out. Joe Redfield took a moment to remember back to why he hired Pete as his full time deputy.

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A local boy, Pete Matson grew up in this town. And, except for a three-year hitch in the army, had spent his entire life here. The road to the deputy job paved in the last year of his army service. Pete Matson had been transferred to a Military Police Battalion. He used his experience there to help him have more options in civilian life. Although the time spent as an MP turned out to be unremarkable, the opportunity did give him some police experience.

After Joe Redfield was elected, and Sheriff Sam Edwards turned over the office, Edwards' deputy retired as well. This left the new sheriff without a deputy or any backup at all. When he put the word out for a new deputy, only three people applied for the position. A retiree with no prior experience. Pete Matson, the former Army Military Police soldier. And Lori Jacobs, a former employee for the highway patrol.

The decision came down to Pete Matson and Lori Jacobs. Although, Joe Redfield believed age would not be a problem, the retiree had no prior experience. The other two appeared to at least have some police background.

Lori Jacobs had highway patrol experience. She went through the program and had begun the intern period before she quit and decided to move to the mountains full time. On a previous occasion, she applied for a deputy position under Sheriff Sam Edwards. But, Edwards already had his deputy and stood fast. He did not need another.

Pete Matson's military background factored heavy in the decision and he got the job. At least Pete had prior, though limited experience. He did work quite hard as the full time deputy. And got better at the job.

However, Joe Redfield was impressed enough with the other candidate, Lori Jacobs and her background, he petitioned the city council to add a part-time deputy position and give the position to her. She would be the on call deputy and fill in as needed. Everyone agreed with the town growth, a backup, even if part-time, would be a good idea for overnights and weekends.

Redfield also suggested they keep former Sheriff Sam Edwards on as an honorary deputy. Both the town council and Edwards liked the idea. With Edwards, a natural for on call duty as well. In the end, the sheriff had a staff he could call in as needed. But, he found he used Lori Jacobs more these days. Or, at least called her quite often for one reason or another.

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The light outside faded fast, which caused the light inside the office to disappear. Pete switched on the overheads and filled the room with neon light. One of the neon bulbs flickered before it caught and exploded forth with light. Redfield gazed at the light for a moment.

Like a dead weight, the sheriff slumped into his chair, the squeak once again filled the air as he rocked back and forth. Rather than stop at the desk he

used, Pete Matson decided to sit in one of the chairs gathered in front of the sheriff's desk. He set the woman's purse on Redfield's desk.

"Joe, wallet says the name was Sarah Charvonce. She had \$98 inside. Some change and a credit card receipt from Floyds Bar & Grill."

Redfield nodded.

"She had an emergency contact number. Looks like her parents. I couldn't tell if she had a boyfriend. Don't think a husband."

"Yeah, Morrow said she checked in alone." Redfield said.

Pete Matson nodded.

"Maybe she met someone. I didn't find anything suggests she had company. What you think made her do it? I mean, you know, stand out there?"

Redfield raised his hands in the air.

"Can't say, Pete. At the moment, looks like she drove the snowmobile to the top of the ridge and naked. Maybe it died or malfunctioned somehow and she made her way down to the cabin. Footprints in the snow say as much. But, why did she stop at the window. Why not go around to the front. Try the door at least. Morrow said he found the door unlocked when he arrived. Begs the question, don't it. Why would she have stood there anybody's guess."

"Except for the clothes strewn about, everything else still put away. Her purse on the counter and the money in there." Pete Matson ran his hand through his hair. "Everything looked normal. No foul play as far as I can tell."

Redfield nodded.

"I had someone retrieve the snowmobile. See what it tells us."

Matson stood and pushed the chair closer to the desk.

"I'll put her stuff in the back. I can tell you women's clothes, but if you need to take a look?"

Redfield shook his head.

Matson put her purse in an evidence bag and sealed it. He put tags on the other two bags. Redfield watched him carry those to the back.

"Okay Joe, you know where to reach me."

Redfield watched his deputy leave the office.

## Chapter 4

Joe Redfield drove to the open field where his deputy had directed. The call came about an hour ago. He enjoyed a Sunday morning off and chose to stay in his civilian clothes.

An ambulance, the coroner's wagon and Matson's cruiser were already there. He pulled up behind. When he exited his cruiser he saw everyone gathered around what looked like two people on snowmobiles. Only when he got closer did he see they were naked.

"They're both gone, Joe." Matson said it first.

Redfield walked closer. The two people appeared to be frozen as well.

"Sorry, Joe, they are both frozen solid on each machine." Fred Randall offered. "Tracks lead from back there. No other marks I can see. No footprints. No one walked out here or around here. Only the snowmobile tracks. My guess, they were alone. Drove out here and. Maybe something went wrong. Well, you can see for yourself."

Redfield nodded.

"Joe, we have something else." Matson said with a slight hesitation.

Redfield looked at him. Matson still hesitated. Redfield waved his hand in a give it to me motion. Matson sighed and spoke softer.

"It appears they were staying at the cabin. You know, the cabin."

"Do you know for certain?" Redfield asked.

"The two kids who found them said they followed tracks from the end of the road. And where the cabin sits. I don't know anything for sure yet, but sure sounds like they came from the cabin."

"Maybe we better go check it out. Fred, you okay here?"

Fred Randall nodded.

The two men walked to their separate cruisers and nodded as each got in. Redfield backed up and out. Matson fell in behind him. Redfield retrieved the handset from his radio and called back to Matson.

"Better call Ed Morrow. In case we need to get in. Might need his keys."

"Roger, Joe."

The cruiser pulled onto the driveway of the cabin. Redfield stepped out. His deputy pulled in next to him. Together they walked up the stairs. Matson tried the door. It opened. They stepped inside. Two piles of clothes were there, folded neat. A man and woman. Redfield looked around and walked to the center window fully expecting to see a snowmobile up there. Redfield remained at the window to look out, while Matson walked back into the room.

"Got a wallet here. Says Seth Rodgers." He looked through a purse on the counter. "Got an Ashley Rodgers. Maybe husband and wife. Look here Joe, some white residue. And there are open bottles of alcohol. Think maybe they got smashed or stoned or both and thought a naked ride in the snow a good idea?"

Redfield nodded.

"I wish it were that simple. I gotta tell you, Pete. I don't like the looks of this. I mean two people ride off into the night, naked on snowmobiles. Could not have been more than twenty degrees last night. You know what I mean? Maybe up and down the street. A quick run. But, all the way to where they were found. I don't like it, all I'm saying."

Pete Matson nodded. He put her wallet back into the purse and put the purse into an evidence bag. He put the man's wallet and other personal items into another evidence bag. Each pile of clothes placed in their own evidence bags. He placed the liquor bottles in bags and took a sample of the white residue. He also placed the glasses in bags.

"Joe, you want me to pack up the rest of their stuff?"

Ed Morrow burst through the door.

"Why the hell are you here? What are you two doing here? I mean, this place was rented to a very nice couple. The Rodgers. Said they celebrated their anniversary. I mean. Well, what the hell are you guys doing here?"

Morrow saw Matson hold an evidence bag.

"Oh Christ, did something happen to them?"

Matson looked at Redfield.

"Joe, you want to take this?"

"Ed, looks like I have some bad news." Redfield sighed. "We came from the field where they were found. It appears they went for a naked snowmobile ride last night. Well, they're deceased, Ed. Naked, frozen solid on top of their snowmobiles."

"You can't be serious. Why I spoke with them yesterday afternoon. Your call said. Well, to meet you here. Said they had a great time and thanked me for such a lovely cabin. How could this happen?"

"Ed, we still need to figure it out. But, I need to show you this."

Redfield motion him over and pointed to the white residue on the counter and the open bottles of liquor he bagged.

"Looks like they had a party last night. Maybe it got out of hand. But, if someone else was with them, maybe something went wrong and the others fled. Any idea who those others might have been?"

Morrow shook his head.

"Well, you think of anything, you let us know. How about you get out of here and let us finish. Sorry you had to come out. Thought we might need the key to get in. We sure did not want to bust the door down. Anyway, the door unlocked. Thanks again, Ed."

Morrow nodded, but turned back.

"When can I get this cabin back. There's still some season left, but before you know it, summer starts, rents non-stop those months. Might be able to get one more in this season before the snow melts."

Redfield looked at Matson and back to Morrow.

"How about we call it a season and maybe we put it back in your hands for the summer. Not sure what we'll find yet, but I promise you we'll get it done soon as we can."

Morrow nodded. He attempted to say something, but surrendered and left. And left the door open as he did. They heard his car start and drive away. Matson looked at Redfield.

"Listen Joe, I can finish here. Pack everything up. Why don't you head back home and we can pick it up in the morning. You know we won't know anything more until Fred tells how they died. Or, what they died from. Although, how they died appears obvious at the moment."

Redfield nodded, but paced across the room once more and stopped at the big picture window. His eyes glanced up.

"I wish I knew what happened. Maybe you should take more pictures. You know, everything in the room. Maybe the bedrooms as well. Take everything. Maybe we can put something together."

"Will do, Joe."

"You sure you got this? Don't need me anymore?"

"No, Joe. I'm good here. I'll finish up, seal and tag it for now."

Redfield nodded and walked to the open door. He turned and looked over the great room once more. With a nod, he left, bounded down the steps and entered his cruiser. The engine fired and the wipers reengaged. The heater kicked in. He looked out up at the cabin. A wave of déjà vu washed over him.

He backed the cruiser out, swung it around and sped off.

Before he was out of site the big front door closed.

Pete Matson did not notice, as he was in the bedroom to pack up the couple's clothes into the suitcases. Next would be their toiletries from the bathroom and the winter clothes from the entry way.

Pete Matson had done it all before.

Joe Redfield did not go back home. Instead he went to the office and waited for Pete to get back. A hour and a half later, Pete walked in, but carried suitcases and other items.

"Joe, why are you here. I thought you went home. It's Sunday, your day off. Go home. We can get to this in the morning."

"Pete, I couldn't. Can I see the pictures you took?"

Pete handed him his cell phone and went back out to his cruiser..

While Redfield reviewed the pictures, Pete brought in more items and included the woman's purse.

"Money was there, Joe. Looks like her jewelry as well. Nothing appears to be missing. I gotta believe they went for a joy ride and something happened. You

know, with what we found in the cabin. Maybe they weren't thinking. Decided to be adventurous."

Pete set the purse and other items on his desk.

Redfield looked up.

"Yeah, nothing in the photos you took suggests otherwise. You write it up and I'll sign off. Accidental deaths. Get the cause from Fred when he finishes."

Joe Redfield walked to the front door. Pete watched him.

"Thanks, Pete."

The front door closed. Pete put the items in the back.

## Chapter 5

The summer months passed without a major incident. Only the usual summer crowd issues. Alcohol related mischief, some drunken vandalism. Speeding and other traffic related incidents. Nothing out of the ordinary.

The first snow fell in mid-October. Heavier snow followed. By November, a good base sat on the ground and encouraged the winter crowd to flock to the snow covered area.

Joe Redfield got the call on a cold late November Monday. Two bodies were found, naked, looked like they tried to get it on in the snow and deceased. While he pushed for clarity, Fred Randall got on the phone and insisted he come out there and see what the hell happened. He grabbed his jacket, pulled the door closed, engaged the lock and climbed into his cruiser.

Less than a mile from the cabin, the bodies had been discovered by a couple of cross country skiers, who now sat in Pete Matson's cruiser. Fred, Pete and another person were gathered by the couple. He walked up and saw what they had said.

She sat on top of the male in a quite suggestive sexual position. The male's hands were frozen to her thighs. Her arms at her side in an attempt to ride him until they froze solid. Redfield shook his head to remove the image he envisioned.

"Just like that. They walked out here naked got it on and froze up? C'mon Fred, give me something. Please."

Fred Randall stood up. He knelt next to the couple to examine. What, he wasn't sure, but had the same thoughts as Redfield.

"Wish I could, Joe. Wish I could. But, first look says so. They walked out here naked and started to get it on. Then froze up mid. Well, mid-something. I'll say that much."

Redfield bent down to take a closer look. Both had their eyes open. His appeared to look at her. Her eyes focused on the sky. Her knees were deep in the snow. The snow crept up all around his hips and back. His knees bent which held her back toward him.

"Jesus, Fred, if I did not know any better, I'd say they were in the thick of it. I mean it sure looks like they tried to get it on alright."

"You may be right, Joe. I'll know more when I can get them apart. Nothing I can do. We'll have to move them like they are. Store them until they start to defrost. I'll know more later."

Redfield, Matson and the other person all looked at Fred.

"Who is this?" Redfield asked.

"He's with me. No way I can move the bodies in my wagon. George has a pick-up. We can load the couple in the back. You boys ready? We'll need everybody to do this. George, think you can get the pick-up as close as possible?"

"You're serious?" Redfield blurted out.

"It's either this way or get a rig out with a hoist. No way else I can see."

George backed his pickup as close as he could get to the bodies. The four men gathered around and with a great effort, got the bodies, still connected into the back of the pick-up. As each man huffed and puffed, George closed the tailgate.

"See you back at the shop, Doc?"

"Yeah George, catch up with you there."

"I have a question, Fred. What are you gonna do there?" Matson asked.

"Nothing. George will back his pick-up into my garage and we'll wait for the bodies to thaw. Put each on a gurney. I told George it could be a day or two before we can get them apart. He said fine. That's what I'm gonna do."

They watched as George's pick-up crawled through the snow and dipped a couple of times, but he managed to get the truck back on the road.

"Well, boys, nothing more to see here." Fred Randall walked away.

"Do I need to ask?" Redfield said.

Pete Matson shook his head. Together they walked toward their respective cruisers. Matson pulled in first, Redfield right behind. Matson was out first and bounded up the stairs. The door was unlocked. Redfield entered right behind him.

Redfield stood in the doorway while Matson looked through the cabin. Clothes were strewn about this time. Matson grabbed a pair of pants, removed the wallet and looked inside.

"I got an Albert Jefferson."

He looked around and picked up a purse.

"I got a Loretta Samuels."

Redfield nodded. Matson gathered up their clothes. Redfield walked straight to the big center window.

"Pete, you better take a look at this."

Matson walked over to the window and stood beside him. Outside in the deep snow sat footprints which lead back up to the Ridge. The area right outside the window had been quite disturbed as if one or more persons walked around in the snow.

"Jesus Joe, What so you make of those?"

"Certainly something to think about?"

Redfield continued to stare out the window. Matson went about the chore to gather clothes and personal items into evidence bags. On the counter sat white residue, coupled with a bottle of opened scotch. And three glasses.



"Joe, take a look at this."

Redfield took a last look at the foot prints and walked over to where Matson stood. He focused in on where Pete pointed.

"Three glasses."

"Bag them. See if we can get prints. Three glasses says a lot and says nothing. Maybe one was dirty already and someone selected a fresh one."

"Joe, I can finish up here. Sure have practice of late."

"Hell of a way to start the season off. Maybe we should burn this cabin down and be done with it. Or, maybe it's time we shut it down. Tell Ed Morrow no more rentals."

"Yeah, you tell him no more rentals. Surprised he wasn't here already to ask when he can have it back."

"Tell me what?' Ed Morrow stood in the doorway.

"This cabin bad luck, man. What I mean." Matson blurted out.

"You're telling me something happened to the couple who stayed here?"

"Yes. What we are saying. We found them both out in a field getting it on until they froze solid." Redfield chimed in.

"You can't be serious?" Morrow walked further into the room.

"Hold on, Ed, you're in a possible crime scene. I need to ask you to back out. Redfield can give you the details on the porch." Matson pushed.

Redfield nodded and motioned for Morrow to back out.

"Ed, let me say this as simple as I can. Five people associated with this cabin have been found dead, naked and frozen solid. Need I say more?"

"Joe, c'mon, you're not gonna tell me this cabin had something to do with those deaths? I mean. The cabin? Are you serious?"

"Don't know yet. But, we do know those deaths are all related to this cabin. After I talk with Fred Randall, I might have more details, but right now I have to say we will seal it. No one gets in until we say so. Do you understand?" Redfield raised his voice a tone.

"Joe, c'mon. This place a gold mine. Rents so well. I mean. Well, I do need it back and soon. Winter here already. Rates are higher and the cabin booked every weekend. C'mon, Joe."

"Let me talk to Fred and take a hard look at what we have. Maybe in a week or so. I don't know yet. I'll do what I can." Redfield sighed.

"Thanks, Joe, sure appreciate it." Morrow started to leave, but turned back. "You don't think this has anything to do with the girl who I found here first?" Morrow waved his hand in the air. "Hell, what am I thinking."

Morrow climbed into his car.

Redfield flashed for a moment on the foot prints. His thoughts raced, but in an instant shook his head to clear it. He walked back inside. Matson continued to collect items into evidence bags.

"Pete, you take your time. Maybe come back tomorrow and the next day. Maybe we can hold it for a couple of weeks this time. Ah hell, Pete something

happened here. Maybe we do our job and figure it out. I can accept one suicide, or accidental death, maybe two, but not multiples with multiple people. No, something happened for sure here and I damn well better find out what ."

"I'm right there with you, Joe. Let me finish up here and we'll start fresh in the morning. Maybe take a closer look at their possessions this time. And the photos. Might be something."

"Yeah, Pete, yeah. Let's do it. See you at the office first light tomorrow."

Redfield walked out of the cabin, bounded down the stairs and entered his cruiser. He took a moment before he fired up the engine. A long look at the cabin. Backed out, turned and fishtailed on the road until the tires got purchase. The cruiser picked up speed.

Before Redfield had left the scene, the big door closed.

Pete Matson did not notice. He packed their clothes into the suitcases in the big bedroom. He had already packed their toiletries into evidence bags. The winter clothes from the front hall were already in his cruiser.

Redfield stopped at the crime scene, but waited a moment. He got out of the cruiser and trudged through the snow back to the spot. Even less to see. He looked up and down. To the left and right. No other marks were present in the snow from any direction. After he cursed out loud, he marched back to his cruiser. Fired the engine and sat a moment longer before he sped off.

Two weeks later, Ed Morrow insisted he had a couple with a reservation and would hate to lose it. In spite of Joe Redfield's protests, Ed threatened to take the matter to a Judge. Joe Redfield relented and released the cabin. Morrow almost did not have enough time to get it cleaned on Friday afternoon. The guests were booked to arrive Friday night for a weekend of boarding.

# Friday Night ...

## Chapter 6

The frigid snowy air became disturbed by the roar of a snowmobile engine. It stopped on the driveway right in front of the cabin and parked at the base of the stairs. Ryan Palmer looked up at the cabin.

The cabin sat cold and alone at the end of a tree-covered road and created a shadow in the dark of the night. The sharp distinctive features of the structure were all but hidden from view. Winter clouds billowed in the sky which kept the moonlight from offering any assistance. An occasional cloud break would open and let the light in for a moment. Illuminated for a brief moment, the cabin hoped for more, waited for life, but the clouds would once again close, covered the light and caused the cabin to slip back into darkness.

A light dusting of snow, fresh fine white powder covered the roof, the stairs and the driveway, which created a black and white effect devoid of any color. On a winter day, the bright white of the engulfed snow removed all color from the landscape and except for the defiant pine tree who displayed a green aura, this truly would be a black and white photo.

Ryan did not wait for the engine to sputter and die, dismounted and adjusted his jacket. He pulled the collar up as the wind brushed across his face. Fresh powdered snow gathered on the stairs and porch and only became disturbed and flattened by his foot steps.

A small layer of snow fluttered in the air as he retrieved the key from under the welcome mat and hung there as the mat dropped back down. The white powder fell and rested back on top of the mat. As he inserted the key into the lock on the front door and rotated the key with a full turn, the lock clicked louder. He twisted the doorknob, heaved against the wood structure and forced the big door to swing open.

Once inside the cabin, he stood a moment. The darkness and cold engulfed him. Still in the doorway, it looked like the place had not been used in quite a while, but he knew it had only been a couple of weeks. He switched on a lamp on the table by the sofa and illuminated the big room. Musty air from nonuse engulfed the cabin interior. To let some fresh air in he opened a side window, The effect pushed the cold air into the room right through the cabin to the open front door and created a strong cold blast of frigid air.

A bunch of newspaper crumbled up, mixed in with some twigs and small branches created a base for the fireplace. A tall stick match struck to ignite the materials. The flames jumped to life, encircled the newspaper and kindling and burned to life.

As the flames subsided and the twigs and branches began to burn, Ryan placed smaller pieces of wood on the smoldering pile and waited for the new wood to ignite. After, he placed the larger log onto the pile. The wood began to ignite and filled the room with light and warmth. The fire began to take shape.

A gust of wind blew through the room which tickled the fire and created a chill. He closed the window. And ever watchful he walked back around the room. All looked good. The fire burned perfect. At the front door, he made one last look through the room and nodded his approval.

As he pulled the door hard, he heard the click of the lock, but still turned the knob. The door stood firm closed and locked. He placed the key back under the mat. The snow fluttered and hung in the air for a moment, before the white powder lowered back down onto the welcome mat.

Next to the snowmobile, ready to leave, Ryan thought something forgotten. Something not done. But what? What else needed to be done? He cursed louder, raced back up the stairs, flipped the mat over and retrieved the key all in one motion. Violent, hurried, it gave up all of its snow. The mat flipped in the air and landed upside down.

With a slight rage, he manhandled the lock and door to get back in. The key turned. The knob twisted and his shoulder hefted against the wood frame. The force caused the door to swing open and bounce hard against the inside wall. In a panic, he looked and found a pencil and a narrow pad of paper, which advertised the Ed Morrow Real Estate firm, on the kitchen counter by the phone. Straightaway he scribbled the note.

Heard you were coming,  
thought I'd start a fire,  
turn on a light,  
Love, Sarah.

Ryan placed the note in the middle of the small kitchen table. The pad and pencil returned to their original spot by the phone. As he slid across the floor, he caught the door, slammed it and heard the metallic click as the lock and mechanism reconnected into the doorframe.

Without thought he returned the key and repositioned the mat right side up. Ryan raced back down the steps to the snowmobile, looked around one last time, nodded assured. Now everything stood ready.

Headlights could be seen in the distance as they danced along the road. Snow caused the vehicle to move in every direction as it approached. But he still watched as the lights grew closer. Ryan sat astride the snowmobile and fired the engine. Time to leave. The stage set.

He took great pain to maneuver the snowmobile around and faced away from the road. This time prepared to depart in the opposite direction and head into the forest. He stopped at the end of the road and wondered for a moment about the marks in the fresh snow and if they should be dealt with. But, the headlights drew brighter and closer.

As he pulled onto the fresh snow the snowmobile left the road and dipped before it caught. The rear tracks bit into the fresh powder so he pushed the engine harder until the rear tracks gripped. The snowmobile began to pull away and cut a new path as it built up speed.

The snowmobile disappeared into the night.

A gust of wind blew across the steps and porch, swept up and twirled the loose disturbed snow as if by request. The clouds parted to let the moonlight shine upon the cabin. Through the windows, the bright light illuminated the area around the structure. A fire burned in the fireplace and smoke billowed from the chimney. The warmth of the fire engulfed the room and removed the cold and tightness to let the big great room relax.

The cabin became alive again. The color back.

The snow cascaded down.

## Chapter 7

Falling, swirling snow, coupled with the wind blowing the loose powder around made visibility a premium at times. Strong gusts created pure white out conditions and reduced visibility to zero. In the dark the headlights would only illuminate the mass of white crystals blowing about in front, but would not pierce the wind driven snow any deeper, which forced the car to a crawl.

When the wind would let up to allow passage forward, deep snow covered the road and made it harder and harder to follow the narrow path carved in the snow. A blanket of fine white loose powder settled across what appeared to be the road. But, without any true distinction the car slipped from side to side and on occasion drifted too far to one side or the other.

Inside the little rental car, designed for the city, not for these conditions, sat two couples rigid. Suzanne Harris and Hezekiah "Zeke" Reigns in the back and Joshua "Josh" Smithson and Tiffany Goodwyn in front. Josh drove on this leg. Each of them suffered the tension caused by the conditions as they fought off muscles cramps and fatigue due to the length of the trip in the little economy car. One, surely not suited for winter conditions.

As his knuckles were white as the snow, Josh held on tight to the wheel and fought to keep the car on the road as it bounced in and out of the ruts. The car pitched and bucked as the light traveled road offered tough resistance. After several hours, they were more than ready to get out of the little, quite uncomfortable car.

A work acquaintance, who first rented the cabin where they would stay, could not go this weekend and offered the opportunity to Suzanne and Zeke late in the week. They declined at first as their relationship had hit a rough patch. Zeke thought maybe a quiet weekend together would help work out their problems. Suzanne hesitated at first, but relented with one condition, ask another couple to go along. If for no other reason than to act as a buffer in case it did not work out. With a deep sigh, Zeke agreed.

On very short notice, they asked Josh and Tiffany, dear friends since their college days, along for the weekend to repay a favor. Josh and Tiffany had dated for some time and although they talked about marriage someday, Tiffany remained noncommittal. Jack hoped a weekend away from the city might give her some time for reflection and agreed.

Unfortunately, the trip took up most of the day. The last few hours ever more slow in the blowing snow. But inside the car, spirits were high as they

appeared to get closer. Although, Friday would be lost, there would be Saturday and possibly a little time on Sunday to get some boarding in and whatever else before they would have to leave mid-afternoon for home.

Both couples had been snow boarding before, but never at such a remote place. Previous jaunts were to local weekend getaways, with their hoards of people, but nothing like this place they were told. A little less traveled, the stepsister to the main resort and maybe not as crowded. This acquaintance of Zeke's convinced him a stay at the cabin better than some basic hotel or motel combination. It fostered their believe this would be worth the long drive and looming hassle to get there.

Falling snow, or blowing snow, or both, made it almost impossible to see and the road seemed endless. As he fought to see ahead, Josh again slowed the car to a crawl. Each of them kept a look out through the frosted windows and tried to spot the cabin.

Suddenly, through the white air the cabin appeared and caused Josh to brake hard which sent the car into a slide on the snow covered road. In turn it stirred up a cloud of white powder as the car came to a stop. The air took a minute to clear and for a time they could not see anything, let alone a cabin.

The little economy car had stopped a few feet past the cabin and all four looked back to their right. Lights were on inside and illuminated the area around the structure. Smoke rose from the chimney. No one said anything at first. But, the question lingered. Why was the cabin lit already.

"Maybe the cleaning people or the rental agent, maybe." Suzanne said.

She used her sleeve to wipe the frost from her window caused by her own heavy breathing. In agreement, each of the others nodded and mumbled acceptance of her simple statement. Josh backed the car up and again slid as he stopped. He manipulated a turn, accelerated easy and inched the car onto the driveway. He braked in front of the stairs, but slid before the car came to a complete stop.

Wipers scraped against glass offered the only sound inside the car. Without a word, everyone sat and stared out the windshield. They all looked at the front door and waited for someone to come out. And to be sure, they continued to wait, but no one did. Again, Suzanne took the initiative and yanked on the back driver's side door handle as she spoke.

"Okay gang, we did not come here to look. We came here to."

But before she could finish, the other three yanked on their door handles and in an instant all four doors were open. Outside the car, the four of them stood, closed the doors and stretched. They walked toward the stairs and climbed each snow packed step. Zeke retrieved the key from under the welcome mat as instructed and unlocked the front door. In succession they went through the doorway. Entered. Stood. And gasped inside the cabin.

The beauty of the place overwhelmed them and the moment of anxiety left, replaced with one of relief and exhaustion. Equipped with four large rooms, the cabin offered plenty of space. Two served as bedrooms, or more specific,

sleeping quarters. One equipped with a bunk top and lower double bed. The other a double bed. A rollaway wrapped up in each room stored against the side wall. Room enough for a family. Or, about any other combination of sleeping arrangement imaginable.

The other two rooms were divided into three sections. An area served as a galley kitchen equipped with a four-burner propane gas stove. A top and bottom door refrigerator. Several wall cabinets for food storage with counters on both sides. A small table with three chairs made up the dining area.

Divided into two sections, the great room devoted the larger section to lounging. A four-piece sofa, scattered at different angles to form a rather unique sitting arrangement, sort of a snaking "S" or "U" combination, engulfed most of the great room space. On the far side of the great room, made of glass, stood the outer wall. Three large windows, with a grand center window offered a view of breathtaking vistas.

An illuminated outside floodlight reflected the falling snow and spewed its light out a few yards into the dark. The angle of the wall, as well as the cabin would allow one to observe almost a one-eighty panorama site. A magnificent view. The glow of the outside light showed the faintest glimpse of a small incline which lead away from the cabin up to a tree-lined ridge.

As Zeke admired the view, Suzanne yelled out.

"Here's the answer!"

Zeke turned to face her, while Josh and Tiffany stopped their progress, looked at her and listened attentive. Suzanne held up a sheet of paper in the air and once she realized she had everybody's attention, proceeded to read out loud.

"Heard you were coming,  
thought I'd start a fire,  
turn on a light  
- Love Sarah"

Zeke nodded, while Josh and Tiffany went back to work. They all breathed a sigh of relief. Although, none of them had a clue about anyone named Sarah. Or, why she lit the fire. But, sure appreciated the heat the fire generated.

While Suzanne held the note in her hand and reread the message, the others went about the business of moving into the cabin. Time to get settled and get ready for tomorrow's trek to the mountain for some serious boarding. They carried in luggage and unloaded supplies from the car. Suzanne joined Zeke to help carry the luggage and set up their bedroom.

As Tiffany passed by, Josh grabbed her, crushed her in his arms, held her tight and planted a passionate kiss on her lips, which Tiffany reciprocated. For a moment, Tiffany stood, leaned against Josh's chest and stared out the big window. Josh left her to finish getting settled in.



~

As Sarah maneuvered down a trail through the tree-lined woods, a flurry of snow engulfed her. She pulled the snowmobile into an open area, approached the top of a ridge and brought the snowmobile to a abrupt stop. She stepped off and began to pace before the engine finished grumbling. She continued to pace back and forth.

Beyond and below the ridge almost straight down the side of a small incline stood the cabin. Smoke bellowed from the chimney as it waited for the new occupants. A minute ago, she caught site of a small car as it maneuvered down the road in the distance below, alternately visible and obscured by the blowing snow. At the moment it did not appear to be new snow yet, only fine powder blowing about. But, snow fell off and on all day and hard to tell which this included at the moment.

The small car appeared to stop, because it did not reappear on the other side. Only the back of the cabin, the roof line and the large center window that faced the ridge, were visible from this vantage point.

She watched through the breaks in the blowing snow. A person appeared inside and moved about visible through the window. Then another person appeared. A man and a woman. A couple. Sarah began to turn, but another couple came into view. The occupants of the car were inside the cabin. And, there were four of them, which caused her to keep her focus on the window as she strained to check for sure.

The wind stopped for a moment and all four figures in the window were very clear. A couple locked in each other's arms. Another gust of wind and blowing snow obscured the view again.

A last gust of wind took away the view, but stopped for a moment and allowed the blowing snow to settle back down. Once the window came back into view, only one person, a woman stood there. She appeared to look back up the incline toward the ridge and right back at her. Sarah nodded as she turned away. She mounted and fired her snowmobile. Sat back and let the engine roar to life. The loose snow flew around her from the thrust of the engine.

~

Tiffany continued to stand at the big window to take in the view. She let her eyes follow the incline up to the ridge best she could in the floodlight. As if on cue, the wind stopped and for a moment the view became clear. A chill passed through her body as the ridge above came into focus. Tiffany thought she saw something in the distance up on the ridge. She shook her head and dismissed it as soon as she thought it.

As the wind picked back up, blowing snow blocked her view. Although, she looked for a moment longer and tried to see through the swirling white powder, but the view disappeared.

After the long tension packed drive up had cost them most of Friday and somewhat of a white knuckled ride to find the cabin all a glow as it waited for them, the appropriate move, to unwind. A Friday night loomed ahead.

There would be all day tomorrow for snow boarding.

She continued to stare at the incline of the hill as she focused in on the ridge above. Tiffany, quite sure she saw something, or someone move about. Although, it could have been a wild animal who moved about. But, the swirling snow distorted her view. Each time the wind would subside she got a glimpse of movement. When she tried to focus the wind would gust and her view blocked. She pressed closer to the glass.

Sure she saw a faint light in the distance, Tiffany reached for the light switch to cut the outside light off in the hope it would help her view. As she paused for a moment to check her reach, she realized she stood a good foot away from the switch. A slight curse later she shifted her position, hit the switch, and returned her gaze to the window. The light faded to darkness. The lights up on the ridge appeared to be headlights.

Tiffany called for Josh to come over and take a look, but he had gone back outside. She realized she stood alone in the room and continued to stare out the window. The lights on the ridge disappeared into the darkness. She immediately turned the floodlight back on. A cold chill passed through her body. She stepped away from the window with a quick glance back.

A moment later, Josh came back in with a sack full of groceries and kicked the door closed behind him. He noticed Tiffany's distant stare and asked her what. But, she waved her hand in the air and shook him off. Decided it no longer important enough to pursue any further. She watched Josh continue to put groceries away, engrossed in her own thoughts.

She left the window, but took one last look. Only blowing snow appeared outside. Nothing more to see. As she stepped back further inside, the light reflected off the glass and created a mirror image, which caused her to turn away. Her back faced the big center window. A small quiver racked her body, while another wave of goose bumps covered her. Tiffany used her arms to cup her hands to her shoulders, covered her chest and shook for another moment. She stood in front of the fire for a stretch before she walked over to Josh and offered to help with the groceries.

As Tiffany approached, Josh pointed to the bedroom where Suzanne and Zeke disappeared. Tiffany nodded. Josh proceeded to the bedroom door, banged on the door with force and yelled.

"You guys ever coming out?"

He walked back to the center of the room next to the table and continued to unload groceries from the bags with Tiffany's help. They emerged from the bedroom. Suzanne's face flushed, but regained her composure and walked over to stand next to Tiffany and noticed the distant stare in Tiffany's eyes.

Tiffany shook her head and mumbled. But, her eyes again fixed on the window. Suzanne followed her stare and tried to look out of the window. The light reflected on the glass gave back a mirror image. They both jumped when Josh came up behind them, placed his hands on each of their hips and pulled both girls close.

"What the hell are you looking at? The abominable snowman? You two sure were staring quite hard!" Josh bellowed.

Both Suzanne and Tiffany turned away, before Tiffany said something.

"I thought I saw lights out there. Up on the ridge. But I can't be sure."

Josh looked at Tiffany. At the window. Back to Tiffany.

"So what. I'm sure we're not the only ones here. I'm sure there are other people around. We're not isolated, you know."

Josh continued to unload the last of the groceries.

"You're right, Josh." Tiffany spoke softer. "I suppose I'm a tad uptight what with the drive here and all."

"Forget it. I have the recipe to fix you up. Fix us all up for that matter."

Josh pulled a clear plastic sandwich bag filled with marijuana out of his jacket and tossed the bag to Zeke.

"How about you fix some up? I'll get the wine. We said unwind."

The mood turned much lighter. Suzanne put another log on the fire.

Tiffany pulled a couple of pieces of sofa closer to the fireplace as the guys joined them. During a lull in the conversation, the wind gave off a fierce howl, which shook the cabin. The couples snuggled closer to each other and expelled a strained laugh as another gust hit the cabin.

The joint passed from hand to hand. The wind howled again. The mood grew more relaxed, while the wine flowed. Over time, they became oblivious to the world outside the cabin and their only thoughts were of the smoke, the wind and the fire, which cracked and popped. The wind howled and caused each couple to huddle closer.

The lights on the ridge had moved away. The blowing snow already covered the snowmobile tracks and footprints. Tiffany couldn't help but look through the window once more. Through the glare, the ridge appeared empty. No movement. No lights. The fire popped. She snuggled closer to Josh and laid her head back against the sofa into Josh's shoulder.

One more toke. One more sip. One more moment and she would be okay.

There would always be tomorrow.

The fire popped again.

The wind shook the cabin.

## Chapter 8

Sarah maneuvered the snowmobile into position and started back down the trail. The snow continued to fall harder driven by the wind which blew the fresh loose powder around. Either way quite difficult. With each gust the visibility dropped to zero. She had to slow and wait for the gust to pass.

Blowing snow also made the journey harder to see the bottom of the trail. But, she ventured down and half stood at an excruciating pace and let the weight of the snowmobile carry her down, but rode the brake all the way. Sarah noticed the snowmobile leveled off.

She realized she hit bottom and pulled the snowmobile to the side, jumped off and headed back to the path amazed at what she navigated in the fierce blowing snow. The snowmobile sat as it sputtered and died. The wind calmed down, but still came in gusts, which forced her to turn her head away.

Sarah had grown accustomed to wait for him. He ran late as usual. Maybe he always came late. She couldn't quite remember at the moment. Instead, she tried to remember once when he arrived on time. She began to pace back and forth. Nope, certain he always arrived late. Always.

While the wind gusted and the snow blew every which way, the air became bitter cold. She decided to go on without him. He could meet her there. She rubbed her hands together, pulled on the gloves and fired up her engine. The machine roared to life in the frigid air. But, the motion halted by the glow of an approaching light and the faint noise of a snowmobile engine in the distance. A light danced in the night as it took shape and moved up the road. She cut her engine. The air quiet again. The snow settled back down.

Beams of the approaching light began to grow brighter. She dismounted her snowmobile. The noise grew louder. She walked to the middle of the road, stopped and turned to face the approaching snowmobile.

Lights brighter. Noise louder. The loose snow began to fly about while the snowmobile approached. Her hands jammed in her jacket pockets, Sarah took up a position with a slight tilt to her right. The right lean to convey her attitude. Late again. He arrived late as usual.

The wind gusted and blocked out the approaching headlights for a moment. But, Sarah stood her ground and turned her head to avoid a hit from a flurry of snow in her face. The roar became louder. The lights brighter. She turned her face back to stare straight ahead.

Worn jeans, tucked tight into her high-top leather boots, jacket open at the neck, but the sweater and hooded sweatshirt covered her neck. Long flowing light brown hair cascaded down across her shoulders and spilled wildly into the hood of the sweatshirt. She did have a scarf, but tucked tight into the pocket of her jacket. Gloves covered her hands, thermal ones with liners, but only the liners covered her hands and fingers. The outside, or skins as they were referred to, were clipped to her side belt loop. She reached five-feet seven or so, higher in the leather boots, maybe five-eight. Slim of build, but remarkably strong, very athletic growing up. She still maintained a trim and fit body.

Sarah stood her ground in the middle of the road and shifted her stance to present an air of authority. As she shifted her weight to the left, Sarah waited, but kept her hands in her jacket pockets. She flicked her head to shift her hair. A wind gust from the front pushed it back in place as if choreographed.

While his snowmobile inched closer, Sarah straightened up. Legs spread apart. Boots planted on the snow covered road. She lowered her head to stare straight at him. His snowmobile pulled right up. Stopped short of her legs. The driver got off and let the engine die as he walked toward her. She tilted her head to follow his movement and got right in his face when he stopped in front of her.

"Ryan, where the hell have you been?"

She tried to shout over the last roar of the engine as it sputtered and died.

"Hey Sarah. Easy. I'm only a couple of minutes late."

Ryan smiled as he approached, but did not meet her eyes yet.

Sarah stood her ground, did not move a muscle except for her eyes.

"In case you haven't noticed, pretty damn cold out here." She yelled this time without the engine noise. "You're late. You're always late!"

And kept her eyes focused on his movements, while he stepped closer.

"Yeah, quite cold out for sure and I'm not always late, either. Besides, I had to take care of a couple of items first. You know, the usual setup. Had a little problem, almost forgot the damn note, but I fixed it. Besides, you know, I've got something for you. Don't I always."

Ryan handed her a little package and waited for her to take it from him.

She moved her hand from her pocket. Ryan thrust the package toward her, but she kept her movement deliberate. He thrust the package out again and pushed it toward her hand. But, still did not meet her eyes. Ryan took her hand and placed the package in her glove covered palm. She turned the package in her hand. Her scowl ever so gradual turned to a smile. He smiled with her and for the first time met her eyes.

"How much?" She asked matter-of-fact.

"Two grams. All I could get." Ryan pointed. "We'll have to make do."

"Might not be enough tonight?" Sarah eyed him suggesting.

"Depends on how fine you spread it." He raised his hands up in the air.

"It's not like this snow you know. It's not abundant." He tapped the package. "Your snow cost by the gram. Don't worry I've made arrangements to get more tomorrow."

Ryan leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. Sarah let him, but put her left hand against Ryan's chest so he could not get any closer. He straightened up and moved away from her face, but looked down at her hand against his chest.

"I never worry, but you were late. Always late."

Before Ryan could respond, Sarah held up her hand for him to be quiet.

"You should know there are two couples in your cabin this time."

Ryan looked up over her shoulder but stood silent as if in thought.

Sarah shifted her stance to block his view and forced him to look at her. She held her hands out palms up the little package visible in one of them held in place with her thumb.

"Maybe we should pass on this one."

"Serious? No I did not know. Could be interesting though."

Sarah stepped closer to Ryan, which forced him to back up.

"What are we doing, Ryan? I don't like this. Complicated enough without four of them. I don't like this. Something. Well, could get ugly. We should walk away right now. There are four this time."

Ryan backed up a little more from Sarah to choose his words.

"Okay. Okay. Let's see how it goes tonight and if it doesn't look right, we'll walk away. Like we did before. But, let's wait. Hey, it could be interesting. Four huh? Could be very interesting. What do you say? You up for this? Give it a try at least."

Sarah tapped her foot in the snow and stared back at Ryan harder, which caused him to step back a little further. She looked down and twirled the package in her hand. Ryan watched the package rather than her eyes. He still watched as she put the package into her right jacket pocket and worked the zipper before she looked back up. She turned away from him. Ryan waited.

Sarah walked back to her snowmobile. Mounted her machine and fired the engine. Snow blew about from the thrust. She fell into the seat, pulled her legs in and let the snowmobile leap forward, but stopped long enough for him to line up behind her. Ryan walked to his snowmobile, fired the engine, turned his machine around and inched his snowmobile in behind hers.

Sarah moved her machine forward, accelerated and followed the trail. She could not see him. Her machine churned up too much snow. But, she knew Ryan would be a short distance behind her. She accelerated harder, let her body sit back and down and eased into the power of the machine. She pushed forward.

The wind blew and the snow gusted around her. She pulled out onto the road and moved to the side off the hard packed snow into the more powdery snow. Again picked up more speed. In the winter most folks traveled by snowmobile. Or truck. But almost never by car. Or not at night. The road clear.

They would arrive like the car did right up the road and on to the driveway. Once again, she tried to look back, but still could not see Ryan in the blowing snow. Her plan, at the moment, to park right in front and walk right to the front door.

The wind gusted and sent another flurry of snow right at her. Sarah ducked as it passed her face and looked back, but still could not see Ryan. She avoided a second gust of wind driven snow and faced forward. She shrugged her shoulders to bring the jacket up higher on her neck and swore at the bitter cold. Into view loomed the lit, smoke billowing cabin.

## Chapter 9

Inside the cabin, the fire cracked and popped louder, a full on blaze. The intensity of the heat so strong the logs added were engulfed in flames in an instant after they were placed in the fire. On the last go around, Suzanne decided to place two logs into the firebox.

The fire gave off a good light, as well as a lot of heat. To further lighten the mood, Josh went around and turned off all the lights. Zeke placed a fire log in each of the bedroom stoves. By the time they would be ready to turn in each bedroom would be warm and cozy.

In front of the fire the heat had taken awhile to get the chill out. Tiffany had not looked at, or out of the window since the last glance. Confident she saw something, but no longer cared what.

All four gathered by the fire and had used half their bag already. They also consumed both bottles of wine. The stress of the drive, the cabin lit and fired, and Tiffany's window adventure a memory of the past. Each of them relaxed, enjoyed the pop of the fire and watched the shadows dance the raging flames created.

A gust of wind slammed against the cabin and shook the windows to remind everyone the wind still there, which caused each of them to react. They looked at each other, began to laugh and let the momentary fear pass into uncontrolled laughter.

Josh started it off, told the first story and timed the scary part to the pop of the fire or the slam of the wind. He whispered at times so the others would listen harder. Silly stuff, to be sure, but what fun these stories were to tell in this perfect setup by the fire. Zeke told the next story with a gust of wind to help build the tension around his. Next, the girls, Suzanne and Tiffany, each told equally chilling stories and had the wind and pop of the fire to add to the suspense.

They watched as the fire appeared to pick up momentum since Suzanne placed two more logs in. The flames grew and grew. The entire area inside the firebox became engulfed in one giant flame.

"Hey Suzanne, think maybe you put too much wood in."

Everyone seemed to say at once and all nodded in agreement.

"Looks like, doesn't it?" Suzanne mumbled. "Think it will be okay?"

"I don't know. Looks awful big." Josh spoke to the fire.

With each of their faces lit from the glow, they sat in awe of the raging flames. The stares stayed perfect, except for an occasional blink. Caught up in the



dancing flame seemed like an eternity before the flames began to taper. The outer edges of the fireplace were blackened by soot. Before long, the fire tapered off and they were able to relax. However, the sense of relief would be short lived. Outside the cabin a whining noise began to grow louder.

Although they continued to sit silent and waited in the hope the noise would pass. Each of them contemplated what the noise could be. The noise more definite now sounded like it originated right outside the cabin. But, they continued to sit motionless and waited, in the hope the noise would pass. It did not. The fire popped louder, which added to their frazzled nerves. All of the relief from the drive and relaxation replaced by apprehension.

A moment later the whining stopped, faded little by little. In its place, a loud commotion began to build and seemed to be right outside the front door. A gust of wind slammed into the cabin, which caused the windows to creak and rattle. The fire popped in cadence to the beat of their hearts. Tiffany not the only one with goose bumps this time and with the size of the fire, those bumps had nothing to do with the cold.

Without a doubt somebody stood outside the front door.

The loud roar of the wind against the cabin muffled any other sounds from outside, but something did happen out there.

No choice, but to wait and listen.

To add to the tension in the room the fire popped again, which sent ash and residue out of the fireplace into the air. Josh and Zeke were on it in a second. Josh scooped up the ash and tossed the debris back into the fire. Josh held unto the shovel. Zeke held the poker.

All four silent as they waited.

~

Sarah stopped her snowmobile in front of the little car and angled in between the steps and the vehicle. She dismounted and watched Ryan pull in and park behind her. Their engines sputtered and died. While she waited for him to move away from his snowmobile, she could not help but wonder how this would go tonight. Next to her snowmobile she looked for encouragement. Ryan waved his arms and egged her on.

Sarah approached the steps somewhat anxious and again looked back another moment. Sarah looked up at the front door to the cabin and hesitated long enough to hear Ryan whisper.

She approached the steps hesitant at first but threw caution to the wind, raced up and stopped right in front of the door. As soon as she knocked, the wind gusted and overpowered the sound of her knock. She knocked harder the second time, but with the wind subsided, the knock sounded angry and more of a threat. A sort of pound rather than a gentle knock, which caused her to step back. She did not want to be too close when the door opened.

Sarah waited.

A voice from within, faint, but no doubt a man's voice yelled out.

"Who's there?"

Sarah looked back before she answered. Ryan waved her on.

"Sarah. It's me Sarah." She yelled back and watched the door.

With a slow motion the door opened. A man peered out from the breach and eyed her up and down. Sarah backed up some more, so as not to be right upfront. In hopes to break the ice she strutted about and asked.

"You like what you see?"

The man appeared to relax and yelled back to the others inside.

"Hey, it's Sarah."

As he looked over the woman who stood on the porch, he eyed her up and down. He did like what he saw. Her long brown hair spilled into the hood of her sweatshirt. The tight jeans tucked into her boots. Her smile lit up the night air. Josh placed the shovel against the wall and opened the door wider. He raised his arm and motioned for the woman to enter.

Sarah turned and pointed behind her.

"So you don't get freaked out, I've got a friend with me tonight. Two of us. But, don't worry we brought plenty of goodies."

Sarah watched the man and waited for his reaction.

With a slight hesitation, Ryan held up a bottle of wine and a grocery bag.

"Thought we'd welcome you to the cabin, get better acquainted. Hope you didn't mind my warmin' the place up?"

She waited for his reaction.

Josh swung the door further open and informed the others inside.

"Hey, we got guests and they bear gifts. What say we ask them in?"

He stepped back as the couple made their way in, walked past Josh, further walked into the large room and gathered in the center. They waited for someone to make the first move.

Suzanne and Zeke came over, offered to take their coats and introduced themselves. Josh met up with Tiffany from the opposite side, introduced themselves. Everyone shook hands. Coats piled up on a piece of sofa in the far corner opposite the windows. Groceries and wine set on the kitchen counter.

Sarah cupped the front of Ryan's Jacket with her right hand.

"Ryan?"

"Yeah Sarah, like you said, two couples here tonight. Should be interesting."

Sarah continued to hold on to his jacket.

"Remember what you said. We bolt it don't look right. Because, if you don't, I will. Hell, I may anyway."

Sarah let go of his jacket, left Ryan and began to mingle.

Josh took the bag of groceries into the kitchen and placed them down by the sink as he spoke to no one in particular.

"You guys hungry? Want me to put those steaks on?" And let out a nervous mumble "So this is Sarah, whoever the hell Sarah is.

Sarah waved her hand in the air as she pointed.

"Let's say we are all ready to eat, but we can't expect you to cook. Wouldn't be fair. We crashed the party. Besides, I might sound like I'm a braggart, but I believe Ryan here can do those steaks justice. Why don't you let him cook this time and if you don't like it, we'll let you ruin the steaks next time."

Josh pointed as he set the package of steaks down, left the kitchen and stood in front of the counter.

"All yours, sir."

Josh stepped around Sarah as he passed and winked. She smiled back. As he passed the table, Josh scooped up the wine bottle.

"How about some wine while we wait?"

"Yeah, and how about some of this?" Came a soft, slight shrill voice out of nowhere. Tiffany held the bag in the air.

"Tiffany, I think." Josh eyed Tiffany as he spoke.

"It's okay Josh. Yes on both counts." Sarah spoke up. "If you did not offer, we would have."

She pulled out a bag twice the size of their sandwich bag filled to the top from Ryan's backpack.

"Hey Zeke. Zeke, right? Will you do the honors?"

Zeke nodded, caught the bag in mid-flight and walked over to the far end of the counter on the other side of the kitchen.

Once more, Sarah began to speak, but hesitated for a moment, looked at the others first. She reached inside her jacket pocket, removed the small package Ryan gave her earlier and looked around while she spoke.

"Would anyone like to do? Ah, powder your nose so to speak?"

She held the package in the air for all to see, but no one responded and wondered if she had made a mistake. She continued to look around the room, before she spoke softer.

"C'mon guys. Its okay if you don't. I understand. Would anyone mind if I did? Hello, anyone here?"

Sarah continued to shake the package in the air, arm elevated, hand waved and waited for a response. Zeke broke the silence, looked at the others first, paid particular attention to Suzanne, but she remained silent.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I wouldn't mind a little. Did not think anybody did so anymore. You know, with the price and all. Hell, some might say a vice of the past. I mean."

"It's okay, Zeke. His stuff." Sarah said as she pointed toward Ryan.

Zeke looked at Ryan and gave him a thumbs up.

"Even better. Did not know you could still get this straight up."

Sarah touched Zeke's arm.

"I know what you mean. But we still get some regular. You know, for recreational purposes. If you know what I mean."

As he nodded in agreement, Zeke watched while the others went back to what they did before the interruption.

"Okay. I'll lay lines out and whoever wants." Sarah said. "Well, can help themselves. Someone should put more wood on the fire?"

Suzanne raised her arm and walked toward the fireplace. Somewhere along the way she became the keeper of the flame. At least this chore would be near the heat.

Relaxed, Sarah removed an old, quite worn, leather bound kit from Ryan's backpack and set it on the table. She further removed a small pocket mirror sheathed in velvet from the backpack as well. After she placed both on the table, she opened the package and emptied the contents onto the mirror. She glanced up to see Zeke stare at the equipment she set out as she spoke.

"Cool gear huh? Takes you back, you know. Anyway, Ryan found this rig at a garage sale here in town. Looks like it sure got a lot of use."

Sarah held up the leather pouch. Zeke saw the leather looked quite worn and obvious, well used. Zeke folded his arms across his chest, while Sarah began to chop, pile and chop, and break off small quantities to form lines. She finished four lines before she stepped back and raised her hands to offer the first batch to whoever wanted one. Zeke went first, ran the well worn gold tube across the first line into his left nostril. Repeated the process for the right and squeezed his nostrils together to inhale deep. Someone else went next and the process began all over again. Sarah continued to carve out new lines.

The aroma of sizzling steaks cascaded through the room.

Sarah stepped away from the finished lines and joined the rest who were not involved over by the fireplace. They engaged in small talk and tried to get better acquainted. No matter how many times you meet someone new, it always seems hard to relax. This time would be no different, with a certain apprehension already in the air as they gathered around and still in an apprehensive manner made their small talk.

The wind slammed against the cabin and rattled the windows. The fierce wind continued to howl, coupled with the fire pop and cracked loud. All of this went unnoticed against the noise level inside the cabin.

The tempo had been set. The music turned up and the conversations got louder. Everyone talked over each other. A Friday night. They were here. Another couple dropped by with goodies. Time to unwind and enjoy.

The snow continued to fall outside the big center window.

The wind continued to swirl the snow about.

A perfect Friday night.

## Chapter 10

The wind kicked up outside. It tossed and swirled the old and new snow all about while the temperature continued to drop in anticipation of the dead of night to create a fine deep powder. The snow continued to blow about and should be great for tomorrow's trek into the land of fresh powder boarding.

Against the backdrop of pure white snow, the cabin stood tall. It appeared and disappeared as the moon popped in and out of the clouds. The quiet solitude of the outside gave no indication of the noise inside the cabin. The snow blew about in silence, unnoticed by those inside the cabin.

Steaks and fixings finished. The dishes cleaned up. Everyone huddled around the fire to share the heat, the light and traded stories. Sarah did not know how many lines she managed from the little package. And to her, it did not matter. They had finished all of Josh's and most of Ryan's bag and a couple of bottles of wine consumed.

Everyone continued to have a good time. The stories had gone full circle. They were all in their mid-twenties. All reasonably set in their career goals, or so everyone claimed. Sarah said she came from the other county as did Ryan, who came to visit and swore Sarah said to crash the party, or start one, which depended on your point of view.

Josh pressed as to where besides the other side the two came from, but Sarah wouldn't say. It led Josh to believe they might be from a different social group and did not want to let on they were perhaps, slumming.

Although he continued to press, they wouldn't relent. Amused, Ryan said they would know everything by the end of Saturday night. He promised as much. When Josh continued to press, Tiffany elbowed him in the ribs and whispered to let it go. Josh glanced over at Zeke, who nodded and waved his hand. Josh relented. Tiffany pulled Josh closer and hugged him tighter to her. He seemed to relax and lowered his head into Tiffany's lap. She began to stroke his hair and relaxed against the back of the sofa.

"Hey, it's too early to get lovey dovey with a party on." Sarah yelled.

Ryan pulled Sarah back down and smothered her head in his lap.

"Leave them alone. They can cuddle if they want."

Sarah fought Ryan off, broke free and smashed him with a pillow. Ryan caught her by the ankle and tripped her up, which caused her to bounce down heavy on her backside. While she sat there and rubbed her butt, Ryan crawled over and whispered in her ear. She pushed away and shouted.

"Oh no you're not! You're not gonna to that again!"

She backed further away from him and slid across the floor on her backside toward the kitchen.

"You can't be serious."

Ryan picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. At the door he stopped and spun around so he could open the big front door. A blast of cold air and snow blew into the room when the door opened. As he struggled to balance her, Ryan walked out onto the porch. Sarah begged him to stop.

On the porch he placed a hand on her butt leaned her forward and with a quick turn he heaved Sarah into the air toward the front yard aimed at a large snowdrift built up there. She landed face down.

Sarah hit with a flop and sunk her face and the front of her body into the deep fine powder. A flurry of snow rose in the air and landed back down on her back side. It covered her all over in fine white powder. For an instant she lay there motionless covered in new and returned snow.

Gathered on the porch, outside the door, Zeke and Suzanne on one side of Ryan and Josh and Tiffany on the other, they stood and watched all this unfold, but waited to see what would happen next.

One arm, then the other extended out. Sarah braced in a push up position and raised her head and chest up. She spit out snow and shook her head to clear it. Her hair flew into the air and shed the crystals. Her face and upper body covered in fine white powder. As she turned her head toward them, she tried to lift up from the mound of snow and when everyone thought it might be okay, she let out a yell.

"Holy shit, the snow so cold. You'll pay for this, you jerk."

As Sarah struggled, she fell back on her butt in the snow. She used her knees and legs to stand up and grabbed two handfuls of fresh wet snow. After she made her way out of the drift, her left leg sunk down to her knee when she took her first step. But, the right foot hit something solid and helped propel her out of the drift. Her breath left a fine mist in the air with each breath, Sarah stood on the driveway covered with a thin layer of white powder. She held two handfuls of the wet cold snow.

Ryan panicked and made a beeline for the door. He pushed everyone back in as he did and slammed the door, locked it and leaned back hard against the wood frame.

"Ryan, you have to let her back in?" Tiffany yelled.

Ryan looked at her and shook his head.

"You can't leave her out there, she'll freeze to death."

Tiffany reached for the door.

Ryan stopped her with both arms extended.

"Tiffany, are you crazy? She'll kill me. We can't let her back in. Let her stay out there. Cool off for awhile. I mean. You know what I mean."

Tiffany pushed him aside, unlocked and opened the door.

Sarah stood on the other side, with deep breaths, covered in a thin layer of snow. Each breath could be seen in the frigid air. Tiffany pushed Ryan back and motioned for Sarah to come back in.

Sarah stepped into the cabin with the snowballs and without hesitation threw those at Ryan. Both hit his chest. Tiffany closed the door behind her and pushed Sarah forward into the room. Everyone stepped aside to let Sarah pass.

The fine white powder covered her clothes, but began to melt and created wet spots. The color in her face began to come back. Melted snow ran off and dripped onto the floor. Lines of water ran off her backside down her leg.

While everyone stood fascinated with the site of it all, they noticed Sarah had begun to turn altogether white. Not from the snow. It all but melted and left patches of water all over her clothes. Her skin color was white. Sarah continued to stand there as she huffed and puffed.

Ryan grabbed her and shook her.

"Okay Sarah, stop it. That's enough. Let's see if I can warm you up."

He kissed her forehead. Her cheeks. Lips. Held her closer and rubbed her arms up and down.

Suzanne had already retrieved a blanket and covered Sarah's shoulders from the back. Ryan pulled toward the front and tightened the blanket around her. He guided Sarah over to the sofa. The color began to return.

Sarah put her hand on her head and ran her fingers through the wet matted hair. She hung unto the blanket with the other hand.

"Whew, I kind of zoned out there for a moment, sorry. But, it doesn't change anything. You will pay for your little stunt. Wow, let me sit here for a minute."

Sarah pulled the blanket tighter around her, looked at the others for the first time and motioned with her hand. After she helped Sarah up, Suzanne guided her over to the fire and directed her to slip down to the floor. Her back to the sofa. Sarah let the blanket fall open to let the heat in.

"Look guys it's late, what say we call it a night?" Suzanne said it first.

"Sarah, if you want to stay for awhile and get warm, it's okay. Stay as long as you like. Pull the door closed when you leave."

Suzanne patted Sarah's shoulder as she spoke. Sarah nodded and placed her hand on Suzanne's. Surprised at how cold her hand felt Suzanne rubbed it.

"My God, you're still ice cold. Will you be okay?"

Sarah nodded and continued to pat her hand. Suzanne tightened the blanket around her. She looked at the rest and saw shoulder shrugs, hands raised. Suzanne got up and left Sarah by the fire. She asked Ryan if he needed anything. He shook his head and took up a spot next to Sarah on the floor by the fire. Sarah laid her head on his shoulder.

Josh and Tiffany said good night and walked to their room. Suzanne asked again, if Ryan or Sarah needed anything else, but Ryan motioned no. With Zeke's encouragement, Suzanne and Zeke said their goodnights and walked to their room.

After he heard the last door close, Ryan pulled a flask filled with Bourbon out of his jacket. He handed the flask to Sarah, who took two healthy gulps. He kissed her on the forehead and whispered sorry. He got carried away before. You know. Sorry. He took a strong sip of the bourbon.

Sarah shivered and pulled the blanket tighter around her body. She turned and smoothed the blanket on the floor. Ryan slid in next to her, between her and the sofa, but kept her faced toward the heat and arranged the blanket tight around her. Said they should rest awhile. As she pressed closer, she reached back, patted Ryan's cheek and whispered.

"Are you up for a snowmobile challenge?"

"Shut up and rest, Sarah." Ryan squeezed her tighter.

"C'mon." Sarah elbowed him. "Get out of those clothes and let's see what you're made of. Snowmobiles, butt naked to the ridge and back? Isn't that your gig? What do you say? Huh? Think you can handle it, Ryan?"

"Shut up and get some rest. We need to leave soon."

"Chicken." Sarah nudged him again. "Afraid to ride a snowmobile in the all together?"

"No, I've done it before." Ryan whispered back. "But, we are not gonna to do it tonight. Get some rest so we can leave soon. Get out of here. Rest now."

"What, I get dumped face down in the snow and when I want to play you back out?" Sarah persisted. "Thought you had a pair?"

"I do and they are nice and warm. Get some rest."

Ryan waited for Sarah to respond, but nothing this time. He nudged her, but still no response. In the hope she had drifted off, he waited some more for her to respond. Nothing. Ryan could hear and feel Sarah's labored breath beneath the blanket. She was asleep.

The fire cracked and popped, Ryan put another log on before he crawled in beside Sarah. The fire should last for a while. Let's rest, then we can go. He pulled Sarah closer. Yeah, we'll rest for a moment. His thoughts faded as he drifted off to sleep.

The fire cracked and popped and gave off a much needed warmth.

The cold air chilled him. The fire had burned down only ash remained and made the room darker and colder. Ryan sat up, rubbed his face and let the blanket fall to the side. And noticed the air quite colder. Ryan focused in on those two facts. He also suffered the cold air pass over his naked lower body. He bunched the blanket around his legs while he adjusted to the situation. He continued to orient to the surroundings, but lifted the blanket up to look.

Socks, pants, underwear and shoes were off. He swore. But, he couldn't remember why. He gathered the blanket back up onto his shoulders and fully covered his body. He realized Sarah no longer laid next to him and why he had full possession of the blanket.

He waited for a moment longer and wondered where she went. He tried to look around the room in the dark, but in the dim light he could tell she



wouldn't be there. He stood up, but kept the blanket with him and walked over to the kitchen. To the powder room. The open door and the light off suggested unoccupied. He stepped into the middle of the room, looked around again more frantic now.

Her clothes, scattered across the sofa, but a couple of pieces on the floor, right down to her underwear, were tossed about. At the big window, while clear outside, offered little light.

"Damn, still dark out," he whispered. "Hell, what time is it anyway?"

He walked to the front door and tried to decide what to do. The blanket dropped on the floor next to him. He pulled the door open. Not locked. Did they lock it earlier? He couldn't remember for sure.

On the doorstep, the wind blew, swirled the loose powder. The cold snow hit his bare skin, stuck and melted against warm flesh and attacked his naked lower body with a vengeance. It forced him to focus and remember why he stood there. The cold door jam burned his bare feet. His pair shriveled up and receded back into his body. He wrapped his arms around his chest for warmth, but knew he needed to get back into the cabin. A quick look around, he noticed the snowmobile out front. Only one snowmobile. There should be two. He swore.

His feet screamed like they were on fire. They burned from the cold stoop. The rest of his body began to ice up from the moisture of the melted snow against his warm skin. He looked for another moment and stepped back inside.

Pants from the sofa. Shoes on the floor. Socks were stuffed in his shoes.

He dressed, put his coat, scarf and gloves on as well. Dressed and ready to go, he took one last look around and grabbed the blanket to take with him. Sarah might need it. Satisfied with his preparations he walked to the front door and closed the door, careful not to lock it. Maybe he could find her, get her back and dressed and get out of there before anyone noticed or thought anything further. Maybe before anyone woke up.

The gloves pulled on tighter, Ryan mounted his snowmobile, wrapped the scarf around his head and ears and tucked it into his coat before he zipped it up. The blanket folded and placed under him on the seat. The flask out, he took a healthy sip of the Bourbon.

With a slight effort, he fired the engine, let it idle and warm up for a moment. As he started to pull out, he stopped and sat back in the seat. The clothes, what should he do about her clothes. They were still scattered inside the cabin. Should he go back in and get them, but decided it would take too long. He needed to go, now.

As he started to leave, he stopped again. He aimed the snowmobile back unto the road and moved out. He gunned the throttle and pushed the snowmobile harder. He decided to go back the way they came. At least it would be a place to start. A little further and he would be off the road back onto the trail. More comfortable there. Safer. His head began to pound.

Ryan had to balance with care to take the bumps and ruts. He pushed harder and took the turn wide at the trail, but missed the drift on the side. Kept

the throttle open and righted the snowmobile into the center of the trail. He pushed harder. The light at the front did not let him see very far ahead, but he knew the trail well enough. A couple of turns ahead might be a little hairy.

He applied the brake hard, the machine slid forward. The track dragged and stopped at the incline. The trail went up there. Straight to the ridge. But, steep and covered in snow and no doubt ice. Or, it wound to the right a straight and slow gain trail. The long way around to the ridge.

Ryan decided the incline would be too steep and hard to get up. He elected to go right and pushed the throttle out on the straight trail, which would take him to the ridge soon enough. Ryan's thoughts came in bunches. His head ached. He slid his gloved hand across his face, nodded and pushed the snowmobile harder.

In the bitter cold and blowing snow, he began to sweat.

The snow continued to fall. Or blew around. Either way it engulfed him. Where the hell was she? Would he find her in time?

# Saturday Morning ...

## Chapter 11

The bright sun filtered in through the bedroom window. No snow or wind at the moment. The air quite clear outside. The clouds were gone and gave way as the sun penetrated, hotter and warmer at this elevation.

Tiffany opened her eyes against the offensive light, while Josh slept sound next to her against the wall. She rolled over away from the light, but awake and made the decision to get up. She tempted fate and slipped out from under the covers. The chill seized her body with a vengeance. The lightweight oversized tee shirt offered no comfort, since the fire in the bedroom stove had burned out. Now only smoldering ash. No help either.

She reached over to the chair and retrieved her panties, slipped those on and shivered as the cold material touched her skin. Enough for the moment, but she grabbed the big flannel robe and wrapped the soft material around her body. She stood for a moment to let the heat build up.

With the robe on she slipped into her jeans and sat in the chair to put her socks on. The air too cold to take the robe off and remove her oversized tee for a heavier shirt. With the robe closed she cinched the belt and waited to warm her body to afford her some comfort before she moved.

Tiffany noticed Josh had not stirred through out this process and appeared still sound asleep. She let him. Still groggy from last night, her head ached. Maybe a couple of aspirins. She stumbled into the outer room, walked toward the kitchen and remembered she saw aspirins in the cabinet over the sink. She had watched as Josh put those away with the other items.

Tiffany retrieved two tablets and opened the refrigerator to rummage for something to wash them down. A carton of orange juice stood on the inside shelf. She retrieved a glass from the cabinet, poured some juice, put the carton back and closed the refrigerator door.

One aspirin first, and the other. She sipped the cold beverage and forced the aspirins down. Her back against the counter, she continued to sip the juice, but soon realized she poured way too much. Determined to finish it all, she continued to sip, but the liquid too cold to gulp down. She decided to take the rest to the bedroom with her. As she made her way back, she glanced nonchalant at the big center window.

Tiffany let out a blood-curling scream. The glass smashed to the floor, broke into little pieces and spilled the rest of the juice across the wood floor. She continued to scream until the other three joined her in the great room.

Josh grabbed and held her, while he tried to calm her down. He stood there in his boxer briefs, shirtless and sockless. Josh turned toward the window. Tiffany, quite agitated, continued to point.

Zeke and Suzanne also stood next to her. Zeke dressed in regular boxers. Suzanne, a long shirt of Zeke's, and panties on. Together, they were hunched together, held on to each other and looked out the big center window. Looked to where Tiffany pointed.

On the outside of the big center window, stood a person. Hands against the glass. The person looked in, but did not move.

"What the hell?" Zeke blurted out.

"Hello." Josh interrupted him. "Who are you? Hey? What do you want?"

He called out louder, but the person did not move or react.

Josh and Zeke separated from the girls, who stood in the middle of the room and held on to each other. The two men ventured closer to the window. They moved with trepidation at first, but kept their eyes on the person who stood there. Looked at each other for a moment before they got closer. They realized the person did not move and appeared to have both hands flat against the glass but stood almost knee deep in the snow outside.

Sun shone on the glass and glared back into the window at them from the ridge, which prevented them from a good look at the makeup of the person. They did notice footprints down from the ridge. As if someone walked down and stopped at the window to look in.

They approached from each side. Josh and Zeke checked their side windows for anything else out there and pressed closer to the glass. Josh from his side noticed the person appeared to have been there for some time. A light dusting of snow covered the hair, arms, breasts and shoulders, which created a white outline on the form. They both realized the person a female and naked.

"Hey, Josh, she who I think?" Zeke grabbed Josh's shoulder.

"Guys." Suzanne cleared her throat. "Hey, guys look."

Suzanne pointed out woman's clothes were scattered about the sofa and if the naked lady stood outside to look in, maybe the two events were connected.

"What happened last night after we went to bed?" Suzanne asked.

"Maybe she went for a joy ride and." Zeke began to say, but trailed off.

The others looked at him and waited for him to finish, but he did not.

"Why don't you girls stay here while we go out and take a closer look?"

Josh said as Zeke nodded in agreement. They both disappeared into their respective bedrooms to get dressed. When they were gone, the girls inched closer to the window, but still kept a safe distance.

Zeke emerged first from his bedroom and handed Suzanne her jeans. He suggested she might want to put them on in the cold. She did. Right behind him,

Josh met Zeke. Each put on their coats and gloves. In an instant they were out the front door.

At the big center window, the girls stood huddled, but back some, watched and waited for the guys to come into view. For no particular reason the girls stepped back a little further.

Josh and Zeke stopped at the corner of the cabin and peered around, but the woman still did not move. Josh went first. Sopped right next to her. Zeke right behind him. Josh tapped the woman and to his surprise, the woman appeared to be frozen solid. Zeke raised his hands, palms up to ask.

The body obvious a female and naked. Hands pressed flat against the glass. Legs spread slight. The eyes wide open. She stared straight into the room, like she stood there and waited for it to happen.

Zeke reached around and tapped the woman. He had the same reaction.

"What should we do?"

"Don't know Zeke. I sure don't know." Josh shook his head.

"Should we bring her inside?"

"No." Josh waved his hand. "I mean, we shouldn't touch the body at all."

"Yeah, right." Zeke looked at the frozen woman. "Think we should cover her or something?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." Josh sighed. "Hell, I don't know. Let's go back inside and talk this over. It's awful damn cold out here."

Suzanne watched as Zeke then Josh entered the room and removed their gloves and coats.

"Is it her?" Tiffany said very soft.

"It could be. Not sure. All frozen up. Hard to tell." Josh offered.

Tiffany looked out the window up toward the ridge and pointed. The sun too bright to see anything, but the others followed her gaze.

The footprints in the snow traveled back up to the ridge.

"What should we do?" Suzanne whispered.

"What we need to talk about." Josh sighed.

The whine of a snowmobile began to grow louder outside, since the front door had been left open and as they turned to look, they heard the engine die, which indicated the snowmobile had stopped in front.

Without hesitation, Josh went to the door to meet Ryan on the stairs.

"Hey, Josh. Damn crazy lady went for a snowmobile ride. And get this, looks like she went naked. Looked for her the last couple of hours. Thought I'd check if she doubled back. Or, if you guys heard or knew anything."

"Ryan, I think I have some bad news." Josh stopped him.

"What bad news?" Ryan looked at Josh but did not understand.

Josh hesitated, tried to gather his words.

"It's Sarah. I think we found her. She's outside. But."

"Where? I need to let her know what." Ryan pushed forward.

"No. You don't understand." Josh stopped him again.

"What the hell?" Ryan looked at Josh and tried again to enter. "What don't I understand?"

"Ryan, I think she's dead. We found her a little while ago outside up against the window. She's frozen solid man. She must have."

Ryan stepped back and began to laugh. Stopped when he saw the puzzled look on Josh's face.

"Yeah. It's a trick of hers. I can assure you she's fine. Of course I'll have to waste the day to get her thawed out."

Ryan pushed past Josh at the door and entered the great room.

Zeke stood there but held unto the girls off to the side.

Ryan stopped in front of the big center window.

"Ryan, we're so sorry. How can?" One of the girls asked.

"Hey, it's fine." Ryan cut her off. "I told Josh here, she does this quite often. A trick of hers. Pisses me off though, because I'll have to spend the day at the clinic while they thaw her out. Let me gather up her clothes."

"Wait a god-damn minute." Josh bellowed from behind. "Don't you think we should do something?"

"We will. I mean, I will."

Ryan interrupted with a wave of his hand, but looked at Josh.

"Help me get her and load her up on my snowmobile. I'll take her to the clinic. Start the process. What time do you have? I think the clinic opens later."

"Listen Ryan." Josh stood his ground. "I'm not sure what. But she's."

"Yes, she is, Josh. Frozen. So, the sooner I get her to the clinic, the better it will be for all of us."

Ryan continued to gather Sarah's clothes. Smiled when Suzanne handed him a brown paper bag she had retrieved to put Sarah's clothes in.

"Why, thank you, Suzanne." Ryan said and bowed.

He began to quick fold the clothes before he placed them in the bag.

"Wait a damn minute. It's obvious she's dead and we should call someone before we move her or do anything. We already walked out there and touched her, which I suppose we shouldn't have done either. But, frozen solid to the touch and." Josh tried again to state his case.

"On the contrary, she's not dead at all, she's rather frozen. A medical name for what she did escapes me at the moment. But trust me, she'll be back with us tonight and we'll have another get together. Our treat, of course, to repay you for all of the hassle. You know. Well, I think I have it all. If you should find anything else of hers around please hang onto it. I promise you, we'll be back tonight. Help yourselves to any stuff might be left. Anything. Any of those other goodies. We'll bring more tonight."

Ryan handed the bag with Sarah's clothes to Suzanne to hold.

"So, you guys want to help me get her?"

"I still don't know about this, man." Josh waved his hand and pointed with authority. "It looks too weird to me. Besides, I never heard of anyone frozen

solid then back to life and all you say. I'll tell you what Ryan, I don't see her back here tonight I go straight to the cops tomorrow and let them sort all this out."

"Fair enough, Josh, fair enough. In this town, it would be the latest sheriff and his one and a half deputies, Our law around here. Have fun with them. Everybody knows everybody and what everybody would be involved in, so mention Sarah and he'll sure tell you a story. But, and a big but here, when Sarah and I do come back tonight, I expect you to kiss her cute little ass there."

Ryan pointed to the big center window.

"Of course, it will be much warmer. A deal? Huh? How about it Josh? Do we have a deal?"

"Okay, it's a deal, assuming Tiffany doesn't mind my kissing another woman's ass, bet or no bet."

Josh stopped and looked at Tiffany for approval. She shrugged her shoulders, hands folded across her chest.

"Figuratively, my friend. Figuratively. I sure don't want to cause no hard feelings amongst you kind folks. What say we get her, so I can get this done?"

"No."

"No?" Ryan looked at Josh, then Zeke, who also shook his head.

"Sorry, Ryan, you want to move her you go ahead, but we don't want any part of it." Josh pointed to the window. "She's dead and we shouldn't touch the body let alone move it. No sir, we can't get involved."

Ryan looked like he would explode in a rage, but took a deep breath.

"Okay, I get it. But, I assure you, not dead. She's. Well, absolutely her freezing game. But I do need to get her to the clinic. The sooner the better."

Zeke began to speak, but did not. The girls remained silent. Josh spoke.

"Look Ryan, I still don't believe any of your explanation. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt for now, but I don't see her back here tonight, I go straight to the sheriff and tell him everything. Do you understand?"

"Sure. Yes I do. But remember our deal. Can't wait to see you on your knees as you kiss her sweet ass tonight. Apologies to Tiffany, but we have a deal." Ryan turned and walked out the front door.

All four gathered at the window to watch him get the frozen lady.

Ryan appeared around the corner and waved as he approached the body. Positioned in front, he used the window ledge for support, grabbed the extended arms and propped those on his shoulders. With some effort he navigated a turn, stepped back away from the window and took small, but sure steps.

They watched him disappear and raced to the front door.

Ryan appeared with the frozen woman toward his snowmobile. He used the extended arms for leverage.

"Little help to get her mounted?" No one moved. "I did not think so."

Ryan mounted her across the back of his snowmobile, almost as if the woman became a passenger and sat there. The arms were extended straight out, hands flat, hair frosted over. Breasts were protruded forward, rock hard. Knees with a slight bend. Pubic hair so brittle it stood straight out. Eyes open a sliver

and stared straight ahead. A look of sadness in them. After he took the bag from Suzanne, Ryan worked into the frozen lady's outstretched arms to get seated and tucked the bag in between them.

"She'll need her clothes after. Suzanne, I thank you for your kindness."

The frozen lady looked rather grotesque mounted and belt tied to the back of Ryan. The body rocked as he drove off, her arms still positioned straight forward. Before long, the sight of her bare back and the snowmobile faded into the distance. They went back into the cabin. The door closed and locked.

After she made her way to the window, Tiffany looked out and up toward the ridge. The footprints were still visible and traveled back up to the top. There appeared to be a snowmobile parked there. The lights still on and a flag rippled in the wind, which caused her to wonder if anyone would get the snowmobile later. To her astonishment, someone already began to move the machine. The brightened lights told her the engine fired and in an instant the lights backed away and the snowmobile disappeared. Although, she was desperate to say something, she did not.

Zeke and Josh were already in a heated argument about the body.

"Josh, I don't disagree with you. The whole episode sounds like bullshit, but at least the body gone. We don't have to deal with it no more. In fact, I don't care if we never see either of them again. I'd prefer it. The whole ordeal too damn weird if you ask me. At lease we can say we had nothing to do with her moved from the premises. All on Ryan."

Josh walked toward the kitchen before he answered back.

"Look, all I mean, I don't believe if someone freezes to death, and as you know, the woman appeared frozen solid, I don't believe she can be thawed out and go on like nothing happened. I still think we should talk to someone, maybe check this out further, maybe the sheriff Ryan mentioned."

Zeke stood on the other side of the counter.

"Listen Josh, I'm with you there. I've never heard of this shit either. But what I'd like to point out, we're rid of the body and from what Ryan said about their sheriff and all, I don't think we'll ever hear from any of them again and the whole episode over. What say we get some boarding in?"

"You're right, we should at least get some boarding in." Josh nodded.

The girls slipped away, walked to each of their bedrooms to get showered and dressed. Josh began work on breakfast. Zeke asked if he could help, but Josh waved him off.

"No sir, but you can clean up."

As he prepared breakfast, Josh worked in the kitchen, with an occasional look out the window and at the foot prints still visible in the snow. He spotted Tiffany in the doorway to their bedroom, who looked back at him.

"Hey babe how about another log on the fire. Maybe take the chill out?"

She nodded, walked toward the fireplace, spoke softer, for Josh to hear.

"Are we okay? I mean, I know you're worried, but what should we do?"



Tiffany placed a log on the fire and walked to the kitchen.

Josh took a moment to look up from his preparations, assured her everything would be fine and reached across the counter to kiss her. Tiffany stood there another moment to watch Josh get breakfast prepared and touched his face once more. She backed away and went into the bedroom to get ready. Josh continued his breakfast preparations with a renewed interest. Yeah, this will all work out and dropped the eggs into the frying pan. The propane gas flame underneath brought everything to life. The coffee waited, brewed and ready. Yeah, this will all work out. No need to worry anymore.

The sunlight shone bright into the room through the big center window.

The big center window with the frozen lady no longer there.

The sky clear, no snow yet.

Josh looked down and back up.

"Damn it, I'm calling the sheriff after breakfast."

He said out loud, although no one was in the room to hear him.

## Chapter 12

Saturday mornings were usually delegated to clean the office. As sheriff, Joe Redfield worked Monday to, and included one-half day Saturday, somewhat regular hours. The one full and one part time deputy handled the on-call duties on weekends and evenings. Of course, the sheriff would always be on call should the need present itself.

The chore to clean off his desk kept him busy most Saturday mornings. With a little luck today, he would be able to go home around two, perhaps a normal Saturday. Saturday night not a big deal for him.

Since he worked in the office on Saturdays, he usually opened to the public, otherwise the office would be closed. Specific office hours were established with on-call a twenty-four seven operation.

When the sheriff went home on the weekends, weeknights or closed the office for any reason, the phones were routed through an answering service which also served the local merchants.

One of the deputies, or the sheriff, would always be available to handle any emergency, otherwise the instructions were to call back in the morning. The whole operation seemed almost like a regular job. Saturday morning in the office meant file papers, organize his desk and remember to put his coffee cup in the sink in the back.

As he shuffled some papers into a pile on the desk, he heard a thump. Something had fallen off. First, he looked behind, to each side, before he walked around to the front. The desk pad pushed the wood with brass nameplate off the edge, which sat face down on the floor. He pushed the desk pad back onto the desk to make room, retrieved the nameplate, turned it in his hands and saw the name inscribed: SHERIFF JOE REDFIELD. He did not use Hugo, never did. It sure beat the routine back on the inner city police force.

While he thought back to how all of this came about, he sat back in the chair, but still held the nameplate. Those thoughts drifted back as if they were yesterday.

Joe Redfield wanted to get out of the city for a while. A overwhelming tough case drained him. Although, they made a clean bust, only one officer wounded and one of the suspects shot dead in what otherwise could have been a bloodbath. The case tight, everything done by the book, but had not gone well in court. The two other suspects had hired high priced attorneys and put down retainers bigger than his annual salary. He needed to get away, get some rest and only think about mindless details. Like, what will he have for breakfast.

A colleague of his mentioned he should rent a place in the mountains away from the hustle of street life. A small town atmosphere might be the place to go for a few days. After a good amount of persuasion, Joe Redfield gave in and said he would try the idea for a couple of days. He had decided he would only stay a short time, lie low and for sure not get involved in any local affairs.

The town consisted of two blocks of buildings composed of little storefronts, which housed everything from a real estate office, to a local owned bookstore, which also sold coffee and home made baked goods.

The town never had a mayor and probably never would. The sheriff enforced the law and the merchants were the town council. The rule of the land for well over one hundred years. Ever since "the great storm of nineteen ought seven" as it came to be known.

~

Joe Redfield did not hesitate to stretch his trip to six days. He arrived on a Sunday afternoon and on a Friday night his butt parked at a table in the back of a dive called: Floyds Bar & Grill, on the edge of town. As best he could tell it no longer acted as a grill, maybe a bar and not so much. Referred by a couple of locals, who suggested he should go there for a night cap.

The original owner, old man Floyd, had operated the place as a bar and grill who most said somewhat decent food. However, the old man had developed cancer and after a tough fight, died a couple of years back. The bar run by his son, Floyd junior, who decided it would be too much work to do both, so he stopped the food and expanded the bar area. It meant he did not put tablecloths, napkins, condiments and silverware on the tables anymore.

You ordered your drinks at the bar and found a seat or a table and so on through out the night. Floyd junior never waited on anybody, but on Friday and Saturday nights he usually had a waitress, sometimes two, to help out as much for his benefit as the customers.

Floyd's Bar & Grill sat off the main road into town. The parking lot in the winter full of snowmobiles, since they were the desired form of transportation this time of year. Joe Redfield had arrived by car, still not sure why he came on a noisy, crowded Friday night. He sat toward the back wall and nursed the second top shelf scotch on the rocks.

The week long get away had proved helpful. Maybe something to this mountain air after all. He waved the waitress off for a second time. Through out the course of the evening, he observed the crowd. Force of habit more than anything else, but never-the-less kept a watchful eye out for trouble.

At the time, Redfield did not know the current sheriff or his deputy would patrol the weekends at Floyd's Bar & Grill, due to the possibility for trouble. Tonight trouble appeared there in a big way.

The current Sheriff, Sam Edwards, had the build of a slight man, almost sixty years old. His shoulders stooped while he walked. The loudmouth at the bar stood about six inches taller and about seventy-five pounds heavier. Redfield knew this situation could get ugly real quick.

He watched Sheriff Sam Edwards as he walked over to the loudmouth and tapped the big man on the shoulder, which distracted the loudmouth for a moment. The loudmouth grinned and handed his drink to the current sheriff.

Joe Redfield looked away. He knew what would happen next. As the current sheriff looked at the glass in his hand, he had no defense from the freight train that slammed into his chest in the form of the loudmouth's right hand. Sam Edwards reeled backwards and smashed into tables and people. They all crashed to the floor. The loudmouth roared with laughter.

Redfield took the last sip of top-shelf scotch and set the glass down as he approached from the right. He knew the loudmouth would have to turn full to make his right hand effective. It would give Redfield the one shot he would need. He knew he had to act now.

"Hey buddy. Hey."

The loudmouth turned and prepared to face his adversary.

Not about to wait for the loudmouth to make his move, Redfield brought his right foot into contact with the big man's groin. The loudmouth doubled over. Redfield moved quick, grabbed the man by the hair and proceeded to smash the loudmouth's face into the bar. Once. Twice. A third time for good measure. The fourth time splintered the bar rail. He jerked the loudmouth back, saw the bloody mess used to be his face in a blank stupor.

As the loudmouth started to slip to the floor, Redfield straightened the heap back up, planted one last right hand to the center of the bloody face. The loudmouth reeled backwards, fell across two tables before he collapsed into the center of the room. Drinks, glasses, beer bottles, chips, peanuts, napkins, and purses all crashed down around the loudmouth's body.

The bar, eerily quiet throughout the ordeal, became interrupted by the sound of the crashing debris. Redfield stood there a moment and shook his hand. The punch hurt. It had been quite a while since he hit anyone so hard. He waited a moment longer sure the loudmouth did not start to get back up. He grabbed a bar napkin to clean his hand.

Sam Edwards, had been propped up against a wall. His breathing appeared irregular. A couple of broken ribs, would be the early guess, Assuming the lung did not collapse, he should be okay until the ambulance arrived. A couple of patrons tended to Edwards.

Redfield removed the handcuffs from Edwards' belt and made his way through the debris to the loudmouth sprawled in the middle of the room. Breathing heavy, but definitely out cold. Redfield rolled him over, positioned him face down and proceeded to place the cuffs on. Because of the size of the man, the cuffed hands would create a painful position. Redfield had to make

sure the man would be somewhat incapacitated once he came too. Once those activities were completed, Redfield had a chance to stop and look the situation over. The bar looked a mess. Floyd mumbled about the damage. Redfield's stern look shut him up for the moment.

The current Sheriff Sam Edwards began to regain some of his composure. Patrons began to right the tables and pick up some of the debris. The whole ordeal only lasted five minutes, but in the heat of the moment time appeared to stand still. Later on, although pressed for details, practically no one could remember what happened. Or when. Or to whom.

The cry of the siren grew near as the ambulance arrived. Along with the ambulance the current deputy also arrived and took charge.

Joe Redfield showed identification and assured Sam Edwards he would stop by in the morning to make a statement and motioned for the ambulance to take him away. He spoke a moment with Edwards' deputy.

A number of patrons began to leave amid Floyd's protests. The deputy suggested it might be a good idea if Floyd called it a night. More patrons began to file out and turned a deaf ear to Floyd's protest.

The ambulance pulled out of the driveway. The deputy helped Sam Edwards into the passenger seat of his cruiser, who insisted he not take up space in the ambulance.

The last task would be to get the loudmouth into the deputy's cruiser. Redfield offered and Floyd got volunteered. The three men got the big guy up, out the door and into the back seat of the cruiser. The deputy unhooked the cuff on the loudmouth's wrist and added his handcuffs in between to give the man some relief from the strain on his arms. The man too damn big for a single set.

The loudmouth would be taken to jail and would get his medical attention there. Again, too damn big and way too dangerous to have him wake up in the local hospital. Redfield watched the deputy drive off. He knew Sam Edwards would be at the jail to supervise, broken ribs and all.

Redfield patted Floyd on the back, while they walked back in.

"Hell of a night, Floyd. Are all Friday nights like this? Oh, by the way, don't forget to sanitize the bar. No telling what he left there. Night, Floyd."

Floyd mumbled as Redfield left him and walked over to his car. Floyd continued to mumble, while he got in and drove off.

The next morning, a Saturday, Redfield stopped by the office to write up his statement. Sam Edwards sat there, his right arm in a sling. The deputy stood off to the side. Redfield started to ask, but Edwards waved him off.

"Only a couple ribs bruised, no big deal."

Redfield nodded. Edwards pointed and the deputy handed him a clipboard. The loudmouth still back in the cell sleeping it off. A few loose teeth, a nice bruise or two, but he would be fine. The medic had patched the big man up right in the cell. Only then did the deputy remove the handcuffs.

When Joe Redfield retired he decided to move to the mountains permanent, got a one bedroom apartment and when Sam Edwards decided to retire, several members on the town council convinced him to run for sheriff.

~

Something jabbed Joe Redfield in the shoulder. Poked, more annoying than necessary. At first, he brushed at the poke, but the poke turned into a shove. Words were spoken. Redfield woke with a start. Bolted upright. Eyes wide open. Did not realized he fell asleep at the desk.

The poke came from old lady Maddox, the cleaning woman.

"If you want to sleep, go home. I can't clean this pigpen up with you in the way. You're all pigs. Always have been. Always will be."

Redfield jumped up out of the way.

Old lady Maddox cleaned six days a week. She dusted, swept and the general clean up. Old lady Maddox had always been old. People said she was old way back when she worked for the guy before Sam Edwards and he had been on the job for twenty-four years.

According to the story, she did this job for at least fifty years. Redfield was uncomfortable calling her old lady Maddox, but the only way anybody knew her. As he watched her mop the floor behind his desk, she cursed as she went along. No question because he had a penchant to spill coffee back there.

Old lady Maddox looked up at him.

"Think you can keep this place clean 'til Monday?"

"Sure will old. Ah, Mrs. Maddox."

"Then go home. The only way. You've all been slobs. Ever since I began this job."

"But, Mrs. Maddox, it's why we have you."

"You watch your mouth sonny! A good swift kick in the ass will set you straight."

Joe Redfield stepped back, although the desk separated them.

"Yes ma'am. I did not mean it the way it sounded."

"You sorry excuses never do. Afterward."

Old lady Maddox continued to mop behind the desk obviously agitated at the depth of the stain on the floor.

"A bunch of smart asses, too. Put on a badge and you're a big shit. You watch yourself, sonny. Sam Edwards before you tried to get smart too. I taught him, did not clean this place for a month. He begged me to come back. Offered me a raise. Damn fool, did not know I don't get paid."

Redfield looked up and at her, with complete surprise.

"You mean you do this for free?"

"Another damn fool. I own the building."

"Well then, Mrs. Maddox good point."

"You damn well remember it, sonny. You would look pretty stupid if the sheriff had to look for another place to set up his office. Hell, I've had some rather good offers over the years. One time, a group wanted to open a casino here. Can you beat it?"

She stopped mopping and looked at Joe Redfield, but looked back down and continued.

"I asked him what I was supposed to do with the sheriff and his office. Turned out the sheriff wanted to open the casino, with a couple of so called partners."

She stopped again, stuck the mop into the bucket and rung it out, before she continued.

"Didn't finish his term though. He was shackled up with some guy's wife. The husband caught them, killed them both. In the process shot up the only cruiser. Deputy had to use his own car for a couple of months until I bought the town a new cruiser."

She looked up for a moment, before she stuck the mop back in the bucket. With a grip on the handle she continued.

"They made the deputy the new sheriff, served for 30 years before he died. We had one other before Sam Edwards, now you. We did have the one dog. Every town has one. You gonna be a dog?"

She came to an abrupt stop and stared him down.

Redfield saw her eyes burn into him before he spoke.

"No. I mean. I'll try not to be." Joe Redfield could only mumble.

Old lady Maddox looked him up and down.

"Well you better not be. I might throw you out for the hell of it."

They both remained silent while old lady Maddox went about the business of cleaning. Joe Redfield moved back behind his desk after she finished, watched her push the bucket toward the back. She stared at him as if to say don't mess it up after I already cleaned. He got the hint.

"So if you do anything stupid, I'd take it personally. Do right by this office or else, Joe Redfield. And call me Eleanor. Stop with the old lady shit."

He watched the front door close behind Old lady Maddox, ah, Eleanor. Joe Redfield sat there and held the nameplate, walked around to the front of the desk and replaced the nameplate in its spot. And did not realize he did it.

He stopped for a moment, shook his head and tried to focus on what had happened. That crusty old woman, whose only words were to yell at him since he took office. Who he considered only the cleaning lady, berated him and like a flash walked out the front door. He had heard some stories before, but never paid much attention to any of them. Wow, he thought, what a woman. Why, after all this time on the job. He tried to do the math. To figure out how old she might be, but decided it best if he did not know.

Okay, so he was only the fifth sheriff since the storm. Would he do twenty plus years as well. Life here could be quite simple.

Except for the incident.

In about an hour, the Saturday morning paper filing, desk cleanup job would be done and he could go home and relax. Maybe he could stop by the diner on the way, grab a late lunch or early dinner. Meals were interchangeable on Saturdays.

Although, he let the deputies do the on-call duties, he would still be involved. One of the demands of the job. As sheriff, he still got the call. Sometimes he would fill in when they needed a night or weekend off. Because the work or on call so much, there could be little time for a normal social life and he often asked, if he did work so much. Or, did he think he did? Either way he still did not have much of a social life.

The dates every now and again were to break the monotony. He preferred the short engagements. In simple terms, he did not have time for a lengthy relationship. Each time he tried, it would usually end bad. The job occupied most of his time and proved hard for the few women he met to tolerate.

The few times he tried to stay at someone's house, the answering service would know to call him there. Everyone knew everything in this town. No secret where he would be, or who with. He did not know whether it harder on him or the women he saw. Either way, the answer meant no real social life. The job. Always the job. Well, he would show Eleanor Maddox he would not be a dog.

He thought about one possibility. But it might get too complicated. Better to leave it alone. But still, it might work. Could be worth pursuit. Redfield drummed his fingers on the desk as he thought about the idea some more.

The finished report lay on his desk.

He yawned and leaned back in the chair, the squeak ever present.

The phone rang. He looked at it. The phone rang again.



## Chapter 13

"Sheriff's office. Redfield speaking."

"Yes. I would like to speak to the sheriff please."

"Speaking. This is sheriff Redfield."

Redfield glanced at the clock. One-thirty-five. He swore under his breath. He had wanted to get out of the office at a reasonable time today. A long week and he looked forward to some time off.

Yes, sheriff. We might have a problem out here and we thought we should speak to you about it first."

"Out where?"

"Sorry sheriff. We're at this cabin."

The man read off the address. Redfield stiffened up.

"What kind of problem?"

"It might be better if we talked in person."

"I'll be there in twenty or so." Redfield sighed.

Joe Redfield put his jacket on. Took a last look around the office and pulled the door closed. The cruiser fired right up, but still waited a moment before he pulled out.

On the drive out, he decided not to think about anything and wait until he arrived at the cabin to find out what did happen. A short time later he knocked on the door. The cruiser sat in the driveway next to a little car. The door opened. A man stood there in front of him, but did not move.

"I'm sheriff Joe Redfield."

"Sheriff. Yes. Yes. Thanks for coming out."

Redfield entered. He saw three other people also there.

"So, what problem do you have I needed to come all the way out?"

A woman began to speak, but one of the men on her left interrupted.

"We'd like to ask you a couple of questions and maybe get your take on something." The man said.

The other three nodded, while the man on the left continued.

"You know, sort of fill in the blanks about something we saw. I mean, something we heard about."

"So, what is your question, sir?"

Redfield glanced at his watch. Two o'clock.

The man on the left looked at the others. They offered their support and motioned for him to continue.

"Well, if someone goes out in the cold. You know, snow and all. You know, not fully protected. Let's say not clothed enough to withstand the cold. Naked perhaps. Say they freeze up. Can they? You know, be thawed out? Or, you know, is it possible? Do you understand? In other words? I mean."

The man continued, but Redfield stopped listening. Here we go again. With some effort, he focused his attention back to the man who spoke.

"Okay, what we want to know. If someone freezes solid, can they still be alive? You know, can they be thawed later? Like everything okay? Maybe not everyone. Maybe only some people can. You know. Double jointed or some shit. Maybe? Hell, I don't know. But along those lines. Have you ever heard? Well, what we wanted to know. Quite curious. Something we heard."

The man on the left stopped. The others stood focused on the sheriff and waited for his answer. Redfield motioned for all of them to sit. They did on various parts of the sofa. He sat and leaned forward.

"Listen folks, why don't you tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened." The woman on the left blurted out. "We were at a party and someone told a story."

"Then why did you call me out here if nothing happened?"

"Well, we had the party. I mean." Josh struggled for the words. "Some people at the party."

"We had the party, but someone told a story." The woman interrupted.

Redfield put his hand up to stop her. The man on the left squeezed her leg for support. Or, maybe to quiet her. Either way she sat silent. They all waited for the sheriff to continue.

After a deep breath, Redfield did.

"You folks want to tell me Sarah came by your cabin last night and you found her frozen solid up against the big center window this morning. Who you want to ask me about?"

Redfield took a quick glance at the big cabin window.

Both women sat up startled at the sheriff's confirmation.

The man on the right, the silent one, slumped back on the sofa.

The man on the left, pleased with the sheriff's affirmation.

"Yeah, so you do know? Wow, maybe okay after all."

The speaker sat back into the sofa and looked at the rest as he nodded his own satisfaction. The other three breathed a collective sigh of relief and nodded to each other. The man on the left continued.

"Well then, I guess we won't bother you anymore. Thanks, Sheriff."

"Wait a minute sir. Suppose you tell me about last night anyway. I'd still like to hear your version of what happened."

Redfield raised his hands as he spoke to keep everyone seated and focused on the spokesman, who looked at the others, but spoke up.

"Well sheriff, it's late and if we want to get any boarding in, we better get to it. Some other time maybe. You answered our question. Have a nice day."

They all got up. Redfield stood up as well and asked them to be seated, but his request ignored. The two men and two women continued toward the door, grabbed their coats and scarves. Redfield raised his voice and asked again.

"Wait. Give me another minute. Please."

They stopped and turned back to look at the sheriff. He motioned and pointed for them to be seated.

"Listen folks, I have a reason. Please. Let me say up front it's more than idle curiosity and of course anything you say will be strictly off the record. I only wish to hear your version of events."

He looked over at each one of them and said it again

"Strictly off the record. Okay? Please. Sit down and tell me exactly, and I do mean exactly, what happened."

The spokesman eyed the sheriff with distrust. Redfield mouthed off the record and pointed for them to be seated. They took their spot on the sofa.

"Why don't we start with your names?"

The spokesman answered.

"Right. Okay. I'm Josh Smithson. I'm with Tiffany Goodwyn." He pointed to the woman next to him on his left. "Those two are Suzanne Harris and Zeke Reigns." He pointed to the woman and man seated to the right on the sofa."

When Josh noticed the sheriff took notes, he cried out.

"What the hell did you write down?"

Redfield looked up. At the pen in his hand and set the pen down.

"Your names so I can remember."

He held the pad up and showed the four names written down.

"Can we continue, Josh?"

"Okay, sheriff here goes. We, us four, had a little celebration. You know, we made it here when this other couple arrived. Well, we invited them to join us. I should mention when we arrived we found the cabin lit and the fire started. And by this Sarah person, the one who showed up later."

"Another couple? Right. I need to know who, besides Sarah?"

"Is it important?"

Josh looked at the others for support, but they were as baffled as him.

"Yes, Josh you do. It would help me to understand better."

Before Josh could respond, he noticed Suzanne shook her head. While he looked at Suzanne, Josh continued.

"Sheriff, I don't see how it would make any difference."

"It makes all the difference."

Redfield paused and lowered his tone.

"Believe me. His name makes all the difference. I sure would like to know the name of who, besides Sarah, showed up at the cabin last night."

The sheriff waited with pen in hand for Josh to answer.

"Sheriff, I don't think I can. I mean."

"Listen Josh, suppose I tell you what happened last night and you stop the run around and give me the other name. Okay?"

The sheriff stared at Josh Smithson, Tiffany Goodwyn, Suzanne Harris and Zeke Reigns. They all showed a look of anguish. Maybe more to the story and now they were right smack dab in the middle. Again, no choice, but to listen.

Joe Redfield slid his hand across his face and spoke softer

"Soon after you arrived, two snowmobiles. I presume they arrived on separate machines?"

The group nodded in response.

"A knock on the door and a woman's voice answered. I understand you found the note left by Sarah who said she lit the fire and now she stood outside the door. Do you still have the note?"

The silence assured Redfield he had their full attention. The group sat hypnotized and listened to the sheriff, while he told his story and sat fixed on his every word. He continued.

"Sarah, and her friend brought steaks, wine, pot and, of course, Sarah brought her cocaine."

"Hold on sheriff" Josh interrupted. "We never said anything about."

"We're talking here okay?" Redfield held up his hand. "Off the record, remember?" The sheriff waited for them to respond.

"Sheriff, you do understand." Suzanne spoke first.

"Nobody said anything. Off the record, remember. Only a story."

Redfield waited for them to digest his last statement. Suzanne nodded first, then Tiffany. Zeke looked at the others, while Josh waved his hand for the sheriff to continue.

"At some point, Sarah and her friend get into a little grab ass. The friend tossed Sarah into the snow. Usually face down so it has the most impact."

The group nodded, looked at each other before they looked back at the sheriff. A throat clear. Slump back into the sofa and feigned interest. But not.

"You offer Sarah a chance to warm up before they leave. Sarah and her friend left in front of the fire while you all retired for the night."

Redfield looked at the two couples in front of him and waited for a response, but none came. More fidgeting, one yawn and a nonchalant look around the room.

"Sometime during the night, Sarah went for a ride on the snowmobile and the way I heard the story sans clothes. A naked jaunt on her machine. The next morning spotted in front of the big center window there still naked. And, of course, appeared frozen. Her clothes were scattered about the sofa."

Joe Redfield sat back into the sofa cushion.

The blank stares emanated from the two couples answered his question. They sat there and stared back not quite sure what they heard. There might have been a slight hint of fear, for not only did this happen last night and this morning, but the sheriff knew the story down to every detail.

"Okay. What does any of it mean, sheriff? I mean if it happened before, it must be okay." Suzanne said.

Redfield leaned forward, focused on the window behind them and checked his watch before he took a deep breath.

"I don't know what the hell it means either. I only know what I've been told happened. Quite frankly, I don't think you should stay in this cabin tonight. Get out. Go home. Rent another cabin if you must. Whatever. But, whatever you do, do not stay here again tonight."

Suzanne appeared to be in control, but looked at the others first.

"What? Why not? Why can't we stay here tonight?"

Redfield panned the room. How could he tell them what he must. Not sure he believed any of this either. These kids for sure would not. But how could he not tell them? He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knee and spoke.

"I don't quite know how to say this, but here goes. Sarah's a ghost. A spirit. An apparition. Or, whatever you call them. Not real. At least not anymore. You experienced a visit from your cabin's ghost. Happens this time of year. Winter season. Snow. When the snowmobiles are out. And only at this cabin."

Redfield pointed to the window.

"Sarah parks her snowmobile up there on the ridge. People say they see the lights at night. Her visits extremely rare. Like never. But there have been a couple reported visits. A knock on the door. You know the rest."

Redfield waited for what he told them to sink in and fully expected the reaction he received.

"Thanks, but no thanks, sheriff." Josh spoke first. "We bought your little act up 'till now. But c'mon, you expect us to believe any of your ghost bullshit? Sarah's a ghost? The woman we partied with last night and found frozen solid this morning. C'mon now. Get serious, sheriff. Small town bullshit to entertain the tourists? Somebody get a kickback on cabin rentals?"

Josh removed his cell phone from his back pocket.

"Here look."

Josh walked over to the sheriff with the phone. Redfield saw the first picture. A naked woman. Hands pressed against the glass. Josh swiped.

"As you can clearly see. She sure looks frozen."

Redfield looked at the picture. A side shot of the woman. Josh swiped again. A close up of her backside. Josh swiped. Her front with snow on her shoulders, breasts and extended arms.

"I have several more. You can't tell me she's no damn ghost. Christ."

Josh took the phone back.

"As real as she was last night. You may be right on one point. Looks like she went for a naked snowmobile ride. Something happened for sure. Well, she made it to the window. Look for yourself, sheriff."

Josh pointed to the window. Redfield walked to the big center window. The foot prints there. They lead down from the ridge to the window. He winced. He knew this scene all too well.

"I have more to the story. If you'll let me finish."

"More? Sorry sheriff. There's more? Of course, there's more. How can there not be? Damn man, what kind of horseshit is this?" Josh bellowed.

Joe Redfield took another look out of the big center window at the foot prints. He paid particular attention to the disturbed snow around the base of the window.

"Where is she?" Redfield asked.

"Who?" Josh blurted out.

"Sarah." Redfield turned around. "The frozen naked woman."

His question appeared to catch them all off-guard. Without a doubt they did not expect the question. No one answered. Redfield stepped away from the window and pressed.

"So where is she? Where is Sarah? Josh, you showed me the pictures of her outside the big center window. What the hell did you do with the lady? The naked lady from this morning. I have a mind to run you all in for tampering with a dead body. Somebody, right now, tell me what the hell you did with Sarah."

Redfield stepped further back into the room right up to where they stood.

"Josh? Zeke? Tiffany? Suzanne? Nobody? Okay, get your coats, we'll all go back to my office until you tell me what happened to Sarah."

"Okay." Josh yelled out.

Josh looked at the others for support. Nods and head shakes greeted him.

"Oh screw it. I told him I would not hesitate to talk to the sheriff if we got in a bind. Look guys, I don't want to be in the middle of this anymore. I'm sure none of you do either."

Josh rubbed his hands across his face.

"Ryan took her."

"Ryan? Ryan who?" Redfield interrupted.

"Ryan, all I know. He's the one who came with her last night. Had the steaks and all."

Josh took his cell phone out again and swiped several times.

"Here look."

Redfield saw the picture of a man all bundled up who carried the frozen lady toward a snowmobile. Josh swiped. Another picture of the frozen lady on the back of the snowmobile as it drove away.

"Ryan said he needed to get her to the clinic to have her thawed out. Said this stunt a game of hers. She gets frozen and he has to have her thawed out each time. All I know. All any of us knows. You gotta believe me, sheriff."

"How about a last name for Ryan?"

Josh shook his head. Redfield looked at the others. They shook theirs as well. Redfield made several notes on his pad. He pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket.

"Josh, number on the back. Send me those pictures. All of them. And the ones you did not show me."

Redfield looked hard at him as he held his cell phone out. Josh took the phone from him and did what he asked.

"Did you send me all the pictures?"

Josh nodded. Redfield took his phone and put it back in the jacket pocket.

"Okay, sheriff. You still think Sarah a ghost? You saw the pictures."

Redfield looked up from his pad. Closed it and nodded.

"How about I tell you what I know?"

Josh rolled his eyes. The others groaned. Redfield continued.

"At the beginning of last season. A woman was found naked, dead and frozen solid outside the big center window there. Hands pressed against the glass looking in. I believe somewhat like you saw this morning. All indications were nothing more than a stunt gone bad. In fact, we wrote it up as such."

Redfield cleared his throat and spoke louder.

"Soon thereafter, a couple who stayed in the cabin and who by the way were the first ones since the incident. Well, on Sunday morning the couple were found naked, dead and frozen solid in an open field astride their snowmobiles. Our first thought, they got drunk, or stoned, or what have you, and did something stupid."

He took a deep breath and paused for a moment.

"Then it happened again. Earlier this season the couple who stayed here reported a party with another couple Friday night. Said the name Sarah and her friend. Maybe this Ryan character you told me about. Anyway, two days later, naked, dead and frozen. Found in an intimate embrace together out in a field of snow. Did you know, you four are the first to stay here since we released the cabin back to the rental agency."

The two men and two women looked to each other. As the spokesperson for the group, and encouraged by the others, Josh spoke.

"Great story sheriff, but I have a hard time putting it all together. Suppose you clear it up for us since you seem to have all of the answers."

Joe Redfield eyed Josh full of resentment quite tired of Josh's sarcasm.

"Sarah was the name of the woman we found naked, frozen solid outside the center window of this cabin. The first to meet her demise here. Many believe her ghost comes back to the ridge where her snowmobile was parked when we found her. A haunting maybe? A wandering spirit? Hell, utterly anybody in this town, including my deputy, has a theory. But regardless, she was the first to die and be found naked and frozen. And yet people report they saw her up on the ridge. Or, at the very least her snowmobile. Parked. Lights shone bright. And you four say Sarah stopped by to have a party last night."

Tiffany remembered back to when they arrived and she believed she saw lights up on the ridge. A cold chill crossed over her body, but too afraid to say anything she remained quiet. Josh did not and stood up.

"Wait a damn minute sheriff. You expect us to believe any of your ghost story bullshit? Why."

Redfield motioned for him to be seated.

"I don't expect you to believe anything. I've merely told you the facts as I know them. You believe whatever the hell you want."

No one moved, so he continued.

"Sarah likes to park up on the ridge during the season."

Joe Redfield watched for a response, none came.

"Doesn't it make you stop and think for a moment after all I told you? Don't you think what happened to you last night and this morning a little strange? Regardless of what you believe, you found a dead, naked woman outside the window this morning. Doesn't that give you pause? I mean, you found a dead woman and did not report it. Why not? Think about it. Might I repeat my suggestion you not stay in the cabin tonight?"

Josh bolted upright.

"Whoa sheriff, let's not get carried away here. Even if we did believe any the horseshit you told us. Well, Ryan said they'd be back tonight. With Sarah thawed out. We sure don't want to miss the opportunity to see for ourselves, especially after all you told us about them. Whether we believe any of your crap or not, how could we not? I mean the chance to see Sarah again. Which also means we did not find a dead body. C'mon, who wouldn't want to see her after what we witnessed this morning?"

The other three nodded they agreed with Josh and wanted to stay as well. Once again everyone rose up. This time Redfield did not stop them. They thanked the sheriff for a most unusual, but entertaining story. The nervousness of the group belied their pretended nonchalant attitude.

"I could keep you away." Redfield picked up on the uneasiness.

Josh turned to face the sheriff with a glare in his eye.

"And how would you do that?"

"I could arrest you." Joe Redfield waved his hand in the air.

"For what?"

Josh started toward the sheriff. Joe Redfield held his ground.

"You tampered with a dead body. There are at least a couple of infractions I could charge you with."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Josh asked in astonishment.

"Where is the body, Josh?"

"I told you Ryan removed the body. We did not touch it." Josh glanced at Zeke. "Well, maybe I tapped the skin to see if she had frozen up overnight. But, like I told you, Sarah will be here later. C'mon sheriff, you expect to make a case out of this?"



"No. Not at all. But, enough to hold you all until Monday. At least until this case could come before a judge. The weekend would be over."

"You could, but you won't."

"You're right, I won't. Serious, you still want to stay here tonight?"

"Now more than ever, sheriff. Now more than ever."

"After all I told you about the cabin. About your so-called guests?"

"Especially, after all you told us." Josh said quite loud.

"How about if I took a ride out later? You know, look the place over?"

"What the hell is with you, sheriff? Do you believe any of this ghost crap? Have you ever seen her? Or him? Or them, yourself?"

"No, can't say I have. Why don't we call it a gut feeling?"

Josh stared at the sheriff in disbelief, while he looked at the others.

"Why don't we call it a day, sheriff? I mean, of all the bullshit I've heard in my life. Sheriff, you have to excuse us. We need to get some boarding in and I believe time for you to go."

Josh opened the big front door.

"Thank you for a most enjoyable afternoon, sheriff."

Redfield walked to the door, turned back and looked at each of them. He saw apprehension and determination and wondered which would convince the other. The big door closed. A chill rocked his body. His hands rubbed up and down each arm for warmth and continued to watch the cabin door for another moment before he climbed into his cruiser.

"Well, that went well." He said to no one.

The engine fired.

He glanced at his watch and swore.

A cloud formed in the sky.

Redfield backed out of the driveway, shifted into drive and moved the cruiser forward.

Darkness would arrive soon.

## Chapter 14

Joe Redfield looked up when the door opened. His deputy, Pete Matson, walked in. Pete set his ten-gallon Stetson on the desk and coat over the chair.

"Did not expect to see you here this late, Joe."

"Got a call earlier. had to take a ride out."

"Sorry Joe, you could have called me on the two-way."

"The call came from the cabin, Pete."

"The cabin?"

"Yeah Pete, another. You know. But different this time."

Pete took a chair in front of the sheriff, moved forward, scraped the chair as he did and leaned on the sheriff's desk. The two men were about a foot and a half apart from each other across the top of the desk. Pete spoke first.

"Different? How so?"

"There were others this time." Joe Redfield said matter-of-fact.

"You mean others who saw?"

"No. Yes. I mean, there were two couples at the cabin instead of one. They reported the contact together. So yes, more who saw this time."

"Sarah and her friend together?"

"Right. By the way, I found out the friend with her. Well, this time at least, goes by Ryan. A name we haven't heard before."

"Sounds interesting." Pete said, his voice higher.

Redfield waited a moment before he answered and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I tried to tell those kids about the other couples, in the hope they might listen to reason and get out of the cabin before tonight. You know, before anything else can happen there."

Before Pete had a chance to respond, the sheriff cut him off.

"It means the first time more than one couple made contact with good old Sarah and her friend and frankly I'm not sure what to make of it. Sure changes the complexity of the story. Two couples saw them both this time. Hard not to give it credence."

As he looked at Pete, Redfield pointed.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Pete?"

"Do I what?" The question caught Pete Matson by surprise.

"Ghosts, spirits, apparitions, whatever the hell you want to call them. Do you?" Joe Redfield said louder.

Pete took a moment before he answered.

"Well, I had an great-aunt once claimed her grandfather always stopped for tea on Thursdays years after he died. Well, never mind. No I don't. Well, maybe in some instances. But I don't in general. Well, in church they always. But. Well, you know part of the. No I don't."

"Jesus Pete, do you or don't you?"

"Yes."

The room fell silent, neither spoke nor looked at each other. Redfield stared at the ceiling and put his feet up on the desk. Pete fiddled with his hands, turned and wrung them together.

"Let's say the jury still out. I don't believe straight up, but I don't disbelieve either. I would be open to. Well, you know."

Pete sat back in his chair. Redfield looked over at him and nodded.

The sheriff lifted his feet, dropped them to the floor with a thud and spun to face Pete. He choose his next words after some thought.

"Seems like the whole ballgame, Pete. A ghost somehow involved. Everything always points back to the damn ghost story. Do you see it any other way? I mean, what are your thoughts."

"If you want to make it your case Joe, go for it, but you might have a hard time selling your theory to anybody. You might want to think it through first on how you want to approach your theory."

Pete leaned forward and spoke softer.

"You know Joe, I do agree with you. Well, somewhat. Well, I don't know how in the hell you would prove a ghost did. Or, had anything to do with. Or, anything there could possibly involve a ghost. I mean."

Redfield nodded in agreement and looked up at his deputy.

"That's the rub, Pete. What the hell else am I suppose to believe? Look at our known facts. The last time she and her friend showed up. Well, next day, a couple of kids were found naked, dead and frozen solid in an intimate position. I find it hard not to believe she and her friend, or one of them, or both had something to do with the couple we found last season naked and frozen atop their snowmobiles."

Redfield looked at his deputy.

"But, the piece that nagged at me since I saw those kids earlier. In fact, one of the women raised the question."

Redfield rubbed his hands across his face.

"You know the story. Sarah and her friend stop by on Friday night to party. Saturday morning, Sarah found naked, frozen solid up against the big center window. How?"

"How what?" Pete sat forward. "What are you getting at, Joe?"

"How can it keep happening? Unless a ghost story? I mean the first time she was found naked, dead and frozen, like we did, should be the end. How can she keep getting found? Do you see what I mean? I mean how the hell can it keep happening?"

"Yeah, I do see what you mean." Pete nodded. "Unless this was a ghost story, how can it keep happening. Once found frozen solid should be it. And what, it has been two, maybe three times reported, maybe more we don't know about, Sarah found naked frozen solid outside the window?"

"So Pete, how would you answer the question?" Redfield slumped back in the chair, squeak present.

"I guess we have our work cut out for us, now don't we. Like I said Joe, I'm right there with you. But, how do we prove any of this? Unless? Are you saying maybe not a ghost story?"

"Don't know that either."

Redfield rubbed his hands across his face again.

"The only way this works, we believe a ghost story."

The chair scraped as Pete got up and walked toward his desk, but waited for Redfield to continue. When Redfield didn't, he spoke.

"Well Joe, I'd better get back to rounds. Wrap it up for the night. You know. After head home. Listen Joe, you think this out some more. And know I'm with you. Can't say you're wrong. But sure can't say how we can prove any of this. I mean a ghost story. Well, involved somehow. I think we need more facts."

Pete wanted to say more. But stopped. Thought for a moment then spoke.

"Remember I'm with you, Joe. You let me know and I'm there with you."

Redfield watched his deputy as he stood by his own desk and wondered which one of them believed what.

"Yeah. Thanks Pete. I appreciate it. I'll let you know as soon as I know."

He leaned back in the chair, the squeak ever present.

"Hey, Pete. What are you doing later tonight?"

"Ah. Why do you ask, Joe?"

"I'd appreciate it if you could do something for me later."

"Ah, c'mon, Joe. Saturday night. I worked extra already. Besides, the dance at the hall tonight. You know."

Pete put his coat back on and grabbed his hat off the edge of the desk.

"No, I mean after, say around midnight."

"Midnight? You mean the bewitching hour?" Pete said with a smirk.

"Maybe you're right. Not about what you said. I mean maybe around ten, ten-thirty. I don't know for sure. Whatever time would be convenient."

"Yeah. Sure. Why so hostile, Joe?"

"I don't know. Sorry. In actual fact, I don't know. I have a bad feeling about those kids tonight. They weren't buying what I was selling. I'd like. Well, I have a couple of ideas I'd like to follow up on and I don't know what I might

need later. What kind of help I might need and, you know. How about check in with me later? You know, check in, see what's happening?"

Pete stood at the door and waited for the sheriff to let him go.

As he sat back, the squeak ever present, Redfield spoke softer.

"Tell you what, use the cruiser tonight and if it's a wild goose chase, I'll call you and tell you so. But, if you don't hear from me, try to get in touch with me and if you can't reach me, round up the troops."

"Why Joe? Are you expecting trouble?" Pete looked at Redfield who still fidgeted at his desk. "You are? Damn."

"I don't know what to expect." Redfield signed. "But I don't like it. Two couples this time. A feeling I have. I want to check a couple of ideas first. Please check in occasionally? I promise if a wild goose chase, I'll let you know as soon as I know. Maybe nothing."

"Sure Joe. Whatever you need. I'll be on the horn. Check in. But remember the dance. Might be off and on. Anything else?"

"Where's the dance?"

"At the hall."

"Yeah. Right. You said as much. Talk to you later. Oh, and Pete, thanks for understanding."

"Sure, Joe. Are you sure you're okay? If you want, I could hang around tonight and maybe."

"Yeah, I'm fine. No, you go. No need for both of us to screw up a Saturday night. Go on, get the hell out of here. Have a good time. I'll talk to you later. It's probably nothing." He looked at his deputy. "Thanks again Pete, I do appreciate your understanding."

Pete nodded, turned, opened the door and stepped out.

Redfield watched as the front door closed behind his deputy and heard the roar of an engine, coupled with the grinding of tires on pavement filled with grit, signaled the end of Pete's visit.

He continued to think about Pete Matson. A good deputy who did work hard at the job. Always there when you needed him. At the very least, he followed orders well. Sorry he yelled at Pete. How in the world could he expect this kid to respect him as a sheriff, who claimed a case was tangled up in a ghost story? More like local legend crap? It would make more sense if Pete told the story. But, nothing else made sense so far. A ghost story.

Redfield continued to struggle with his thoughts and spoke out loud.

"What did Matson say, the bewitching hour? Jesus. Did I order the kid to be on duty until midnight on a Saturday night. I'm sure Pete must have a life even if I don't. When was the last time I went to a dance on a Saturday night?"

The sheriff stayed lost deep in his thoughts another moment.

With a quick motion he lifted the telephone receiver and punched in a number. The phone answered on the third ring, the conversation brief and the handset returned to the cradle.

He looked at the instrument on his desk as he drummed his fingers.  
Not yet sure why he made the call, but relieved he did.  
Besides, he might need the extra help later.

As if in a trance, Redfield walked back to the coffee pot, grabbed a cup from the shelf and reached for the pot. The coffee pot rattled in his hand, empty. Of course. Saturday. Old lady Maddox already cleaned the pot and everything else in the office.

In frustration, he rummaged around the cabinets and found a jar of instant coffee. Now all he would need to do, boil water. He contemplated the thought for a moment and the visual picture of old lady Maddox scolding him for making a mess on the weekend convinced him to run the hot water instead.

With all due caution, he walked back and tried not to spill a drop as he approached the desk. His cell phone sat there. He activated the device and opened the photos Josh sent to him earlier.

With his deputy gone and the office quiet again, Redfield clutched his coffee cup as he sat back in his chair, the squeak ever present and took a moment to remember back to how all this began.

The woman's name Sarah Charvonce. Fred Randall, the coroner said it might take a couple of days for the body to thaw out and maybe he should wait a day or so before he called her parents, but he called anyway and explained the situation when they arrived. He remembered the incident as vivid as if it were yesterday.

As he swiped through the photos a scene began to form. Redfield stopped cold, his thoughts tried to connect the dots. "Well, I'll be damned." He said out loud and looked up ready to say something more, but no one stood there to say it to. He returned his focus to the phone.

When he swiped each photo, he thought he saw something unusual and tried to decide if it meant anything. His eyes widened, free hand moved through the pictures, his other hand held the coffee cup.

He reached for the edge of the desk, braced and sat forward. Did not hear the squeak this time. He attempted to set the coffee down on the desk, but instead set the cup on a loose stack of papers. The cup tipped, slid off the desk and smashed to the floor. The liquid spilled everywhere.

For a moment he looked at the mess gathered around the broken cup.  
But only for a moment.

His eyes locked on the photos. His finger swiped in both directions.

## Chapter 15

Josh, Tiffany, Zeke and Suzanne hashed and rehashed their own thoughts in silence. Each tried to decide what to believe about what happened last night and this morning's confrontation. But more specific, the lecture from the sheriff about the details and background of the incident. Mumbling and nods kept their thoughts fluid. There could be no doubt something happened last night, although sufficient doubt as to what did happen. This morning's find loomed very real. No denying what they saw. And what happened later when Ryan came back.

Could the situation be as desperate as the sheriff described it?

Did they witness an actual ghost sighting?

Or some local bullshit they were fed? Evidence to the contrary sure suggested otherwise. Should they get out as the sheriff suggested. But if so, from what? The couple last night seemed friendly enough, certainly not the kind of ghost crap you always hear about. In fact the couple seemed very real. Would a ghost party like they did last night? And what about the goodies they brought? Would a ghost have anything like they brought?

Although, they thought the same, each wrestled with their own thoughts, an occasional attempted to speak, but never got the words out. A nod or two here and there let each of them know they thought the same. Words did not need to be spoken at this moment, all while the music played from the car speakers.

A quick trip to the ski area had proved fruitless. None of them in the mood for some boarding. They never left the car. Although, they sat for a long time before they decided to leave. Zeke turned the car around and took the road back to the cabin. The mood in the little car solemn.

Straight ahead of them, off the road to the right loomed the cabin. Easier to see this time in the faded daylight and clear air. However, this time there were not any lights on, nor did any smoke bellow from the chimney. The cabin looked dark and foreboding, almost eerie. Like the night before, the car stopped in front and slid on the snow packed road.

Inside, the great room stood cold and uninviting. Last night a raging fire created a degree of warmth. They stood in the doorway. A moment's hesitation before they entered. Almost as if they shouldn't be here this time.

Suzanne mumbled about the fire and volunteered to start a new fire. She walked toward the fireplace to gather wood. Josh and Tiffany meandered to the kitchen to round up some food. Zeke reminded everyone of the advent of the

night's guests and their promise to bring more grub and goodies again and maybe they shouldn't eat anything yet.

With a wave of his hand, Josh pointed to the clock. It would be a while before those so called guests were scheduled to arrive. They ought to go ahead and have a late lunch.

The tension in the room grew thicker. They paused somber, looked at each other for a moment, maybe thought of the reality of it all for a second. Perhaps a touch of fear seized them. Or, a slight hysteria prevailed. They sat quiet for a time. Some gazed out the big window toward the ridge. The light outside faded fast once the sun passed behind the mountain top.

"I guess we'll find out tonight, won't we?"

Josh's voice cracked as he spoke.

A few yeses and nods of the head signaled agreement.

As he went about the mechanics of fixing lunch, he put water on to boil, Josh pulled hot dogs out of the refrigerator and created a simple late lunch as he took charge of the preparations.

When she walked past the table, Tiffany picked up the last of the pot and suggested they might want to indulge before dinner. No one disagreed. For a moment, she couldn't remember whose pot or if it did belong to Sarah, or Ryan. She noticed the others looked at her. Shrugs and nods greeted her question.

While they passed around the pot, Josh cooked the hot dogs and placed the dogs on a plate, grabbed a bag of regular and a bag of BBQ chips, set those goodies on the table and instructed everyone to help themselves. He collected every possible condiment he could find in the fridge and loaded up the table. He put down one six-pack of beer, but with a mischievous smile, he pulled another one from the fridge. At the ski lift they had picked up a case of beer. They sure had their fill of wine the night before. However, this might be a two six-pack night. Josh placed the second six-pack down on the table.

The dogs were devoured in no time. None of them realized how hungry they were. They munched on chips and sipped a second bottle of beer as they sat and passed small talk around the table.

"I think we should go. We should get the hell out of here right now."

The rest of the conversation stopped while they all eyed Zeke.

"Without a doubt we should go. I have a gut feeling we should get the hell out of here. Screw the festivities later."

"I believe nothing to do with your gut. Are you telling us you're afraid of ghosts?" Josh bellowed across the table at Zeke.

Zeke looked right back at Josh, at each of the girls.

"Call it what you want, but something about this whole situation doesn't feel right. Something. Well, not right. What I'm saying. Maybe the sheriff was right. We did tamper with a dead body. Say what you will, she was dead."



"Oh c'mon Zeke, where's your sense of adventure? Don't you want to know more about who we met last night? They sure don't seem like any ghost I've ever heard of. I mean, aren't you the least bit interested?"

"No. Not anymore. It's not fun anymore. Something happened last night." Zeke paused and looked from one to the other.

"Well, at the very least, something happened this morning. Something none of us can explain."

"Will you lighten up already, Zeke?"

"We sure did not get much boarding in, did we?" Suzanne tried to change the subject. "Well, maybe tomorrow."

"How do we know there will be a tomorrow?" Zeke asked solemn.

"Jesus, Zeke, will you knock it off already? Look, if you want to leave, there's the damn door, man. Leave!"

Josh stopped and stared straight at Zeke. Both girls tensed up, waited for the other to speak. Josh waved his hand and spoke softer this time.

"Look Zeke, I did not mean to snap at you. But damn. Even if you believe anything the wacko sheriff told us. And, I will say, quite a story. Wouldn't you want to see what happens tonight? And even if you did not. And I'm not sure I believe any of it. Wouldn't you still want to stay and hear what our famous couple has to say about everything? Remember what Ryan said about the sheriff? Mention Sarah and he'll tell you a story. Well, he sure told us a story."

Josh paused and looked at the girls first, back to Zeke.

"Well hell, let's put it to a vote. Do we stay or not? All in favor?"

Josh raised his hand.

One more, another and the fourth hand raised in the air.

"Okay, who cleans this mess up?" Suzanne asked. "And Josh, don't give me any of your woman's work bullshit either."

Josh raised his hands in the air, as if to say, who me?

Zeke volunteered along with Tiffany. The two of them began to clean off the table together and carried everything into the kitchen. Suzanne walked over to the sofa by the fire. Josh followed and sat down across from her. She soft touched his arm as she spoke.

"Josh, do you think anything will happen tonight?"

"Suzanne, I don't know. But, I'll tell you this. It doesn't make much difference. If something will happen, it will happen. Suppose we buy any of the horseshit the sheriff said and decided to leave. We drive back to the city and get in an accident. Is it because we left? If we did not leave, would we have had the accident? Do you know what I mean?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what the hell you just said."

Suzanne let go of Josh's arm, sat back into the sofa and folded her arms across her chest.

"What I mean." Josh turned slight to face her. "Suppose we leave and something happens, or we stay and something happens. Will it matter where it

happens? Look, we had a good time. Why the hell should we leave and be sorry we did? And why I feel so strong we should stay."

Suzanne continued to look at Josh for a moment, still not quite sure what he said. She looked away toward the window as she spoke.

"I suppose you're right, Josh. I don't know what to believe anymore. I have to admit I've been on edge since this morning. I still can't forget the sight. I absolutely knew she had."

Josh put his hand on her arm and interrupted.

"Hey, easy. I thought so too. In fact, remember I put up a beef about it. We'll have to wait until tonight to be sure. Maybe they have something can be done. Hell, we don't know everything. I remember I read something about freezing you to cure diseases and stuff. Maybe it's on the level. Honest, I did read it somewhere. Hey Zeke, you know anything about it?"

"About what, Josh?"

Zeke and Tiffany joined the two on the sofa. Josh continued.

"You know, about freezing to cure some types of diseases. I remember I read something about something. Maybe how they fix the woman. I mean, Sarah. Or, whoever the hell she was."

Zeke nodded and sat down next to Suzanne.

"Yeah, I heard something like it before, but don't know a damn about it. I don't think what happened to the woman though what they had in mind. In my opinion, the woman froze to death last night and I'd be hard pressed to believe any different. I don't care what kind of process they got. Besides, they do it in a controlled environment. Where they can monitor what's happened. What the woman had this morning was frostbite. Of the whole body!"

The four digested everything said, realized the same thought, also realized the alternative to not believe any of it. With only one solution, they would have to wait until tonight to see how this played out.

Suzanne broke the silence.

"Well, the hell with it. So what if they are ghosts. What business is it of ours or anybody's? Do we care? I mean, do we care? We had a good time. It was a great party. So what the hell is the difference? Who gives a shit? Huh? Huh? C'mon, don't you all agree? Isn't it the bottom line here. To have a good time? I say let's forget it and make ready for our guests tonight. Should be a great party. What do you say? Huh?"

The other three looked intently at Suzanne. They weren't sure if she spoke from the heart, or if a mild case of hysteria had set in. After a moment, she appeared sincere about the whole idea. They relaxed and nodded in agreement. After all, they all came back to the cabin and after a vote they all agreed to stay. Suzanne continued her argument.

"Yeah, and besides, what do we in actual fact know about ghosts anyway? Because we always were led to believe ghosts are scary, doesn't make it so. I mean what's your version of a ghost? What the hell, maybe we discovered a new species of ghost. Makes it our duty to stay and investigate, right?"

Suzanne let out a loud belch.

"Sorry, my heads spinning. Whew, I better rest for a minute."

In time, the others got up from the sofa, moved about, straightened up and worked to convince each other of the importance of staying. Time to get the place ready for tonight's party.

Not everyday you get to party with a ghost, or two, or whatever they are.

## Chapter 16

After he drove to the edge of town, Deputy Pete Matson parked at the turnaround as usual. The darkness extended out past the edge of town onto the road and drifted away. Through the pitch dark, he could see every inch of the blacktop. He knew this road better than any other. First, as a boy who grew up here and now as he patrolled it. The cruiser parked, he turned off the headlights and picked up the clipboard off the passenger seat.

Pete Matson did not see a single word as he flipped through the pages stuck there. The motion a physical action. Realized it, set the clipboard back down and switched off the dome light. Adjusted the gun belt while he slid down in the seat. The service revolver jabbed him in the side. He reached across, removed the six gun from the holster and placed it on the clipboard next to him.

The conversation he finished with the sheriff flashed through his mind. He wanted to tell the sheriff, but it did not feel right. Although he believed Joe Redfield to be a good man, who always treated him right. But somehow intimidated by their last exchange and needed to get out of the office before the conversation went any further or any deeper.

With a deep sigh, he should have told the sheriff what he thought. But he became concerned of what Joe Redfield might think of him. At the moment it did not feel right. After he listened to what the sheriff said earlier, he began to admit to see the snowmobile would be quite interesting. A smile formed on his face.

Driven by a woman, a very attractive woman, with long brown hair. Still sure he saw her somewhere before, or at least thought he did. She passed by the cruiser several times and always waved while she passed. Sometimes she cruised right alongside while he drove. One time, it looked like she wanted to stop, but when Pete looked back up she already had passed by.

Who could she be, but figured she would be someone from the other side. Someone from those exclusive cabins over there. At least what he wanted to believe and certain she would be unapproachable. But he sure would have liked to speak to her anyway.

A couple of times he asked around town to see if anyone knew her. He asked Joe Redfield once, but no one seemed to know anything about the lady on the snowmobile. Several others also saw her go by, but did not pay it no mind. Only another snowmobile that passed by, they said. But he knew different. He knew she would be someone special.

A gust of wind shook the cruiser, picked up in the last few minutes. Another one hit. The snow began again, or maybe still blown snow. Either way

the white crystals filled the air. The snowflakes melted as they hit the windshield and ran down as they turned to liquid. The effect took Pete deeper into an experience a few days ago which crept back into his mind.

~

The hour late, he had finished his rounds and about a mile out of town near Floyd's Bar & Grill. As he glanced over, he saw a lone snowmobile parked in front outside the bar, slammed on the brakes as the cruiser began to slide. Maybe it could be her inside he thought with excitement. He corrected the slide, aimed the cruiser into the parking lot and slid to a stop short of the snowmobile.

The probability of her inside would be slim at best. Hell, it could be anybody. But what if? What if it was her and what if she was in there right now and I don't stop. He decided to take a chance. He exited the cruiser and started for the door but stopped. His heart raced, body heated in the cold air.

He approached the door, the loudness of the music and voices from inside filtered their way out. Deputy Pete Matson took a deep breath before he entered. But checked the snowmobile one more time. Sure sounded like a lot more happened in there than one, maybe two people and took another look to be sure. Only one snowmobile parked outside.

With a shrug of the shoulders, Pete marched forward used the left hand and left shoulder to heave open the big front door. All along the bar, the stools were empty. All of the tables were empty. The only noise from within came from the television which showed some old gangster movie. Pete stood motionless and stared in disbelief.

He rushed back outside.

The parking lot empty, except for the cruiser. Startled, he looked on either side. The snow lay puffy, with no marks of any kind. No tracks to or from the parking lot. The hair on the back of his neck stiffened. His shoulders cramped.

"What the hell." He muttered.

A moment later he went back inside Floyd's Bar & Grill.

Floyd appeared from the back.

"Something I can do for you, sheriff?"

"No. It's me, Pete. I thought you had a crowd in here, sounded noisy."

"Crowd? Hell no! The TV. Comes and goes. The place's been dead all day. Nobody been around. Sure you heard about the storm? Nobody wants to get caught in it. Besides, a weekday. You know. If you were smart, you'd head back to town yourself. Thought I might close."

Floyd continued to ramble on.

Pete no longer listened and continued to scan the bar. Still did not believe the place empty. He thought for sure, but focused back on Floyd.

"You gonna be okay here, Floyd? I better head back. Don't want to be caught out here when the storm hits."

"Hey, you okay, Pete?" Floyd looked hard at the deputy. "You look kinda funny. Like you've seen a ghost or something."

"Yeah, Floyd, hoped I would have. Well, maybe she."

"Damn son, want me to talk to Redfield. He work you too hard."

"No, it's okay Floyd. A long day and I meant. Well, I thought. Well, thought this place full. Well, you know. Well, I better hit the road. See you later. You better keep the two-way on in case the phones go."

"Will do, Pete. You take care of yourself and tell Joe Redfield I said to take it easy on you. Hear?"

Pete Matson didn't hear those last words. He had already walked out the door and back to his cruiser, sat half in and half out and stared at the ground. Except for his tire marks, there were no other tracks or impressions of any kind on the fresh snow. A shiver racked his body as he sat there with the engine off for quite some time. What little heat had been left in the interior dissipated and the air became quite as cold inside the cruiser. Without further thought he fired up the engine and kicked the heater switch to high.

~

The sound of a snowmobile about to pass brought him back to the present. He hit the wiper switch to clear the window. The lights in the distance approached town and his position. He watched as the machine approached to the left of the cruiser and passed by in a whirl of snow. And as quick he recognized the driver. A local guy who owns a house outside of town. Not sure relieved, or sad, it wasn't someone else.

He pulled the light switch back out and used a three-point turn. The cruiser angled back into town. Passed each shop and shined the spot light into the doorways. Watched for someone passed out.

Crime not that rampant in the town, but partying was and people tended to forget the temperature. More often than not tourists would venture out in the cold, pass out somewhere and usually wind up with a bad case of frostbite to show for their time here. Most of the work the sheriff and deputies did would often be cold related this time of year.

Pete continued up the street. The sheriff's office came into view, the lights still on. He stopped in front.

"Maybe I should go in, tell the sheriff what I really think."

Pete wrestled with the idea for a moment, but thought another time. The dance tonight. Later would be better. The cruiser moved slower past the office. Once past the sheriff's office the cruiser picked up speed, gained as it raced through town. As they discussed earlier, he would take the cruiser home tonight and regrettably to the dance later. Pete's thoughts no longer considered the day's activities, but rather the impending night's possibilities.

The cruiser gained more speed.

Lori Jacobs still in the middle of getting ready since Joe Redfield had called. She knew he hated to wait and decided to only shower and not wash her hair so she would be ready. Said he would be out front, in a half hour to forty-five minutes. She continued to fight with her hair to try and make it look like something. She planned to take her time to spruce up and attend the dance tonight, not to be called on duty on such short notice.

If he called late Saturday afternoon, this must be important. Damn, she muttered, why won't this work? The only solution would be a ponytail. She tightened the hair band and gave a last look, but her hair looked worse. Frustrated, she released the hair and created a sort of flip, wild twist and stuck a wooden comb into the mix. The new look somewhere between, I tried to do something and I did not give it much thought.

The uniform lay out on the bed, but Lori Jacobs stood there in her underwear and decided against a uniform tonight. Instead, she selected casual jeans and a heavy sweater. From the information Redfield gave her it appeared they were, or at least she would be, in the office tonight. The jeans slipped on okay, but the sweater caught and pulled on her hair. She swore and took another glance in the mirror. The hair flattened out and the wooden comb became a tad askew. She swore out loud. Not sure if her hair looked better or worse. As she sat on the edge of the bed, she pulled on her boots and tucked the jeans into them. Some light makeup and she would be ready.

There are days Joe Redfield did not notice she was a woman and others when she wished he did not. Unpredictable as hell. She never knew what to expect. Probably, why she always tried to look good if he called. No matter the time. Lately, he called quite often. All she could hope for now he would be wrapped up in whatever and not notice her hair. She checked her watch. He should be here any minute.

She took a last glance in the mirror. Her hair looked worse than when she began. She pulled out the wooden comb, picked up the brush and started over. After she brushed the hair out, she tried the flip again and swore. But, this would have to do, not a date, only the damn job. Who would care what she looked like?

Lori paused another minute in front of the mirror and decided this look as good as it gets. She set the brush back down on the dresser top, straightened out the sweater and turned from side to side to check out the jeans and allowed enough of a turn to look at her butt. She hoped maybe the rest of her would distract his view from her hair. She turned off the bedroom light as she left.

The heavy coat hung on a rack by the door. The scarf and gloves hung there as well. The coat draped over her left arm. She placed the scarf and gloves over it. With a last look around, she closed the apartment door and locked it.

Much easier to wait for Joe Redfield downstairs in the lobby.

## Chapter 17

Redfield looked at the mess on the floor. Of course the cup smashed into pieces and the liquid ran to the corner of the wall. Oh well, old lady Maddox can clean it up in the morning. Two thoughts popped into his head. The first, tomorrow Sunday and old lady Maddox did not work on Sundays. The second, if she did and she found the mess on the floor, she would have his hide.

So, only one option to consider. He walked back to the sink and fetched some paper towels. Best choice would be for him to clean the mess up and before old lady Maddox ever saw it. However, before he got back, the pictures on the phone recaptured his thoughts. The paper towels occupied a spot on the desk with no further use.

To complete his thought process, he retrieved the files of the others who were found naked, dead and frozen solid.

As he looked through the pages, he reread each report. All still said the same. In each instance the person was found naked, dead and frozen. Why? Why would the body be naked? The nakedness has to be more than a fluke. People don't stroll out into the snow and cold naked, stand there, and wait until they froze to death. Basic reasoning said a person would not. To his mind, venturing into the snow naked and simultaneously freezing to death without moving would not hold.

He began with the file on Sarah Charvonce, but took a moment while he remembered back to the day when he walked into the cabin and looked at her naked frozen body. Her hands pressed against the glass. The coroner, Fred Randall found nothing unusual, except for the fact she froze solid while she stood in front of the window in two feet of snow. Redfield remembered Fred Randall made the effort to point out the scar when they loaded the body onto the gurney. He recited the facts out loud.

"Body found upright against the window of the cabin, palms flat pressed up against the glass, naked, frozen solid. The clothes were found intact inside the cabin, except for a pair of her panties. The panties were found later, recovered from the snowmobile found up on the ridge. No apparent signs of struggle or possible violence. Some indications she had a visitor on the night before the incident. They both assumed a male. Everything else appeared in order."

Redfield turned the page over, cleared his throat and read from there.

"She had rented the cabin on her own for a Friday to Sunday weekend. No idea of, or if, she had a visitor. Parents said she had not dated anyone recent. But,



she could have met someone from town for the night. Ed Morrow reported a renter did not check out on time and when he went to check the place, he saw the woman through the window and called the sheriff to investigate."

Redfield looked for Fred Randall's report.

"Parents claimed the body. Autopsy declined. Cause of death listed as accidental. Case closed."

He let out a deep sigh and read the report again this time silent. Satisfied, he read the coroner's report again. The information said the same. The lady froze to death and without any reason to think different. It appeared accidental. No reason to assume otherwise according to the coroner.

"Yes, there were traces of alcohol and drugs in the body, but nothing wild or in any great quantities, at least nothing would kill her outright. The coroner did not make a complete autopsy, because the parents wouldn't consent. They both assumed the parents were afraid the coroner might list the cause of death as a drug overdose, or something along those lines. After they took great pains to assure the parents not the reason for the autopsy, the parents still would not allow one. The issue did not seem important enough to pursue, with the tragic loss of their daughter. They both agreed to release the body to the parents. But, not before Fred Randall had time to thaw her out. In other words to get the arms down and let the rest of the body relax."

Sarah Charvonce went home.

Joe Redfield took a breath.

"Next." The sheriff said to no one in particular. But, again looked up and out into the empty office to make sure.

"One male, white, twenty four, six feet two inches tall, one hundred eighty pounds, black hair, brown eyes. One female, white, twenty-two, five feet six inches tall, one hundred fifteen pounds, brunette, green eyes. Both astride snowmobiles, naked, dead, frozen. Their clothes were found inside the cabin, intact. Indications were they undressed, placed their clothes in appropriate piles. Ran outside to the snowmobiles. Drove into the snow. Parked and waited until they froze solid."

Redfield paused and rubbed his eyes.

He picked up the piece of paper and continued, but looked up again to make sure no one there. The rest of the report read the same. No autopsy. No reason. The coroner's information the same as before. Single sheet of paper. Redfield turned the piece of paper over in his hands and looked at both sides before he put it back into the file.

He continued to address his non-existent audience.

"Let me see. Yes, takes care of Seth & Ashley Rodgers. Next? Right. Albert Jefferson and Loretta Samuels."

Redfield set the current file down and picked up the other one.

He looked around the office, but no one stood there, at least no one he could see. He looked back down at the report, back up, back down, back up again and stared at the open space in front. He looked back down.

"One female, white, twenty-one, five feet four inches tall, one hundred ten pounds, blonde hair, blue eyes. One male, white, twenty-three, five feet eleven inches tall, one hundred seventy pounds, brown hair, hazel eyes. Both were naked, dead and both frozen. They were found together with her on top, in a suggestive sexual position. No assumption made as to why, excluded from the official report for parents' sake. And so on and so on, like the others."

The file placed back on top of the others.

Again, Redfield rubbed his eyes.

"Okay, why the hell were they out there naked? Too damn cold to go out clothed. So, why the hell did they go out naked? Yeah. Okay. I get it. Have fun. Maybe a dare. But more important, why did they stay out until they froze?"

Redfield pondered his thought for a minute, repeated it over and over again in his mind. Once more he rummaged through the files and repeated the bottom line. All naked. All frozen. Once more he went through the files and counted them off out loud as he went.

"Sarah Charvonce, naked, dead, frozen, outside the window."

"Seth and Ashley Rodgers, naked, dead, both frozen, but sat astride their snowmobiles like it was the plan."

"Albert Jefferson and Loretta Samuels, naked, dead, both frozen. Coupled in a suggestive embrace. Planned?"

Redfield stopped his cadence and shifted the files on the desk, once more through the list. No Ryan. No file either. Forgot to pull the file. He stood up and glanced across the desk. No file. He stepped around the desk. The crunching of glass made him look down and caused him to swear. Old lady Maddox would sure bust his chops for not cleaning up the spilled coffee on the floor.

By the time he finished his thought, he stood in front of the file cabinet where he kept everything in one drawer, titled: *Incident at the Cabin*. No file there. He looked in back of the drawer. Nothing fallen down either. He looked back to the desk, back to the drawer. Nothing. No file. This time he swore out loud.

The drawer slammed with a bang. The telephone handset stayed in mid air as the sheriff punched in Fred Randall's number, but dropped the handset back into the cradle. A quick search on the desk for the private listing, he found the one he wanted. Redfield punched the new number.

One ring, two rings. "C'mon, c'mon." Three, four.

The call answered on the fourth ring.

"Coroner, Fred Randall speaking."

"Yeah, Fred. It's Joe. Listen, I need your help."

"Oh, hello Joe. Sure. What, another stiff?"

"No, nothing like that. Some paperwork I can't seem to find I need for an investigation I'm in the middle of."

"Yeah, sure. What do you need?"

"I've been going over this damn Sarah report and I keep coming up one body short."

"What Sarah report?"

"You know the ghost story."

"Joe, c'mon, you don't buy into those stories? Do you?"

"Fred, listen. You know I don't, but it happened again last night."

"What happened last night?"

"Sarah and somebody named Ryan showed up at the cabin. You know, another reported contact. But there were two couples there this time and they called me today to report what they witnessed. I drove out there to meet with them, to hear their story first hand and saw the footprints from the ridge, like before. Two couples, Fred. This time there were two couples said they saw Sarah and a guy they said named Ryan. And, of course, their surprise this morning."

The phone fell silent, only the crackling on the line could be heard.

"Okay, Joe, it's Saturday afternoon, late afternoon. I'm in a good mood so let's say I'll humor you for a while. So, what do you need from me?"

"I need the file on Ryan."

"Ryan who?"

"Hell, Fred, I don't know. I don't have anything else. You know, the guy she was with this time. Maybe before as well. Anyway, I only know Ryan."

"Who was with?"

"Sarah."

"Right, of course. How do you expect me to look for someone I don't know their name?"

"Hell, Fred, I don't know. But he would have frozen to death naked like the others and would have stayed at the cabin at some point. Should be enough to go on. You can't have many fits all those options? Right?"

"Okay Joe. You in your office?"

"Yes, thanks Fred."

The phone fell silent and returned to dial tone. The sheriff replaced the handset back into the cradle. As he glanced at the files on the desk, he tried to remember any details for someone named Ryan. Why couldn't he remember anything? Not even a last name? And why couldn't he find the damn file?

The ringing of the phone caused Redfield to jump and let out a small yelp. He grabbed the receiver before the first ring finished.

"Yeah, Redfield, Sheriff's office."

"Sorry Joe, nothing." Fred Randall spoke up on the other end.

"What do you mean nothing?"

"What do you think I mean? Nothing. No file. Nada. Zip. As in no file."

A momentary silence fell between the two men. The crackling in the line could be heard over the breathing.

"Fred, are you sure?"

"Joe, I told you. I looked six ways from Tuesday. Nothing. In fact the only other deceased I had was recent. Died of naturals and he was eighty-six. I don't think he's your boy."

Again the silence, the crackling, the breathing and the occasional voice in the distance as land lines seem to do once in a while.

"I believe you Fred, but there has to be something. He must have died before he became a ghost."

"Joe, will you knock off your ghost bullshit. There ain't no damn ghosts."

"Fred, he was with them last night and I believe he's been with Sarah before and if she? He should. Or should he?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Joe?"

"Okay, one more question, Fred. Could he have died in the other county?"

"Huh? What? Sure. A person can die anywhere. Why, are you worried you might have a celebrity ghost working your county?" Fred chuckled.

Redfield did not hear Fred finish. Cut him off mid sentence and placed the handset back into the cradle. Of course, it could be a possibility. But, in all likelihood it would not be the case this time, because. Would it?

As he tapped his fingers on the desk, Redfield continued to try and make sense out of the mess. Right now, he knew five were dead. At least he thought he knew. But, why the hell did this Ryan character show up? And why would he run with Sarah? Who most believed our ghost. Or was she. He looked at the files on his desk once more.

With a touch of fear, the whole situation seemed very wrong and until he could have time to figure out what the hell happened, he would. Well, he needed to get those two couples out of the cabin tonight. One way or another.

The clock on the wall showed six straight up.

"What the hell is going on here?" He bellowed.

# Saturday Night ...

## Chapter 18

The fire popped, while the wind slammed into the windows, rocked the cabin and stirred the embers about. Suzanne poked at the fire, somewhat oblivious to the effect it caused and waited. The mystery couple should arrive soon. A snowmobile passed the cabin, which created a touch of apprehension in everyone and only subsided as the sound faded away. Of course, there were other people in the area and the sound of snowmobiles would not be uncommon. However, with the anticipation building, every sound caused the heart to skip a beat or beat a little faster.

The supply of beer began to run low. So did the pot. The bag from Sarah almost empty. Coupled with the emergency sandwich bag Tiffany brought, not enough to sustain a group of four apprehensive people for any length of time. They thought they would have to weather the tension while they waited without anything to help and began to become a real concern.

Once again the sound of an approaching snowmobile hushed the four. Once again they sat attentive and waited to see if the machine would pass this time. But, the whine of the engine grew louder and louder until the noise appeared right in front of the cabin. The motor sputtered and died and it did not sound like there were any other snowmobiles. The loud whine and abrupt stop of the engine suggested one snowmobile pulled up outside the cabin. Their apprehension subsided a little. At least the couple weren't back together. But, they weren't together either.

With a rack of nerves the two couples waited. They first heard a thump as someone mounted the steps. An instant later they heard a loud knock at the door. All four jumped, startled by the echoing sound. The knock came again, but they stayed plastered to their spots. The knock grew louder and louder. A bang. A thump. A pound on the door.

Suzanne's hand stopped the circulation in Zeke's leg. He tried to ease her grip, but to no avail. The knock came again. This time Suzanne let go of Zeke and marched to the door. Before she could grip the knob, the pounding began again which caused her to jump back and clutch her chest as she gasped. After a breath she reached out, turned and yanked, but the door would not budge. The lock still engaged. As she flipped the latch, Suzanne turned the knob, pulled in one big sweep motion and swung the door open to the room.

Ryan stood outside ready to pound again.

"My God, are you people deaf? Didn't you hear me knock? It's cold out here. Can I come in?"

Suzanne stood by the door, while the other three looked on in the background and stared at Ryan, but did not speak.

Ryan looked past Suzanne at the others.

"Well, can I? C'mon, what the hell? Hey, can you speak? Should I go and come back? What? Hello."

"Where's Sarah?" Someone asked. Everyone asked.

"She'll join us later. She needed to take care of something first. In case you haven't noticed, I'm alone. Hey, it's cold out here. Can I come in?"

Suzanne stood aside to allow Ryan in. The other three gathered around him as he entered. Ryan set his gloves and scarf on the counter by the kitchen.

Suzanne attempted, but Josh spoke up first.

"Listen Ryan, I don't quite know how to say this, but we don't believe you. I mean after what happened this morning, don't you think we're a little anxious to see Sarah right about now?"

"Sure. Sure. Sarah will be here later. She had to take care of something first. Honest. You gotta believe me."

"Take care of what Ryan, her funeral?" Suzanne spoke this time.

Ryan looked hard at Suzanne before he answered.

"Will you knock it off? We fixed her today. She had to take care of something. You know. Her cocaine. Like last night. You know. For her. For us. For all of us. For the party tonight."

"What, a new way to freeze?" Susan blurted out. "Listen Ryan, we talked to the sheriff today. We know all about Sarah. And how she died."

Suzanne had taken control and she did not intend to let Ryan off the hook.

Ryan stared at her and in turn, the others.

"Great. That's great. I suppose the sheriff had you believe his ghost story bullshit. Damn wacko sheriff pumped that local crap since he got here and you bought it. Boy I tell you, simpletons from the city. Feed them a line and they believe anything. C'mon guys, you don't believe his ghost bullshit? Do you? Tell me the truth. Well, do you?"

Ryan waited for somebody to answer as he paced up and back.

"Well, the sheriff's story did make some sense." Josh replied.

"Sense?" Ryan became enraged. "Sense? How the hell can you say his ghost story crap made sense? It made sense. How the hell can you say it made sense? A ghost story made sense? Wait, I'll get some damn marshmallows and we'll sit around the fireplace. We can roast the marshmallows and tell ghost stories to each other. Damn, maybe I better leave and forget I ever met you guys. What else did the wacko sheriff tell you? Something else profound, I'm sure. C'mon guys. Did Sarah look like a ghost to you?"

Again Ryan paced and waited for someone to respond.

Suzanne made a motion, but decided not to.

"Well, the sheriff told us about Sarah and how she froze to death outside of this cabin." Josh took over again. "And also threatened to arrest us for disturbing a dead body. I mean, damn man, he threatened."

"What about Sarah?" Ryan looked at Josh, puzzled.

Josh hesitated before he answered. Suzanne spoke up.

"Well, the sheriff knew how she froze to death outside the center window and all the other details. Josh was right. The sheriff said."

"I'm sorry, Suzanne I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Are you talking about the same woman here with us last night?"

"Yes." Suzanne said louder.

"The same woman? Yeah, and did he show you pictures of her? Pictures of the woman who was here last night? I don't think so." Ryan pointed.

"No, but."

"But, nothing. How can you know? How can you be sure the sheriff meant our Sarah? Anybody can tell a story about someone freezing to death. It happens out here, you know. And quite often unfortunately. Could have been another woman named Sarah. I mean, c'mon."

"But he knew her name, Sarah Charvonce and the details of how they found her outside the window." Suzanne pressed harder.

"This is a small town." Ryan sighed and continued. "Everybody knows everybody. You get to know who runs in what group. Not too hard to guess who would be at a party at a particular time. Jesus, you guys are simpletons. What do you plan to do? Run home to mommy?"

Ryan's insults added to their confusion and his explanation contained some logic. At least in part, or in theory anyway. They came this far, a little farther wouldn't change much.

"Okay Ryan." Josh took control again. "Suppose everything you said true. I still have a problem with Sarah. She looked dead to me, man. And the sheriff knew the whole story. How do you explain his story?"

Ryan looked straight at Josh, paused, took a deep breath and walked further into the room, closer to everyone, but spoke softer.

"I don't. Maybe something similar did happen in the past. A story he knew or heard about. All I know. Look, The Sarah I know is a brat. A spoiled little rich girl from the other side. She likes to have her little fun. Somehow she found out about how to freeze and thaw and every now and again she pulls her little prank. I only date the chick, man. I don't control her life. If she likes to play games, it's her business. Besides, the trick had its moments."

Tiffany turned to face Ryan, her voice shrill.

"Its moments? It had its moments? Like scaring the shit out of someone. Scared the shit out of me. Scared the shit out of all of us. Scaring the shit out of someone you call its moments?"

Ryan looked at her.

"Well, yeah It worked, did it not? C'mon guys lighten up. Sorry I broke your little bubble. But maybe the time has come for someone to set the wacko sheriff straight, before someone starts to believe his crap."

They all agreed and nodded, There were some holes in what the sheriff said. Maybe he did get off on some wild assumptions. Maybe something did happen in the past. Maybe something similar. They left it there. But, the big question still hung out there.

"Where is Sarah?" Josh took the lead.

Ryan turned from Tiffany, faced Josh and spoke softer.

"Listen Josh, I'll take you to her. It's why I came alone. We need your help to get the supplies here. After her trip to the clinic, one of the snowmobiles. Well, out of commission. I thought you could bring your car over."

"Over where?"

"To Sarah's place. The groceries and other goodies are there."

"Don't either of you have a car?" Suzanne blurted out.

As soon as the question asked, uneasiness filled the room. They were not quite sure why. But a gnawing feeling something was amiss permeated the air.

"Well yeah. Sarah. But she has it. I told you she tried to score some cocaine for tonight." Ryan let out a deep sigh. "It's her gig. She needs her cocaine. I already told you the other machine out of commission from too much use today. You remember, from all I had to do this morning."

Ryan paused and waved his hand in the air toward the rest.

"Listen, Sarah said she would meet us there or here later. It all depended on how long her excursion took. I thought we could go over, fetch the groceries come back here and get started on the party tonight. So, will you help? Josh, how about you and Tiffany follow me?"

Before Josh could say anything, Ryan looked over at Suzanne and kept his eyes on her as he spoke with a sly smile.

"Hey Zeke, means you and Suzanne will be alone here for an hour or so. Think you can handle it? Huh? But only an hour. Maybe a little less. So whatever. A whole hour maybe. Okay with you guys?"

The tension broken with his little innuendo and caused a smile or two. Harmless razzing and suggestions as to how to spend the hour filled the room. Josh and Tiffany dressed for the trek into the cold. Suzanne and Zeke walked the three to the door and waved goodbye as they left. Ryan on the snowmobile. Josh and Tiffany in their little economy car.

~

Her back against the closed door, Suzanne couldn't help but realize the cabin would be theirs alone. If only for an hour.



Inside the great room, the fire raged, which threw grotesque shadows across the wall. It did not take long for Suzanne and Zeke to slip into the quiet and solitude of the cabin. The fire seemed to draw them into the mood and hypnotically drew them closer.

"Hey. Sure hot in here." Suzanne blurted out.

"Yeah." Zeke followed.

They drew closer, wrapped up in each other's arms, snuggled, hugged, kissed, engulfed and relaxed. They were alone. Zeke suggested they retreat to the bedroom. Suzanne shook her head no.

Outside the wind howled and the cabin creaked against its strength. The fire raged louder, more powerful than ever, the heat intensified.

As Zeke watched her, Suzanne sat up and pulled her sweater over her head in one sweeping motion. Her hair caught for a moment, but spilled down across her shoulders as the material set free. One of the bra straps hung down on her arm. The other held fast to the designated shoulder. Zeke's eyes followed the inconsistency. Suzanne hitched her shoulder which caused the fastidious strap to fall out of place. With not much of an effort she reached behind, unclasped the latch and with a slight hunch forward the bra fell free of her breasts.

Zeke's eyes followed the motion intrigued. He had seen the results before and knew how lovely her breasts were. But something else happened in the moment. Something alive. There had been other times. The back seat of the car, when it became more of a wrestling match to get it off. Or, in her parent's house the forbidden fruit syndrome. And, of course, the good times when everything had been easy. No one or nothing to disturb them.

But somehow this time over shadowed all of those moments. Maybe the fire or maybe the mood coupled with the wind and the fire helped set this time apart from the others.

It all ended in an instant.

With a devilish look in her eyes, Suzanne proceeded to toss the bra into the fire. They both watched the undergarment go up in smoke, flames danced around until the material turned black and in a moment disappeared.

"I've always wanted to burn my bra." Suzanne said matter-of-fact.

She unsnapped her jeans and lifted her hips into the air to slide the jeans off. Zeke pulled them off her feet and tossed the garment into the air behind him. The jeans hit somewhere behind the sofa and plopped onto the floor. Suzanne did not resist as Zeke pulled her panties down off her hips, past her knees and over her knee high socks. Zeke flung the panties into the air. Suzanne pulled up the knee-high socks as if they made a difference. Naked, except for those. She sat elbows hooked around her knees, which propped her up as she stared into the fire. She turned toward Zeke.

Zeke lay back, and let Suzanne have her way. She removed his pants and flung them viciously across the room. The pants bounced against a wall and slid to the floor. Zeke turned but could not see. In one motion Suzanne tore at the crotch of his boxer shorts and ripped them away before Zeke realized she did.

The next instant found them in a passionate embrace. Suzanne's hands worked frantically at the buttons of his shirt, worked them loose and the shirt off.

The wind slammed against the cabin and caused a ripple of creaks and groans from the timbers. The fire raged on and created silhouettes against the walls, but the shadows were lost on Suzanne and Zeke. They were one.

Afterward, Zeke placed another log on the fire. Suzanne wrapped the blanket Zeke had retrieved for her moments before tighter around her. As Zeke scurried back, Suzanne opened the blanket for him to get in. As she did, she raised her feet. The knee-high socks were still on, misshapen and down around her ankles, but never-the-less still in place.

"Look Zeke, you did not knock my socks off."

Zeke answered as he raised his legs. Both of his socks were still on as well. They laughed until the tears formed and melted into each other's arms.

The fire raged on, popped every now and again. The two snuggled closer together wrapped together in the blanket, Suzanne's head against Zeke's shoulder. Her fingernails danced across his chest and sent a shiver through his body. He stopped and cupped her hand, which she glided to her breast. The nipple hard and erect. Her hand slid down his chest, over his abdomen, their lips met and began all over again.

Their own personal tension seemed to disappear as they had a intimate moment together unencumbered by their own troubles. The cabin, the fire and the solitude helped to bring them together for this moment at least. They held each other close. Whatever else happened, they did have this time together.

Outside a fine white powder circled about. But not new snow yet, only loose powder blew in the air. The energetic wind kept the air alive. A shadow passed the window as a cloud blocked the moon. They did not notice.

The snow outside the center window continued to dance in the wind.

Darkness settled in. The nighttime had arrived.

## Chapter 19

Joe Redfield straightened up the desk, put the files into one stack, but took a glance at the coffee on the floor. He thought for a moment about old lady Maddox and conjured up this vision of her slapping him around with her wet mop as she screamed obscenities at him. With a shudder he started for the mess. Too late. The goo had dried. The decision easy. He would call in sick on Monday.

At the door he turned, looked back over the office. As an after thought, he switched off the lights. The wind engulfed him as soon as he stepped outside and ruffled the light weight jacket, which he pulled tighter around him. The job did supply a heavier coat with the uniform, but the coat bulky. He preferred not to use one. The light jacket offered no defense what-so-ever against the cold wind.

When he opened the trunk to his cruiser, he saw the heavier coat folded up in there. For a moment he thought about it, but only for a moment. The shotgun what he wanted. Unlike the deputies, he did not carry the shotgun mounted inside his cruiser. He preferred to keep the equalizer locked away in the trunk. He also removed a box of shells.

He kept the service revolver, a standard six shooter, strapped to his side, western style, with the optional tie down attached. Due to the setup, at times he imagined the old west. Six gun at his side. Ten-gallon hat mounted on his head as he roamed the streets and looked for.

A sound off to the right interrupted this thought and drew his attention away. He peered around the trunk lid to focus. The shotgun in his left hand and the right reached for the service revolver. Thumb on the hammer cover ready to pull. A person all bundled up hurried by oblivious to the sheriff. Redfield watched the person continue on down the street. The wind bucked and whipped, tipped his hat and reminded him he wasn't dressed to stand out here with only the light weight jacket on. The next gust of wind convinced him to switch out the ten gallon hat for a ball cap. Better resistance in the wind.

He decided against the equalizer and put the shotgun and shells back into the trunk. In a quick motion he closed the lid and stepped back toward the office. As he fumbled with the keys in cold hands, he managed to get the door open. With the keys in the lock, door open and light off, he walked back to his desk.

In the bottom drawer, he found the piece. An antique pistol from the 1920s. A Colt .32 Auto passed down to him from a relative for use as a backup when he became a city cop. Small, handy and lethal, he cherished the piece. With his right leg on the desk, Redfield pulled the pant leg up. The holster fit straight across above the ankle. The strap wrapped snug around the leg. Although, the

six gun standard gear, his memory of an inner city cop brought him back to reality. After he gripped the .32 auto, he checked the magazine. Full capacity. He loaded the magazine back in the weapon, chambered a round and set the safety before he placed the .32 auto into the ankle holster. The pant leg dropped over the rig as he placed his foot back on the floor. Not accustomed to going heavy on the job here, but a sense of relief with the .32 auto strapped to his leg.

The cruiser fired up on the second crank. The tightness present in cold cars seemed to intensify while he waited for heat. The gear selector into drive, he noticed the drag on the transmission and used a heavy foot on the accelerator pedal. The cruiser responded and gained speed toward the edge of town.

The two-way radio crackled, static filtered through. The sheriff waited for it to be audible. Quiet. He let it pass. The radio crackled again and this time Redfield grabbed the handset.

"Pete?"

Quiet again, he replaced the handset on the dash clip.

The radio crackled again. More static. Garbled voice.

"Jesus Pete, you forget how to use the radio?"

Quiet.

"What the hell? Pete, you got problems with the set? Break squelch twice."

Quiet.

Redfield set the handset onto the seat. The tension of the cord pulled it onto the floor as he drove on and did not notice.

The radio crackled. Static. A garbled voice.

He reached for the handset. Not in the dash clip, which caused him to swear. He reached for the cord. As he came up from the floor with the handset in his right hand he directed the cruiser back into his lane. The cruiser skidded on the slippery road. He kept the handset in his right hand while he used two hands to steer the cruiser back under control. Quite agitated, he pressed the button.

"Okay, who's out there? Not funny anymore."

"Redfield." A woman's voice broke squelch.

He waited for more.

Quiet.

"Who's out there?" Redfield spoke louder into the handset.

The voice came across hurried, garbled, only every other word.

"Redfield - hell-o - Redfield - you - at -"

"Yes. Sheriff Redfield. Come in. Over."

"Redfield - you - to - now -"

"Hold the button down. No. I mean release first then press down hard."

"Redfield?"

Joe Redfield waited for the voice to disengage.

"Yeah. Who is this?" And waited for a response.

The radio crackled as the voice came back.

"Sarah."

He pressed the button and did not wait, but only created static. He released and waited a moment before he tried again.

"Who? Some kind of a joke? Okay, who the hell is this?"

Annoyed now, he waited for an answer and began to press the button to speak again, but the voice came back.

"Sarah Charvonce. I need to see you right away."

Redfield considered his response for a moment before He replied.

"Pete, are you screwing around with me again? Not a good time for games. Who the hell is this?"

The woman's voice came back on, stronger and clearer.

"Redfield. Will you please listen for a minute? I'll be at Floyd's Bar & Grill. If you are ready to meet me you better come now. I won't stay long. Your decision. You're almost there. On your left."

The radio fell silent. Redfield tried to raise the voice back. But no response. He knew there were only three cruisers. His. The one Pete used. The oldest one, former Sheriff Sam Edwards' cigarette smoke encrusted cruiser, parked in back of the office for Lori or Sam to use as needed. He remembered the old cruiser not in service at the moment due to another dead battery. His thoughts raced. *So, who the hell was on the radio? Had to be coming from Pete's cruiser. Did Pete put someone up to this? What the hell was this all about?*

Before Redfield could contemplate whether or not to go to Floyd's Bar & Grill, the decision made for him as Floyd's appeared up ahead. The voice had been right. He was there. But how did she know? The cruiser screeched to a halt, skidded into the parking lot and stopped short of the lone snowmobile parked there and Floyd's front door.

Inside Floyd's Bar & Grill, he saw a woman at a table in the back. Floyd spotted the sheriff and attempted conversation, but Redfield waved him off as he passed by and continued toward the woman. She sat there as he approached. He tried to remember her description. Brunette was all he could remember. The woman there, brunette.

"Sit down Joe Redfield, I won't bite."

The sheriff eyed her up and down, looked around the room and positioned so as not to be trapped or boxed in.

"How do I know you are who you say you are?"

"Sheriff, you'll have to believe me."

Redfield looked around and back to the woman.

"Sorry miss, I don't think I can. Not a good time."

She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Will you at least listen to what I have to tell you?"

Redfield continued to look around.

"I'm sorry miss I'm very busy right now. I don't have the time. Why don't you come by the office Monday morning and we can talk there."

He turned and began to walk away, but the woman called to him.

"Joe Redfield, wait! Wait a god-damn minute."

He turned to face her and positioned his hand toward the service revolver at his side. His thumb flipped off the leather hammer hold.

The woman stood to the side of the table. She unfastened her jeans. Redfield watched with interest. Floyd perked up and adjusted for a better view. She hesitated for a moment to look at the sheriff.

"Well, Joe Redfield, maybe this will help."

The woman cupped her jeans at the waist and lowered the fabric down to her knees. The panties were white lace, bunched from the jeans pulled over and appeared to be brighter in the dim light. In an instant the panties were down on top of the jeans both gathered at her knees.

Floyd dropped the glass he had in his hand which smashed to the floor. The sheriff heard, but did not look. His eyes locked on hers and had not broke contact since she began.

The woman turned, bent down and gave the sheriff a clear view of her buttocks. He stared at her. At her buttocks. A smile formed until he saw. On the right cheek appeared a single distinguishable scar. He knew the pattern before he focused on the spot, which caused his smile and attitude to waver. The woman bent further and extended her buttocks toward the Sheriff.

"Go ahead touch it, Joe Redfield. Maybe you'll believe me. Go ahead I don't mind. You know you need to."

He reached and placed his hand on her right butt cheek and ran his fingers over the scar. The scar protruded from the skin and seemed real enough. Floyd broke another glass. The sheriff looked this time. Floyd fumbled around and pretended not to look. Redfield continued to rub his hand over the scar and the tenderness of her right butt cheek. The scar very real to the touch, jagged but soft. The skin warn, not what he would have expected. Then again, he did not know what to expect. But, the touch warm and smooth as he ran his thumb across the scar.

The woman spoke just above a whisper.

"When I was six years old, I played in my grandparent's backyard and tried to climb the chain link fence. I would have made it too, but my foot slipped and caused me to sit down hard on the jagged top. My underwear caught and turned me upside down. By the time I recovered, the sharp edge had torn through and pierced my butt. I hung there until the fabric ripped away. My weight caused the jagged edge to dig in deeper and by the time I fell, the cut stretched rather wide. At six years old the scar covered most of my fanny, but as I got older the scar became smaller and formed the unique pattern. I know you saw the scar before. Fred Randall, your coroner pointed it out that day. If you still don't believe me, you can check the details out with my parents."

Redfield removed his hand and waited for the woman to face him.

She pulled her panties back up into place and then her jeans. He watched until she pulled the zipper up before he met her eyes.

"So Joe Redfield, will you listen?"

"For a moment."

"Floyd, I'll have a glass of red wine from the good bottle. None of that box junk you peddle. You better bring the sheriff a scotch on the rocks. Make it a top shelf scotch none of your well crap. Looks like he needs one right about now."

"How did you know I drank scotch?" Redfield asked.

"It comes with the kit."

"What kit?"

"Five easy lessons on how to be a ghost."

Before he could respond, Floyd stood over them with the drinks and mumbled something about no damn waitress. Redfield reached to pay, but Sarah placed her hand on his.

"Floyd will run a tab for us. Right Floyd? Add twenty percent gratuity."

The mention of a gratuity appeared to appease Floyd's vanity. They both waited until Floyd left before they continued.

"Who are you?"

"Oh sheriff, I believe we established who. We're up to what do I want."

"Okay, what do you want?"

Redfield looked across the table at the woman who claimed she was the dead Sarah Charvonce. He took a strong sip of the scotch.

She looked up and away, back down and back to the sheriff.

"This may sound strange, but I want to help you, Joe Redfield. You have to put an end to this trouble. Before another. Before something happens again. Before this gets any further out of hand."

"Help me? How? End what?"

Sarah looked down again, up past him and met his eyes.

"There are two couples in the cabin. Never happened before. I don't. I'm afraid something will go horribly wrong this time. You need to stop. You need to do something before. Before it's too late."

"This, from you." Redfield wiped his hand across his face. "You believe something will happen?"

He looked at her as he asked not sure he understood.

"What do you need me, or should I say, want me to do?"

"I can't tell you very much. I need you to understand about Ryan."

Sarah looked away. Redfield grimaced at the mention of the name and looked hard at her as he swirled the ice in his glass. He took another strong sip.

"What do I need to understand about Ryan?"

"He's not one of us. At least not what you think."

"One of who?"

"Do I have to spell it out?" Sarah cocked her head and looked at the sheriff, but took another sip of her wine.

"Okay, okay, let's skip that for a moment. What should I know?"

Sarah did not answer right away. She fought with her own thoughts. Started to speak, but stopped before she let the words out.

"Find out where Ryan stays here. It will give you the answer. His place here will give you the answer you need."

"What place. Where? What answer?"

Sarah sat silent. Her eyes looked down at the glass in her hand.

Redfield took another sip and spoke softer.

"Listen Sarah, I did not mean. Not sure I understand."

Sarah put her hand on his and squeezed. Her hand cold to the touch.

Redfield wanted to pull his hand away, but left it there under hers. She looked back up, her eyes met his.

"You have to trust me Joe Redfield. I wish I could do more, I wish I could tell you more, but I've done too much already. Not how this works."

She stopped and put her head down.

He sat silent, looked at her and reached over with the other hand. She cupped his hand in hers. Redfield continued to look at her while he spoke.

"Sarah, as you can imagine, I'm confused as hell. I'm not sure what to believe. Can you? I mean. Anything else. Maybe some more details."

Sarah squeezed his hand tighter. Her hands colder and looked down for a long time before her eyes met his.

"Sorry Joe Redfield, all I can tell you. I must go. I've been here too long already. I should not have said anything. Not how this works."

She put her hand on his cheek.

"Please Joe, you must hurry. Not much time left. You do believe me, don't you? Ryan the key. Find him. But find his place. It will give you the answer. Find him before he can. Before anything happens again. This has to end."

He looked across the table at the woman who sat there and wondered what the hell he did believe.

"You want me to believe you are who you say you are?"

"Joe, it doesn't matter what you believe about me. Not important. What matters you believe what I told you about Ryan. He is very real and he is the key here. You need to find his place and before the night is over. Please, find his place. All I can say. Will you promise me you will?"

He still sat there with his hand under hers and noticed a slight squeeze. He nodded yes. She squeezed again and removed her hands. He took a final sip of his scotch and let the ice clink against the glass.

"You are a good man, Joe Redfield. Remember, you and I got our start together. I believe I can trust you. I know you'll do what you can. Sorry we have to meet under these circumstances. Maybe next time."

Redfield grimaced as he sat back in the chair. The ordeal last season flashed before his eyes while a cold shiver passed through his body. He let his eyes focus on her ready to say more. But Sarah stopped him.

"I must go."

She placed her hand on his cheek again. The touch cold. He noticed a lightness came over the woman's skin.



"Sarah wait. I need more."

"Sorry Joe, all I can do and I shouldn't have. Not how this works. You must understand, not how this works. Please do what you can. Find his place. Hurry. Time will run out."

Sarah kissed his forehead and stepped away. Her lips cold to the touch.

Redfield turned, but she was gone. Sarah was gone. He looked around. No one. He let out a deep sigh and reached for the glasses to bring back to Floyd. But only his glass sat on the table.

"Well, I'll be damned." Flowed from his lips.

"What's that sheriff? Say who was she? I didn't see her leave. Don't think I've seen her before. Who did you say she was?"

"You saw her, right?"

"Of course, I did." Floyd got indignant. "So who was she anyway?"

"Floyd, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Sure I would. I'm a bartender. I listen to everybody's bullshit. How come you didn't bring her glass too?"

"What glass?"

"Her glass. She stole my glass?"

"Easy, Floyd. I bet if you counted your glasses they would all be there, except the two you broke."

"C'mon Joe, who is she already? You with someone new?"

"Nope."

"So who was she?"

"Okay. She's a ghost."

"A what? Say, do you and Pete smoke the same shit? A couple of weeks back he said the same bullshit. He might've seen a ghost. Except I did not see anyone. But this time I saw the lady plain as day. Say what do you fellows do back in your office?"

For a moment he wanted to ask Floyd about Pete, but his own encounter all he can handle at the moment. He left Floyd babbling as he walked to the door.

"Bye, Floyd. Thanks for the drink."

Quite sure Sarah's tab wouldn't be there either and laughed at the thought as he walked through the door. Floyd kept rambling on until the door closed. The wind reminded him about the light jacket. He pushed the collar up and pulled the jacket tighter.

The cruiser sat angled into the lot rather than parked. He had not bothered with parking and pulled in to let the cruiser stop. The snowmobile gone and he couldn't help but notice there did not appear to have tracks in or out of the snow. His tire tracks the only marks in the loose snow. Somehow he expected as much.

While he sat inside the cruiser and waited for it to get warn, he tried to decide what to do next and what he believed happened in Floyd's. The logical choice would be to head back to the office to figure out this Ryan character and if he did have a place here and why. And what he would find there. Of course, this

all hinged on whether he believed any of what happened in Floyd's Bar & Grill. Maybe slip back to his investigator's logic and decide if any of this real. Or, another wild goose chase. On the other hand.

The cruiser fishtailed as it left the parking lot, bumped and swerved onto the highway. The sheriff got the vehicle under control and pushed down on the accelerator.

An image of the woman at the table in the back of Floyd's Bar & Grill came into view as he drove along. For a moment he remembered how attractive she looked. Her long brown hair and the way it spilled over her shoulders. Of course dressed too warm to be able to distinguish her figure, but if her butt any indication, he was confident the rest as nice.

For another moment he remembered the soft touch of her skin and the sensation as he rubbed the scar on the right cheek. A feeling he missed for too long. No matter how involved you are in what you do, nothing can replace the soft touch of a woman. If only he could.

"Oh shit, Lori!"

Joe Redfield yelled out and pushed down hard on the accelerator. He forgot all about her. His thoughts raced. *How long ago did he call? What time is it? The little dash clock showed seven. He checked his watch to make sure. Seven o'clock. How long ago did he call her? At least a couple of hours, he thought. Damn, she will be pissed.* He pushed harder on the accelerator.

The moon broke through a cloud and illuminated the road for a minute. He stretched his neck to look up out of the windshield. The sky still looked clear. There were quite a few clouds, but held. No snow yet. It could work on our side, unsure why he thought it, but still decided it would be good it did not snow.

The cruiser continued on in the direction of town. Redfield slammed on the brakes, the cruiser skidded across the road where it came to a halt and straddled the highway. He fought with his thoughts, tried to decide if he should get those kids out of the cabin, or go back to the office first and get some more details. The fiasco of the meet this afternoon convinced him another confrontation with those kids better be supported by facts this time. That above all else determined his decision. He slammed the cruiser into reverse, jackknifed the cruiser back, forward, and ground the gears back toward town and the office.

And Lori Jacobs.

The adrenalin began to flow. He had not been this excited since the city. Only the nagging feeling something was about to happen and the terrible thought he might not be able to do anything about it kept him from enjoying this new found excitement. The cruiser surged forward and reacted to the increased pressure on the accelerator.

Time slipped away.

The sky still looked clear at the moment. But there would be more snow yet tonight. No doubt about it. Snow would come.

The wind gusted and blew white crystals about.

Redfield noticed the old cruiser strain under his punishment, but he had no choice. He had to get there before it was too late. But where?

## Chapter 20

Ryan inched the snowmobile to a stop in front of the secluded cabin and jumped off before the motor died. He watched the little car pull in right behind and motioned the driver to bring the car up to the front right next to his snowmobile.

Josh and Tiffany climbed out on the driver's side of the economy car, stood and waited for Ryan to join them on their side. They looked around and took in the sight of the oversized cabin and surrounding area.

This cabin appeared much larger than the one they stayed in. And based on the distance they traveled from the main road this place also included a great deal of land. A shed or building of some sort stood in the back. The headlights from their car illuminated the back building as they swung the car in and around the snowmobile.

The porch light illuminated the stairs. There were lights on inside as well, but the cabin appeared quiet at the moment. Josh pulled Tiffany close. Ryan joined them with a hand gesture for them to follow him as he raced up the stairs. A slight rap, turn of the doorknob, push against the wood frame and Ryan stepped inside. Josh and Tiffany right behind him.

"Sarah. Hey Sarah, you here? Hey, you here yet?"

Ryan yelled as he looked back at Josh and Tiffany and shrugged his shoulders. Tiffany took Josh's hand, squeezed it tight and walked further into the large room. Ryan left Josh and Tiffany in mid-room, removed his coat and dropped the garment over a chair, but nodded as he did. He rubbed his hands together and walked toward the fireplace where a good blaze danced in the firebox. After he poked the embers he placed another log on top, but kept his back to Josh and Tiffany.

As Josh watched Ryan's casualness, Josh removed his coat, helped Tiffany remove hers and hung both coats on the coat rack by the front door. On his return she grabbed his hand again and squeezed tighter this time. Josh patted her hand in an everything will be okay gesture.

Ryan continued to stroke the fire.

Tiffany noticed an old armchair faced the fire with a sunlamp on either side. She considered the lamps a rather odd arrangement given the large size of the fireplace, which stood a good five feet high and at least three or so feet wide. Why would anyone need sunlamps in front of such a heat-generated warmth. She began to ask when another urge took precedence.

"Hey Ryan, I hope this place has indoor plumbing."

"Yep." Ryan made a sweep toward the back. "The door right there. Has a tub and shower as well. This was some big wig's place. I understand he stayed here for long stretches. The place also has a couple of freezers out back for food storage or whatever."

The last part of Ryan's proclamation was lost on Tiffany as the bathroom door closed before he finished. Josh stood next to Ryan at the fireplace. Both men stood and stared at the flames. Ryan placed his free hand on Josh's shoulder.

"She okay? She looks kinda nervous or jittery like something off."

"Yeah, Ryan. Yeah. She's okay. The ordeal from this morning. She's the one saw her. You know. Saw Sarah against the window. I mean, you know."

"Yeah I know. But, hang in there."

"You live here?" Josh asked and shifted the conversation.

"Yes."

"A very nice place. How did you come by it?"

Josh glanced about the room and took in the size and the furnishings.

"Well, most of these cabins rent out. People like to come up through the snow season. Check with the real estate office in town. They can tell you what's available. Why do you ask?"

"Conversation. What about this place?"

"Don't know. Sarah's place. She's the one rents here."

Ryan looked around the room as he continued to stoke the fire and watched the embers fly about.

"Do you ever rent it?" Josh asked matter-of-fact.

"Yes. I mean no. I never rent this place. But I have rented cabins over here before. My parents have a place over in the next county. I like to get away once in a while. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, conversation."

Before Josh could ask his next question, he was interrupted by the bathroom door opened and a new person emerged. Both of them noticed the difference. Ryan took the initiative and whistled as Tiffany approached. Tiffany had combed her hair. Polished up her makeup and straightened out her clothing.

"Damn Tiffany." Ryan spoke first. "I'm glad we're alone."

"What the hell do you mean, alone? I'm here." Josh bellowed.

"Yeah. Well, we can work around him. Right, Tiffany?"

Ryan smirked, placed the poker back in the stand and moved toward her.

"Ryan. Where the hell is Sarah anyway? I thought she was waiting for us here." Josh bellowed again.

"Well, she said. But she will meet us later as soon as she. You know. But at the moment it's a private affair."

Ryan kept his eyes on Tiffany as he spoke, unaware as Josh muttered something, while he approached her and stood face to face.

Tiffany leaned in. Their lips met.

At first, Tiffany resisted, but for reasons known only to her, she responded and followed through with a deep tongue wrestling, breast crushing, hand roving mother of a kiss.

Josh became much more animated.

Tiffany broke the kiss, but did not relinquish the grip she had on Ryan as she faced Josh.

"Do I detect a little jealousy there, darling?"

"Yes. Well, you know."

"It's okay Josh. Don't fret. Ryan, you're a jerk." Tiffany cried out and pushed Ryan away from her.

"What? Whoa? Why? C'mon didn't you enjoy the kiss too?"

"Ryan, you're still a jerk. If you touch my ass again, I'll rip your nuts off."

"What's with the hostility? Then again, I might like it. C'mon let's try."

"All right Ryan, enough. Josh here will go ballistic."

"Do you know you're beautiful when you're mad?"

"Of all the bullshit. C'mon Ryan. Enough already."

"Well you are!"

The room fell silent. Tiffany walked over to Josh, who stood solemn as he tried to figure it out. Tiffany stopped him before he could speak and held up the note.

*Ryan, went to get some more of my snow. Sorry, took the car again. Should be back soon. Stay put until I get here. Make yourselves comfortable. – Sarah.*

Tiffany held the note in the air. Ryan took the piece of paper from her and read the words. He crumpled the paper and tossed the ball into the fire. With a sweeping motion Ryan took Tiffany in his arms.

"Well, that settles it. We don't have much time. Josh will you excuse us?"

"Jerk." Tiffany said again as she pushed Ryan away.

"Boy some people. What a one track mind."

"Besides, Josh here would get jealous."

"No, I'm not."

Tiffany looked at Josh for a long hard moment. With a mischievous smile, she put her arms around Ryan's shoulders, turned her head to the side and aimed her lips. Ryan met her halfway. His arms encircled her waist and pulled her close. Josh surrendered.

"Okay. Okay. So I am jealous. So what. C'mon break it up will you? C'mon, Tiffany. You know I don't like it when you act up. C'mon, enough already. Jesus, a few beers. Quit it will you? You know it bugs me?"

Tiffany and Ryan broke the hold and if on cue kissed again. But only a lip job, no tongues this time. Ryan let her leave his arms.

"Without a doubt, you are beautiful when you are mad. I don't know, Josh. How did you ever get someone this good? You got money or something?"

Ryan winked as he said it. Tiffany walked away, moved around the old chair and bumped into one of the sunlamps. When Ryan did the same she asked.

"Hey Ryan. What are the sunlamps for?"

Ryan continued to walk toward the kitchen and retrieved the decanter of wine off the counter after he collected a couple of glasses.

"What did you say?"

"The lamps. What are the sunlamps for?"

"How the hell do I know? From the looks of the setup, it appeared Sarah worked on her tan. Maybe she likes a little color without the cancer. Heavy-duty sunlamps for sure. They'll do the job for an all around tan."

"But why so close to the fireplace?" Tiffany pointed.

"Ever sit around one of these cabins naked this time of year?"

"Ryan?"

"No. I mean. Say you wanted to get an all over tan, it would be kinda chilly in the altogether. I guess the fire helps. Want to try?"

"Try what, Ryan?"

"Sit around the cabin naked."

"Okay enough, Ryan."

Josh took the glass from Ryan. And shook his head through the latest innuendo sparing and held still as Ryan filled the glass with wine from the decanter. Tiffany did the same, while she and Ryan talked some more about the sunlamps. Tiffany took a sip and walked over to the sofa to the right of the fireplace. Josh joined her moments later and sat across from her.

As he set the decanter on the mantle, Ryan pointed to the door. As if he heard a noise outside and raced to the front door. He threw the big wooden door open expecting to find someone. But he knew different.

The porch, the steps, the driveway, the road, even the air stood empty.

## Chapter 21

Outside the apartment building the older cruiser kicked twice before it died. Deputy Pete Matson already entered the lobby, oblivious as the cruiser called out. The door closed behind him as the cruiser gave the last gasp.

The keys were dumped on the table by the door. The heavy coat tossed over a chair. Most of the rest of the uniform went the same way and landed on a chair or the floor.

He stood in underwear and socks in front of the fridge with a decision. Eat first. Shower first. His stomach grumbled and made the choice easy. Eat first. Selection was quite limited in the empty fridge, but a quick three-egg scramble did the trick. Afterwards, the dishes were rinsed and stacked in the sink.

A nice hot shower would be the absolute cure. The cascading water soothed his skin and muscle after a full day for a Saturday and the day's events which added to the tension in his muscles. Sitting in a cruiser all day sure could tie a man up. The hot water soothed his body under the spray.

Fifteen minutes later, Pete stood primed, perfumed, groomed, dressed and ready for action. As an afterthought he picked up the pieces of his uniform, carried the pile back to the bedroom and deposited the remains into a laundry basket. A thought to finish the dishes, but decided those could wait. With a last look around the apartment he turned off the light and stepped out the door.

Out front, he proceeded to the cruiser. Damn, what if he met someone tonight and wondered how would he ever explain the cruiser. But what would happen if he did not take the cruiser and the sheriff needed him. Better to explain the cruiser than to let the sheriff down with a screw up. Although, he still believed the sheriff's concerns were unfounded.

As he approached the cruiser, he noticed the driver's door ajar. The light illuminated from inside and when he came closer, he could hear the squelch of the radio. Instinct took over and he reached for the service revolver, but the gun not strapped to his side. He chose not to wear the gun belt with his civilian clothes. Instead he brought his backup tucked into a shoulder holster. The sheriff said he might need him later and if he has to use the cruiser tonight, it meant he would also carry the side arm. As he removed the backup from the holster, Pete pulled the door the rest of the way open.

No one inside. The radio sounded louder with the door open. No voices, only squelch. Quite sure he turned everything off. The radio handset lay on the seat off the dash clip. His clipboard knocked to the floor and on the floorboard of



the driver's side sat pockets of water. He lowered onto the driver's seat, slid in behind the steering wheel and tried to figure out how. A strong aroma of perfume filled the air.

Deputy Pete Matson looked out through the windshield. Not a soul visible. He checked the sides and turned to check the back. No one. He looked once more around the inside. Everything else looked okay. He placed the handset back on the dash clip. With a slight effort, he retrieved the clipboard from the floor of the passenger's side and set it back on the seat next to him. With a strong pull the driver's door closed while he fired up the engine and waited for the inside to warm up. The smell of perfume grew stronger in the closed up car.

Pete dropped the gear selector into drive and inched the cruiser forward. The perfume smell lingered and although not offensive, he lowered the driver's window an inch to get some fresh air. Or maybe because he needed air.

As he approached the stop sign at the end of the block, a gust of wind hit the cruiser and blew snow through the open window. The crystals hit the side of his face, but Matson did not notice and rolled through the stop sign with one of those half stops. The inside compartment began to get warmer, but the heater had not turned on yet. Pete lowered the window a little more. The smell of perfume still prevalent.

The cruiser continued down the road.

The perfume inside engulfed him.

~

The time approached about two hours since the sheriff called. Lori Jacobs went back up and changed into her uniform. Maybe this would be serious and it would be official work.

She tried to call the office several times, but no answer each time. Sheriff Joe Redfield's cell did not answer either. With no other way to reach him and without a cruiser she could not raise him on the two-way. He did not call her either as she checked her messages several times.

On the last trip up a half hour ago she changed back into her earlier outfit of casual jeans and sweater and put the uniform back in the closet. If he was this late, it can't be that important and this was Saturday night. Not scheduled to work. Regular clothes would do fine.

As she started to go up to check yet again, the sheriff pulled up in front of the building. She shook her head and checked her watch. Seven-fifteen. She stepped out from the warmth of the lobby and into the cold night air. Joe Redfield opened the door from the inside for her. The cruiser moved forward before she got her seat belt on.

"What's up, Joe?"

"Listen Lori. I'm sorry I'm late. I got caught up in something."

"It's okay. But, if I would have known I could have taken more time to get ready instead I threw on some clothes and rushed down. I thought you said right away."

"I am sorry. You look fine." He looked over to check her out. "Do something new with your hair?"

"Damn you, Redfield. I don't believe you. I can spend all day on my hair so it looks nice and you don't say boo. One time I'm rushed, don't have a chance to do anything and all you notice."

Lori Jacobs sat silent on the passenger seat next to the sheriff.

"Jesus, Lori, what the hell bit you?"

"You did, damnit. You never notice me when I look nice. You only notice when I look like this. You know, I could be at the dance tonight instead I had to wait for you. I know I'm on call and all, but."

"You always look good to me. Always. Too good."

Lori Jacobs sat silent and bit her lower lip. Joe Redfield swung the cruiser around, drove down the main road toward the office, placed his hand on hers and squeezed.

She left her hand under his.

They drove in silence for the next few minutes. Redfield kept his hand on hers and reassured her.

"What's up, Joe? What do you need me for?"

"I think we have a situation. There are some folks at the cabin. Two couples this time. They called. I went out to see them. They had another one of those Sarah and her friend visits. A guy named Ryan this time. You know the story. But different. Two couples saw. And. Well, I think something will happen tonight. I'm calling in the troops until I can get a handle on everything."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'll explain it all when we get back to the office."

"What do you think will happen?"

"Well, some events have led me to believe her friend, Ryan, with Sarah last night may be more involved than we think."

"How so, Joe?"

"I'm not sure yet."

Redfield slowed the cruiser down as he approached the center of town. Lori Jacobs sat silent and stared out the passenger window.

"Joe, can I tell you something?"

He removed his hand from hers to grip the steering wheel, so he could lower the window a little with his other. The air became warm inside.

"Sure go ahead. As long as it's not you're quitting."

"No, Joe. Nothing of the sort. But this Sarah story. I'm probably the only one in town who doesn't. Well, her. Maybe it's because I don't believe in ghosts."

Redfield looked across at her, but she stared straight ahead and did not look at him. The cruiser inched closer to the office. He waited a long minute before he spoke.

"It's okay. Neither do I. Or should I say did I? But I saw her today. Matter-of-fact I met with her."

"Who?"

"Sarah."

They sat in silence. The sheriff's office straight ahead.

Redfield glided the cruiser over to the curb and slid as the car stopped. Out the door in an instant. He did not wear the seat belt. Opened Lori's door before her belt came undone. Closed the door behind her and waited for her to pass before they walked to the office door. A quick check of the sky. No stars and the air colder. The jacket no protection against the cold frigid air.

A snowflake fell. And another. And several more.

~

Suzanne's eyes opened. The focus not back yet. The shape of the ceiling beams came into view. As she tilted her head, she gazed about the room and except for the occasional crackling of the fire, everything quiet. As she rose up, the quilt slid off her chest, exposed her bare skin and sent a chill through her.

Zeke stirred next to her. Her movement also pulled the quilt from his back. She covered him up and slipped out. Her whole body was racked with a chill and thousands of goose bumps. She took a moment to look for her clothes, but remembered their fate and abandoned the search. She hurried to the bedroom.

The terry cloth robe, tattered and beaten, a garment that saw better days. Such a cherished one it could not be replaced. Zeke bought her two other robes. Both still hung in her closet back home never used. She slipped her naked body into the robe like it knew it belonged there. The warmth engulfed her.

Suzanne dug into the suitcase to search for another pair of socks and did not realize she still had a pair on. Nothing else, but she did have on socks. She tossed the socks back and grabbed a pair of panties. She headed to the bathroom. The cold seat hit her with such a vengeance she no longer needed to go, swore and jumped back up. As she rubbed her butt to get the heat back, she worked the panties back up, stumbled and walked back to the fire.

Zeke had not moved and still occupied the same position she left him in. She searched for a clock in the darkened room and wondered how long they slept and whether or not she should wake him. The thought of a shower intrigued her, but after the toilet seat, she knew anything else in there would be as bad. The desire to go began to come back and as she walked toward the bathroom she heard a voice call out.

"Go for me too, will ya?"

She changed direction, knelt down next to him and stroked Zeke's head. The trip once more sidelined. She eased him awake.

"C'mon get up. It's late."

"How late? Anybody here yet?"

"I don't know. No not yet. But, I'm sure they'll be here soon. C'mon get up. Help me straighten this place up."

"Okay. Okay. In a minute. Where's my clothes?"

"Over here. Over there. In the kitchen. "

"Oh yeah. They did get sort of tossed about. Hey, do you have on the damn robe again?"

"Yes, I have the damn robe on again. You tossed my clothes about. What did you expect me to wear? Now get up. Let's go. "

"Okay. Okay. I'm sure you have other clothes. Where did you say mine?"

Zeke got hit in the face with his pants, followed by his shirt.

Suzanne and Zeke showered together and dressed in haste afterward.

Zeke returned to the main room to attend to the fire.

"Well, how does this look?" Suzanne joined him a few minutes later.

"Looks fine to me."

"You did not look."

"Looks good to me." Zeke stopped the poke and looked her over.

Suzanne punched him on the arm and went about the room to straighten up. Zeke watched her. Twice it looked like she began to say something, but stopped. Zeke pushed.

"What? What did you want to say?"

Suzanne hesitated before she spoke.

"Where do you think they are? It must be awful late. Why did they take so long? Oh Zeke, do you think something happened to them? Maybe they had an accident or something?"

"No, c'mon. Don't worry. They'll be here soon. Must have got involved with whatever. Forgot the time. You know. We've done it before. Hey, I liked the time we had together. It has been awhile since we. Well, since we had some quiet time together."

Suzanne looked at him.

"Yeah. Zeke, we can figure us out when we get home, assuming we get through the night."

"Suzanne, everything will be fine. I'm sure they will be here soon."

"I know you're right. But, still a little concerned."

She walked over to the windows and joined Zeke as he put his arm around her. She nestled into his shoulder as they stood together and stared out the large center window. Suzanne couldn't help but glance up toward the ridge. The fire cracked and popped in the background. Suzanne held Zeke tighter with each crack. For a moment, the sight of the lights up on the ridge left her apprehensive not to know how the night would end. Zeke held her tighter. She

looked down at the snow in front of the window and noticed the footprints in the snow were almost gone.

Suzanne closed her eyes and held Zeke tighter.

The sky grew darker as the snow began to fall.

## Chapter 22

"I wonder what took her so long."

Ryan spoke to no one. Because no one could hear him anymore. No one conscious anyway.

The wind howled in the distance, shook trees and blew loose snow around. The door stayed open another moment. The cold air passed across Ryan's face. With a little effort, the door closed against the wind.

Tiffany slumped to the left. Her head rested against the arm of the sofa. The wine glass rested on her lap between her fingers, empty. Josh slumped down. His head against the back of the sofa. The wine glass to his right. A drop left. The liquid trickled onto the sofa and left a small stain. Ryan loomed over the two. Although, confident they were both out cold, he kicked each of their feet to be sure. No response. He did it again for good measure. Still no response.

At the kitchen counter, he poured two fingers of Bourbon neat, and downed the liquid. He removed the wine glasses from Josh and Tiffany, and commented on the vintage. Both glasses were rinsed out and the decanter placed back on the top shelf of the cabinet over the sink. As he wiped his hands, Ryan glanced back at the sleeping pair. Watched for any signs of movement. He poured another two fingers of Bourbon neat and poured another, drank half of it before he set the glass down and took a deep breath to regain his composure.

As he strolled back to his guests, the Bourbon hit and he stopped a moment to regain his bearing. Better lay off the sauce until the job completed. In something close to a stagger, he reached the sofa and braced against the arm next to Tiffany. He tugged at the front of Tiffany's sweater, pulled the fabric up over her bra and stopped below her chin. Neither the sweater, nor Tiffany, offered any resistance. The bra, a skin tight beige front loader with plastic catches offered no resistance. He unhooked the catch.

His heart raced and lips went dry, but had no idea why so excited. Maybe because she teased him earlier. As he looked at her breasts, he saw the nipples harden. In a panic he jumped back, ready to react but waited. Nothing else happened. She sat unresponsive. Her sweater up around her neck. Bra hung to the side and the nipples rock hard. The cold. Must be the cold. Nothing more. Normal reaction. On his knees once again, he cupped each breast and savored the soft touch. He pulled the sweater back down to focus.

Outside the back door the air seemed almost warm. Although, still very much winter. Sure would appreciate a better or colder night for this. Much worse

weather had been called for. It caused him to swear and slam the door as he entered the big room. Ryan decided to do Josh first. He knelt down.

"Well, Josh, not such a smart ass now, are you? You gave me so much grief this morning and before. Why I picked you to go first. What? Nothing to say?"

Josh's slumped body lay still on the sofa. Ryan reached down to remove his boots. Even with the winter clothes Josh wore it did not take long to undress his unconscious body. Finished, Ryan hoisted the naked Josh across his shoulders for the trip out. Experience taught him how to balance a heavy body this way, which made it easier than to drag dead weight.

Once again on the back porch, Ryan believed the weather too warm for his task. The body dipped and shifted while Ryan made his way to the center shed. Ryan slipped on a rut in the path and almost lost his balance. He swore at the misstep. Josh's body shifted, which he stopped to adjust.

There were three sheds in all in the back. But the center shed would be the easiest to get to. After he stopped outside the door to the shed, Ryan dropped the naked body to the ground, and let it settle in the snow. Josh landed face up.

After Ryan fumbled with the latch, he slipped into the shed. The light shone bright and the air did feel colder inside, but still not cold enough. The box on the outside used to control the temperature read minus ten degrees. He set it to minus twenty. He wanted to start there and could check the progress later.

Ryan mounted Josh's body on one of the slabs used to store, or prepare game hunted. The leather straps were fastened into place so the body would not slip off and freeze into some unworkable shape hard to form later. As Ryan surveyed his work, he noticed Josh's pecker had fallen to the side. He tried to right it and balanced it on top of the testicles. Sure did not want to have to deal with it later. The protrusion stayed upright.

"Must be the money?" Ryan said out loud. "Obviously not the equipment."

Josh's testicles receded in the cold which caused the appendage to stand up further. Ryan wondered for the moment if the body tried to respond to his comment. But shook his head. Must be the damn booze clouded his thought.

Once back inside the cabin, Ryan did a dance by the fireplace, rubbed his hands together and spun around and around to get warm. He made the trip out back without benefit of a coat and spent more time in the freezer than planned.

Tiffany still lay slumped to the side. The sweater somewhat lowered to the bottom of her breasts. He carried her to the chair in front of the fireplace.

"Well, you wanted to know earlier what these sunlamps were for. You will know soon enough. For now I will put you here so you don't get cold again. Okay with you, my dear?"

As he knelt in front of her, Ryan removed the boots, pushed the pant legs up to remove the socks and pushed in the stomach to unfasten the jeans. He worked those down past her hips over the knees and off her feet. He dropped the material by the side of the chair. For the moment he rearranged the panties back in place. The sweater lifted off easy as did the bra, which slipped down each arm and pulled free from the back. Also placed in the pile.

Tiffany sat slumped in the chair. Her head rested on the back support. The arms free to each side. The feet planted on the floor. The knees raised. The thighs spread open. The beige matching panties not much of a cover. More decoration than clothes. Ryan leaned back on his legs to enjoy the view. Although not in the game plan, he became excited.

"One hell of a kiss you planted on me earlier." He said out loud.

He removed the panties and forced the thighs together as they slid down. Once past the knees the thighs fell back apart which gave Ryan a full view. He lifted each leg to complete the task.

"So what do you say, Tiffany? Still want to play? If only we had the time. But, here you are sitting around the cabin naked."

Ryan watched Tiffany, or rather her naked body in front of him as he stood back up. The body slumped to the side which forced the legs to close as if to make a statement. Ryan nodded in agreement.

"You're right Tiffany, time to go." He said with a sigh.

Ryan hoisted Tiffany over his shoulder and carried her out. The path still as slippery and icy as the first time out. He slipped at the same place, almost lost his balance and swore as before. Inside, he placed Tiffany on the slab across from Josh and strapped her in.

As he poked down Josh's body with his finger, Ryan tested the buoyancy. Still soft. He turned back to Tiffany and positioned her hair under her head. He fixed a second strap to keep her breasts propped up so they wouldn't freeze flat or to the sides which would be much harder to form later without some leverage. Satisfied with the formation, he gave one last look at Josh. His pecker still stood straight up. Okay there. Not a lot of time to perform his work later. Pleased the bodies were set, he flicked off the light and the room went dark.

Outside he put the latch back in place and turned the temperature down to minus twenty-two. Ryan slipped again on the way back. This time he fell into the snow and swore a tirade as he brushed the white powder off.

Inside the cabin, Ryan once again performed the dance by the fire, rubbed his hands together and spun around. The snow steamed off his clothes, but his thoughts were on the two bodies in the freezer. Two down. Two to go. Four in one night a real possibility. Proud of his effort to create the story which separated the two couples. And maneuvered to get these two here with the only car to leave the other two with no way to get away. Nor would they would know any better and would have no choice but to wait for him to return.

Once warm enough, Ryan collected the clothes, but dropped pieces as he picked up others. He let the whole pile drop back to the floor, retrieved a brown paper bag from the kitchen and proceeded to put both sets of clothes in. He placed the bag by the door.

Out on the back road, their little car crept along and came to the spot Ryan had selected earlier. Not too far, but not too close either. Somewhere out near the old Whitmore place. On the road between the main highway and the secluded cabin where Josh and Tiffany were stored. With no one at the old Whitmore



place and no one in the cabin he came from, the road he picked never used anymore and still covered in snow. The car slid as Ryan slowed down and looked for the right spot.

Once there, Ryan drove the car off the road, smashed it into a snow bank and killed the engine, but left the keys in the ignition. He removed the clothes from the bag and scattered them about the inside of the car. Tiffany's decorative beige panties were hung on the rear view mirror. He wanted to create absolutely the right atmosphere. A devil may care look, and arranged the clothes like they were discarded, not forced off. Once Ryan was satisfied with the placement of the clothes he got out and ran around the car several times to obliterate the foot prints. Hard to tell later if the couple were barefoot or not.

Behind a clump of bushes, Ryan retrieved the other snowmobile he stashed for the trip back to the cabin. Always faster by snowmobile. Ryan pulled into the driveway and took very little time to get back. This might work out better than he imagined.

Inside the door, he saw what he missed. Both of their coats were still on the rack inside the door. He swore out loud and thought for a moment. Paced back and forth and spoke out loud, quite agitated.

"Maybe I could take them later. No, it wouldn't be the same. All of the clothes had to be in the car at the same time. Damn, damn, damn."

He shook his head from side to side, because he would have to go back out there. For a moment, Ryan thought he should go out back and check the buoyancy of his two guests, but decided the coats needed to get to the car. Everything the same, he mumbled over and over again. Everything the same.

Light snow began to fall.

## Chapter 23

Joe Redfield held the door open for Lori, who turned on the lights as she entered. The sheriff right behind her. Once inside, Redfield walked to his desk while Lori Jacobs stopped at the desk across from the deputy's. She removed her coat, gloves, scarf and placed them on the chair. The sheriff sat down with his jacket on already deep in thought.

Lori crossed the room and stood in front of him.

"So, where's Pete?"

"He's probably at the dance. But, I told him to take the cruiser."

"So he gets to go to the dance and I'm stuck here with you? What is this, a trick to get me alone on a Saturday night?"

As soon as Lori said it she was sorry she did.

"Sorry Joe. Bad joke. Listen, I know you have a couple of thoughts to work out. What say I go get us some food and let you work for a minute. I'm sure you haven't eaten yet. Have you?"

Redfield sat silent and shifted files and papers around.

"Well, have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Eat. Did you eat anything yet. I thought I could get some food."

"Yeah. Good idea. Better get a sandwich for Fred. He will be here soon."

"Joe, listen. I'm sorry. I did not mean. Well, I did not mean anything before. A joke. I mean. I'm sorry."

Redfield sat back in the chair with the usual squeak. Lori stood in front of the desk fidgeted and looked down.

"Would it be so bad we were alone together on a Saturday night?"

Lori Jacobs raised her head to look back at Joe Redfield. His face solid. No trace of emotion. She did not know if he was serious or kidded her and did not know how to answer.

"Would it?" He repeated the question without a change in expression.

"Well, quite frankly, Joe, I thought you'd never ask. And, if you asked me to be alone with you on a Saturday night, or any night, the answer is yes. If you only kidded or fished, the answer still yes. Your move, Joe Redfield."

The expression on his face changed to a cross between excitement and panic. Lori never took her eyes off of him as she walked around the desk and positioned on his lap. The chair squeaked and groaned under the added pressure. Before Redfield could react Lori kissed him hard on the mouth. He

responded to the kiss and kissed her back. His arms went around her, held her tight while the kiss lingered.

Lori broke off the kiss, rubbed his cheek and patted him on the shoulder.

"I better get the food. You must be hungry."

The chair squeaked and groaned as she stood up. Redfield watched while she put on her coat, scarf and gloves. She looked at him and walked out the door.

"Damn," he said out loud as he savored the taste of the kiss and tried to get back to the business at hand. With nothing on this character Ryan and nowhere to start and nothing to go on, his thoughts went back to the encounter with Sarah. *If it was her. Hell, anyone could have a scar on their ass. Maybe it was some broad who gets her kicks dropping her pants in bars sent there to throw him off. That would explain everything. Everything, but the disappearing act. At least it would be a good stunt, vanishing into thin air. It sure gave more credence to the identity of the woman in Floyd's Bar & Grill. It's what ghosts do best. Appear and disappear? Ghosts? Hell. What will I think of next?* Redfield's mind filled with arguments both for and against what he witnessed earlier. Something in him wanted to believe all of this, but the investigator, the trained professional, suggested he not get too anxious. At least what he had been taught. Logic, always use logic hammered home. View the facts and proceed accordingly.

*Well, logic didn't work here. Not your everyday run of the mill ghost. Ghosts were supposed to haunt you and scare the shit out of you. Not meet you in Floyd's Bar & Grill and drop their jeans. Not to mention passing on a tip. A tip? From a ghost no less.* The answer seemed to lie in one simple fact. He either believed what happened today and look for this Ryan's place. Or, not believe and let fate set the course. There could be no reasoning here at all. Believe or not. *The gut said go with it. Take it on face value and assume the woman in the bar another person who gave you a tip. If the tip turns out to be a wild goose chase. Okay. Life goes on. But, if it turns out to be right and could have prevented something bad from happening. Screw logic. Get off your ass and go for it. So the first step, to find out about this Ryan character and to do that, he would need help.* His thoughts stopped there and picked up the phone. He punched a number in, the phone answered on the third ring.

"Coroner's office, Fred Randall speaking."

"Hi Fred, it's Joe. I need your help."

"Oh hi Joe. Sure. You got something this time."

"Nothing solid. A couple of leads. I need you to bring your files over."

"Okay sure. What files?"

"How soon can you be here?"

"Ten minutes, maybe. What files do you want?"

"You know the ones we discussed earlier. Sarah and the other four."

"Of course, I should have known. Be right over."

The phone went silent in his hand. He depressed another button and brought back a dial tone. But, he couldn't find the number he wanted. Instead of putting the receiver back, he laid it on the desk while he retrieved the phone

book from the shelf. By the time he picked the receiver up it gave off those strange noises a phone will make when left off the hook for too long.

Redfield punched another button and dialed the number from the telephone book. After the tenth ring he slammed the receiver down. After he realized almost eight o'clock on a Saturday night, he would have been surprised if someone did answer.

The box sat on the table behind the auxiliary desk. A duty he let the deputies handle. Every business in town listed an emergency number on file at the sheriff's office. The only time he would ever use the box would be when someone would get drunk and knock out a window or trip an alarm. This would be the only time he could remember he used the box in an actual investigation. The number he wanted leapt out at him, because it appeared to be more of an advertisement than a number. A bright colored card with the slogan:

*"You won't find any with a deal like Morrow! Largest rental agent in town. We never close. If the office is closed, call me at the number listed below. It's never too late to make a Morrow deal!"*

He dialed the number. As soon as the click stopped he could tell a machine would take over.

"Always open my ass."

He slammed the receiver back down. On the bottom of the card, a number with what appeared to be the word home next to it handwritten in pencil. Redfield dialed the number.

"Hell-o." A woman answered on the third ring.

"Hi yes. I'd like to speak to Ed Morrow, please."

"I'm sorry he's not here right now, but if you would like"

"This is Sheriff Redfield." He cut her off in mid sentence. "Do you know where I can reach him? It's very important."

"I'm sorry sheriff, but."

"Look lady, it's a matter of life and death. Where can I reach him?"

"Hold on... Ed."

Redfield waited for Ed Morrow to come to the phone and drummed his fingers on the desk. A sort of pace while he sat. There were muffled voices and what appeared to be argument in the background.

"Hell-o this is Ed Morrow. What's up sheriff?"

"Listen Ed, why did your wife say you were not home?"

"Oh sorry, sheriff. We have a little dinner party and she did not want me to be disturbed. People call here all of the time."

"Not the sheriff."

"True. How can I help?"

"Well Ed, I need to know everyone named Ryan, who rents a cabin in this county this weekend."

"Sheriff, I don't think you realize."

"I do know what I asked for. How soon can you have it?"

"I'll start first light Monday morning."

"Like hell you will. You'll start right now and I'll expect it in half an hour."

"Sheriff, be reasonable. Saturday night. The office closed and I'm in the middle of a dinner party. Well, you must know."

"Ed, I don't care what you have to do. I need to prevent a murder and I need the information. You want me to send someone over to get those files?"

"You can't, the office is closed. Besides."

"A fire ax to the front door would work. Anything else stop me?"

"An ax? You can't be serious. Why, you would need a court order."

"Look, Morrow. What do you think would happen if I called the judge right now and told him I need to prevent a murder, maybe multiple murders, but I needed information some sorry ass real estate agent wouldn't give me. Because he had a dinner party? Do you think he'd sign the order?"

"Sheriff, can't you give me something to go on other than Ryan? What if he's not with our office? There are others you know."

"Okay, you get on the horn to them. You're the biggest. Why I picked on you. I need the information and I need it now. Do you understand, Morrow?"

"How can I reach you sheriff?"

"I'm at my office. Hey, Ed. Thanks."

"Sure, always glad to do my civic duty."

From the sarcasm in the voice and the abruptness of the end of the conversation, he knew Ed Morrow not at all happy about this deal. Couldn't blame him either. He could apologize later. Before he had a chance to cross over to his own desk, Fred Randall charged into the office.

"This better be good. I left a nice warm house on a Saturday night, mind you, to come over. It's cold and snowing out there. Any coffee?"

"No. Sorry, Fred. The stuff I make is poison."

Fred handed his files to the sheriff as he passed by. Redfield took the coroner's files and added those to the pile on his desk.

"I'll make some. Might be a long night. So what have you got?"

"Five bodies found naked, dead and frozen in the snow. I underline naked and frozen. What I got."

"That's it? I thought you had something hot. Oops, sorry. Bad pun. But we knew all of it already. Why all the excitement?"

"Why were they naked Fred? Why not dressed and frozen? Would you go out in the snow naked? Do you know anybody who would? It doesn't make sense. Something more here and I might have an idea."

"Do you want to tell me what the hell you're talking about, Joe?"

"Don't you see Fred? They were all naked."

"So what? You know they might have been high or at least under the influence of something before they ventured out. So they got stoned and wanted to romp naked in the snow. What's the big deal?"

"I don't think they were."

Fred poured them each a cup of coffee and sat on the corner of the sheriff's desk.

"Listen Joe, I did the preliminaries before I released the bodies. You know, there were traces."

"Yeah, I know, but not enough."

"We don't know for sure. The bodies were removed before we could do a complete autopsy. Besides, not necessary. Let's assume the parents would have allowed one. We listed the cause of death as accidental exposure, case closed. With the alcohol and drugs and without clothes, hypothermia could set in rather quickly. And with the stuff in their system, who is to say what their state of mind would be like. Where are you going with this? We found traces of marijuana and cocaine and booze, or wine in their system. You found those items all over the cabin. What more do you want?"

"I want something more, Fred. I want something more."

The room fell silent. Redfield tried to work up to tell Fred about the meet at Floyd's Bar & Grill, but knowing Fred like he did he hesitated. Fred was a black and white kind of guy. If he could see it under a microscope he would believe it. Otherwise, it did not exist. They sipped their coffee in silence.

"Joe, maybe if you told me what you're trying to say. Maybe I would understand. So far you haven't said anything new. What's on your mind?"

"The bodies. Naked and frozen. The whole scene. It doesn't fit. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"But Joe, under the influence. You know."

"Yeah Fred, I do know. After ten years in the city, I do know what people will do under the influence. But those kids, not one of those times."

Fred shrugged his shoulders.

Redfield sighed. He did not get through yet.

"Here Fred, look at the pictures."

"No thanks. I've seen them enough times."

"No, take a closer look at them this time. Objective, not as evidence of a crime scene. Look at them as you would any photo and tell me what you see."

More to appease the sheriff than anything else, Fred took the pictures from him and tried hard to look as Joe Redfield suggested, but nothing new jumped out.

"Sorry Joe, I don't see anything different."

"Okay, let me ask you this. Hypothetical, of course. Say you got drunk, or high or both. You were at a party or only with a girl holed up in a cabin someplace. Let's say you smoked a little, powdered your nose, drank some booze, whatever. What would happen?"

"I wouldn't have the faintest idea."

"Ah, c'mon, Fred. Hypothetical. You're a doctor. You know how the body would react. What do you think would happen?"

"Well, if I am alone with a girl." Fred looked at the sheriff with a smirk.

"You did it already. It's afterwards. You're bored. What next?"

Fred regained his composure, the smile slipped from his face.

"The next step would be sleep. But it's hard to say. It would depend on how much they had in their system."

"You got young kids. Strong sound bodies quite capable of withstanding a lot. Or thought they could do anything."

Fred hesitated and stared at him for a moment.

"Well Joe, it would be hard to determine what state they were in."

"It doesn't matter." Redfield sighed.

"Well, let's say high. Maybe looser in their thoughts. I don't know."

Redfield looked at Fred, but spoke slower at the moment.

"Would you say they would be capable of anything?"

"Well, no. Not anything. But, they could be persuaded to do something they wouldn't normally do. Hell. Joe, I don't know, they might be. Hell, I don't know. What do you want me to say?"

Redfield looked hard at Fred and pushed.

"What about go out in the snow naked? Could they?"

"Well sure. Nudity would not be a problem. Sure they could run out for a moment. Maybe make a naked snow angel or something creative before they ran back in. You know, before the cold."

Redfield sat back in his chair, the squeak ever present. Fred Randall realized the situation almost as soon as he said it. He reviewed the pictures again. And there it was plain as day. Now he understood. Redfield massaged his face with his hands, as Fred spoke.

"Jesus Joe, what would make them?"

"The question. I hope, before the night was over, we'll have the answer."

What Fred now saw and Redfield discovered earlier in the day. The position of the bodies. Given the fact they were naked and out in the freezing snow one would assume the natural survival instincts would take over. But, in each case, not only was the body in a nonchalant position, but also in three of the five cases a smile formed on the face. Not logical people would stay put while their life slipped away. Or so one would assume. Everything from the arms extended to the bodies embraced. The normal reaction would be to curl up. Try to save some body heat. But certainly not position yourself naked in the snow and cold and wait there to die and ultimately freeze solid. The damn position had nagged at Redfield earlier. And now Fred saw it as well.

"Jesus, Joe. The bodies were posed. The only answer."

"Yeah, Fred. It sure looks like it. The damn position nagged at me earlier, but I wanted to get your take before I jumped to any conclusions. Sorry to brow beat you like I did, but I had to make sure."

"Well, I'll be damned."

"Fred, we may all be damned we don't figure this out tonight."

Now he had to tell Fred about the meet at Floyd's Bar & Grill.

## Chapter 24

Pete Matson checked his coat at the door and nodded hello to people he passed while he worked his way into the hall. He angled toward the bar where he contemplated whether he should order a drink or not. Technically, he was still on duty. Or, at the very least, on call. But what the hell, Saturday night and all, and this was the big, well maybe not big, but the Saturday night dance. Screw it he decided. His Saturday night and here at the dance.

He pounded on the bar and placed a five down.

"Bartender, a tall draft of your finest if you please."

The bartender handed him a bottle quite wet from the ice chest. Pete took the very wet bottle somewhat hesitant. Before he could say anything more, the bartender moved away with his five dollar bill.

Pete set the bottle on the bar for a moment, grabbed a couple of napkins and wrapped one around the bottle. The napkin became quite saturated. He left it on the bar and wrapped another around the bottle. The other napkin he used to wipe his hand. The cold wet bottle settled into his left hand. The dry napkin wrapped around the glass base.

As he left the bar area, he looked over the rest of the room. Said a few more polite hellos as people passed by on the way to, or from, the bar. Over on the far side of the room were gathered a group of girls. Some he recognized as locals. Others, probably renters or friends. On his side of the room stood a bunch of guys. Most he recognized as locals, who cut up and kept to themselves. Ignored the girls. On occasion, they would look over to see if anyone new joined the girls' side. As if it would have made any difference.

Pete scoped out the situation before he joined the boys.

The boys exchanged amenities, involved in small talk, general discussions on everything and nothing and checked out the crowd as new people arrived. The nature of the game. Look, but don't touch. See, but don't notice. The game and both sides played it well.

On one glance through the crowd someone noticed an extremely attractive girl enter the room while the dance in full swing, which jammed the center of the room. Pete did not notice the girl his back to the dance floor. One of the boys punched him on the shoulder and pointed across the room, which forced him to turn. He picked her up in an instant, but she stepped behind a couple of overweight gentlemen engaged in a very heated discussion. The same guy punched Pete again and pointed. Pete nodded. He saw her full on this time. As often happens when you stare at someone, she looked over and their eyes met



for a moment. Pete instantly turned away. He did not want to be caught in a stare. Once again the guy poked him.

"Hey man, here she comes."

All Pete heard. Not the comments. Or the giggling. Or the whoops. And looked up long enough to see her cross the floor. When she got close enough for them to hear, she called out his name.

"Pete? Pete Matson, are you hiding in there?"

Pete Matson stood petrified not able to look up, cleared his throat and spoke in a low guttural growl.

"Yeah." Cleared his throat again. "Yes." Pete tried to look up at her.

"I thought so. Hi, how are you?"

The lady reached out her hand to shake, which Pete sheepishly reached for. But she did not wait, grabbed his hand and held onto it with both of her hands. Pete stared at their hands locked together, still not able to speak.

"I'm fine. You know, fine. How are you?"

"Ready to dance. Let's go big guy."

She tugged his arm and pulled him toward the dance floor. Pete encouraged by a pat on the back and did not remember he handed his beer to someone. He wiped his wet, sweating, beer bottle holding hand on his pant leg. As soon as they reached a safe spot, she turned in front of him and waited for him to join her. Pete barely moved, not able to get his eyes off of her.

She wore a blue chiffon dress. Knee length with a neckline cut dangerously below her breasts. The dress had two thick straps on each shoulder twisted across her chest which covered each breast. The back of the dress was cut low in a swoop with material gathered above her waist. The dress did not allow for a bra. Her long brown hair dropped below her shoulders and draped across each one. In a flip motion, she threw her head back and let her hair settle onto her bare skin. To finish off the outfit, she wore matching blue three-inch high-heeled shoes and what appeared to be dark colored pantyhose. Or tights.

The band played a slow song and before Pete could react, she slipped into his arms moved to the rhythm and laid one hand on his shoulder and the other around his neck. He heard the whoops and hollers from the boys side of the room, but chose to ignore them. He placed one hand on her waist and the other mid back, which touched her bare skin. She spoke softer in his ear.

"So you do know how to dance. How long before you asked me?"

Pete tried to face her, but she kept him close.

"Huh? Well. I did not see you."

"You did not see me and I wore this dress for you."

"I mean. I did not see you before."

"You mean you don't recognize me yet?"

Pete stiffened, mortified. Who was she? So familiar he must know her. Without a doubt, she knew him. This could be embarrassing and an early end to his unbelievable fortunate night.

"As a matter-of-fact. I'm afraid I don't. How about a clue."

"Why Pete, how could you not? Okay a small clue. I have a snowmobile."

"Snowmobile? A clue? Everyone has a snowmobile."

She danced in his arms and whispered in his ear.

"But not like mine. And the way you stare at me every time I pass by. I'm surprised, Pete. I thought you would know me right away."

Pete's mind began to work overtime and searched for clues. Or, maybe he did not want to know the answer. She pushed on.

"How about cute girl who waves from her snowmobile when you are parked at the turnaround at the edge of town? I know you always looked for me when you were parked there."

Pete sure he did not want to know, but blurted it out anyway.

"You? Holy shit. I mean. Excuse me. Are you the one?"

"Now you got it. I m the one."

"Jesus, I always fantasized. I mean wondered."

"C'mon Pete. What were you about to say?"

"Nothing. I mean, nothing."

She pulled him closer. Her body against his and got a strong whiff of her perfume. Sure now he recognized the fragrance. She kept pestering him to answer and he soon forgot about the perfume.

"C'mon tell me. Tell me, or I won't dance with you anymore."

"Nothing. I always thought. Oh, it's silly. You don't want to know."

"Yes I do. Please tell me. Please."

"I never thought I'd ever meet you."

"Why not?"

Pete paused before he answered, not quite sure what to say.

"It's like you belong in another place. You know, the other county. Other side of the tracks, so-to-speak. And I would not be good enough."

"You're silly, Pete. Why would you think such a fable?"

Pete's mind raced, the realization of who she might be. Or, at least who he thought she might.

"Can I ask you another question?"

"Sure Pete, anything."

"Your name?"

"My name. Well, kind of personal. I don't know if I can be so forward."

"What the hell are you talking about? I only asked your name. You can tell me your name. Can't you?"

She faced him with a serious expression. Watched him squirm while he waited for an answer. She couldn't hold back any longer. First giggling, followed by outright laughing. Pete caught on he was kidded and began to laugh with her. She laid her head on his shoulder and Pete about melted. Pete asked her again.

"Well, what is your name?"

"What is what?" She kept her head against his shoulder.

"Your name?"

"My name?"

"Yeah, you know, the call you answer to when someone yells 'hey' and you answer. What do they yell?"

"Oh you don't want to know. Let's dance some more."

"Yes, I do. I do. I can't keep calling you 'hey something'."

"You're sure you want to know."

"Jesus. Yes. Your name. Yes, I want to know."

Pete pushed her back so he could face her, but the band went into some kind of musical close. He could see her lips move, but he could not hear and shook his head, pointed to his ear and indicated he did not hear. She said it again, but he still did not hear and waited for the music to stop.

"What? What did you say? I did not hear."

She spoke louder this time.

"Sarah. I said my name is Sarah Charvonce."

The hairs on the back of Pete Matson's neck rose as a cold chill passed through his body. Her perfume grew stronger than ever and he remembered where he last picked up the scent. The band began to play another slow song and Sarah moved back into his arms. He whispered in her ear.

"Sarah. A nice name."

"I knew you'd like it, Pete."

"So Sarah, where did you say you lived?"

"I did not say. Why do you ask? Does it matter?"

"No. No. Not at all. Something about your name. I know a Sarah Charvonce, or rather know about her. I mean."

"What do you know about her?"

"No. I mean. I mean, I'm working on a case. I'm a deputy here in town."

"Yes, I know, besides your gun crushed against my right breast. Do you always carry the gun?"

Pete reacted somewhat awkward. He forgot he wore the back up gun in a shoulder holster these last moments.

"No. Here, let me fix it for you."

In his attempt to adjust the holster, he inadvertently stuck his hand inside her dress and slid his hand across her bare breast.

"Why Pete, on a first date? You sure don't waste any time."

"Oh jeeze. I'm sorry. I did not mean to. Jeeze."

"It's okay, Pete. You can leave your hand there or do you want to try the other one while you're in there to get the full picture?"

"Jeeze. Ah jeeze. Sorry. I did not mean."

Pete awkwardly removed his hand from the inside of her dress and did not know what to do with it. She grabbed the wayward hand and placed it on her back. While they danced, she reached in and pushed the holster back. Pete could feel her breast press against his chest. She kept her arm inside his sport jacket, rested on his waist and held onto his belt.

"I hope you liked touching my breast as much as I did, Pete. Where were we? Oh yeah. You were about to tell me about a case you're working on."

Pete enjoyed her pressed against his body, his hand rested on the bare skin of her back and the realization of where his hand had been and what it touched sent a warm feeling over him as he held her tight and spoke.

"It's nothing."

"What's the case about?"

"You don't want to know. It's boring."

"Yes, I do, Pete. I want to know everything about you."

She kissed his neck and snuggled closer. Pete could only take a deep breath. She put her head back on his shoulder.

"It's kind of silly. I mean the whole idea is preposterous."

"What idea, Pete?"

"I mean the concept. Can you imagine anything as silly as a ghost story?"

Pete stopped the moment he said it, but still held her. She did not react at all, kept her head on his shoulder and held him close. But, he could feel her. Feel her breast push against his chest. The smell of her perfume. The feel of the warm skin of her bare back on his hand. She did not move as she spoke, her voice muffled from her position against him.

"Sounds exciting to me, Pete. What's the case about?"

He thought about how much he should say or do at this point, but he threw caution to the wind and continued.

"Well, we have this investigation and unless we factor in the ghost story, it doesn't seem to make sense. It's too bizarre."

"So what does it have to do with me?"

"Nothing. Except the person in the case was named Sarah too."

"Who's named Sarah, Pete?"

"The ghost."

Pete regretted what he said as soon as he did. But still no reaction from her. She continued to keep her head on his shoulder and held him tight. Pete continued to keep his hands on her back. One on her bare skin and one in the fold of the material at her waist. They continued to dance for a while and did not speak. Pete waited for some reaction, but none forthcoming.

She kissed his neck again and spoke softer in his ear.

"Pete, do you think I am a ghost?"

Pete Matson tensed up and did not know what to say. She continued to kiss his neck, pulled back a tad and kissed his lips. Pete did not know how to react. She kissed him again, this time with passion. He returned the kiss. She released and put her head back on his shoulder.

"Well, do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you think I'm a ghost, Pete?"

He still did not know how to answer. She sure did not feel like a ghost. Of course, he never held a ghost before.

"No, of course not."

"Yes, you do, Pete. I can feel it in your body. Do I feel real to you?"

"Yes, of course, you do. You feel nice. So soft."

"Do you want to feel my breast again?"

"Yes. No. I mean, sure I do, but. No. I don't need to feel your breast."

"It's okay, I don't mind. Did my breast feel like the breast of a ghost?"

"Huh? What? No. I mean, your breast ordinary."

"Ordinary! You think my breasts are ordinary."

"No. Jeeze. I did not mean your breasts."

"Shut up, Pete."

She kissed him on the lips again. Pete returned the kiss and held her tighter. She pulled away, met his eyes and stroked his cheek.

"Shall we go?" She whispered.

Pete saw the boys hold their beer bottles high in the air with their heads down in silent salute while he worked his way through the crowd with Sarah.

The coat check area jammed with people to and from. The two teenagers who worked the coat check were completely overwhelmed. Pete worked his way to the counter. One of the teenagers took his ticket and as he reached for Sarah's, he noticed her coat on already and for a moment looked at her in amazement, but the crush of people distracted him and he let it pass.

Outside, the snow fell. Sarah waited for Pete to lead the way. They walked briskly to the cruiser, Pete held onto her so she wouldn't slip. The shoes she wore were not meant for snow and ice. Pete opened the passenger side door for her.

"Watch out you don't rip your stockings on the two-way there. Not the greatest car for dates."

"I think it's cute."

Pete closed the door behind her and raced around to the other side. He opened the driver's door with a pop, slipped inside and bumped into her as he climbed in. She had slid over and sat in the middle with her legs up on the passenger's seat. She put her arm around him as he fired the engine. It roared to life right away. Pete lowered the gear selector to drive and the cruiser sped away. She continued to stroke his hair as she spoke.

"Sorry about in there, Pete."

"Sorry about what?" Pete Matson tried to look over at her.

"I like to have a little fun. My name really, Sarah Charvonce."

The mention of the name caused him to tense up again. He took a breath.

"The kid? Sure. It's okay. But why me?"

"I only meant to kid, Pete? I'm sorry."

"No. I don't mean the kid. I mean, why did you pick me out of all of those other guys?"

"I know you, Pete and I wanted to meet you. I'm sorry about that night at Floyd's Bar & Grill. I did try. But couldn't."

"You know me? What? What about Floyd's?"

Sarah snuggled closer and pressed against his body while he drove.

"I tried to meet up with you before. At Floyd's. But couldn't. I. Well, I couldn't. I'm sorry."

The incident at Floyd's Bar & Grill passed through his mind. He wanted to ask so many more questions, but swallowed hard and cleared his throat.

"You said you know me? How? I mean."

"Well, not personally know you. But, you wave to me all of the time at the turnaround. You know, the only place I drive the snowmobile so I can see you wave to me. Otherwise I stay up on the ridge."

Pete Matson swerved the cruiser for a moment. His palms began to sweat. Once again he fought to keep his composure. He cleared his throat.

"So you can see me wave? I mean."

She slid her hand inside his jacket, touched his chest and rubbed her hand against his shirt.

"I asked around about you. Heard you were a nice guy. Are you?"

"I think so. What else did you hear?"

"You live alone. Hurry up and drive."

Pete Matson pushed down on the accelerator, propelled the cruiser forward, but avoided speeding. He did not want to advertise his presence. They reached his apartment building in no time. Sarah slid out the driver's side behind Pete, caught her pantyhose on the two-way and snagged the material which caused a big run to form.

Inside the apartment their lips met before the door closed. They continued to kiss and dropped their coats to the floor. Pete slipped the straps of the dress off her shoulders and pushed them down her arms. Her breasts fully exposed. Sarah stopped and pushed Pete away. Panicked he thought he went too far, but Sarah pointed to his gun. Pete removed his sport jacket and the shoulder holster, placed the rig on the table and laid the jacket over it. While he did, Sarah pushed the dress down past her hips and stepped out of it. She placed the garment over the sofa. Pete noticed the run in her stockings, but before he could say anything she slipped back into his arms and locked lips. They worked their way to the bedroom and left a trail of Pete's clothes.

Their lovemaking both passionate and intense, a true meeting of the souls. Sex but a small part. The oneness. The intensity. As if they had done this forever and maybe they had. There would be no afterward, a moment of reflection and a much needed trip to the bathroom.

Pete staggered back into the bedroom, ready to dive under the covers again. To rejoin her. But stopped short of the bed. His eyes surveyed the scene.

She was gone. Sarah was gone.

He spun around, thought maybe they passed each other. He went back to the bathroom. Not there. The front room. Not there. The kitchen area. Not there. He swung the apartment door open full and looked up and down the hallway. No sign of her. Back inside he let the door close behind him. The blue chiffon dress no longer lay on the back of the sofa. The shoes were gone. The coat she had dropped on the floor inside the door no longer there.

No trace of her remained.

As he stood there naked, the chilled air got the better of him. He went into the bedroom, crawled back under the covers. His thoughts spun wildly. As his head hit the pillow the faint smell of perfume rose up. He rolled over and placed his nose next to the pillow. The scent there all right and on the sheet and blanket.

Once he slid down between the covers to position all the way under, his foot hit something. As he lifted the covers, he reached down, pulled the obstruction out and held the article up in the air. The material unfolded. A dark pair of pantyhose with a nasty run hung before his eyes. Pete smiled. A warm sensation came over him.

She was here. Sarah. Here. With him.

The pantyhose placed on the bed next to him.

Sleep would come easy.

Pete Matson completely forgot about his commitment to the sheriff.

The snow continued to fall outside.

## Chapter 25

As he traveled down the snowmobile trail from his placement of coats in Josh and Tiffany's little rental car, Ryan flashed back to the first time he visited the cabin after Sarah. Well, after.

~

Floyd's Bar & Grill on a Saturday night. Ryan left after one too many Bourbons neat and decided to cruise by the cabin to have a look. When he pulled his snowmobile up to the driveway he spotted two other snowmobiles parked at the base of the stairs and realized someone must have rented the place already. Not surprised Ed Morrow would rent the cabin out so soon after the incident.

He stopped behind those snowmobiles, let the engine die and waited for a moment. But, decided he should leave and reached for the starter. The front door opened. A couple stood in the back light and looked down at him.

With a wave of his hand he spoke with a noticeable slur.

"Sorry folks, only passing by."

"Are you a local?"

The man walked down the steps toward him and stopped next to the other snowmobile.

"Can I ask you a question? We thought about a night ride, but not familiar with the trails, I thought, if you are a local. Well, maybe."

Ryan regained some of his composure and looked the man over, before he looked up at the woman in the doorway.

"So you guys want to go on a midnight ride. I might be able to help you there. But I'm afraid I need to use the facilities first. If you would be so kind?"

The man motioned and Ryan slid off his machine, followed the man up the stairs and nodded to the women as he passed. Since he knew the layout of the cabin quite well, he proceeded straight to the bathroom.

The couple waited for him by the sofa. Ryan came back and walked straight to the big window pulled open the curtains and pointed.

"See the ridge up there?"

"Yes, we saw a snowmobile parked there last night." The man said. "Lights on and it sat there for quite some time. So we wondered. Well, what made us think about a night ride."

"You saw a snowmobile parked there last night?"



They both nodded.

"Could you see who it was? I mean."

"No." The man looked at the woman. "But we saw the flag flying in the wind and thought maybe."

"A flag, but you couldn't see the driver?" Ryan nodded.

"No, but we thought. Well, we wondered how to get up there and if the person did it at night. Maybe we could?"

"Well, Like I said, the ridge above the incline you see out there. A trail winds around the incline and stops at the top. A quick ride there and back. A girl I knew once did it one night. But."

"But what?" The woman asked.

Ryan waved his hand in the air.

"Ah, I don't know if I should say. I better not."

"What? What were you about to say? What did you do?"

Ryan looked at the couple. A smile formed on their faces in anticipation.

"Not sure I should say. Are you sure?"

"Yes." The collective answer.

"Okay." Ryan took a breath. "Me and my lady friend challenged each other as to which of us could make it all the way there and back. Naked."

Ryan waited while the couple digested the concept.

"And?" The woman spoke first.

"And what?"

"Did you?"

"Yes."

Ryan walked over to the sofa to sit down. The woman sat next to him, but looked back at the man before she spoke.

"How long did it take?"

Ryan looked at her then at the man.

"How long did what take?"

"You know, to get there and back? What about the cold and the snow. I mean naked and all."

As he smiled slyly, he waved his hand in the air.

"As I recall about twenty minutes. There and back. The trail winds around. No real great distance at all." He whispered. "If you must know, we were quite. Well, quite loaded. If you know what I mean. Why?"

"You game?" The woman rose and stood next to the man.

"You're serious?" The man looked on with horror at her.

She nodded yes and turned to face Ryan.

"Can you take us? You know. Show us the way there and back?"

Ryan nodded. The man raised his hands in exasperation. Ryan stood up and walked over to the couple.

"You have to stay right with me. I'll go slow enough, but stay close. You can get lost on the turns easy and the trail quite steep on the way down. Right with me. Understand?"

The couple nodded.

"By the way, name is, Ryan."

"Seth and Ashley Rodgers."

Ryan pulled a flask out of his jacket and took a sip. He offered the flask to the couple. Ashley took a drink. Seth declined. Ryan began to get undressed.

Seth and Ashley looked at him for a moment. The woman pulled her bulky sweater over her head. Next her camisole underneath. She did not wear a bra. Unfastened her jeans as the man watched, shook his head and began to remove his clothes. Both left their clothes in neat piles on the sofa.

At the door, all three naked, Ryan stopped them.

"Remember, once we get outside we have to move. Let's put the lady in the middle."

Ryan handed each of them a towel.

"Put this on the seat so your bare ass doesn't freeze to the leather."

Ashley giggled as she held her towel. Seth flipped the towel over his shoulder.

Outside, they fired up their machines, fell in line behind Ryan and waited for him to lead the way. He pulled out onto the road and turned onto the trail next to the cabin. Both snowmobiles were right behind. Gained a little speed, he headed for the trail to the ridge.

As he mentioned, the trip only took about ten minutes to get to the top. But when he stopped, the other two weren't behind him. He waited a moment, but when they still did not show up, he started back down.

Ryan pulled his snowmobile in front of the cabin, got off and ran inside. Fortunately, they did not lock the door. He dressed and went back outside. After he fired up his machine, he headed back onto the trail, but this time he went straight. If they missed the turn maybe headed back into the woods. He traveled down the trail with deliberate care. If they went straight he would eventually catch up with them, but after quite some time, he still did not find them. On the way back, he spotted tracks in the fresh snow, which lead off the trail into an open meadow.

With some effort he pulled the snowmobile off into the thick power, gunned the engine and plowed through the thick snow in the direction of those tracks. The tracks swirled back and forth, obviously caused by someone not accustomed to driving a snowmobile off trail in deep powder. After a good amount of time, he came across one of the snowmobiles buried in deep snow. The engine dead. He followed another set of tracks off to the left until he found the other snowmobile also buried in the snow. But no one there.

As he drove around some more, he found them. Huddled together next to a tree. He brought the snowmobile to a stop and walked over to the couple. He

knelt in front of them and waited. Watched for a movement. But nothing. He grabbed the leg of the woman and shook it. Nothing. The man. Nothing.

With a struggle he loaded the woman onto the back of his snowmobile and drove her back to the second stalled snowmobile. For no particular reason he propped her onto the snowmobile in a sitting position and left her while he went back for the man. He left him face up next to her in the snow.

He maneuvered his snowmobile back to the first stuck snowmobile and managed to pull it out of the snow back into the path his machine made. Once positioned he towed the abandoned machine to the location of the other snowmobile and parked it next to the one Ashley was propped up on. With some effort he propped Seth onto the machine into a sitting position. He made both of them face toward the open meadow.

After he mounted and fired his snowmobile to go get help, the liquor fueled idea hit him. With a wicked smile he climbed back off and walked over to Seth first. He arranged his body more into the seat, put the hands on the throttle and the feet up in a ready to go position.

Satisfied, Ryan went over to Ashley. Although, she appeared colder, he was able to form her to the sitting position, put her feet up and her hands on the throttle. But the temptation too great. He fondled her breasts and noticed they became more buoyant to his warm hands. He used that discovery to his advantage and made her breasts look more natural in her current position.

Thoroughly pleased with his work, he climbed back on his machine. The first time he did something like this was to hide the truth. This time he did it for the pure evil pleasure. What did he care about these two? They asked for this. Sure, they were already gone. Why bother to go for help. Why not have a little fun. Let someone else find them. They can believe what they want. Ryan fired up his machine, pulled onto the fresh powder and powered the machine out of the scene back through the deep snow.

In all probability the couple were still alive. But, by the time they would be found they would be deceased. Either way did not matter to Ryan, who did not go for help, but went straight home.

Ashley and Seth Rodgers were not found until late the next day.

Subsequent visits to the cabin failed to convince any one else to participate in a night ride, let alone a naked night ride. He decided from now on, he would be in control. Unfortunately, the season ran out and he only did the one scene before the weather got too warm. It was pure coincidence he took the job as custodian for the judge's place. Celebrated his luck when he saw those freezers in the back. The process would be so much simpler from now on.

~

As he revisited those memories, Ryan did not notice the wind blow the snow in his face, or the snowmobile bounce along the trail, which churned up as much snow as the wind did.

Back in the center room of the big cabin, the trip back to the site to drop off the coats did not take long by snowmobile. Before he came in, Ryan went around back and lowered the temperature in the center freezer to minus twenty-nine. The lowest the temperature it would register.

Although already raging, he fed the fire and paced back and forth. Not enough time he mumbled. Not enough time. How long had it been? He tried to remember. He knew full well he needed to finish up here before he could go back to the cabin and finish his plan to set up the other two.

Time's up. He needed to finish. Can not wait any longer. Has to be cold enough to sustain the effect. Ryan opened the back door and walked down the path to the center freezer. Inside the light glowed with such brightness, Ryan squinted. The naked Josh and Tiffany were there. Strapped in. Solid and erect. He still poked a finger down each body. Tested. Rigid. Maybe okay. As he worked his index finger across the thicker areas, the stomach, down the thighs and, of course, across Tiffany's breasts, all seemed rigid enough.

The straps on Josh's body sprung free, which caused the body to slide into Ryan's arms and forced him to drop to one knee. It took an extra effort to get back up. Balanced haphazardly, Ryan made it to the door, slid the body through as if he tossed a sack out. The body dropped solid into the snow. He loaded the cold stiff body onto the make shift sled and pulled the sled back to the big cabin. Once inside, he would be able to slide the body across the floor to the chair by the fire for the final step.

The sun lamps were already on in full force. The fire raged dangerously. Ryan worked Josh into the chair. The neck rested on the back and the legs against the tip of the seat protruded straight down. The effect looked like a surf board would if you laid it against a chair. Condensation and steam already began to form all around the body. Ryan pushed on the mid section. Nothing.

A few minutes later, Ryan pushed on the mid section again as steam rose. This time a slight give began and Josh's body began to bend. It fell into the chair in a sitting position. Both legs protruded straight out. He worked the knees to bend into position. The arms already became loose and lifted each to move them. Water ran off everywhere and saturated the old armchair. The body ready to form. He dragged Josh out of the chair and placed him behind the sofa away from the fire.

After he made his way back to the center freezer, Ryan spent a moment to look at the prone naked Tiffany and poked his finger down her torso. With care he undid the straps and used his body to keep her in place. Tiffany slid off the table. Ryan pushed her toward the door and moved her out into the snow. Finished, he closed the door to the freezer. As he did with Josh, he loaded Tiffany onto the makeshift sled. He pulled the cargo with great care to the back door and once there carried the naked Tiffany into the big cabin.

Propped in the chair, the body took its turn to thaw. When the midsection began to give, the body slumped into the oversized armchair. As Ryan did with

Josh, he worked the knees, arms and legs. The rest of the body began to loosen as each of the sunlamps beat down.

With the warmth of his hands, Ryan worked Tiffany's breasts back to a natural hang position. The extra strap kept them from freezing flat, but they did not look natural. They achieved a formed, pushed together shape. Frustrated, he worked each breast, kneaded and squeezed, but became afraid the rest of her would get too soft. With one last massage, he removed Tiffany's body from the chair and placed it next to Josh's on the floor in back of the sofa.

Ryan took up a position in front of the fireplace. Between the intense heat of the sunlamps and the cold of the bodies his hands throbbed. He began to warm them by the fire, alternately opened and closed each hand.

The sunlamps caused steam to rise from the old armchair, which Ryan thought about leaving on to dry the chair, but instead turned both lamps off. He did not want to start a fire and draw attention to this place.

A quick check of Josh and Tiffany showed they left quite a puddle of water on the floor behind the sofa. Maybe the room too warm. He looked around and spotted the raging fire and shook his head in fear. Better get them back outside. He needed to go to work.

Ryan dragged each of the bodies outside and set one next to the other face up on the ground at the base of the front steps. The bodies were harder to move since they were softer, because he couldn't slide them. Instead, he had to half carry and half drag them out. He stretched his back and neck and laid Tiffany up against Josh. With the glove off his hand he poked down each body to test the stiffness. The outside skin soft, but each body still appeared somewhat rigid. A few minutes out in the cold would help.

Better go, or they may stiffen up too much. Once again, he tested each arm and leg. Still moveable. For good measure he fondled Tiffany's breasts and pushed on her abdomen.

The rapid softening Josh and Tiffany were attached to a special sled connected to the snowmobile. Tiffany's body placed on top of Josh's body. He pulled away and checked the cargo. Both bodies appeared to be secure. The snowmobile tipped and swayed back onto the trail. The cargo jumped as he left the road, but stayed in place.

He arrived back at the spot where he left the little car and pulled the snowmobile with sled close, but stopped right past the front bumper. With the time back in the cold, the bodies were still loose enough. After he unfastened the rope, he let both slide off the sled. Tiffany's body fell off Josh's body and landed face up in the snow.

With a huge effort, he dragged Josh's body to a spot about fifty feet from where the car had stopped. Further out into the deep fresh snow where he worked on the position of Josh's body. He leaned the head and shoulders up against a small snow mound. Raised the knees and planted the feet in the snow.

After he retrieved the other body, he positioned Tiffany on top of Josh, spread her legs to straddle him, but kept her arms stiff. Rested her hands on Josh's shoulder. Her arms stiff enough to stay in place. To make sure, Ryan held onto the arms for a little longer. When he suffered the cold on his hands he let go and tested the stiffness. The arms held her up.

Tiffany's body sat positioned over Josh in a straddled posture. Ryan positioned Tiffany so her groin lay across his. Worked the legs until he had the knees fully bent. Her feet tucked under each leg to look like she sat on him. More like she mounted him as if they were about to get it on right there in the snow.

Ryan smoothed out Tiffany's hair and made it look more natural. He stood behind Tiffany and held her breasts, which generated enough heat from his hands to move them around. Once satisfied with the position he let go. They needed the right hang. A more natural look. He pulled her back a little more. The hair slipped forward off her shoulder. There, the desired effect.

Once again, he tested each body for stiffness and the outer skin began to harden. He worked each body a little more. Placed Josh's hands on Tiffany's thighs and formed Tiffany's hands better on Josh's shoulders. Fluffed her hair some more and let the strands cascade down over her face.

He got down beside Josh, looked up at Tiffany's face and used his thumb to form her cheeks and push a semi smile into her lips. The breasts hung absolutely perfect, but he touched each one to test the consistency. They held firm. The abdomen had the right sag. Ryan nodded his approval.

One last touch. He used his right thumb to force Tiffany's eyelids open and thought he saw the eye move. But realized the movement a reaction to his cold finger.

As he stood over Tiffany, he looked down at Josh's body and tightened the legs so they braced her on top of him. He worked the fingers on Josh's hand free to make them seem more natural as they rested on her thighs. Meticulously, he worked Josh's face. Took out the rigid look. Formed a smile and forced the lips open. For a final touch, he used his thumb to force open Josh's eyes and focus them on Tiffany over him.

Ryan laid down on the ground once more, looked up at Tiffany and made sure nothing moved while he adjusted Josh. He reached up, turned her head a tad and took one last look at her breasts and stomach. Nodded his approval.

After he stood back up, he walked around his creation. Everything looked fine. Satisfied, he scattered the snow, obliterated his footprints and marks and used the tree branch he found to smooth out the snow. Removed his boot prints on the way back to make it look like new fallen snow.

All around the car, Ryan ran back and forth. Worked to eliminate any deliberate footprints or marks and created one big flat area in the snow. To finish, he used the branch to obliterate the boot prints and left scrapes. When he believed the sight looked natural, he worked the snowmobile and sled back onto the road. Trampled and smoothed those tracks as well.

The snow began to fall harder and should help to mix the snow up well. Should work out okay and nodded his approval. He surveyed the scene once more and nodded again, and admired his work for a few more moments.

He mounted the snowmobile and fired the engine as he sat back on the seat. Time to go back to the big cabin and regroup. Still a lot of work to do tonight. The sled bounced and slid from side to side as Ryan traveled through the forest and followed his earlier trail back.

Without any weight on the sled nothing could keep it in place. Ryan traveled as fast as the snowmobile would go. Damn the sled. On a particular nasty rise and dip, the sled disengaged and fell off. Flipped over into the snow. Annoyed, he stopped the snowmobile and walked back to the sled. He swore and considered leaving the sled there. But no loose ends. No loose ends. He said again and again.

The snow began to fall harder.

## Chapter 26

Lori Jacobs entered the office with sandwiches and drinks as the door slammed shut behind her. Joe Redfield and Fred Randall looked up. Nodded to Joe and said hello to Fred as she set the bag on the auxiliary desk she used.

"You guys ready to eat? Joe, I got your usual, a BLT. Fred, you can have the corned beef or the chicken sandwich."

Lori placed the BLT in front of Redfield and held out the other two for Fred to pick. He took the corned beef. All three ate in silence for a spell.

Lori wiped her mouth, took a sip of her drink and spoke first.

"So, did you guys figure it out yet?"

Redfield pointed to Fred, who answered.

"Well, I think we're onto something. We are quite sure the bodies were positioned. Which means."

"Which means, we should look at this as a murder investigation now."

Redfield interrupted, took another bite of the sandwich and sip of coffee. Threw the crust into the wrapper, crumbled it up and tossed the ball of paper in the trash. He sat back in the chair, the squeak ever present and cleared his throat.

"One more item." He waited a moment before he continued.

Fred crumbled his sandwich wrap and tossed into the trash. Lori pushed hers away. Half a sandwich left. Both looked at Joe to hear what he had to say.

"Fred, do you believe in ghosts? I know where Lori stands."

Redfield decided to hit him with the question straight up. Not beat around the bush. Maybe catch him off guard. No easing into it. However, Fred did not bite, raised his hand and tilted his head.

"What did you say, Joe? Did I hear you right? Ghosts?"

"Yep. I asked you straight up if you believe in ghosts. Yes or no?"

"Of all of the absurd questions. Of course, I don't. You know, I don't. Why on earth would you ask me of all people? I am a scientist remember?"

Redfield hesitated before he responded. Lori sat quiet at her desk while she watched the two men spar.

"Well Fred, a ghost or at least one particular ghost seems to play a factor in all of this. No matter which way I go, it all comes back to the damn ghost story. Now mind you, I've thought this out."

"Joe, you can't be serious, a ghost?" Fred waved his hand in the air. "I hope you're not gonna put a ghost story in any official reports. Because, it might seriously hurt any chances you have at re-election, not to mention retention of



your current job. Listen, Joe, I'm your friend, but outside this office, you go off half cocked about ghosts I can't help you."

Redfield massaged his face with his hands. Fred Randall poured more coffee. Lori Jacobs made a gurgling noise as she came to the end of her drink.

"Fred, let's take a minute. Every time we have someone freeze to death it comes back to Sarah. The first. You know. So, I think."

"Jesus, Joe, not the infernal Sarah ghost story again. You know it's local legend. Only renters seem to see her and usually after they consumed quite an amount of booze, or drugs, or both. Hell, if I were in their state, I'd probably have a few moments as well. Don't tell me you're buying into a ghost story?"

"Are you, Joe?" Fred looked hard at Redfield.

"It happened again last night." Redfield said softer.

"What happened last night, Joe?"

Redfield was tired. The pressure started to show on his face. This verbal war with Fred did not get him anywhere. He looked at Lori, back toward Fred and sighed before he continued.

"The ghost, or this Sarah character, or whatever you want to call her, visited the cabin again last night. The two couples there this time called me out there earlier to report the sighting. First time we had two couples say they both saw Sarah last night and, of course, this morning. The story the same. Sarah shows up with her goodies and with her friend. I found out named Ryan. They all have a party and in the morning she's frozen outside the center window."

Redfield waited a moment and took a deep breath before he continued.

"The snowmobile sighting usually on the ridge, which gave rise to the Sarah ghost story. But, Sarah and her friend together at the cabin? And another point." Redfield rubbed his hand across his face. "How can the story keep happening? I mean, how can she keep appearing naked, dead and frozen? Once she's dead and found should end it all. How can she keep getting found?"

"We never recovered a body after Sarah Charvonce." Fred offered. "So, how do we know what happened. Or, what they actually saw out there? We only know what they reported they saw."

"Right. No body. Yet, the incident keeps getting reported." Redfield sighed. "How can the story happen over and over again?"

"Now wait a minute Joe, are you saying?"

"Not at all. But how would you explain it?"

"I don't." Fred waved his hand. "It's a story remember? A story."

"Exactly." Redfield leaned back, the squeak ever present. "A story. A ghost story perhaps? How can Sarah show up outside the window again and again?"

"Now wait a minute Joe, are you saying you believe a ghost story?"

"Are you Joe?" Lori asked softer.

Redfield sat silent for a spell, looked at both of them and said the next words a tad above a whisper.

"Well, on one occasion, something terrible happened after a Friday night visit. Certainly, not another story. But I do think something will happen again tonight. And frankly, I don't know what to do about it. Or, how to stop it."

"What will happen?" Fred said sarcastically.

Redfield stared at Fred. He did sympathize with him. Fred did not believe. He understood. Hell, not sure if he believed any of this yet either and spoke softer.

"I'm afraid someone will get naked, dead and frozen tonight and as you have discovered, it doesn't appear to be a misguided accident anymore."

Fred leaned forward in his chair. Lori watched.

"You can't be serious, Joe? What are you trying to say? A ghost did this?"

"Not a ghost. Never said a ghost did any of this." Redfield put his hand up. "But, I have a tip I'd like to follow up on which appears to be quite vague and the person who gave it to me. Well, let's say it pushes the envelope."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either." Lori chimed in.

Redfield leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk.

"I have to tell you what happened earlier. But, you already think I'm nuts and maybe. Well hell, I probably am. But I have no other choice."

Lori and Fred looked on. Lori pulled her chair closer. Fred sat back in his.

"I saw her. In fact I met with her today." Redfield blurted out.

"With who? Lori and Fred said together.

"Sarah."

Lori's eyes rose up. Fred rolled his, not having any.

"Now c'mon Joe. I'm trying to help. Don't start bull-shitting me."

"I swear to you both. It happened. Skeptical at first. I'm still not sure. Oh hell, a lead still a lead."

"Joe, now c'mon."

"Look Fred. Damn it."

Lori cut them both off.

"Whoa guys. Let's settle down here. Listen Fred, I'm with you. You know it. I don't believe any of this ghost business either. How about we hear Joe out. Maybe he has something. Go ahead Joe, what did? You know, did she tell you?"

Fred looked at Lori for a long time before he directed his attention back to Joe, who hesitated before he spoke. Fred and Lori fidgeted in their seats.

"She said Ryan was not one of them. She told me to find Ryan's place and I would have the answer. Find his place to get the answer."

Lori and Fred waited for more. Redfield remained silent.

"Suppose you tell us the whole story." Fred said. "See what we think?"

Fred folded his arms across his chest and slumped back in his chair. Lori sat forward and rested her feet on the swivel legs of the chair bottom. Redfield looked at Fred, Lori who nodded in agreement. He spoke with some hesitation.

"Alright, here goes. I came out of the office and got in the cruiser. Someone tried to use the two-way, but did not get through. I thought it was Pete screwing around. You know, to give me the business. We talked earlier. But, a woman's voice came on and said to meet her at Floyds."

"Floyds? You mean Floyd's Bar & Grill?"

"Fred, please let him finish."

Redfield stared at Fred, but Lori motioned for him to continue.

"When I went in Floyds, I saw a woman in the back. She instructed me to sit down, but I decided I had enough of this game and began to leave. She called out and when I turned around she unbuckled her jeans."

"She did what?" Fred asked sarcastically.

"Yeah. This I want to hear." Lori added.

Redfield glanced at them and rubbed his hand across his face.

"She pulled her jeans down and turned to show me her butt. Specifically, her right cheek. It was there Fred. The same pattern scar we saw when we removed the body. Remember, you pointed it out to me. I touched."

"Wait a damn minute." Fred interrupted. "You mean to tell me you grabbed some woman's ass in Floyd's Bar & Grill and it proves she's this Sarah person. This ghost. Am I missing something here?"

Redfield waved his hand in the air.

"Fred, don't you remember? The first person who froze to death. Sarah Charvonce, had a unique scar on her right butt cheek. In fact, you made mention of it in your notes after you pointed it out to me."

He shuffled files on his desk until he found hers.

"It's right here in your notes."

Redfield handed the file to Fred, who took the folder and read the passage. Lori took the file from Fred and read the same. Redfield continued.

"She showed me the scar to prove it was her. Or, who I was supposed to believe. She described how the injury happened. Told me to check it out if I did not believe her. I touched it Fred. The scar very real. The skin so soft and warm."

"Okay Joe, I think we get the picture." Lori interrupted.

"You mean you touched some girl's ass in Floyd's Bar & Grill and we're supposed to believe the ghost?" Fred's voice rose up.

"Someone was there and gave me a tip." Redfield interrupted.

Fred and Lori looked at him but waited.

Redfield waved his hand in the air, but spoke softer.

"Look who ever, or what ever I saw there in Floyd's Bar & Grill, made the effort to be there and gave me this tip. Whatever I believe I saw irrelevant at this moment. All that matters, I got a tip I should pursue. Worst case, a wild goose chase. But, if we do nothing. Well. Well, I can't do nothing. I need to follow up on the tip regardless."

"What tip?" Fred sighed and asked full of contempt.

"Two couples. Something wrong. Find Ryan's place for the answer."

"And what will you do with your tip?"

"Well, I called you and I got in touch with Ed Morrow."

"You did not?"

Lori watched, while the verbal spar began again between the two. She waited and listened.

"Look Fred. I'll be honest."

Redfield tapped his finger on the desk.

"I thought the whole meet a setup. A prank. Right down to the scar. But, she said, she had to warn me and disappeared. Her glass. The snowmobile outside. No tracks. Everything gone. Fred, you know I've been right there with you on this. I don't go in for this ghost story nonsense either. But, she disappeared. The whole scene too damn weird. I swear to you Fred. If I doubted for a moment, I wouldn't. Well, I think you know me well enough to know I wouldn't waste your time. But, something we should look into. Something we should do and don't. Well, I'd rather it be a wild goose chase. Well, Fred, can you run with me on this one? I promise. If it turns out to be a wild goose chase, I'll back off this whole ghost story once and for all. Do we have a deal?"

Lori continued to watch while Fred digested Joe's plea. He appeared ready to debate some more, but heaved a deep sigh and asked softer.

"So what did Morrow say?"

"Turned me down. Said Saturday night. He had a dinner party or something. The office locked up. I told him I'd get one of the deputies to take a fire ax. Anyway, he's over there now. He should be here soon."

Redfield leaned back in the chair, the squeak ever present.

Lori cleaned up the sandwich wrapper and tossed it in the trash.

Fred continued to study the file and did remember back to the body of the first frozen woman. And the unique scar on her buttocks. He looked up at Joe.

"Joe, I have to ask. What did Floyd do when you touched this woman's ass in his bar?"

"He dropped and broke the glass he was cleaning."

Fred nodded.

Lori Jacobs looked at them both for a long minute. She knew whatever did happen spooked Joe Redfield enough to take action. Whether or not he could ever convince Fred he needed to act. She finished cleaning off the desk and walked over to his.

"What do you need me to do, Joe?"

Redfield looked up at her, leaned forward in the chair and gathered the files off his desk.

"Here's mine and Fred's. Now we know, or at least suspect these were more than accidental, I want you to review each file and see what else we might have missed. Also, check back over the reported sightings. We logged each one. Maybe there's something in there. Determine what were sightings and what were actual contacts. I don't think too many reported Sarah up on the ridge, but those few who made contact with the Saturday morning adventure, probably

reported what they discovered. See if you can find something there. Anything. Some kind of pattern maybe. Something within those reports."

Redfield took a breath and looked at the files in Lori's hands.

"The first body, Sarah Charvonce, would have been found last season. The next couple also last season. The last couple this season. See if a pattern. Why the gap. How many times has the cabin been rented since? Remember, a murder investigation. Pick them apart. Start over."

Fred placed the Sarah file he looked at on top of the others while Lori passed by. She dumped them on the desk and began to create piles.

"What's next, Joe?" Fred got up to get another cup of coffee.

"We wait for Morrow."

## Chapter 27

The ringing of the phone caused Joe Redfield and Fred Randall to jump and Lori Jacobs to stand straight up. The sheriff grabbed the receiver before it finished the first ring.

"Sheriff's office, Redfield speaking."

"Ed Morrow, sheriff, I have the information you wanted. There are eleven people named Ryan who rent cabins at the moment."

"Eleven? Great. Alright, bring them over. See if we can narrow some."

Joe Redfield slammed the phone down and swore.

Fred and Lori had both heard the exchange but remained quiet. Fred watched the sheriff walk around the desk to the front door, but before Fred could ask, Joe opened the door and stood outside to wait. Fred let the question pass.

A door slammed in the distance and when he looked down the street, Redfield saw Ed Morrow race down the sidewalk. His arms filled with files and stood aside to let Morrow enter, who stood inside the door to await instructions. Lori motioned for Ed to set the files on her desk as she made room. Redfield closed the door and stood in front of it.

"Well sheriff, here's your files. Hope you have fun."

Redfield continued to stand in front of the door and shook his head. Ed Morrow could hear the door locked and raised his hands in protest.

"C'mon sheriff, be reasonable. I brought the files. I have a dinner."

Redfield shook his head.

"Fred's making a fresh pot of coffee. Shouldn't be here long."

He pointed to the files, which Lori arranged into a pile.

Fred reentered the room.

"Hi Ed, how's it going?"

He handed a fresh cup of coffee to Joe.

"Better until he called." Morrow jerked a thumb at the sheriff.

Fred joined them at the desk and also looked through the files.

"Anybody know what we should look for?"

"Ryan." The sheriff replied and picked up another file.

"Well, we can eliminate these four, last name of Ryan" Lori said.

"And this one." Fred added.

"Sheriff, this is crazy. What are we looking for anyway?"

Ed Morrow cried out as he went to get a cup of coffee. Fred and Joe watched him leave. Lori put another rejected file on the pile. Morrow returned

with the pot and filled Joe's and Fred's cup, Lori declined and he continued to talk while he did so.

"There must be something else to go on besides the name Ryan."

"Alright Ed, do you have a haunted cabin?"

"Joe, you said." Fred tried to stop him, but Redfield waved him off.

"Fred, if I may interrupt you for a minute, as a matter of fact, yes."

Morrow said matter-of-fact.

Lori looked up. Fred sat back on the desk. Redfield looked pleased.

"Well. Please continue, Ed."

"Personally, I don't. But, it's the infernal Sarah Charvonce story. Of course, you all know about her."

Joe pointed at Fred, who shook his head. Lori stood up and stood on the other side of Redfield. Morrow continued, but cleared his throat first.

"Tough to rent the place anymore. Surely not from anywhere in the area. I only rent to someone from the city. People who don't know anything about the story. However, it's never the same people twice. It's like the haunted house theory. Only good for one night. And, if I'm real lucky. One weekend. A couple of times I've been forced to refund the deposit because the renter's left on Saturday morning spooked to all get out."

Morrow paused but looked up at Redfield, who stared back.

"Joe, you and I have been there, done that."

Redfield nodded as he picked up the conversation.

"Fred, you remember. Ed the one found the woman outside the cabin. Called us out. Lori, he was first on scene. He sure knows the details."

Morrow nodded, looked at Fred, Lori to wait for instructions and stood quiet. Redfield motioned for him to continue.

"Anyway, I try not to rent the cabin unless I have too. You know, to avoid the hassle. And now with the unfortunate incidents of those other couples, who by the way stayed at that exact cabin. Well, you know."

Morrow paused, looked at Redfield, who motioned for him to continue.

"Well, the place almost never rents at all. I thought I should take it off my listings. Maybe forget about the place. But damn, such a grand cabin. I hate to lose the revenue from the place. I mean, it rents so well."

"So, why did you rent it out this time?"

"I did not." Morrow pointed. "This time a local rent from the other county. I don't know who occupied the place."

"I don't understand."

Fred interrupted him, held another file in his hand as did Joe.

"Yeah Ed, I don't either. Why would someone from the other county rent a place here? They were already here."

Morrow looked at Joe, Fred and questioned with his eyes.

"Do I have to spell it out?"

"Yes." The response from Joe and Fred and Lori.

Morrow laughed as he spoke.

"Maybe the person hooking up with someone on the side. Maybe they want to get away for a weekend. Maybe."

Redfield interrupted him as he closed another file and handed it to Lori, who placed it in the reject pile. Seven eliminated.

"Okay, okay we get the idea. I guess I never gave it much thought. But wouldn't you still do the paper work?"

"Not necessarily." Morrow interrupted before Joe could finish. "If an agent over there wanted the place they would check with my office and if it wasn't rented they could reserve it and my office would list it as occupied. Simple. We would settle up later. No big deal. Happens all the time."

"But you would eventually know who stayed there? Right?"

"Well. Yes. I believe the information in the file there. Yes, the secondary rentals folder."

Lori retrieved it off the desk and handed it to Joe.

Fred raised his hand to stop the conversation. A file open in his left hand.

"Lori let me see the file there."

Fred pointed to the file she put in the reject pile.

"But Fred, it's not rented and why I."

Fred waved her off before she could finish and took the file from her. He opened it on top of the one he held.

"Ed, what's the story with this one?"

Morrow took the file from Fred.

"Oh, sorry. A non-rental. I must have grabbed it because of Ryan."

Everyone in the room stopped and stared at Morrow, which made him feel quite uneasy as he stood there.

"Ryan, what about Ryan? You said." Redfield spoke first.

"Joe, it's a mistake." Morrow interrupted. "I looked for every file with the name of Ryan and I must have grabbed his as well."

"Tell me about the file anyway," Joe said as he closed the file he looked at and handed it back to Lori.

"Nothing to tell. It's the judge's place. As you know the judge bought the place from old lady Maddox after her husband died. She did not want to stay there anymore and moved into one of her buildings here in town. We don't rent it. Never did. But since the judge took ill. Still alive as far as I know. Anyway, we began to take care of the place for him. After the judge retired, he stayed out there all season and before transportation like today. Back when snowmobiles or horses got you around this time of year. Before the roads were put in place. It's a big place. Lot of land. Sleeps a bunch of people. Lot of food storage. Hell, those freezers out back could hold. Well, I know he did a lot of hunting. Anyway, we take care of the property. Keep it up for the family. We hired a caretaker who lives over in the other county to go out there once a week. Or as needed. You know, whatever the season requires."

"A caretaker named Ryan." Redfield interrupted. "Do you have his address in the file?"



Morrow stared at Redfield for a moment.

"Yes, it should be in the file."

Fred waved his hand again.

"Joe, the caretaker's address the same as the guy who rented your ghost cabin."

Redfield took the files from Fred. Lori looked over his arm at the information. Joe flipped through a few pages before he spoke.

"Ed, why would this guy rent a place if he has access to one already?"

"Quite simple, sheriff. He only takes care."

Redfield interrupted, waved his hand and looked at Morrow.

"C'mon Ed. You have access to a great place and to quote you, you have someone you saw on the side. Why not bring her to the place you already have access too? Why would you rent another place?"

"Well, he's not allowed to use."

"Who would know, Ed? Who would know?"

"I suppose no one would. But what if someone showed up?"

"What else out there?"

"The old Whitmore place. But no one there anymore." Morrow said.

"And how long has he been the caretaker?"

"A little over six months."

"And how many people have showed up in that time?"

"No one I know of."

"Anybody in the last year?"

Morrow shook his head.

Joe Redfield closed the file. Fred nodded. Lori shook her head.

"Thanks Ed, I think you can go."

Redfield kept the two files, walked over to his desk, shook Morrow's hand and patted him on the back. Lori handed Ed the other files. Fred walked Morrow to the door. Shook his hand and thanked him. Lori waved good-bye. Before he knew what happened, Ed Morrow stood on the sidewalk outside the door of the sheriff's office.

Fred stood in front of Joe's desk. Lori stood next to Fred, who asked.

"Joe, are you thinking what I am?"

"Yeah Fred, I believe I am. But why would? What's the purpose?"

"Joe, Those freezers out back might have something to do with all this. Might lend credence to the position theory. I have to admit I don't like where we are headed."

"Me neither Fred. Me neither."

Redfield continued to fidget at his desk. He looked first at Fred, Lori.

"Lori, call the sheriff over there. See what you can find out about this Ryan. His full name in the file."

He waited with Fred, while Lori made the call, looked over at her and noticed her make notes and say a lot of uh huhs. Once she hung up, she jumped up and stood in front of the desk.

"Okay, the name Ryan Palmer. But, here's the rub. Ryan Palmer died four years ago."

Both Fred Randall and Joe Redfield stiffened up.

"It's not like you think." Lori raised her hand. "Ryan Palmer died of a drug overdose and his parents gave up on the other son. They have a younger son named Jason Thomas Palmer, who goes by Jason, or Thomas, or JT, but lately used his dead brother's name, Ryan."

Lori took a breath and looked over her notes.

"I spoke with the deputy in the office tonight and he said this kid a real boozier. Chugs Bourbon like soda. After his brother died, he started to hit the bottle hard and hasn't stopped. Put a girl in the hospital after he rolled a snowmobile he operated drunk. He put another girl in the hospital after he rolled her rental car, also drunk. And there were half a dozen other incidents all while quite drunk. Deputy said not surprised to hear he might operate over here now. Burned all his bridges over there. Said he sure did not know Jason used his dead brother's name."

Redfield nodded and looked at Lori, but gave a glance to Fred.

"Looks like I'm going to the judge's place. I have to see what's out there."

Fred and Lori walked with him to the door. Lori squeezed his arm.

"Lori, you stay here and set up a command post. Fred, would you mind staying with her? See if you can raise Pete. I know he's at the dance, but I told him to check in and to be at his radio. Maybe try his cell phone. Maybe you can get him. Either way, have him come here whenever you hear from him. I want everybody where I can find them in case. Well, depending on what I find at the judge's place. And I might need one of you to meet me at the cabin as well."

Redfield stood for a moment. His thoughts raced.

"You better call Sam Edwards. Let him know what's up. Have him stand by and if he wants to come in, let him."

Again he stopped and turned, but turned back to face Lori.

"Would you give Eleanor Maddox a call? Ask her if anything else she can tell us about the judge's place. I'll keep in touch."

"Wait there's more." Lori raised her hand.

He looked at her.

"I'm sure there's more, but I think I have enough."

He took a deep breath and spoke softer.

"Yeah. Get Sam Edwards in. We probably will need him later."

"Wait this is important." Lori grabbed Joe Redfield's arm. "The deputy said Jason or Ryan has a lady he runs with sometimes named Emily Sarah Grafton. But, she goes by Sarah. Said a real coke head. Can't do life without her cocaine. I told him we'd sure like to talk to her." Lori tightened her grip on his

arm. "Joe, the girlfriend goes by Sarah. Do you know what that means? Joe, she goes by Sarah."

"Well, I'll be damned." Redfield nodded let a smile cross his face. "Good work. Yeah, we sure do need to talk to her. Better have the deputy pick her up. Good work Lori. Damn good work. Thanks."

Redfield stepped out the door. Fred and Lori watched as he got into the cruiser. The engine fired and the cruiser drove away before Fred and Lori went back inside the sheriff's office.

The snow appeared steady at the moment.

## Chapter 28

Inside the judge's place, Ryan let his coat drop to the floor and staggered over to the fire. He was tired and without fore thought sat down in the old armchair. Swore as he jumped up with the back of his pants and shirt quite wet.

As he danced in front of the fire, Ryan waited for his pants to dry and pulled at them over and over again. The intense heat caused steam to rise off the material. Still wet to the touch, but at least a warm wet. From his vantage point by the fireplace, Ryan took a look around the room. The sunlamps, a great find in a thrift store needed to be taken away. They sure helped speed up the process this time. The armchair would dry on its own, but will have to stop by later tonight to make sure the fire out. Otherwise, the place looked okay.

The pant legs still damp, but quite warm. Not much longer.

He walked around the room. Everything still looked good. No clothes around. No shoes or boots. No telltale signs of visitors. He touched the sunlamp but still too hot to load. He would have to get those later.

Ryan put on his coat, went outside and drove the snowmobile to the side of the cabin where there were two extra gas cans and used one to fill the snowmobile. Once done he brought the snowmobile back to the front of the judge's cabin and parked it off to one side on a well-worn trail next to the driveway. A light snow fell. A quick look up in the sky he saw stars and wondered if it might clear up before he went back inside.

~

Joe Redfield's cruiser careened onto the highway and fishtailed as it hit the slick road. Curious as to what he would find at the judge's place, he pushed down on the accelerator. Maybe all a wild goose chase. Maybe not. The cruiser passed the edge of town and headed out onto the open road.

As he drove, Redfield thought about his encounter with Sarah.

*She told him to look for Ryan's place. Could this be the place? But why? Why did she warn him? And who the hell was Ryan Palmer? Could he be the one involved in all of this? Confident, he could dismiss the idea Ryan also a ghost. Ghosts don't rent cabins. Or do they? Hell, he did not know anymore. But, whoever Ryan Palmer was, he did believe one part for sure. Ryan Palmer was a real person.*

*As he worked through the facts so far, he admitted yes he overlooked the possibility of an actual person who committed an actual murder. What were once classified accidental deaths appeared a grotesque murder done by a real person.*

The reality of it all seized him with a quiver.

*The simple fact, those kids who he met with today were not visited by a ghost, but by a living person. Who appeared to be somehow involved with those other deaths for an unknown reason at the moment.*

He thought of Sarah again and thought sure she was a ghost.

*Or at least he believed she was. Or could be. Well. Whatever. But how did she fit into all of this? Why would she warn him if she was part of this anyway? Sarah's face appeared outside the windshield. Redfield spoke to the vision.*

"Okay, I think I found Ryan's place, now what do I need to know?"

The face continued to stare back at him while he drove. The change of scenery along with the reflection of the road made the vision appear to move. Like an old time picture show. Flickered up and down.

As he grabbed the reigns tighter he forced his horse to gallop faster. The thudding of the hooves became louder and louder. The vision became more intense. In a moment the vision turned as if to look away. He did not understand. The pounding of the hooves on pavement became unbearable.

Joe Redfield slipped. In an instant, reality came back into focus. The vision vanished, replaced with the knowledge the cruiser had left the road and chewed up gravel from the shoulder which slammed into the wheel wells with a terrible pounding noise.

As he fought to regain control of the vehicle, Redfield released his foot from the accelerator and braked easy to slow the vehicle down. The cruiser drifted better than half way off the road, but still chewed up gravel. In the cold, he began to sweat. His hands slippery on the steering wheel.

Although, not concerned about a slide off the road, because the soft snow would cushion the impact. More afraid he would lose the use of the cruiser, if it got hung up in a snowdrift. Or, buried deep in the snow. Afraid he would be stranded or have to wait for someone to come get him out. No time to spare. He needed to get to the judge's place.

With renewed determination he fought harder, and for a moment got the cruiser back on the road, but rather abruptly the tires lost their grip on the slick blacktop and the car slid back off to the gravel. He still fought, but the rear end began to fishtail.

"Damn." He muttered. "I got to get this baby back."

Redfield's eyes widened and panic seized his chest. Up ahead stood a narrow bridge. No side of the road there, only concrete. And for sure would not be a soft impact. The bridge abutment approached fast and there would be only one chance. At the last possible moment, he swerved the cruiser onto the road. The cruiser lunged, smashed first into the left side of the bridge, back across the road and smashed into the right side, which caved in both sides of the cruiser.

The bridge ended, but the cruiser kept careening. He slammed on the brakes and spun the wheel. The tires grabbed pavement and for a brief moment began to slip. An instant later the tires gained purchase and sent the car into a three hundred and sixty degree spin. And once again before it stopped.

With some effort, the driver's door opened. Redfield fell out of the cruiser. He suffered the cramps in the back of his legs and hands as well as the back of his neck. In addition to perspiring profusely. Rather quickly another urge built up and he relieved his bladder right there in the middle of the empty highway. How much coffee did he have earlier passed through his mind.

Both sides of the cruiser were damaged, but the vehicle appeared to be operable. He fired up the engine and pulled hard on the driver's door to close as he drove away. in an instant, his speed approached forty miles per hour, but still the door did not close. Redfield gave one last tug, able to get the door part way shut. The door rattled quite loud while he drove.

The turn off up ahead and the driveway to the judge's cabin would be a short distance in to the left. He killed the lights as soon as the cruiser made the turn. With a rush of adrenalin he noticed lights were on inside the judge's cabin and with his foot off the accelerator let the cruiser move forward.

~

A light flashed across the front windows, quick enough to catch Ryan's attention. He moved the curtain open a tad and could see a car approach in the distance with the lights off. The snow had stopped for the moment and the moon broke through the clouds. A ray of moonlight illuminated the darkened mars lights, which Ryan recognized.

The cruiser pulled up front. He waited for the person to get out, but no one did. Ryan could not see in through the windshield so he did not know who was inside. Well, a reasonable idea who it would be.

The driver's door began to open and a man emerged. Had to be the sheriff. Who else. Well, whoever, he needed to get out of there. A quick scan of the room, although he knew everything okay. He dashed for the back door. Once the sheriff had stepped onto the front porch he could make his break. The tree line sat about fifty feet into the woods. As soon as he got there he would be clear.

At the first knock on the front door Ryan took off fast. The snow knee deep in parts, but he kept at it and took a last dive into the tree line. His heart raced as he turned over to look. The rear door stayed closed. No lights on in the back either. The sheriff would have waited for someone to answer. As he lifted up, Ryan dusted the snow off and walked deeper into the trees.

~

Redfield knocked again, but did not expect anyone to answer. He waited a moment longer before he tried the doorknob. The service revolver out and clutched in his right hand. The doorknob turned as the door gave way. He glanced back behind him before he entered.

~

The judge had an old pickup truck on the property Ryan parked near the back entrance and reached the truck exhausted. The trek through the snow tired him, which caused him to bounce against the truck and hang over the front fender for support. The driver's door creaked and popped as old cold doors do. But the engine fired right up. Ryan kept the vehicle charged for such an occasion.

The old truck spun and bounced all over in the open field. The service road ahead. He shifted and drove each gear to the max. Clear of the snow, the old truck slid onto the road. So far everything followed the plan, but he would have to work fast. The sheriff's presence made everything become more complicated. He pushed down on the accelerator and drove the truck harder.

~

Redfield entered vigilant. The service revolver at his side. A fire raged in the big fireplace. A puddle of water gathered on the floor behind the sofa. As he walked through the room, he noticed the sunlamps by the armchair. Still warm to the touch. The armchair had the back and seat quite wet. He wondered what it meant and did not want to admit what he thought of the scene. Something may have already happened?

Guarded, he checked the rest of the rooms first. But quite obvious they were not used. Cold, dark and dusty. He opened the back door and spotted the buildings in the back. Those freezers Ed Morrow described.

After he found the switch for the outside light, he flipped it on. But stood to the side in case someone waited out there. After a few moments, he took a single step out, but stepped back in and watched if anyone made a move. Satisfied no one around he made his way off the porch and stood at the bottom of the stairs. But still kept the six gun drawn. He worked his way down the well-traveled path in the snow and watched both sides as he went.

Redfield approached the center building first only because the closest. The light switch inside the door. He flipped it on and ever watchful entered. The light shone bright and there appeared to be a lot of recent activity. The swift coldness made him feel like he entered an ice box. The air so dense inside. Nothing here. He turned off the light as he left and let the door close.

The freezer on the left next, because it would be easier to get to. From the look of the door this one had not been used in a while. He looked inside, found the switch and flipped it on. Only one of the bulbs worked, but the light enough to know nothing happened in there for quite some time.

He assumed all of the activity happened in the center. Redfield thought about passing on the third freezer. But decided to check it out anyway and made his way over to the small building on the right. The door contained an old rusted lock on it, which confirmed his earlier thought. He pulled on the lock to test the strength and decided since the door locked and rusted, good enough and not used in a while either.

As he started back up the path, Redfield stopped and turned. There appeared to be a stream of light from the side of the third freezer reflected on the snow. He worked his way back to the freezer and tried the lock again. The lock looked strong, but the shackle appeared quite worn. He looked for something to pry it, but did not find anything. He trudged back to the center freezer. Inside, he found a piece of pipe amongst the many items gathered in there.

The lock hinge offered no resistance to the strength of the pipe, and popped easy. Vigilant, Redfield opened the door, entered ever watchful and scanned the room. The light emanated from a lone bulb over the door above and behind him. His eyes spotted someone in the corner. He darted behind one of the slabs fastened to the wall, pointed the service revolver and yelled.

"Freeze."

Nothing moved. As he focused harder, he knew a person stood there and kept the service revolver aimed at the target. In this bad light, it could be anything. He walked over to the light switch and turned on the rest of the lights, which made the room quite bright.

There could be no mistake of what he saw.

The body stood, rested against the back wall. Female, naked, the eyes stared straight out. Lips pursed in a straight line open ever so slight. Arms straight. Hands flat up. Knees buckled. Redfield tapped the skin. Backing up he leaned against one of the slabs to stare at the frozen woman before him.

Joe Redfield holstered the six gun and leaned closer.

Covering his hand with his sleeve, he pulled the frozen woman forward and strained to get a glance at her right butt cheek. No scar. He turned the body some more to let more light in. No scar. He spun the body completely around to get a full view. No scar. Forgetting the cold, Redfield let his hand out of the sleeve and rubbed across the buttocks. Nothing. No scar. No marks. No nothing.

"Who the hell is this?" He asked out loud.

He stood back and looked at the frozen woman. He knew this could not be Sarah Charvonce. Her parents claimed the body and took her back home.

"So who the hell is this? Where did she come from? Damn, do I have another naked, dead, frozen woman to deal with? What the hell happened here?"

He said louder to the empty room, rubbed his hands across his face and tried to think. Another look at her and shook his head.

"Well, those questions will have to wait until later. No time to deal with you now." He said to the frozen woman.



Redfield looked down once more before he positioned the woman back against the wall. He chuckled as he thought about the absurdity of having yelled freeze to a frozen corpse and switched off the light.

He angled across the deep snow and forgot the path. Redfield leapt onto the back porch and took a last look back at the freezers. The lights were turned off and the doors were closed. Thought for another moment about the frozen lady in the third freezer, hesitated, but again decided he could not do much about her now. There were live people who could be in danger and needed his immediate attention. He left her there.

Redfield did a quick step through the cabin and slid into the front door, but gained his balance before he opened it, stopped a moment before he exited and looked around the room. The fire began to taper. He wondered by how much he missed Ryan Palmer. Redfield closed the door behind him.

Walked as fast as he could to the cruiser, he pulled the collar of his jacket up around his neck. The frigid air engulfed him. Grabbed the handset from the dash clip and spoke loud over the wind.

"Lori, are you there?"

The radio crackled, until a voice answered.

"Yeah, Joe, what's up?"

"Has Sam Edwards made it in yet?"

Lori handed Edwards the handset.

"Yeah, Joe, I'm here. What do you need?"

"Right. Great." Redfield paused and took a breath. "Listen. I'm at the judge's place and a rather rich crime scene with at least one very unique piece of evidence. Think you can get here and secure this location?"

Sam Edwards looked at Lori, who nodded she understood.

"Yeah, Joe, can do. Lori grabbed gear as we spoke."

"Okay Sam, appreciate it. Be careful out there. Not sure where this Ryan Palmer character yet. He may circle back here at some point."

"Right Joe. I know the drill." Sam Edwards put the handset back.

After a deep breath, Redfield forced the driver's door closed best he could.

~

While she explained the details to Sam Edwards, Lori heard Fred on the hand set with Joe, who discussed what he found at the judge's place. She opened the gun locker and handed Sam a shotgun to go with his service revolver and included a box of shells.

"You be careful out there. Here's the phone number to the cabin where Joe will be. Call here or there when you get to the judge's place. Ed Morrow said the phone still works out there. You may have to sit on the judge's place a while until we get this all figured out. I don't know what Joe will find at the cabin, or what he'll want to do next. Sam, you sure you okay alone? Want someone to go with you? Or meet you out there. I'm trying to reach Pete."

"No, I'll be fine. Remember, I did this a long time." Sam Edwards offered a smile and looked up at her.

"Yeah, sorry." Lori nodded. "You should tell me what to do. Sorry."

Sam Edwards took the shotgun and shells from Lori Jacobs, stuck the box of shells in his jacket pocket and decided not to load the shotgun yet. Fred Randall walked him out and waited for him to get in his pickup truck. Waved as he pulled away.

"Joe, you still there?" Lori, picked up the handset.

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Sam Edwards on the way. Will you wait for him to get there?"

"No. I need to get to the cabin. Get those kids. Don't know where Ryan Palmer went. But, I need to get there in case he went there. Hell, he might be there already."

"Right, stay in touch. Fred and I will hang here."

~

Joe Redfield placed the handset back in the clip, his mind raced. Now if he can only get to the cabin in time. But, in time for what.

The snow began to fall again.

## Chapter 29

As he pressed down hard on the accelerator, Ryan Palmer pushed the old truck into town and did not care how fast he drove. He knew both of the town's law enforcement officers were now occupied. The sheriff out at the judge's place and his deputy at the dance. The truck came to a stop and parked a few doors down from the deputy's apartment building.

Deputy Pete Matson stirred, but did not awaken from his deep sleep, nor did he hear the door open to his apartment.

As he reached in to turn on the bedroom light, Ryan heard the covers rustle. He spun out of the room, stood plastered against the outside wall and waited for someone to come out. When no one did, Ryan ventured inside on his hands and knees. Someone stirred in the bed. Ryan waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. A quick scan of the room, he spotted the web gear on the chest of drawers.

Ryan very quiet as he removed the handcuffs from Pete's web gear and jumped on the bed. He immobilized the sleeping deputy and put the handcuffs on each wrist. He spoke as he rolled the deputy over.

"Why are you here?"

"I live here. Where else would I be?"

Pete Matson looked at his assailant in astonishment.

"How come you're not at the dance, deputy? You were suppose to be at the dance tonight."

Pete looked at his assailant a long time before he spoke.

"Earlier."

Pete decided not to finish his sentence, instead looked at the man.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Neither spoke for a moment. Ryan stayed deep in thought and tried to work this out before he spoke.

"I only need some of your gear and I'll be on my way."

"My wallet on the."

"No thanks. I need one of your uniforms."

"My uniform? For what?"

Pete watched as Ryan went to the closet and saw him pull out one of his fresh uniforms. Ryan gathered up the rest of the web gear. A quick search, Ryan looked around the bedroom, but did not see what he needed. He walked over to the bed and stood in front of Deputy Pete Matson.

"Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The gun, deputy. Where's your damn gun?"

When Pete did not respond, Ryan slapped him hard across the face.

"Look, I don't have time for this. Where's the damn gun?"

Pete still did not tell him.

"Get up."

Ryan reached down and grabbed a handful of Pete's hair, forced him up into a sitting position on the bed. With one hand, Ryan pulled at Pete's arm and half dragged him out of the covers, which caused Pete to stumble and fall to his knees as he tried to exit the bed. Helping Pete to his feet, Ryan dragged him to the kitchen and pushed Pete against the counter. Pete stood there naked, the feel of the cold counter top on his back side. Pete moved away from the counter, but Ryan pushed him back and stood facing Pete with his hand extended to let Pete know he should stay put.

Pete let his weight rest against the cold counter top and adjusted his arms to get a more comfortable stance. The handcuffs got tangled in the drawer pull as Pete tried to get a better position. Ryan watched with his hand still extended to keep Pete in place. Ryan removed the largest knife from the block on the counter and pointed it at Pete.

"I'll cut your dick off you don't tell me right now where the gun is."

Panicked as he stood there handcuffed naked, Pete did not have many options and motioned toward the front room.

"Over there under my jacket."

Ryan left Pete against the counter while he went to where Pete indicated. Ryan threw the jacket to the floor, removed the backup revolver from the shoulder holster and held the backup gun in the air. Frustrated, Ryan came back to the kitchen for Pete.

"Not this gun. I need your service revolver. The fancy six gun. Now where is the revolver?"

Pete stood silent.

After he cocked the pistol, Ryan pointed.

"I swear to God, I'll shoot you in the nuts, you don't tell me right now where your six gun is."

The cold steel pressed against his most sensitive place and after a deep breath, Pete told him. Ryan dragged Pete with him. They went back into the bedroom where Ryan retrieved the six gun from the closet shelf.

"See, was that so hard?"

He tossed the other gun on the floor of the closet.

"Alright deputy, let's go."

"Go? Go where?"

"We need to take care of your wacko sheriff before he spoils everything."

"Do what? What do you mean take care of?"

"You will accidentally shoot him."

"Like hell I will!"

Pete stopped walking, which caused Ryan to stop as well and shook his arm free from Ryan's grasp.

"Right. You won't. I will."

Ryan grabbed his arm again and pushed Pete against the wall.

"And it will look like you shot the sheriff and while everyone tried to figure it out, I can finish my work. Let's move."

"I won't go. I won't do it."

Pete stopped again and freed his arm from Ryan's grasp.

"Look deputy, you go, or you die here. Swear to God, I'll kill you right where you stand. Drag your body out. Shoot the sheriff and plant you at the scene with a bullet in your head. Either way you die. I don't give a damn. Go with me and I'll wound you. Let you try to explain your way out of shooting the sheriff. Makes no difference to me. Let's get this done."

Ryan parked Pete on the edge of the bed and dressed in the uniform. He put his own clothes in a gym bag he brought along. Once finished, dressed in full uniform, web gear, six shooter and all, he pulled Pete off the bed and walked him toward the front door.

Pete stopped right inside the door his back to the wall and turned.

"Wait a minute I need to put something on. I can't go out like this."

Ryan grabbed the top coat from the chair and wrapped it around Pete's shoulders, buttoned it in the front, forced Pete to slip on a pair of boots and walked him through the front door. Outside, Ryan took the keys from the web gear and unlocked the doors of the cruiser. He opened the back driver's side door of the car and motioned for Pete to get in.

As Deputy Pete Matson bent down, Ryan Palmer brought the butt of the gun down heavy on the back of Pete's head, dropped him half in and half out of the cruiser. He struggled to push the unconscious deputy the rest of the way in and closed the door.

As he drove the deputy's cruiser through town, Ryan waved to the occasional passerby. They would remember the deputy later. On the back road out to the judge's place, Ryan drove by his latest creation. Josh and Tiffany, waved as he did and admired his intricate design. He knew the sheriff would still be at the judge's place investigating the cabin as a crime scene. Especially, once he found the little surprise stored in the right side freezer.

Ryan rehashed the plan in his mind. He would show up as the deputy, walk right up on the sheriff and shoot him. He would put Pete back in the uniform and use the sheriff's service revolver to shoot the deputy in the leg. Or shoulder. Or in the gut for giving him so much grief earlier. Or maybe in the head to finish the job. The whole scene made to look like they somehow accidentally shot each other. The plan would be perfect. While everyone scurried about as they chased their tail with old man Edwards and the part time lady deputy running the show, he would have plenty of time to finish his masterpiece with no one the wiser.

He drove the rest of the way with a broad smile.  
The snow fell steady at the moment.

~

Zeke cooked what little food he found left over for him and Suzanne to eat. After they finished, Suzanne went into their bedroom to get ready. Zeke waited as he sat on the sofa by the fire. Earlier, he closed the drapes, so Suzanne wouldn't be reminded of the morning discovery. The dark room filled only with the orange glow from the fire.

The bedroom door opened and Suzanne emerged. She had fixed her hair, put on fresh makeup and changed her outfit. The blouse displayed an extra button open and exposed a hint of a white lace bra underneath.

"Well, how do I look?"

"Great, absolutely great."

Suzanne sat on the couch next to Zeke and kissed him. Zeke put his arm around her.

"Hey Zeke, it's late. Where do you think they are?"

"I don't know, Suzanne."

"Do you think anything happened to them? Maybe the car went off the road or something."

"Nah. Remember, they also have snowmobiles. We'd know if anything happened. Probably forgot about us."

"You think so?"

"Why, are you complaining? It's been nice having some time to ourselves and frankly I wouldn't care if those people never came back here tonight. Our time alone has given us the chance to get reacquainted. I know it has been rough the last couple of months, but tonight, this weekend has been special."

Suzanne moved closer to Zeke. The fire popped. Zeke slid further down on the sofa. Suzanne turned, put her head on his lap and watched the fire.

"This was nice wasn't it?"

Zeke nodded yes, but Suzanne did not see.

~

Joe Redfield pushed the cruiser as fast as the roads would permit, with the driver's door barely closed and rattled to no end. He knew he would have to drive all the way around to get to the cabin. No other way by car. The judge's place located out in the county away from everything. No doubt part of the plan. The roads were passable. The sky dark. Light snow fell. But, still should make good time there.

~

As he turned into the driveway of the judge's place, Ryan noticed right away. Damn, damn, damn, he swore louder as he saw the sheriff's car gone.

"Why the hell did he go?"

Ryan yelled out loud, drove up the driveway too fast, did not stop in time, slid and smashed the cruiser into the front steps and could not have cared less. The unconscious Pete Matson on the seat behind him, rolled to the floor and bounced against the front seat. The coat pinned against his naked body.

Out the door in an instant, Ryan ran up the steps and in no time stripped off the uniform and dropped pieces to the floor. He dressed back into his own clothes and put the heavy coat back on. After he gathered a few items to take with, Ryan closed the big wooden door behind him.

Outside, he finished bundling up next to the snowmobile and put his scarf and gloves on. If he went the ridge route he would get to the cabin straight away. Although, it might be dangerous on the down hill. It would be the most direct and the fastest route and should get him there in no time.

He mounted the snowmobile and took one last look at the cruiser. The headlights were on and the driver's door stood open. So what, he thought, but decided to take care of the scene. He did not want it so obvious, in case someone did come by. He swore as he approached the car, reached in and turned off the lights, stepped back and used his foot to close the door. A glance back at the cabin, he thought he should rearrange the place before he left. But, decided he could take care of it all later. Right now, he needed to get to the cabin. Get there in time and get the other two out of there before. Well, get there and everything will be fine. He drove the snowmobile onto the trail and continued as fast as he could straight into the forest.

~

Zeke and Suzanne snuggled by the fire. If either one of them thought of the others, they did not show it. At the moment they were engrossed in each other and how much this time meant to each of them.

~

Ryan inched the snowmobile up and over the ridge and made his way down the incline. He fought hard to keep the machine from rolling. The decanter bounced against the side, but he wrapped the package tight enough it should be okay. Once clear of the incline, only a short distance to the cabin. He stopped in front, but decided to pull the snowmobile around to the side. Clutching the decanter, Ryan mounted the steps.

~

Suzanne let out a scream at the banging on the door. In an instant Zeke wrapped his arms around her, held her and calmed her. He left her by the fire and walked over to the door. He opened the door a crack to find Ryan outside. A decanter of wine dangled from his right hand. Ryan held up the decanter.

"I've been instructed to come over here, pry you with the good wine and. And drag you back to Sarah's cabin. There's a helluva a party going on over there. Care to join us?"

"What the hell took you so long? We thought you forgot about us,"

Suzanne yelled from the background. Ryan looked at Zeke, who stepped aside to let Ryan enter. Ryan met Suzanne mid-room.

"We did." He paused to muffle a belch. "Excuse me. We did. Why the peace offering. The good stuff. Drink up or I'll tell the others you were unsociable."

Ryan appeared to be tipsy, as he staggered to the kitchen and returned with two glasses.

"Did I tell you the good stuff?"

Ryan filled a glass and handed it to Zeke, who took the glass from him. Ryan walked over to the fire where Suzanne stood with her hands on her hips and held out the other glass, which she gave in and took from him.

"Drink up, so we can go. I said I'd be right back. No time to waste. Not with a party in full swing."

~

Joe Redfield left the cruiser up the road. He did not want to alert anyone. He also did not see any vehicles out front. No snowmobiles. No car. Maybe they weren't here anymore. Maybe they went somewhere else. Maybe someone would still be here. Maybe, hell. He took the steps slow and knocked easy on the door. A moment later he knocked again a little harder.

~

After she took her glass from Ryan, Suzanne walked toward the door. Zeke turned around and watched her. Ryan put the top back on the decanter and stepped into the shadows. Suzanne opened the door.

"What ever are you doing here?"

## Chapter 30



The snow blew around the silhouette of Sheriff Joe Redfield.

Suzanne turned to announce the sheriff. Ryan ducked into the shadows.

Joe Redfield stepped into the orange glow of the cabin. Although, not invited in, he continued to the center of the great room. He spotted Zeke by the fire and remembered him from this morning's visit. He saw another man move into the shadows he did not recognize.

"Thought I would stop by to check in on how you all were."

Redfield kept his eyes on the unknown man by the kitchen, who set something on the counter before he moved away. They circled like two animals stalking each other.

Suzanne closed the door and walked into the room next to him.

"Absolutely fine sheriff. In fact, we were about to leave. Right, Ryan? Seems our friends are at. Well, there's a party we are late for."

Redfield kept his eyes on the man in the shadows and did not look at Suzanne as he spoke.

"Ryan? I don't believe I've had the pleasure yet."

"Some other time sheriff. We are in somewhat of a hurry." The man in the shadows answered in almost a whisper. No sign of the tipsiness in his voice.

The glass bounced on the sofa before it crashed to the floor. Zeke lay slumped in the sofa. Suzanne started for Zeke, but Ryan grabbed her by the hair and stopped her short. Deputy Pete Matson's service revolver pointed at Joe Redfield. The glass dropped from her hand and smashed to the floor. The contents spilled free. She struggled and reached back to stop his hand from pulling her entangled hair any harder.

"Hold it sheriff. Don't do anything stupid. Pull your six gun out easy. Easy. By the grip. Empty the chamber. Don't be stupid. I'll blow her god-damn head apart. You had to be the hero. Had to get in the middle. Why couldn't you stay the hell out of this? It could have been perfect. Throw the gun over here and the bullets over there on the other side."

The six gun stopped at Ryan's feet. He kicked the six gun farther away. The bullets bounced on the floor and hit against the wall.

"Please let me go to Zeke." Suzanne pleaded.

"Oh, we'll get to him, Suzanne, we'll get to him." Ryan twisted his hand and pulled her hair tighter. "Okay, take your clothes off. Looks like we'll have to do this the old fashioned way now."

Suzanne struggled, but Ryan's grip entangled in her hair kept her in place. Ryan reached with the gun hand and tore the blouse down her back. The buttons bounced on the floor as the material pulled away from her arms.

Redfield attempted to move, but Ryan leveled the six gun back at him.

"Don't be stupid, sheriff. I will shoot her right here and now. Let's go, Suzanne get those clothes off. Let's go."

Ryan undid the clasp of her bra and worked the material off the front until it dropped to the floor. Suzanne sobbed, but Ryan tightened the grip and yanked her head back.

As the sheriff moved, Ryan swung Suzanne around to put her back between them. Redfield moved around to the side.

"You want to be the hero sheriff? C'mon. C'mon. Watch her brains splatter across the room."

Ryan slammed the barrel of the gun against Suzanne's temple. Redfield stopped his motion.

"Let's go, Suzanne get those damn clothes off."

Suzanne unfastened her jeans and pushed them down her hips. Redfield waited. Ryan breathed harder. The adrenaline took over. The last outburst had been more of a hysterical scream. Suzanne stepped out of her shoes, used her legs and feet to work the jeans off and used her feet to step out of the knee-high socks. Only her panties remained.

"Listen Ryan. Maybe we can work this out?"

"Shut up. Shut the hell up, sheriff. Are you done yet?"

Ryan spotted the panties still on and yanked her head back so far they both fell backwards and crashed to the floor. Redfield moved toward them, but Ryan had the six gun pointed back up at him. Although difficult, he stood back up and pulled Suzanne with him.

"Back off sheriff. Back off."

After a deep breath, Ryan inserted the gun barrel into the front of her panties, slid the barrel down until the tip reached the bottom of her abdomen and used the barrel to push the front of the panties down. The cold steel violated Suzanne for a moment until the fabric gave and dropped down off her hips. Tears streamed down her face. Suzanne stood with her hands on her hair to soften Ryan's pull. She bit her lower lip and did not know what to do. Ryan used the gun barrel to push the panties down as far as he could. Redfield stood helpless. Suzanne broke down, shook and sobbed. Her panties bunched down around her knees. Her hair a tangled mess.

Redfield noticed the almost quizzical look in Ryan's eyes as if he went somewhere else. The six gun lowered to his side and his grip appeared to lessen in Suzanne's hair. The chance he waited for. If he knocked both of them to the ground he could keep Ryan pinned until he could get the six gun away.

Ryan turned, his eyes took another form as he raised the six gun and re-directed the gun back at the sheriff.

"Okay hero, you do him."

Ryan jerked the gun at the unconscious Zeke. Suzanne continued to sob. Redfield looked at him in disbelief.

"You heard me. Get him undressed. I need to finish. How about I add you as the final touch. Won't that be splendid? The hero sheriff right out there with the people he was supposed to protect. A true masterpiece."

Redfield stood his ground and did not move. Ryan's face tightened. He began to raise the six gun. Redfield anticipated his next move.

A loud bang on the door. But, before anyone could move, the door flew open, slammed against the wall, and unleashed a violent wind inside. Everything in the room blew about. Ryan pointed the gun every which way and dragged Suzanne along. Redfield positioned to make a move on him. Rather quickly the room became calm and the door slammed shut. A voice in the shadows called out.

"It's over Ryan. He knows. He knows everything. The sheriff knows what you did. What you have been doing. Everything."

Ryan, Suzanne and Joe looked in the direction of the voice.

Sarah stood in the far corner and faced the trio. Ryan pointed the gun at her. She raised her arms.

"What? You gonna shoot me?"

"Yes, if I have to. " Ryan leveled the gun at Sarah.

"Do you believe it would stop me?" Sarah replied as if to dare him.

In her condition, Suzanne had enough left to appreciate Sarah there.

"Sarah, I'm so glad to see you're okay."

"Shut up. Shut up. Everybody shut up." Ryan yanked Suzanne back.

As Sarah moved into the light, the fire grew brighter. Redfield watched her and waited for this to play out. Ryan moved away from him toward Sarah, who focused her eyes locked on him.

"No Ryan. Time to stop. I told the sheriff earlier you did all this. He knows everything. Let her go."

"No. No. I'll blow her head off. I swear."

Ryan backed up and tightened his grip. He jammed the barrel of the gun into Suzanne's temple.

"Please go away Sarah. Come back later. It will all be done. I've got to finish. For you. Can't you see? All for you?" Ryan sobbed.

Redfield took a step.

Sarah stood her ground.

"I did it all for you. I'm sorry." Ryan began to sob.

Sarah started toward him. The fire illuminated her face. Ryan regained his composure. Redfield had circled around in the hope Sarah would keep him occupied long enough for him to make a move. Ryan saw it too.

"Back off, sheriff. Back off."

He pushed the gun barrel harder against Suzanne's temple. Suzanne no longer suffered the pain.

The tension heightened with the sound of a tremendous bang on the closed drape covered center window. The pounding startled everyone but Sarah, who stood her ground. The banging began again. Louder. Continuous pounding.

Louder and louder. In a panic, Ryan looked at the closed drapes, but kept Suzanne's head down. His hand tangled in her hair.

Redfield looked at Ryan, who continued to sob and began to breathe heavier. Again, Redfield thought he could make a move. Ryan spun, pointed the six gun right at his face, but stepped back and kept the six gun pointed at Redfield. He spun toward Sarah and shook the six gun at her. Turned back to Redfield. The six gun moved with him. The fire raged brighter. The great room aglow in orange light. Ryan continued to turn and pointed the six gun at Sarah.

"Make it stop. Please make it stop." Ryan screamed. "Please make it stop."

The last words a hysterical sob. The fire leapt out of the fireplace and spilled onto the floor, which forced Ryan toward the window. Sarah closed in.

"Why don't you open the drapes to see her, Ryan? Go ahead. Or are you afraid? Do you want me to open the drapes?"

"No! Stay where you are." Ryan spun around in circles.

Redfield watched Sarah. The intensity in her eyes focused on Ryan. Her voice authoritative.

"Or you'll what Ryan? Shoot? Go ahead. If you think shooting me will do any good." Sarah took a step. "Ryan. Let her go. The sheriff knows everything you did. He knows, Ryan. He knows. It's over."

Ryan stared at the drapes as they began to slide open unattended. Suzanne screamed. Redfield stepped back. Ryan leaned back against the wall and sobbed louder than Suzanne. Outside the window stood the naked, frozen woman, hands pressed flat against the glass.

Redfield watched and waited.

Sarah became relentless.

Ryan sobbed harder and grew hysterical.

"It's over, Ryan." Sarah yelled louder. "Let her go."

The fire danced across the floor, ignited the sofa and the wall behind Ryan, which forced him closer to the center window. The flames continued to grow higher and wider.

"No, make her go back. I don't want her here."

Ryan sobbed and slid down against the wall. He still held onto Suzanne's hair, which forced Suzanne to slide down with him. Suzanne dropped hard on her bare butt. Her head cocked back.

"Make her go away."

"And what you said that night?" Sarah yelled over the roar of the fire.

"No. I passed out. I'm sorry. I don't remember what happened. I'm a drunk. I'm sorry. I don't remember anything. I passed out. I'm a drunk. Sorry."

The fire raged.

"Why did you leave me, Ryan?" Sarah moved closer.

Ryan slid further away toward the center window.

Redfield became concerned as the flames danced across the floor.

Suzanne stayed silent. Her hair tangled in Ryan's hands.

"Why Ryan?" Sarah inched closer. "Why did you leave me out there?"

"I'm sorry. I did not mean too. In the morning I went to find you. But too late. You were already. Nothing else I could do. I'm sorry. I brought you inside. I tried to fix everything. Tried to warm you. Please make her go away. Please. I'm sorry. I did try to make you better."

"No, not until you let her go."

Sarah moved closer, inches from Ryan.

The fire spread further into the room, ignited the floor, the carpets, sofa and consumed the wall behind Ryan, which again forced him closer to the window. Redfield became concerned. Raging, the flames consumed the room and danced on the ceiling.

Ryan regained a moment of composure and spoke to Sarah.

"I can't. I have to finish. All for you. Can't you see? All for you. I wanted you. So you wouldn't be alone anymore. I left you alone out there. I'm sorry. I saw you on the ridge. All alone. So alone up there. I'm sorry. I did not mean to leave you out there. I tried to fix you."

"Ryan." Sarah whispered. "Let her go."

Ryan sobbed, but waved the six gun in the air.

"Don't you understand? I could not bring you back. After the first couple got lost. Not my fault. I thought. More like you. When I came back here the first time. The first time I saw you up on the ridge. You looked so alone. I had to do something. Something more for you. Don't you see? I did not want you to be alone anymore. All my fault. I'm only a drunk. So alone. I had to do this. I had to do this for you."

"Ryan, it doesn't work that way." Sarah moved right in front of him.

"Ryan tightened the grip in Suzanne's hair and sobbed.

"I need you to have. Not so alone anymore. Please, let me finish and everything will be okay."

The pounding grew louder and forced Ryan to look at the window. The arms of the frozen woman outside moved. Beat on the glass. The fire closed in on him. Ryan screamed, rose up and pushed Suzanne away. She tumbled to the floor her legs restricted by her panties down around her knees.

Joe Redfield dropped to one knee. The .32 auto in his hand.

Ryan fired at the frozen woman and shattered the glass.

Redfield yelled for him to drop the gun. Ryan spun and fired blind at the sheriff. Redfield had anticipated his move and had crouched on the floor. The bullet struck the wall behind him. Ryan refocused his aim and pointed the six gun at the sheriff. His expression showed the rage inside him.

Joe Redfield fired three shots into Ryan Palmer's chest.

Ryan stumbled backwards and smashed through the shattered glass.

Redfield ran over to the window ready to engage, but did not have to. Ryan Palmer lay sprawled in the snow. His eyes wide open and stared skyward. The six gun still in his hand. Blood oozed from his chest.

The frozen woman had been knocked over when Ryan fell through the glass and grotesquely straddled him on the ground. The stiff arms kept the corpse up. Dead eyes stared at each other. Redfield nodded at the irony of the scene as he holstered the .32 auto.

When he turned back around, startled to find the fire burned in the fireplace and no where else. Yet another look around, he saw everything indeed went back to normal. He spotted Suzanne crawl across the floor toward Zeke. He helped her to her feet and hiked her panties back up. Removed his jacket and placed it over her shoulders. The air in the room became quite cold with the center window gone. He moved Suzanne over to the fire and shifted Zeke off the sofa down next to her.

Redfield looked around the room once more. But he knew the answer.

Sarah was gone.

Redfield stepped into the bedroom and pulled the covers and the tattered robe off the bed. He set the pile down next to Suzanne and Zeke. She placed the tattered old robe over Zeke and helped Joe cover them both with the blanket.

He tried to hang the other blanket over the window. But, the wind tore it back down. A hammer and nails would be required to keep the blanket up. The drapes closed in the hope they would cut down on the direct force of the wind.

As he closed the drapes, he did a double take. Only Ryan's body there in the snow. The six gun off to the side and the frozen woman no longer straddled him. He stared at Ryan's body for a moment. The blood oozed from the chest and began to turn the snow on either side of him red. Quite sure Ryan Palmer would not go anywhere any more he let the drapes close.

He grabbed his six gun from the floor, holstered it and looked around to find the scattered bullets. He picked her clothes up off the floor, went back to Suzanne and handed her the pieces.

"Suzanne, listen to me. I need to get to the cruiser. I'll be right back. I have to call in some help. Suzanne, can you hear me? Suzanne?"

Suzanne nodded her head but held on tight to Zeke.

Redfield wrapped the blanket tighter around her.

With a last look at Suzanne, Joe Redfield stood at the front door.

"I need to call for help. I'll be right back."

Suzanne waved her hand in the air.

Redfield took one last look around the room, but no one else stood there.

He pulled the big door closed behind him.

## Chapter 31

The cruiser door popped and creaked as Redfield forced it open and drove the cruiser the rest of the way to the cabin. He did not try to close the door, reached for the handset and called the office. Lori Jacobs answered as he pulled the mangled cruiser up in front of the cabin, stopped, jammed the gear selector into park and took a moment before he spoke.

"I'm out at the cabin. Looks like I got here the same time as Ryan. Think he must have tried to drug the two of them somehow. The guy passed out pretty quickly, but the girl hadn't touched the wine yet. It got ugly real quick." Redfield paused. "It's over. I put Ryan Palmer down."

"Joe, you okay? Are you hurt?" Lori came on the line.

"No. No. I'm fine. Trying to gather my thoughts."

He stopped, looked out the windshield at the cabin in front of him and continued.

"Listen, I need you and Fred to head out here? Give you the update then."

He paused and tried to remember everything he wanted done.

"Lori?"

"Yeah Joe, I'm still here. What do you need?"

Redfield waited a moment and put the handset to his mouth.

"Have you heard from Pete? Anyway, you better call him in as well. He has the other cruiser. We will need both at some point."

"No Joe. I haven't heard anything from Pete. Want me to pass by his apartment? Check there? Maybe he got lucky at the dance."

As soon as Lori said it, she stopped. The radio fell silent for a moment.

"Right. Either way. See if you can raise him. We need him to help out one way or another."

"Got it Joe. I'll see what I can do."

Redfield waited for her to finish. When he heard the static, he spoke.

"Oh and Lori, one more."

He paused before he told her the rest. In the silence Lori spoke.

"What else, Joe?"

"We may need a medical assist for the guy. Girl's quite upset, too. Have Fred contact the hospital and have them send one out. I'm sure Fred can take a look, but they may need transport. Fred will have a package in his wagon."

"Okay Joe. Anything else?"

Redfield looked up at the cabin through the windshield again, put the handset to his mouth.

"There's only one couple here."

He waited for Lori to digest his last statement. She came back on the line.

"Got it, Joe. Any thoughts?"

"No Lori, nothing. Maybe Sam Edwards can find something at the judge's place. I had to bail rather quickly and did not have the time. Hell, I don't know."

"Joe, their car there?"

"What car?"

"Those kids must have had a car?"

Redfield looked up and out both windows, but did not see a vehicle. He slid out of the driver's seat, stood outside his cruiser and looked over the roof to the side, to the back and around behind him.

"Nope, don't see one."

"Well maybe they went somewhere. Floyds, or another cabin maybe."

"Yeah, right." Redfield stepped on her transmission. The first part brought static. "You better get moving on everything. See you when you get here."

"What's that Joe? I couldn't make out your. What did you say?"

He waited for the static to come back and repeated his previous message.

"I said let's leave it for now. Talk more when you get here."

"Right Joe, be there soon."

Redfield put the handset on the dash clip, stood outside the cruiser and made a feeble attempt to close the door. To no avail. He turned face on and pushed with both hands to force the door closed.

With a tired stretch, he looked up at the sky. The weather cleared and stopped snowing for a moment. A cloud passed over, blocked out the moon, but passed and the moon shone bright as if to say hello. He saluted.

Back inside the cabin, the temperature began to drop, so he placed a couple of logs on the fire. He patted Suzanne on the head and explained to her help on the way. Suzanne stopped her sob but held on tight to Zeke. Who appeared to be still out cold.

As he rummaged through the cabinets, Redfield found a can of coffee and dumped whatever had been left in the pot. Cleaned out the grounds and rinsed everything off in the sink. He scooped some grounds into the container and filled the pot with fresh water. Even his coffee would taste good right now.

The drapes rattled about as the wind whipped against them. But they still helped keep the cold out. The fire began to kick in, cracked and popped. Suzanne and Zeke should be warm enough in front of the fire. But, decided to walk over to make sure and noticed Suzanne had put her clothes back on and wrapped snug inside the blanket. He also noticed she still wore his jacket.

He retrieved a shirt from the bedroom, handed it to her and waited while she removed the jacket. Helped her slip the shirt on and pulled the material together in the front, while she began to button it up. They both realized one of



Zeke's shirts, which caused her to smile. Redfield smiled with her. Suzanne handed him the jacket, which he slipped back on.

With both hands he moved the drapes and looked out the window once more. Ryan's body still there sunk into the snow. Blood covered the chest, and turned the snow red on either side. His body there alone. The frozen woman he saw earlier no longer there. Satisfied, he stepped away from the window.

A light snow began to fall outside as the sky clouded over again. The coffee machine made a gurgling sound. The hot liquid began to drip into the pot. He crossed the room back toward the kitchen and heard Suzanne talk to Zeke. He looked at them for a moment, but they appeared okay wrapped up in front of the fire. Not sure what hit Zeke, but Redfield observed he remained out cold. The coffee pot stopped gurgling. Excited to have the hot liquid, he grabbed a cup, reached for the pot and poured one for Suzanne.

The wind continued to whip the drapes about.

~

Lori listened while Fred Randall called the hospital and requested an ambulance meet him at the sheriff's office. Lori removed her service gun. She did not use a six gun. Dropped the magazine to check. Replaced it and chambered a round. She set the safety before she placed the gun back in her waist band. She put her coat on, motioned to Fred he should go and once again tried to raise Pete.

The ambulance and the coroner's wagon, with Fred Randall, pulled up out front of the sheriff's office at about the same time a few minutes later. She closed and locked the sheriff's office and climbed into the coroner's wagon with Fred who led the way. They took the main road out of town toward the cabin.

~

Sam Edwards pulled and lit an unfiltered king cigarette from his pocket, and drew heavy on the first puff. His wife tried to get him to switch to a milder cigarette, but he wouldn't give up his unfiltered kings. He exhaled the smoke, as he sat in the driveway at the judge's place.

Sam had decided to take the main highway and cross over at Grover's Point, which he believed the safest way. He did not know if the road by the old Whitmore place would be passable and would rather stay on the main road all the way. The stretch out by the old Whitmore place might be hard to pass, since no one lived out there anymore and no one bothered with road maintenance in the winter. He did not want to get stuck tonight. Satisfied with his choice, here now and took another pull on the unfiltered king cigarette. He cracked the window and turned up the heat.

~

The coroner's wagon lead the way, with the ambulance close behind. Lori and Fred discussed the few details Joe gave them. A light snow fell, but stopped. The sky clear again. The moon popped in and out of the clouds. The roads passable and they made good time. In their haste they forgot to stop by Pete's apartment building to check if his cruiser parked there. Lori used Fred's two-way to try and raise Pete. Waited a few and tried again. Fred watched her place the handset back on the dash clip and checked the rear view mirror.

They sat in silence as the road unfolded in front of them.

~

Redfield believed it should be about time for them to arrive and opened the front door. He stepped outside and pulled the door almost closed to keep the wind down. As he looked up, he could see lights in the distance. The vehicles pulled up the side road toward the cabin. He walked down the steps.

Fred pulled the coroner's wagon up behind the cruiser. The ambulance behind him. Fred killed his engine. Lori stepped out of the coroner's wagon and walked around to the front. Fred joined her as they walked past the cruiser toward the sheriff. They both noticed the damaged side and started to ask, but the look on Joe's face suggested they let it go.

"Damn, but it's good to see you both. Lori, why don't you check on those two inside. Stay with them until the medics get them loaded up. Fred, come with me. Your package around back."

Lori nodded and went up the steps to the cabin.

Fred and Joe made their way through the deep snow around to the side of the cabin and stopped in front of Ryan Palmer's body. Joe removed the six gun from the spot where it had fallen when Ryan crashed through the window.

"Fred, this is one of our service revolvers."

Fred Randall did not hear as he tried to figure how to get the body out of there without the gurney. The snow too deep to wheel the gurney in. Maybe they would have to carry the body on the gurney. Like they did the first time. Or, maybe straight up carry the body out.

"Joe, can you lift under the arms, preserve as much as we can. I'll grab the knees and we can walk it around."

Fred looked at Joe, who continued to look at the six gun in his hand.

"Joe? Joe, did you hear me?"

"Huh? What? No."

Joe looked up, at Fred.

"Fred, one of ours. How did Ryan Palmer get our service revolver?"

Fred stopped to look at the gun in his hand.

"You sure, Joe? Looks like any other gun to me."

Redfield turned the gun and stuck his hand toward Fred.

"No. Here. Look. We stamp the grip with an inventory number."

Fred looked at the grip and nodded.

"Joe, let's get the body out of here. We can talk later."

Redfield tucked the six gun into his back waist band, grabbed under Ryan's arms and wrapped his hands on the shoulder to avoid the bloodstained chest. Fred secured the legs at the knees. Together they worked their way around to the front of the cabin and slipped several times as they made their way through the deep snow. They set the body down on the gurney next to the wagon. Fred had already opened the back gate, removed the gurney and dropped the legs when he first arrived.

Ryan Palmer's body sat on top of the gurney. Joe watched Fred tuck the arms on the side of the gurney before he covered it. Together they lifted the gurney and body into the back and worked the gurney far enough into the wagon to close the back gate.

As he leaned against the battered cruiser, Joe watched Fred open the driver's door of the coroner's wagon, retrieve a clipboard from the front seat and begin to make notes.

The snow continued to flutter in the air.

## Chapter 32

Parked in front of the judge's place, Sam Edwards stopped behind the cruiser already parked there. The trip took longer than he expected. Still in his pickup truck, he checked the service revolver.

The driver's door on the cruiser appeared ajar and Sam peeked in the window first, but saw no one inside. he walked around the front of the cruiser and stepped over the bumper to mount the steps.

The front door to the judge's place not locked. Pieces of clothes, what appeared to be a uniform, lay scattered on the floor in the entryway. He took a moment to digest the scene before he stepped around them.

A significant puddle of water sat by the sofa in front of the fireplace. The fire gave off a small light, but began to die out. He added another log. Better now than later. Especially, if he would be here a while and placed the new log on the remaining embers.

With a high amount of caution, Sam Edwards checked every room. The judge's place appeared to be empty. He walked further out the back door. The freezers stood solemn in the distance. As Sam closed his coat tight around, he made his way to the first one on the left and looked inside. It stood empty and unused. The center one empty, but used somewhat recent. The third one contained what Joe Redfield had told him to expect. Otherwise, the property appeared deserted.

Sam Edwards walked though the house and back out the front door to the cruiser as he tried to figure out what the hell it did here. Why did it stop abruptly? And apparently abandoned. Edwards pulled another unfiltered king cigarette from his pocket as he slid into the driver's seat of the cruiser. Easier to call the sheriff on the two-way and would also be easier to smoke while he talked. He grumbled about no where to smoke these days and struck a stick match to the unfiltered king cigarette.

The clipboard lay on the floor of the front passenger seat and with a slight effort he retrieved it. The clipboard belonged to Deputy Pete Matson and as he exhaled smoke he read the last notation. Nothing unusual jumped out. He set the clipboard down on the seat.

For good measure Sam Edwards forced his body around and looked in the back as he took a pull from the unfiltered king cigarette. Once the smoke cleared he noticed a pile of blankets bunched up on the floor. He thought it best to get out and check the pile from the rear door, rather than try to reach over. His age would not allow his body that kind of motion easy anymore.

With the service revolver in his left hand, Sam Edwards lifted the first blanket up. He found another blanket underneath. The second blanket exposed a pair of boots.

He immediately backed out, raised the service revolver and pointed the barrel at the pile. Very alert, Edwards reached in, but kept the six gun pointed as he lifted the second blanket off. It uncovered a body underneath, which caused him to jump back. He waited for any signs of movement. When none came, he stepped forward and reached in. The former sheriff touched the side of the neck for a pulse and acquired a beat. As he holstered the service revolver, he struggled to get the body up onto the back seat, which caused the overcoat to open. Quite surprised, Sam Edwards saw the man naked underneath.

"What the hell?" Sam said out loud.

In a moment, the man's head rolled over while he watched. Only then did Former Sheriff Sam Edwards realize the man there, Deputy Pete Matson. Sam tried to think what to do next. He closed the topcoat and put the blankets back on the prone deputy.

He slid back into the driver's seat to start the engine, which turned over on the second try. Sam Edwards set the heater on full. As the car warmed up and the heat began to penetrate the inside, he reached back and lifted the blankets. As he opened the overcoat, he looked over the torso to check for any wounds or other injuries. The skin looked okay. No bruises or blood stains. Edwards realized the arms were pulled behind and rolled the deputy forward. He saw the wrists were cuffed and let the deputy roll back onto the seat. Closed the coat and put the blankets back on top.

Edwards went back inside the judge's place to get the keys off the discarded web gear and made his way back to the cruiser. He entered through the rear door, reached behind the deputy and undid the cuffs. Released the binding to let the arms come forward. The deputy cold to the touch. He brought the overcoat together, re-buttoned it and placed both blankets over the deputy. Again bundled him up tight. He took a moment to catch his breath. Edwards stepped out of the vehicle and slammed the door closed to preserve the heat. He closed the front door as well. His first thought to pull and light another unfiltered king cigarette, but instead made his way back inside the judge's place. He decided to call it in first. After, he would call Joe Redfield.

~

Both radios came alive at the same time. Sam Edwards voice came through loud and clear. Fred watched Joe answer his radio and listened in.

"Yeah Sam. Joe Redfield. What's up?"

He let go and waited for the response.

"Yeah. Joe. Listen. I'm in Pete's cruiser. It's out at the judge's place pushed up against the front steps. Looks like he did not stop and ran into those steps.

Anyway, Pete Matson in there too. I mean in the cruiser. He's out cold. I mean, unconscious in the back seat."

Joe Redfield waited for the voice to stop and squeezed his handset.

"Sam, what's that you say? Pete where?"

He waited for Sam to respond and looked at Fred next to him. The radio crackled while Sam Edwards came back on.

"Strangest setup, Joe. Pete Matson, naked except for an overcoat and boots. His uniform scattered on the floor inside the judge's place, but his service revolver gone. Handcuffed. It appears someone might have forced. I found him on the back seat floor covered in blankets. Sure cold out here. Lucky he had the blankets around him. I called it in. Boys on the way. There's a pulse, but I don't know. He's alive and I'm keeping him warm. All I can say right now. Joe, you think Pete may have been on to something?"

The sheriff cut him off creating static as he over talked on the radio.

"Couldn't say, Sam. Anything else you know?"

He disengaged and waited for Sam to continue.

"What's that you say, Joe?"

Joe Redfield repeated his last transmission.

"Right. Like I said. Looks like the cruiser did not stop in time and hit the stairs. Wedged Pete into the floor behind the seat. Sure helped. Along with the blankets probably kept him warm enough. Strange he had been covered. Sure helped. Well anyway. I got the heat on. Boys should be here soon enough."

Sam stopped. Joe Redfield depressed his handset button.

"Well, better keep the place secure. The package still there?"

He cut off and waited for Sam to respond.

"Yes sir, Joe. The little lady still in the freezer. Back in the corner exactly like you said. Boy, she's frozen solid. How do you figure she got like that?"

Sam disengaged.

"We'll know more in the morning." The sheriff answered. "When Fred gets a look. He's here with me to pick up another package. She won't go anywhere."

Joe Redfield disengaged and remembered what he saw earlier. Fred looked at him, but he regained his composure and continued.

"Listen Sam, let me know when they get there. Call me back and let me. Let us know what they say. Okay?"

"Will do, Joe."

The radio fell silent. Redfield started to put the handset away, but immediately called Edwards back.

"Sam. Sam, you still there?"

He waited for a response and started to hit the button again. Sam Edwards came on the horn.

"Yeah Joe, still here. What do you need?"

Redfield waited for him to finish. Static broke through and he depressed the button.

"Oh and Sam, thanks for pitching in. Don't know when I'll get there. Have some work to do here. Anyway, I'll keep you posted. Call if you need anything."

"Okay Joe. I got the number. But, I'll probably stay on the two-way. Have someone listen in."

The radio fell silent. As Fred stood against the cruiser's battered door, he had heard everything. They both looked up as Lori Jacobs emerged from the cabin with the couple and the ambulance crew. Zeke had been strapped onto a gurney. Suzanne walked next to him.

Once she left the ambulance crew, Lori came over to Joe and Fred. They watched Suzanne and Zeke loaded into the ambulance. Lori spoke up.

"Said both would be okay. The medic said Zeke's vitals were fine. But he sure was out cold."

The ambulance backed up and made a three-point turn to face back toward the road. The three of them watched the ambulance pull away.

The radio crackled again, Sam Edwards back on the air.

"Wanted to let you all know the wagon here to take Pete away. Said they thought he would be okay. Fortunately, down on the floor and covered in blankets helped keep him warm enough. Nasty blow to the back of the head. Slugged quite hard. They'll know more when they get him back to the hospital and take some pictures."

Joe Redfield nodded as Sam Edwards talked about Pete.

Lori Jacobs looked at Fred, Joe and asked with her hands.

"Tell you in a minute." Fred patted Lori on the shoulder.

The radio fell silent. Redfield reached out to put the handset back, but Sam came back on the air.

"One more, Joe. Boys said when they passed the old Whitmore place they saw a car run off the road, but it did not look like anyone in it. They did not stop because they wanted to get here. Since Pete looks okay, they said they'd take a look on the way back."

Edwards paused and took another pull on his unfiltered king cigarette.

"I did not go that way, so I did not see it. I thought the road might be too rough and went the long way around to the highway instead. Anyway, they asked if I'd follow them to check it out. If only a car abandoned, I'll leave 'till morning." The radio fell silent.

Joe Redfield waited a moment before he spoke.

"What's that Sam? A car went off? Where at?"

He looked at Fred and Lori and waited for Sam to respond.

"Probably got drunk and went off the road. The ambulance guy said the road not too bad. Said I should be okay in my truck. Maybe I better take a look."

Redfield held the hand-set to his lips.

"Might have called for a tow by now. Sam, I need you to keep the judge's place secure."

He released the button and waited for Edwards to respond.

"Joe, they said down the road a piece. Shouldn't take more'n ten, fifteen minutes. Hell, nobody's around. Or might come this way anytime soon. I think it will be fine while I take a look." The radio went silent.

"Yeah, you're probably right, Sam. Maybe you better take a look. Hey, any idea how Pete and the cruiser got there?"

He let go and waited for the response.

"No Joe, sure don't. But, as I said, he was naked except for boots and an overcoat. Handcuffed too. My guess would be someone forced him into the car. Maybe taken by surprise. Can't figure why he was naked. A uniform was scattered on the floor inside the judge's place might have something to do with why. Maybe someone jumped him. Maybe he was asleep. Hell, maybe he can tell us more. Maybe tomorrow or the next day. Assuming he can remember. He took a nasty blow to the back of the head. The boys said."

Edwards stopped and Redfield waited. When the static continued, Joe Redfield spoke softer again.

"Alright Sam, thanks. Let me know, if anything further."

Lori looked at both of them and waited for an answer. Fred Randall brought her up to speed. She looked at Joe. But, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't know anything yet. Other than what you do now."

~

Sam Edwards took a pull on the unfiltered king cigarette. He stood outside ready to follow the paramedics out to the car. Watched as they loaded Deputy Pete Matson into the back. Once the door closed, he crossed over to his truck.

~

Joe Redfield looked at Fred, who shook his head. Neither one knew what to make of it all. He let go of the hand set, put it back on the dash clip and stepped out of the car. Lori and Fred stood in front of him and waited for an answer.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What the hell happened to the cruiser?"

"In my haste to get to the judge's place, I fishtailed on the bridge and played pinball with the sides. No big deal."

Joe mounted the steps and stopped on the porch. Fred and Lori looked at each other. They wanted to ask more but decided it no longer mattered. Fred shrugged and Lori nodded. Fred yelled out over the noise.

"Well, Joe. I'd better get the package back to my shop. Start my preliminary. Although, quite obvious what happened. What's next?"



"I want to look around here some more." Joe looked down at Fred. "Seal it up, Lori can hold here. I will go over to the judge's place. Start the process. See if we can figure out what happened there. I'll see you at the judge's. You still have to pick up the other package we talked about earlier."

Fred walked back to the coroner's wagon. Lori joined Joe on the porch and walked in together. Fred executed the three-point turn to get back to the road.

Inside, Joe put another log on the fire. Lori walked about, took notes, and looked the room over. The wind continued to gust through the broken glass which caused the drapes to flap. They had not spoken since Fred left. Went about the busy work of the investigation. Joe handed Lori the decanter.

"Ryan had this in his hand when I came in. I assume spiked with something. The girl did not drink any, but the guy finished most of his. Passed out straight away."

Lori handed him the bullets from the floor, took the decanter from him and placed it in a brown paper evidence bag she sat down by the front door. After a deep breath, she spoke.

"Joe, about earlier."

"Earlier? What about earlier?"

"Back in the office when I kissed you. I know the kiss terribly inappropriate,."

"But you want to take it back?"

Joe Redfield half sat against one of the sofa pieces. Lori walked over to him and stood right in front.

"No. I mean. I wanted to kiss you. Still do. But, I did not want to put you on the spot. I mean."

Joe Redfield pulled her toward him. Pulled her close. His hand on her upper back and the other hand on her butt. He kissed her hard. She dropped the pad and pen down onto the sofa and wrapped her arms around his neck. Pushed her body against his. They kissed long and passionate. When they broke, they stayed in each other's arms.

"I've wanted to kiss you for so long." Joe whispered in her ear.

"Well, what took you so long?" Lori whispered back.

They kissed again. This time Joe broke the kiss and pushed her out so he could face her.

"Listen. I'd like to kiss you all night and much, much more. But, I need you to do something for me right now."

"Sure Joe, anything."

"I need you to go to the hospital and check on Pete Matson. I mean. I'd feel terrible if. Well, stay with him. And maybe look in on the other two who were here. She should be okay. Anyway, get statements while you wait. Get as much info as you can. The couple they took out of here knows a lot more than they let on. We need to know what. How much they do know. We need details. Will you do it for me? Please?"

"Say no more. I'm on my way. But what about here?"

"I'll finish up here. Seal it up. Best we can do right now. I need to get to the judge's place. I think more to see and learn there. Well, maybe I can come back here in the morning. Or maybe. Hell, I know not the best idea. But, I would like you to go to the hospital. Find out what you can. Check on Pete."

"Sure Joe. Whatever you think best. How will you get out of here?"

"Fred and I found a snowmobile on the side when we retrieved the body. I'll take it to the judge's place. Tank's full. I should get there okay and a hell of a lot faster than I did to get here from there by car."

They walked out to the porch together. Now in an evidence bag, Lori also carried out the decanter.

"I'd better get this to hospital. Maybe they can tell what's in it. Figure out what to give the guy to counteract."

He stood on the porch, faced out and nodded. They both turned at the same time about to speak, but both stopped and nodded. Without another word, they both walked together to the cruiser. With some effort, Redfield worked the driver's door closed. Lori fired up the engine. He watched as she performed the three-point turn to get back to the road. The smile on Joe Redfield's face hurt.

As he watched her drive off, he began to turn back to the cabin, but the cruiser stopped abruptly. Lori backed up toward him. Stopped and struggled to get the door open, so spoke through the open window.

"Joe, Sam on the horn. You gotta hear this."

## Chapter 33

The radio crackled with static while Sam Edwards waited. He sat half in, half out of Pete's cruiser and took another deep pull on the unfiltered king cigarette. The second one since he got back. The cigarette dangled between two fingers of his left hand. The right hand held the handset. He took another pull on the unfiltered king cigarette as he waited for Joe Redfield to get on the horn.

~

As Redfield stood next to Lori outside the mangled cruiser, he tried to grasp what Lori said. At her request, he got the door opened and climbed into the driver's seat next to her to take the handset. He looked at her, depressed the button and spoke.

"Yeah Sam. Joe here. What's up?"

~

Sam Edwards sat up and took another pull, before he spoke.

"Joe, so glad I caught you. You still at the cabin?"

Joe waited, but Sam said no more.

"Yeah. Yeah sure. I'm still here."

Redfield stopped and waited for Sam to continue.

"I went with the boys to check on the car. Like I told you. We did not see anything at first. But when I started to go back."

The radio fell silent. After a minute Redfield depressed the button.

"Sam, what happened?"

Joe waited for Sam to continue. Heard the button depress, but the only sound he heard, Sam exhaled. Edwards took a hard pull on the unfiltered king cigarette before he continued.

"The big guy. You know, Harriet's boy, noticed clothes spread around the inside of the car. Thought maybe some kids wanted to make naked snow angles or some crap."

Edwards took another long pull on his unfiltered king cigarette.

"Anyway, we decided to look around. A few yards from the car we spotted what looked like the two kids. You know. Getting it on. One of the guys

yelled out to them, but no answer. They did not move. The big guy walked out to them and as soon as he got there he hollered for us to come take a look."

Edwards put the handset down. From his shirt pocket, he removed the pack of cigarettes and tapped the pack in his hand until one slid out. Once again, he fired a stick match to light the fresh unfiltered king cigarette and tossed the spent match into the snow.

"Sorry Joe. I had to grab another smoke. I gotta tell you. The scene out there like to spook me. I been around a long time. But, I ain't never seen anything like it before."

The radio fell silent again. Joe Redfield looked at Lori. Edwards came back on the horn.

"They were out there. Those two kids. In the field. In the snow. Naked as the day they was born. She sat on top. You know, straddled him. Looked like they went for a romp in the snow and froze up. Still in position, but frozen. Did not look like they knew what would happen. Weirdest scene I ever saw. Like they were positioned there. Naked. Frozen."

As soon as Sam Edwards said positioned, Joe Redfield knew. Lori bowed her head. Redfield depressed the button.

"Are they?"

Before he could finish, Edwards cut in and created overlapping static. Redfield stopped and waited as did Edwards. Edwards spoke.

"Actually, no. The boys said they picked up a pulse from both. They weren't frozen clear through, only surface hard. Anyway, we did not do anymore. Loaded them into the wagon, right next to Pete Matson. Boys said they carried warming gear inside. You know for this weather. Anyway, said they would start the treatment on the way to the hospital."

Edwards took another pull on the unfiltered king cigarette.

"I gotta tell you. It was a real chore to get them into the wagon. Even surface frozen the bodies would not give. We had to load them somewhat the way we found them. Her on top."

Edwards took another pull on the unfiltered king cigarette.

"Once we got them inside, the boys took off and I came back here fast as I could. About all I know right now. Hard to believe they were still alive. But you know this cold weather drill. And how we always find some weird shit. Well, you know. Anything possible. We'll know more once they get to the hospital."

Edwards took another pull on the unfiltered king cigarette.

"I gotta tell you Joe. I can see how they might get a notion to get it on in the snow and all, but to freeze up while they were doing it."

Edwards stopped. Joe Redfield took over.

"Looks like you found the other couple, Sam. There were two couples here and we only found the one. But I don't think they did it on their own. Maybe, what it's all about. I'll fill you in later with the details. But, let me say, it's not what you think. They were set up. They did not do it on their own."

Redfield paused. Lori sat close to him in the cruiser and looked up. She put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed. Joe nodded.

"Anything else, Sam?"

"No Joe. That's about it. I think the car can wait 'till morning. Don't see the need to have Jerry or his kid bring a hook out tonight. Do you?"

Redfield waited a moment before he responded.

"No. Car's not going anywhere. Listen, I'm sending Lori to the hospital to check on the other couple. And check on Pete. I'll have her look in on the two you found. Okay you hang there a while longer? Give me a chance to seal it up here. I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours."

He released the button and let the handset drop to his lap. Lori rubbed the back of his neck as he let his head drop. Sam Edwards came back on.

"Sure Joe. Nothing happening here. I think you're right. Something went on here. Not quite sure what yet. Hey, do you think it has something to do with those kids we found?"

Edwards stopped and took a pull on his unfiltered king cigarette. The last and flicked the butt into the snow.

"Yeah Sam, I think so. I do think so. I think those kids were positioned and I think the judge's place where it happened. Not sure how yet, but I do believe the judge's place where something happened tonight. Take another look around. See what you think. What you can find. Write up what you can. And I'll get there soon and we can figure it out together."

Redfield released the button. Edwards took a minute to respond. The sound of him exhale preceded his response.

"Right, Joe. I'll be here."

Sam Edwards slid the rest of the way into the driver's seat and fired up the cruiser, lowered the gear selector into reverse and ever so light depressed the gas pedal. The screech from the grinding of the bumper against the wood made an exceptional noise in the quiet night. In a moment the bumper broke free. The front end dropped as it disengaged from the steps and he backed it up a little farther before he stopped.

The gear selector returned to park, he turned the ignition key to off, slid out from the driver's seat and pushed the door closed. He walked around to the front and checked the damage. The bumper looked raised and scratched, but otherwise, not too bad. He walked the rest of the way around the car to check for any other signs of damage. But there were none. Satisfied, Edwards walked toward the steps. The wood had been scraped and chipped in a couple of places, but again nothing significant. With a nod he proceeded up the stairs.

Back inside the judge's place, he looked around. His first thoughts focused on the fire and the need to put more wood in. He would do as Joe Redfield suggested and have another look around, but this time make notes and survey the scene. Begin the investigation. Something to keep him busy until Joe arrived.

The juices flowed, great and alive again. Although, already a long day. He had gotten up early, but ready to go, late night or not. He pulled out his pad and

began to document the room he stood in. Began with the puddle of water on the floor and the sunlamps next to the armchair. Next he would take another look at those freezers and make notes of the discovery found there.

~

Joe put the handset back into the dash clip and got out of the cruiser. He pulled Lori out with him. Once outside, she turned and looked at him.

"You think there's a chance, they? You know, they might?"

Joe turned to face her, put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed.

"I honestly don't know. But if there was a heart beat. You know what happens out here. The cold. It happens. People do survive. I sure don't know. We'll have to wait and see."

Lori nodded she understood.

"It may be a couple of days before we can."

"I can wait." Lori pushed him away.

Joe began to speak, but she raised her hand.

"Trust me. It will be worth the wait. But remember your promise."

Joe looked at her unsure what she meant.

"When you kissed me inside you said and much, much more. Well, the longer we have to wait, it becomes so much more."

A devilish smile formed on her lips. He stepped back, while she slid into the driver's seat and waited as he worked the door closed. She rolled down the window.

"I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

"If I'm not here. Call Edwards at the judge's place. If I'm not there yet, I can call you when I get there."

Lori put the gear selector into drive. She looked out the window at him.

"You okay? You know, putting Ryan down and all?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"So what's up? What are you thinking?"

Joe looked at her through the window, put his hands on the door frame and leaned closer.

"I'm thinking I have three crime scenes and only me and Edwards in the field at the moment."

"Joe, I can."

"No. I need you to get to the hospital and check on those kids. More important right now. It might take a while before either couple can tell you anything, but Suzanne. At least conscious at the moment. Get what you can from her while still fresh. But I don't think we'll get much tonight. Anyway, and check on Pete. I'll wrap up here and seal the cabin. I'll head over to the judge's place. Sam can take me to the other spot to get a quick look. I think most of what we need happened at the judge's place. We know what happened here."

"But."

"It's okay. Now go. Will you?"

"Okay, you're the boss."

As he backed away from the window, Lori smiled.

"Couple of days huh? Think you can wait that long?"

The cruiser took off down the driveway before he could answer.

Joe Redfield watched the cruiser go out onto the road and away from the cabin. The smile on his face wouldn't quit. Although, still in the light jacket, he did not feel the cold.

## Chapter 34

The fresh log became engulfed in flame, coupled with the drapes held back the wind. The inside of the cabin became warmer.

The coffee pot empty, Redfield began to put the ingredients together for another pot. Something to warm him up for the ride over to the judge's place and more than enough to take some with. Fortunately, he remembered to get the heavier coat and gloves from the trunk of his cruiser before Lori left. The grounds were in the container and he began to fill the pot with water when he heard the voice.

"Would you like me to make the coffee for you?"

Redfield jumped and spilled water down both sides of the coffee maker as he turned to look.

"I did not hear the door open."

"I did not use the door."

"Of course, how stupid of me."

"Redfield, don't be angry. I did come back?"

They stood silent. Redfield poured the water.

Sarah stood across the room behind the sofa, almost in the spot where he last saw her. She walked toward him.

"Would you like me to make the coffee for you?"

Sarah did not wait for an answer and stepped around him. She took the pot, pushed him away with her hip, checked the water level and added a little more. She placed the glass pot under the grounds and flipped the switch on.

As he moved to the side, he watched her work. Finished, she turned and leaned back against the counter. He stood on the other side and leaned against the counter there. They faced each other, but did not speak for a long minute.

"Okay, you're here now?"

"I wouldn't know where to start, sheriff."

"Well, I hate to use a cliché, but how about at the beginning? And I think you can call me Joe."

"Okay Joe, what would you like to know?"

"How about what happened in this cabin?"

The coffee machine gurgled. The brewed water began to drop into the glass pot. Joe watched the water drop. Sarah retrieved a cup from the cabinet and did not wait for the drip to finish. She poured a cup, kept the cup under the falling brew, put the pot back and handed the liquid to him.



"I came up here to get out of a bad situation with an old boyfriend. Sounds quite corny now, doesn't it?"

Sarah paused, maybe thought about the time some more. Joe waited. With a sigh, she looked up and continued.

"Can't remember how Ryan and I met. I want to believe at Floyd's Bar & Grill." She looked at Joe. "Of course, Floyd's. Where else would someone meet in this town? Anyway, we had a couple. Couple hell. We had a shit load of drinks. Ryan sure liked his Bourbon. Somehow we wound up back here. Hey, can you get a ticket for driving snowmobiles drunk?"

She looked up, but did not wait for an answer and continued.

"Ryan had this bag. Well, we smoked some pot. I'm not sure if we had sex. You know, I don't think we did."

Joe Redfield stared at her.

"Yeah. I know. Naked and all." She waved her hand in the air. "But naked had to do with the games. Ryan had this obsession about running naked through the snow. Thought it would be an incredible rush. And it was. The cold snow against your bare skin. You know the hot and cold idea. Refreshing somehow."

Sarah paused a moment. Joe sipped the hot coffee. She continued.

"I know. I only met the guy and we get naked together."

Sarah stopped for a moment as if she wanted to say something else, but waved her hand and went back to the story.

"Then came the snowmobile challenge. The challenge involved a drive to the incline and back bare ass naked on the snowmobile." She whispered. "Ryan, the one who hung my panties on the antenna. For luck. He said."

Sarah looked up at Redfield and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well anyway, I thought he meant the ridge. So when he broke off and turned back I thought he got cold feet. Sorry. To prove I could complete the challenge, I drove to the top of the ridge. He went back to the cabin."

She let out a deep sigh, but he stood silent. In a moment, she continued.

"Wouldn't you know it. The damn snowmobile stalled on the top. Or, I did something wrong. Whatever. But, the engine died and there I was. Stuck up there on top and naked. I knew I couldn't stay out for too long. No real choice. I made my way down the incline through the snow to the cabin."

Sarah paused to pour Joe some more coffee.

"I banged on the center window."

Sarah stared at the rustling draped covered window.

"You know. To get his attention. I could see Ryan inside. He laid across the sofa. For a moment he looked up and smiled. But, he must have passed out, because he only laid there while I kept banging. I went around to the front. The son-of-a-bitch had locked the door. I tried knocking on the door, but he did not answer. I went back to the window."

"And where we found you." Joe interrupted.

Sarah looked at him and shook her head.

"No. Quite the contrary. I did not stay there. I couldn't. I went back to the porch and tried banging on the door some more. I huddled in the doorway for a while and tried to stay warm. I had a lot of stuff in my system. I know. But, my body began to feel the cold anyway. I found a tarp on the porch. You know, for firewood cover. I crawled under the tarp to try and stay warm. I kept trying. Banging on the door every so often. I must have drifted off."

The story faded as Sarah stopped. Even with the hot coffee in his hand and his system, Joe experienced a shiver. To hear the story from the person who it happened to quite unnerving.

"But we found you. I mean, the woman. I mean you."

He paused and looked at her, but she stayed silent.

"You're saying you weren't the one standing against the window frozen in the position we found you?"

Sarah looked up at him.

"Not me. Ryan must have put me there."

"Ryan did what?"

"Put me outside the window like so."

"Why? I mean why did he do it?"

"Don't know." Sarah sighed.

Joe hesitated a moment and tried to gather his thoughts.

"Well it sure fit. The foot prints stopped at the window. The hands pressed against the glass. The woman appeared to walk down. Made sense. The snowmobile stalled and you, I mean her, needed to get back to the cabin."

Sarah looked up at him, cocked her head, hands raised.

"He positioned you."

Sarah tapped her index finger to her nose and nodded.

"Of course. Ryan positioned all of his victims. I wonder what the hell that was all about anyway? Any idea?" Joe sighed.

Sarah shook her head.

"What about the notes from you? The fire lit? Lights on? You know?"

"Ryan. All Ryan."

"What about?" Joe pointed to the window. "You know?"

Sarah looked at him. At the window, back at him, but stood silent. He also stood silent. Her gaze somewhere else, Sarah spoke.

"You mean the frozen woman outside the window?"

Redfield, quite uncomfortable as he stood there. Sarah's eyes came back into focus and she appeared to regain a lighter attitude. He answered.

"Yes. The frozen woman."

"Ryan." She sighed deep. "Ryan put the naked frozen woman against the window each time. No doubt, another part of his game."

"Huh? I don't understand."

Joe looked over at the window, back to Sarah and attempted to speak, but did not. Sarah remained silent. Her head down again, lost in thought

somewhere. He fidgeted. Waited for Sarah to respond. When she did not, he spoke a tad above a whisper.

"You mean not you. I mean, when the renters would find the woman on Saturday morning, she?"

"Nope, not me." Sarah interrupted. "A prop. A stand in for sure. Ryan used his naked frozen woman to play his game. I believe you found her earlier tonight. Never me there. Never."

Joe noticed the tension in Sarah's voice, but continued.

"Why? Why would he?"

His voice faded as Sarah raised her hand in the air. He looked at her long and hard before he spoke.

"Okay. What about those so-called others Ryan talked about?"

Sarah did not answer.

"You mean Ryan set this all up? Killed the others to create. Create what? Friends for you? So you guys could all get together. Damn. I don't believe I said what I did."

Sarah did not respond. Stood there and let him go on.

"I still don't understand how you and Ryan?"

Sarah looked hard at Joe.

"What? But the stories? The sightings and those who saw both of you at the cabin? You know? The Friday night party. But why?"

"They saw what they wanted to see." Sarah said.

Joe shook his head and still did not understand.

"The party together with the renters. The goodies. You know. The whole flip in the snow trick. The reports always said in detail you and Ryan would."

Sarah raised her hand in the air to stop him.

"Ryan did it all. I was only there if they wanted me to be there. I presume he did bring a woman, but someone else to play the role. Someone who everyone must have believed was me."

Sarah raised her hand in the air, palm out.

"Yes, a couple of times I did go to the cabin. But, not what you think and never with him. Certainly, never together. Never. "

"What about last night?"

Sarah looked out toward the room away from Joe. She sighed and stared back at him.

"What about last night?"

"You know another." He cleared his throat.

"I suppose another one of Ryan's games. New season and all. Why I took the chance to warn you about him. About. Well, after the second couple. I did not want this to happen anymore. Can we let this go now, please?"

She looked toward the drape covered window and sighed as she pointed.

"My place has always been on the ridge."

He started to ask. She put her hand up.

"Let it go please. Okay?"

Joe looked at her as he tried to digest her statement.

"The sightings of the snowmobile on the ridge were you?"

"Yes. Not sure why. Maybe I am supposed to watch over the cabin. Or watch over the people who stayed there? Not sure why. But never at the cabin."

Sarah's voice trailed off. He put his hand in the air palm out as if to say okay. Sarah stared at him, digested a thought before she spoke and pointed.

"Joe, do you believe in ghosts?"

"A hell of a question coming from you." Joe looked at Sarah in amazement.

"No, not so much." Sarah shook her head and waved her hand as well.

"Simple question. Do you?"

"To tell you the truth Sarah. No. At least not what I have been conditioned to believe anyway. I mean. What a ghost is supposed to be and all."

"Then why do you believe I am a ghost?"

"Well because. Well, you know. The window. Frozen and all. You know. Your freezing to death. My investigation."

"Did I?"

Joe stopped, looked at Sarah before him.

"Hell, Sarah, I don't know what to believe."

"Okay Joe. Back to the original question. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Alright. Yes I do."

"Okay, I'm a ghost."

"You can't be serious. What if I said I did not?"

"Then I would not."

"Wait a minute. You lost me. Are you telling me whatever I believe?"

"It's all a matter of belief. It's all your illusion. I'm here because you want me here. If you did not, I would not be. You saw me at Floyd's Bar & Grill because you wanted me there. Can you understand, Joe?"

"Well, maybe. No!"

Sarah stood silent, faced Joe and offered him more coffee. He declined. Her face contorted as if she searched for the right words.

"Okay, tell me what you believe a ghost should be."

He pondered the question and without thought offered his cup. Sarah smiled as she poured more coffee into the cup.

"Hell, I don't know. A spirit. An apparition. Something. Something scares the hell out of you."

"Okay. Okay, Joe. But, what makes them exist?"

He hesitated and did not know how to answer.

"I guess you let yourself believe they do."

Sarah nodded and tapped her nose again.

"You believe. Now you got it, Joe. What makes it all happen. You believe."

"But ghosts are always scary. They make you afraid. At least, I always thought they did. They. Hell, I don't know."

"Are you afraid of me?"

"No, of course not. Well, I am. I mean, not afraid you may hurt me or anything, but I'm not sure this happened. It's hard to explain."

"It's not us you're afraid of. It's what we represent. A state of mind not acceptable to your standards. Because you don't understand. You become afraid. It's natural. We are all afraid of the unknown."

Joe sipped the coffee and digested the last exchange from Sarah.

"I guess you're right. I mean. I don't expect to run into you in town."

"Joe, you may never see me again. We don't often present ourselves. I believe you can understand why. We do appear every now and again. Sometimes in a haunted house. You know. To keep the reputation in shape."

Sarah said almost laughing, which brought a smile to Joe's face.

"Who's to say? Someday we may run into each other again."

Sarah looked down and back up at Joe.

"But, my job here done."

Joe looked at Sarah long and hard after her last statement.

"How do I convince anybody I talked to you?" He whispered.

"You don't. You can't. Because most people would not believe you anyway. And I could not come with you. It would be bad for the image. For both of us, you know."

"I have to tell them something. Hell, Lori and Fred already think I'm crazy. I told them about our meet at Floyd's Bar & Grill. How do I explain that? Couldn't you come with me maybe one time?"

"I'm afraid not Joe. It would never work. Tell them to ask Floyd. I made sure he saw me there this time. But, it's the same reason. Some would believe. Some would not. Some would see me. Others would not. Besides, I would only scare those who did see me."

Sarah raised her arms in the air and said, "Boo."

Joe jumped back.

"Damn, don't do that. It's hard enough."

"Sorry, Joe. Couldn't resist."

Sarah crossed over and leaned on the counter next to him. He did not know if he should move or not. But, felt comfortable with Sarah this close. He drank the rest of the coffee.

"I hope Pete was okay."

Sarah put her hand on his arm and spoke softer.

"I tried to cover him best I could."

"What? Covered? You covered Pete? How? I mean why? What were?"

"Sorry, I had to go to the judge's place to. Well, you know." Sarah pointed to the window. "Well, I needed to borrow her. Don't worry I put her back."

Sarah said nonchalantly, sighed deep and put her head down.

"I saw the cruiser there with Pete in the back seat. Well, I did the best I could. He only had two blankets in the vehicle."

"I sure hope he'll be okay." Joe turned to face her. "Sam Edwards said he got clobbered quite hard. Anyway, thanks for covering him, certainly helped."

"Pete's a special person. Always happy to see me."

Sarah continued to look down as she spoke.

"We hooked up at the dance earlier and we. Well, you know.

"What? You and Pete did what at the dance?"

"Still don't know how I'll explain what happened between us. Not covered in the kit, you know. Well, I sure do like Pete and well, one flirt led to another. Well, we wound up back at his place. If he ever tries to tell you anything about the dance tonight go with it okay. And leave it there. You, of all people, should understand now."

Joe looked hard at Sarah, tried to absorb everything, but she shrugged her shoulders, met his eyes and smiled.

"And promise me you'll treat him right and take care of him, okay? Remember, Pete Matson, very special to me."

She placed her hand back on his arm, which he noticed was cold through his sleeve. They stood silent for another minute or two. Joe wanted to ask more, but placed his hand on hers and sighed.

"Can I ask one more question. What about the woman in the freezer?"

"Sorry Joe. You have to figure her out yourself. Don't know where she came from. I'm sure Ryan had something to do with her condition. Maybe another one of his snow games, who wound up like me. Remember, to him a prop. I'm sure he did not have any regard for who she might have been. But, treat her with respect. Like you did me. Make sure she gets home okay."

Joe nodded and wanted to say more, but did not.

Sarah put her head down quite obvious in thought.

"You know Ryan not his real name?" Joe changed the subject.

"Yes, when I first met him, he said his name was Jason." Sarah looked up.

"Yes, Jason Thomas Palmer." Joe sighed. "He used his dead brother's name Ryan Palmer. Apparently, got in a lot of trouble as Jason."

"He did that night as well." Sarah sighed.

Joe started to speak, but decided to let it pass.

"Did you know he has a girlfriend quite found of cocaine?"

"I did. Emily Grafton. I believe she might be your other woman?"

"Could very well, we'll look into it. She used her middle name?"

"Yes." Sarah interrupted before Joe could say the name. "Ryan made her use the middle name. Should be no doubt why he used her."

Joe nodded and put his cup in the sink after he rinsed the cup out. Sarah walked away and turned to face Joe. The drapes were open. He looked at her and asked how with his hands. She shrugged her shoulders in response. The wind did not blow at the moment and the cold air a relief. He let it pass. Sarah pointed to the center window, the glass shattered. She spoke a tad above a whisper.

"You found me there and now Ryan. Kind of ironic huh?"

She said no more. Joe started to respond, but let the thought pass and put his head down for a moment. They stood in the middle of the room. Her hands in her coat pockets. Her hair flowed into the hood of her sweatshirt. A slight lean

to her stance. Jeans tucked tight into her boots. Joe noticed again how good Sarah Charvonce looked.

"Joe, I have to go."

Joe walked up to where Sarah stood and nodded.

"So this is it?"

Sarah put her hand on his cheek.

"You sure are cute, Sheriff Joe Redfield. I can see what Lori Jacobs sees in you. I hope it works out for you both. Took you long enough, though."

"What the hell do you mean? How did you know?"

"We girls know." Sarah patted his cheek.

"Yeah, but do you know she doesn't?"

"Yes, I do Joe. It's probably better."

"What? Why?"

"It's a girl thing." Sarah kissed Joe on the cheek and started to leave.

"Sarah, wait. Can you do me one last favor?"

"Sure Joe, if I can."

"Use the door this time, please?"

Sarah placed her hand on his cheek. The door opened. Then she was gone. The door creaked as it closed.

Joe Redfield jumped back. "Damn." The only word out of his mouth.

A faint breeze blew through the shattered glass. He was drawn to it and remembered back to the first time he looked out the big center window and saw the frozen woman there. Certainly, never had any idea it would come to this. A full on conversation with the lady's ghost. He wondered how much of what he heard. Heard? Hell, seen. He believed and certainly not an authority. Hell, not even a novice on ghosts. He did not know what to believe. Or could believe.

The only fact he was sure about, Ryan. Or Jason. Real and he killed real people. And now dead. A real person committed a real crime. The report would say as much. Fred Randall would be pleased nothing mentioned about any damn ghost. Lori would as well. And no doubt so would Pete Matson, who would know a case closed not based on a ghost story. The end of it. Everything resolved? His thoughts raced.

Joe glanced down at the spot where Ryan's body had fallen. The imprint and the footprints, together with the red snow, confirmed the end of this chapter. Ryan Palmer, or who ever, was dead and whatever horrific plans he had died with him. Whatever started here would end here. Should end here.

Snow began to fall. Began to cover the scene up. Before long the snow would cover everything. In the spring the snow would melt and all traces would be gone. The sky once again dark with clouds covered the moon. He continued to watch as the new snow laid a blanket over the blood stains.

Sarah Charvonce closed this chapter. What ghosts were supposed to do. Right their wrong. Or something along those lines. Well, something happened here. Could he ever tell anyone about it?

He decided absolutely not.

For no particular reason his eyes were drawn to the top of the ridge. As he stared up he saw headlights glare down at him. A snowmobile sat there. Flag flew in the wind. For a moment he remembered back to the day when he stood here and first looked up at the snowmobile parked there. The flag waved. It seemed like that incident happened a lifetime ago. As he let a smile form, he envisioned the snowmobile rear back on its tracks and whine louder before it galloped off like some great stallion who had been set free. He focused his eyes back in time to the first vision of the snowmobile on the ridge. He thought he understood it all, even if no one else ever would.

Joe Redfield stepped away from the center window and gave one last look around the great room, but could not resist a final look out of the shattered center window. The snowmobile sat there. Lights bright. Flag blew in the wind. Rider sat astride and stared right back at him.

A moment later the vision was gone. Sarah was gone.

Joe Redfield closed the drapes over the shattered window.

Perhaps, he did not understand any of this at all.