

The truck rounded the final curve of the canyon road and powered up the incline that swept Max and Mattie past the Wheeler Creek trailhead on the right and the boulder-faced dam holding back the waters of Pineview Reservoir on the left, and carried them into Ogden Valley. Visibility was poor, obscuring the beauty that always caused Max to catch his breath when he entered this stretch on his way to Snowbasin.

On their right, pines lined the road, shoulders stooped under heavy white blankets. The reservoir appeared through the mist on their left and looked absent its usual weekend gathering of ice fishermen. Sweeping around a long curve, the pine trees receded, and the Old Snowbasin Road came into view. Only the tracks of the sheriff's vehicles broke the surface of the deep snow, and they were beginning to fade in the onslaught of the unremitting storm.

Mattie slowed the pickup to a crawl. "Can't we get there on the new road?"

He shook his head. "No way. Where the old road and the new access road from Trapper's Loop come together at Snowbasin, the old road is barricaded in winter. So there's no way down from there to the Fosters' home."

"Trapper's Loop and the resort road get plowed. Why not this one?" Mattie said, the tension in her voice rising.

"It does get plowed halfway up the mountain to the Art Nord trailhead, about a mile and a half past the Foster's home. But since it's no longer needed to reach the ski resort, it gets plowed when the road crews get to it. Today, it's gonna be awhile.

Mattie turned into the Old Snowbasin Road and stopped. She looked at Max, wrinkling her brow, distributing its sheen of perspiration into the furrows of her frown. "I can't drive in this," Mattie declared, her tone pleading with Max to take the wheel.

He had known this might happen. Mattie dreaded this old road in the middle of summer under the best of conditions. She feared heights, had since childhood, and the right side of the road, heading uphill, fell away precipitously through a dense tangle of pine, aspen, and scrub oak along much of the distance to the Foster's dwelling.

Max nodded. "I'll give it a try." He swung his injured right leg out the door and eased himself to the ground, taking most of his weight on the left leg. He looked at his crutches in the back seat and decided against them in the deep snow. He limped around the truck, using it for support, and opened Mattie's door. She ran the seat back as far as it would go and slid out. Max opened the back door on the driver's side and helped her up and into the back seat. He knew Mattie didn't like riding on the right side up this road any better than driving it.

Max sat on the front seat, his legs stretched out the door, loosened the knee

brace, and bent his injured leg. There was little pain so long as he didn't exceed fifteen degrees, so he figured this might work. He swiveled into driving position and brought the seat forward until his foot touched the accelerator. He flexed his ankle enough to rev the engine. *It was going to work.*

He turned and smiled at Mattie. She leaned forward and touched his shoulder. Max took off a glove and caressed her hand.

They began the slippery ascent up the snow-covered road, following the tracks of the sheriff's vehicles. It appeared no one had come down yet this morning, and only two or three had gone up before them.

Twenty minutes later they pulled into the Fosters' drive. The home before them carried off a pretty good masquerade as a Victorian. Max especially liked its octagonal tower perched on the edge of a steep drop-off, looking over Ogden Valley, nothing to impede the stunning view down the forested slope to the reservoir. Except today. Today, the house and its magnificent view were shrouded in a veil of falling powder. Like a scene from a fairy tale, it occurred to Max. A tragic fairy tale, because of the mysterious deaths on the mountain.

Three vehicles rested in the home's spacious forecourt—the sheriff's Tahoe, a crime-scene SUV, and a patrol pickup hauling two snowmobiles on a trailer. Max parked beside the pickup, swung his body sideways out the door, and cinched up the brace.

Billy, the youngest of the sheriff's deputies, came from the porch to help Max across the slippery flagstones and up the steps.

Sheriff Connelly's massive frame blocked the way three feet inside the front door. A former all-American offensive lineman for Utah State, he'd gone pro after his third year. In his playing days, the sheriff carried three hundred thirty pounds on his six foot six frame. He didn't look any lighter twenty years later, but his bulk was less solid. Still, he cut an imposing figure.

"Crime scene guys are working. Wait here. I'll get the girl," the sheriff said. No preliminaries. No niceties. Not even a hello to Mattie, whom he liked despite her involvement in the affair of the meth mother.

Billy apologized for Connelly's rude behavior. "Sheriff has tickets for today's game, and the Aggies might get an invite to the big dance. He didn't like being called out for this, but the dispatcher figured none of us deputies would want to handle it on our own, the Fosters being Hollywood people."

"It's okay, Billy. He doesn't like me on the best of days," Max said.

The girl was a surprise. Max thought her parents had kept her hidden during his visits to the house because she was morbidly obese, impaired in some way, ill-mannered, or all of the above. But the young lady who walked around Connelly

into the entryway was striking. She looked more eighteen than twelve, more like a fashion model than a gangly preteen. And she had poise.

She held out her hand. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

Max took her hand. "You're Cassie?"

A wisp of a smile broke onto her face. "What did Emil and Sophie say about me?"

"That you were twelve, for one thing."

"Oh."

Max widened his eyes and tilted his head, seeking some sort of response beyond *oh*.

"I'm seventeen."

"Why did they tell me you were twelve?"

She shrugged.

"We'll take her to CPS when you're finished," the sheriff said.

Max felt Mattie's hand on his arm. She whispered, "Don't let them. Her parents have just died. She needs to be in a more nurturing environment."

Max nodded and turned to the sheriff. "She can come with us."

"She's a minor," he said, his tone suggesting that was the end of the discussion.

"It's going to be hard to get someone from Child Protective Services in this storm," Max said. "You'll probably have to go to them, and then probably have to transport the girl to wherever they elect for her to stay. Probably take all afternoon."

Connelly rubbed his chin. He squeezed by and opened the door. Looking over the sheriff's meaty shoulder, Max could see the snow continued to fall.

The sheriff turned to Max. "We aren't going to have much luck in this weather, and I don't want to inconvenience someone from CPS on a day like this." He looked at Billy. "Make a note that you released the girl to the Jaegers."

The sheriff squeezed back through the entryway, walked into the main living area and yelled, "Aren't you crime scene yay-hoos finished yet?" He turned and looked at Max again. "Monday," he said, dismissing Max as though he too were a subordinate.

Mattie went with the girl to help her gather a few things. Billy assisted Max out the door and to his pickup. At the truck, Max thanked Billy for his help, and Billy started back inside.

"You all right with this?" Max said.

Billy stopped and turned. "Yeah. I'm low man, and you know what rolls downhill. I'm used to it, but I'll be glad when there's a new recruit." He shook his head. "Doesn't look like that'll be anytime soon. Budget's real tight, sheriff says."

“The bodies still at the crime scene?”

“No, they’re not. It was snowing more than an inch an hour up on the mountain. I had the ski patrol take them down.” Billy looked at the sky. “Patrol’s gonna be busy all day.”

Max ignored the temptation to follow the conversation’s change in direction. He knew most of the crowd at Snowbasin would head for one of the lodges after a run or two. It was what made big dump days great for powder hounds—wide-open slopes all to themselves.

“Billy, did the sheriff tell you to move the bodies?”

“Nope. Crime scene crew.”

“Were they up there?”

“At the base. No one but me went up the mountain.”

“No skiers among the CSIs?”

“None that came to the scene. But there wasn’t anything to see, all this snow.”

“You block off the area with crime scene tape?”

Billy smiled and nodded. “Yes I did. Management didn’t like it. Want it down soon as possible. I can take you right to the scene and show you how they must have skied in. I’m off tomorrow and Monday.” His eyes moved to the brace on Max’s knee, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe Monday,” Max said. “We’ll see.”

Billy turned and walked toward the front door of the Fosters’ home.

“I’ll call you in the morning,” Max said to Billy’s back and received a wave in return.

The Fosters’ daughter came out the front door. Max watched as Billy handed her his card and exchanged a few words with her. She remained where she was after he went in, and she looked out over the valley, perched like a young bird on the edge of the nest.

She was not much shorter than Max’s six feet, but her willowy figure made her appear taller. Couldn’t weigh more than a hundred twenty, hundred twenty-five at most, he estimated. Long dark hair framed her face and hung far over her shoulders and down her back, so full it seemed like a covering of the sort one saw in the Middle East. Her face was narrow with high cheekbones and wide-set, dark eyes. A long neck gave the impression of even more height. Lips that were neither full, as had become fashionable in Hollywood, nor thin. And her nose was the most perfect Max had ever seen.

Her appearance puzzled him.

The parents were not unattractive, but they were unremarkable, plain. Max recalled Emil said he was a film director and Sophie a make up artist, so maybe they didn’t have to be all that remarkable—they weren’t vying for starring roles in

films. Neither one was tall, unlike the girl. And their coloring was different—pasty skin and light brown hair.

Emile and Sophie Foster seemed not just different from this beautiful creature, but altogether a different species.