

# Chapter 1

Holly woke with a start. Although the room was dark and silent other than the lulling drone of the ceiling fan, she felt instantly apprehensive. Something wasn't right. Goose pimples rose on her arms and a nervous tingle ran down her spine.

According to the glowing red numbers from the clock radio on the nightstand, it was 5:15am. Instinctively, she laid there quiet as a mouse, listening for any movement or threatening sound. None came.

After several cautious minutes, Holly decided it was safe enough to venture out of bed. Still, as she made her way out of her bedroom and down the hall, she walked with an intentional stealth, avoiding the creaky spots on the old wooden floor. If there was an intruder, she had no intention of alerting him, or them, to her presence.

Soon, the sun would rise and bathe the home in the warm light of its rays. For now, the low wattage porch light offered little reprieve from the predawn gloom, casting dark shadows in every corner that would provide ample cover for anyone who might lurk below. From the top of the staircase, she paused to listen and strained to see. Unable to perceive any movement or identify any rogue sounds, she turned to the bedroom door at the end of the hall.

On many nights, Holly would wake to her mother's cries, the pain of the cancer so intense that she couldn't hold it in. Although a strong and healthy man, her father would invariably, on those nights, be by her side in as much distress and pain as her mother. Holly would administer the morphine and sit with both to offer what little comfort she could.

This morning, as she pressed her ear to the door, there were no cries of pain. Gently, she eased the door open and peeked inside. Facing east, their room was brightened by the horizon's transition from night to day. She could see they were both in bed, covers pulled high.

She was about to slip the door closed and chalk her worried state up to the lingering remnants of a bad dream when she noticed the overturned pill bottles on the nightstand. Understanding rushed in with crystal clarity as she threw the door open and ran to her mother's side.

Screaming for them to wake up, she shook her mother by the shoulders as the sun crested the horizon. The moment the light of day spread over them, she willed it to go away, to

return their pale faces to the shadows where certainty could be replaced by doubt. Panic set in as she realized a thief had come in the night, a thief who takes something far more precious than electronics or jewelry.

With the guttural cry of a wounded animal, Holly straddled her mother on the bed and frantically started administering CPR. After a few compressions, she climbed over her father and began compressions on him. Her efforts were fruitless. Her pleading prayers were unanswered. Both were already gone.

Hands over her face, she curled up between them and cried until the pillow beneath her head was soaked in her anguish. When she finally lifted her head, she noticed the envelope with her name on it propped up against the night lamp beside the overturned medicine bottles.

Collapsing in a crumpled heap on the floor beside the bed, she withdrew the letter and read.

“Dearest Holly, our precious flower, I can only imagine what you must be feeling as you read this. I’m so sorry you have to bear the weight of our actions. I pray you’ll understand our decision, even if you’re never able to respect that it was the only choice that made sense.”

Hands shaking uncontrollably, she tried to steady herself to read on.

“Even when not entirely unbearable, your mother’s pain was incessantly agonizing. For your benefit, she fought hard to conceal it as best she could, but it has only been getting worse. Tonight, she asked me to end it. How could I deny her? She’s my light, my soul. Watching her continue to suffer and fade away, when she’s begging me to give her peace, is something I just couldn’t do.”

Holly thought she’d left all her tears on that pillow, but she was wrong.

“When I told her I would do it, but I wouldn’t let her go without me, she was irate, demanding that I stay behind for you. Of course, I agreed. In all our years together, that was the only lie I ever told your mother. I’m ashamed that I don’t have the strength to continue on without her, but I don’t. She went peacefully, in my arms. Once she was finally at rest, I wrote you this letter and laid down to join her.”

She threw the letter aside and wailed, beating her fists on the floor as if her unwillingness to accept the truth would somehow change what had happened. If the neighbors couldn’t hear her screams in that moment, then they were deaf.

She wanted to leave the letter on the floor where it lay, but couldn’t.

“Hollyhock, I know you can’t see it right now, not while this is so fresh and raw, but this was for the best. Your mother and I are at peace and we’re still together. And now, you can go on with your life, free of the constraints of her condition, free of having to play nursemaid while waiting for the inevitable, free to focus on being the wonderful mother I know you’ll become. The house is paid off. Our insurance is in order. You’ll have everything you need to give our grandson the life he deserves and to live the life you deserve.”

After reading that last line, she climbed back on the bed and slapped her father in the face. One slap led to another until her hands were sore and red. She collapsed on his chest and held his head in her hands before returning to the letter.

“Darling girl, we love you so much. You are our angel, our greatest gift in life. Now, it’s time to live your life. Be the woman we always knew you’d become. Don’t linger in the past, relish the future and live the present to the fullest. We will be with you always.”

Holly woke from the nightmare, her sheets drenched in sweat, clinging to her skin. She glanced at the clock radio on the nightstand. 5:25am.

Since the loss of her parents seven years ago, the recurring nightmares had become less frequent, but the dreams were no less vivid, dredging up emotions no less raw.

It was too early to get Ben up, but too late to go back to sleep, not that she could if she

tried. She took a hot shower and went downstairs to put on a pot of coffee.

Watching the sun rise over the mountain peaks through the bay window, Holly sipped at the steaming cup of dark roast, woefully reminiscent of the past her father had implored her to leave behind. All these years, she'd never blamed her parents for their decisions. Some would say they were selfish. Others might see what they had done as brave or even romantic. To her, it felt like abandonment.

After their passing, one thing was certain. She couldn't stay in that home. They may have thought it a perfect place for her to raise her baby, but after discovering them, it wasn't a place where she'd ever be able to rest again.

With the sale of the house and the proceeds from the insurance, she'd dropped out of drama school and moved to Crystal Falls, Colorado. It was an impulsive move, but she had no regrets. Her boyfriend had taken off the day he'd found out she was pregnant. Once her parents were gone, there was no reason to stay. She wanted to get as far away from the Florida home of her youth as she could, far away from her past, and she had.

Through the bay windows, she caught movement. Maddie Demonte.

The woman was quick stepping it, arms pumping, toward Main Street. No doubt she was on her way to The Funky Bean for her morning coffee and news. It was a ritual Holly knew of but rarely saw, never willing to rise before the crack of dawn. Seeing the woman in her brisk morning walk brought a smile to Holly's face. She was quite a character, that one. Seeing her this morning brought back some good memories, which were more than welcome.

On her first day in Crystal Falls, Holly had been going over the paperwork to close on the modest house she'd chosen. The Realtor, a smartly dressed, middle-aged woman with a borderline frantic disposition, Lizzie something or other, pointed Maddie out at The Funky Bean where they'd been going over the final documents.

According to Lizzie, Maddie Demonte was the oldest living resident of Crystal Falls. With a penchant for gossip, she gave Holly the full scoop. Townsfolk, she said, nicknamed the woman Little Miss Spitfire, partly due to her spunky nature for a woman her age, but mostly due to the sharp and fiery nature of her tongue. She told Holly that on any given morning, just as the light of day crested over the eastern peaks, you could find Little Miss Spitfire fast walking her way down Main Street to The Funky Bean, a ritual she'd maintained since the day it had opened. At The Bean, as Lizzie called it, Maddie took her morning coffee while catching the news. Any other patrons, whether they wanted to or not, would get to hear her personal take, loudly voiced and colorfully spoken, on whatever topic the newscaster broached.

Over the years, Holly had crossed paths with the old woman on several occasions, all of which invariably made her smile. She hoped, if she ever reached that age, to have the same spunk and vigor, though perhaps with a smidge less venom.

"Bennie," she gently shook him awake. "Get dressed, baby. We're going out for breakfast this morning."

"Donuts?" He asked with an expectant smile.

"Yup, donuts. Get yourself ready while I change into something presentable."

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She'd had Ben put on his coat, but had only grabbed a shawl for herself. The brisk air was clean, crisp, and fresh. If the walk to The Funky Bean had been any longer, she would have gone back for her winter coat.

The bare aspen trees, high up on Crystal Peak, looked like rows of skeletons, lined up as if in warning to anyone who'd venture up to the snow-capped apex.

Ben tugged at her dress. "Momma, tell me the story again."

"You mean how we ended up here?" He never tired of hearing her tell it.

"Yeah," he said, taking her hand as she led the way to Main Street.

“Well, you see that peak over there?”

“Crystal Peak?”

“That’s where my father, your grandfather, first took me skiing. It was for my sixteenth birthday. Just me and my Dad.” It was her favorite memory. Perhaps that’s why Ben enjoyed hearing about it so much. “Even though he was an expert skier, he spent the whole day with me on the bunny slopes, teaching me how to snowplow.”

“That’s when you do your feet like this, right?” He pointed his toes together to show her.

“That’s it, baby. You’ve got it. Maybe we’ll hit the bunny slopes together this season.”

“If I touch my tongue to the pole, will it really freeze to it? Like in that movie?” He was looking at one of the gas lamps, converted to electric years ago, that lined the sidewalks of Main Street. His breath, misting in front of his face as he spoke, suggested his tongue would, in fact, freeze to the pole if he were silly enough to test it.

“It would and I’d have to call the fire department to come rescue you, so let’s not do that.”

“When grandma and grandpa died, that’s when you moved here, right?” He asked, going right back to the conversation without skipping a beat.

“You were just starting to grow in my belly when they passed. With them gone, we, you and me, were on our own. I wanted you to grow up somewhere full of beauty, somewhere peaceful, somewhere the two of us could start over.”

“Crystal Falls!”

“That’s right. I remembered how much I loved that vacation, the beauty of the mountains, the relaxed nature of the town, the kindness of the townsfolk. It wasn’t easy to pick up and move across the country, but I knew it would be best, for you and for me. So, I sold grandma and grandpa’s house, packed up our things, and moved to Colorado.”

As they turned onto Main Street, Ben looked up at her with his sweet, freckle infused face and said, “That was really brave.”

“What do you mean, baby?”

“Moving here. You didn’t know anyone here and you didn’t have a job.”

“No, I didn’t, but I knew about the theater. I auditioned that first day, even before closing on our house. They gave me a role in a musical. The rest, as they say, is history.”

It had been the right decision. She’d known it from the moment she arrived. This was the right place for them, the right place for her. No regrets. Sometimes, the mind can embellish memories, glorify them. That wasn’t the case with Crystal Falls. Nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, it was as quaint and full of splendor now as it had been on her sixteenth birthday. With access to some of the best powder in Colorado, it appealed to skiers and snowboarders in the winter. During the summer season, it offered tourists horseback riding, rock climbing, picturesque camping and fishing, as well as an array of eclectic shops that catered to every interest, from local art to handmade candies. For Holly and Ben, along with the other year-round residents, it offered the relaxed life of a small town with the excitement of activity during tourist seasons. Crystal Falls was the perfect place to raise her son, a fact she never doubted.

“That’s where the horses used to drink, isn’t it Momma?” He was pointing at a trough, repurposed as a perennial flower bed, one of the many that lined the lane.

“That’s right, baby. In the old days, the gold miners would tie their horses to the posts. The horses would drink from the troughs while their owners would drink in the tavern.”

“Too cool! I want a horse. Can I have one for my birthday?”

“You’ve got Buster. That dog is almost as big as a horse.”

“No, I mean a real horse. Can I, Momma?”

“We’ll see. Maybe we can at least go riding for your birthday. How about a donut, for

now?” She asked, opening the door to The Bean.

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“Morning Maddie,” Claude called out from behind the counter, dutifully grabbing a cup from the shelf. “Double macchiato latte with extra foam?”

“Black,” she scolded, selecting her stool at the bar top. “You know I take it black, you old fool!”

Yesterday, he’d offered a caramel-topped espresso, of all things. If Claude Connor, proprietor of The Funky Bean, wasn’t half her age and happily unmarried, Maddie would have sworn his morning jibes were a weak attempt at flirtation. She wouldn’t have minded if they were. Claude was a tall, dark, and handsome man. Originally from Nigeria, his skin was as black as her coffee. His short cropped salt and pepper hair matched his neatly trimmed beard and mustache. Claude’s most attractive features, in Maddie’s opinion, were his genuine eyes and always present smile.

“Black it is, then,” he said with a wink, placing the steaming cup in front of her.

“Turn that up, would you?” She asked, pointing at the flat screen on the wall behind the bar. “You know I can’t hear worth a shit.”

Claude sat a small plate with a fresh biscuit and a square of butter in front of her. Maddie never asked for one, rarely paid for it, but always ate the biscuit just the same.

“Haven’t seen that granddaughter of yours this morning.”

Maddie looked at the biscuit with disdain, then buttered it, and took a big bite. “She’s probably out gallivanting around with that no good Sheriff of ours. That, or she’s still in bed. Never could get that girl to rouse in the mornings.”

“Now, Maddie, you know Sheriff Rawlins is a good man. He adores Jenny. Despite your regular beratement, he loves you, too.”

Maddie disregarded his observation with a humph.

“You keep acting like that and folks are going to think you unfriendly.”

“Folks can kiss my lily white ass. If you don’t turn that damn TV up, you can kiss it, too.”

Claude chuckled at the image, but obediently turned up the volume on the television.

She finished her biscuit in two quick bites and washed it down with the rich Colombian blend.

Summer season had ended and winter season was still a few weeks away. The Bean was empty. Maddie knew her choice vocabulary wouldn’t offend anyone, not that she’d care much if it did. Claude never took offense. He seemed to enjoy the morning banter just as much as she did.

Dick Short was mid-broadcast on the big screen. He may not have been gifted with a flattering name, but he was a gifted meteorologist. Maddie swore by his forecasts. The man hadn’t been wrong in 30 years; if he predicted rain, you grabbed the umbrella. This morning, thanks to Claude’s ramblings, she’d missed half the forecast.

“By early evening, the snow will start to fall. We should see an inch or two tonight, two to three inches tomorrow, and another six to eight inches on Saturday. By Sunday, this northerly front will likely turn into a full blown blizzard. We are in for a chilly weekend, so bundle up before going out.”

“Blizzard,” Maddie repeated, “the first week of November? Good Lord.”

That caught Claude’s attention. He set aside the towel he’d been using to clean the counter and turned toward the flat screen as Dick wrapped up the forecast.

“If it follows current projections, the snowfall should ease up on Monday and end by Tuesday afternoon. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to gather some extra wood for the fireplace and stock up on a few staples just in case it overstays its welcome. For Channel Nine News this Morning, I’m Dick Short. Tune in at six for the evening update.”

Maddie pushed her cup at Claude, signaling her disapproval with its empty state. “Fill that up and give me your phone. I need to warn Jenny and have her pick me up a few things down at the market.”

Claude obediently refreshed her cup and went to the register to get his phone. “Didn’t Jenny buy you an iPhone for your birthday?” He asked over his shoulder.

“She did. I told her I had no desire to tweet about my latest fart or Instagram a selfie of me letting her rip. I had her return it. She got me a Kindle instead. Now, I can read my stories without a magnifying glass.”

The bell above the door clanked as Holly walked in with little Ben.

Holly was the town’s most eligible, and desirable, bachelorette. Even Maddie would admit the girl was gorgeous, with her pale skin, red hair, and Barbie doll figure. She regularly turned the heads of townsmen and tourists alike. Many tried to win her favor, but all failed miserably in the effort. Not that Maddie was a nosy-body, but she’d done a bit of digging when the girl had moved here. From what she’d gathered, the girl’s man had walked out on her after finding out she was pregnant. Seemed she had no interest in putting herself in another compromising position with the horde of would-be suitors.

You wouldn’t know she was off the market to look at her. The girl always dressed up. Today, she was wearing a cherry blossom dress with a crimson shawl draped over her shoulders. Little Ben, cute as a button, was wearing a sharp little outfit under his winter coat. For those two, Maddie thought, Easter Sunday comes every day.

“Mornin’ Holly,” Claude called out from behind the bar. “And good morning to you, sir.” He addressed Ben with a wink.

“Yes, yes,” Maddie said, “good morning Holly, good morning Ben, good morning all. Now, can I have that phone please?”

Claude handed her his phone as Holly and Ben seated themselves at the front table. “You really think it’ll be that bad?” He asked. “Weather’s calling for a blizzard,” he said, bringing Holly and Ben up to speed.

“If Dick says blizzard, then it’ll be a blizzard. You can count on it.” She punched in Jenny’s cell number, hit dial, and spun around on the stool.

Ben’s bright eyes were lit up. “Blizzard, Momma? Really? Can we make a snowman?”

“We’ll see sweetie. It’s a little early for that much snow, but maybe.”

Maddie watched, waiting for Jenny to answer, as Holly fidgeted with the boy’s stubborn cowlick.

“OJ this morning?” Claude called from the counter.

“Please, Mr. Connor,” Holly said, “and I’ll have one of your famous biscuits and some of that strawberry jam. Ben would like a donut.”

“With sprinkles, Momma.”

“A donut with sprinkles.” She added, giving up on the stubborn cowlick.

Maddie rolled her eyes at the disrespectful conversation, holding the cell phone out for them to see. Finally, her granddaughter picked up.

“This is Jenny,” she answered, not recognizing Claude’s cell phone number.

“Jen, there’s a blizzard coming. Pick me up some milk, eggs, bottled water, loaf of bread, box of crackers, jar of peanut butter and some of those D-size batteries. Oh, and have Mr. Jenkins drop off a cord of wood.”

“Ma?”

Maddie didn’t mind the girl calling her “Ma.” Before her mother passed, she’d referred to her as Me Ma. After, with Maddie raising her, she’d started calling her “Ma.” It stuck.

“Is that you? Whose phone are you using? I didn’t catch half of that. What blizzard?”

“Good grief, girl! Yes, it’s me. Milk, eggs, water, bread, crackers, peanut butter, batteries

and a cord of wood. I'm down at The Bean, using Claude's phone."

"Okay, Ma. I'm covering for Leda at the library. She had a doctor's appointment. I'll run by the market when she gets back." An actress at the Marley Brothers Dinner Theater in season, Jen volunteered afternoons at the library off season. "Did that weatherman forecast snow? Is that what this is all about?"

*Exasperating!* "He's calling for more than snow! I told you there's going to be a blizzard. Don't forget the wood." Maddie ended the call and tossed the phone on the counter.

"I'm gonna make a snow angel," Ben declared for all to hear.

"Well, bully for you," Maddie said, clearly disinterested in the little fellow's plans to exploit the impending weather.

"And," he added, "I'm going to be in this year's Christmas Carol. I'm Tiny Tim!"

"And a fine Tiny Tim, you'll be," Claude observed, deftly preempting Maddie's less pleasant intended response.

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Jenny pulled into the drive just as Mr. Jenkins pulled out, truck and trailer empty. He offered an absent wave and headed down the lane. At the side of their modest house, her grandmother was hefting another bundle of wood, as if common practice for a woman her age.

Leaving the groceries in back, she jumped out to address the more pressing issue of her grandmother carting wood in the snow. The second she was out of the car, the blustery wind stung at her face. The temperature was dropping rapidly.

"Geez, Ma! Give me that. You've got no business toting that wood, let alone being out in the cold without your jacket."

"If I don't tote it, who will?" She asked with defiance in her tone and an accusatory look on her face, but swiftly passed the load, just the same.

Never married, Jen had lived with her grandmother most of her life. Six months ago, she'd moved in with Steve. Maddie hadn't been too keen on Jen moving out, but after the move, she was determined to show her independence. With Steve backing her, Jenny repeatedly tried to get her to move in with them so they could care for her, but Little Miss Spitfire would have none of that nonsense. So, Jen tried to spend most evenings with her, at least until Steve finished work for the day.

Jen tossed the wood into the crate next to the fireplace and headed back out for the groceries. On the end table in the living room, she noticed four industrial flashlights, rolling her eyes at the sight. Ma had a tendency to go overboard.

"Let's get those groceries put away before the evening update." Maddie directed, making no move to assist in the process.

"I'm working on it, Ma!"

With the last of the groceries stowed, Jen poured herself a glass of sun tea.

Maddie, sitting on the plastic-covered sofa, was busying herself with loading batteries in the flashlights while waiting for the news to come on.

Jenny took a seat beside her, working hard not to comment on her overzealous preparations.

"Have that man of yours come clean out the flue." She screwed the cap on a loaded flashlight and grabbed another.

"I'll ask him if he's got time this weekend."

"No," she said, "I want it done tonight. He'll make time, just threaten to cut off the sweet pie he seems to like so much; that'll convince him."

Jen blushed, knowing her grandmother wasn't referring to anything she might bake. "Ma!"

"Hush, now. Mr. Short's coming on."

Jen sent Steve a text. When it came to Maddie, it was easier to comply than resist.

“The cold front is still following the originally projected path, but as you can see,” Dick said, pointing at the weather map behind him, “the storm’s gaining intensity while slowing along its path. If this pattern continues, we’ll be seeing more snowfall than originally estimated. Blizzard conditions may extend through the week.”

Snowstorms in Crystal Falls were common during the winter season, but blizzards in early November weren’t. In addition to having her grandmother’s attention, Dick now had Jen’s too.

“It looks like Crystal Falls will get the brunt of it. They may see as much as thirty-six inches in the next few days. So, let’s take a look at the Channel Nine Blizzard Preparation Guidelines.” The satellite weather image was replaced by the list:

*Avoid Driving During Heavy Snowfall  
Keep an Emergency Kit in Your Trunk  
Wear Layers  
Stock Two Weeks’ Worth of Staples  
Set out Candles or Flashlights in Case of Power Outages  
Turn on Faucets to a Trickle  
Have a Backup Heat Source (space heater, propane, firewood)*

“Although emergency services in the neighboring Settler, Hamden and Durham counties are already on alert that they may need to help, personal preparation by the residents of Crystal Falls will go a long way toward weathering the storm. This is Dick Short for the Channel Nine Evening Update.”

Perhaps they were in for a good snowfall, Jenny thought. She was considering some precautions of her own when she realized, *Good God, I’m becoming my grandmother!*

“Where is your head, girl? Maddie asked. “Don’t just sit there! Help me load these blasted flashlights.”

# Chapter 2

Sheriff Steve Rawlins, about to finally delve into today's issue of The Daily Nugget, leaned back in his chair and rested his boots on his desk when Jimmy Lawson roused.

"Well, good morning sunshine. I trust you had a good night's rest," he said over the top of his paper, raising an eyebrow at the man behind the bars.

Jimmy spent more nights in the single cell of the sheriff's station than he did at home. He'd never hurt a fly, but the man drank like a fish. Once old Jimmy had a few in him, the phone would start ringing and Steve, invariably, would have to go round him up.

"Why the hell am I in lockup?" Jimmy asked, the smell of stale bourbon wafting through the bars and across the small room.

"Might have something to do with relieving yourself on the window of The Bean while half the town was trying to enjoy their afternoon tea."

Steve sat the paper aside, pulled the drawer open, and dug out the key ring.

"It's not like I was pissing on the flagpole or something," Jimmy defended.

"Nope; that was last week."

The Sheriff unlocked the cell and let Jimmy out, trying hard not breathe in the stench. "The next time I have to lock you up for pissing in public, I'm going to order you to wear Depends!"

"Got anything good to drink in that drawer of yours, Sheriff?" Jimmy asked with a crooked smile.

"Get out of here before I decide to toss you right back in."

With Jimmy gone, Steve returned to his desk, intending to pick up where he'd left off with the paper until his cell phone vibrated. It was a text from Jenny. If her grandmother wanted him to clean the chimney flue, then he'd have to clean the chimney flue. That woman, bless her heart, was nothing if not persistent. If he left now, he might be able to get it done in time to take Jenny to Maybelle's Diner for meatloaf. He'd been craving Maybelle's meatloaf for days.

"Betty Jean, I'm going to cut out a little early. You might want to do the same," he told the woman at the front desk. "And tell Deputy Waller he can call it quits after his patrol."

Betty Jean Sanford had been the receptionist/dispatcher since Steve took over for his father shortly before his death; she'd stuck by him ever since. She was a portly woman with a

big heart and penchant for gossip. He knew she wouldn't leave early; she never did. More likely, she'd be on the phone drumming up rumors with the gabby girls' club before he pulled out of the drive.

"You have a good night, Sheriff. I'll stick around for a bit and see if anything crops up."

*I knew you would.*

The sheriff was less than a block away when the snow began to fall, a thick, heavy snow that threatened to stick.

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Holly was putting away a few sundries she'd picked up at the corner store after their breakfast outing when the doorbell rang.

"I got it, Momma."

Ben was quick. By the time she got to the door, he was already in excited conversation with Kenny Thompson and his little sister Maggie. The Thompson house was just down the street. The same ages, Kenny and Ben had become best of buddies. The Thompson kids were bundled up in winter coats, mittens, and colorful wool hats, their bicycles dropped on the lawn behind them.

"Momma," Ben asked with pleading eyes, "can I go out? They're going to ride to the park before the snow gets bad. Please?"

The snow was already getting bad. It was coming down fast and sticking to the ground. So far this year, they'd only had a few flurries, none of which stuck around. Holly imagined the boys having a snowball fight while little Maggie made snow angels. They were good kids and the park was only two blocks down.

"If you bundle up like they did and be extra careful on your bike, then you can ride with them to the park. But stick to the sidewalks and remember to look both ways before crossing the road. And don't forget your inhaler."

Of all she'd said, she knew he'd only caught two words - "you can." With a big grin on his face, he bolted up the stairs to get ready.

"Come on in out of the cold. I'll make you two a hot chocolate while you wait for Ben."

Neither objected to the enticing offer. They shook off the snowflakes, kicked off their boots, and followed her to the kitchen where she had them take seats at the bar top. They were finishing off their cocoa when Bennie ran down the stairs, looking like a miniature version of the Michelin Man in his heavy white coat and all white ski mask.

"Could you be any cuter?" She asked.

"Nope!"

"Take Buster with you. He can keep an eye on you until I get there. I'll walk over as soon as I'm finished here."

"Thanks, Momma." Glove in mitten, he grabbed Kenny's hand and pulled. "Let's go. Come on Buster," he called to the dog they'd rescued from the pound on his fourth birthday.

Holly watched as they left, Buster obediently at their heels. The dog seemed just as excited about the snow as the kids. They say dogs are man's best friend. This dog was a boy's best friend. The two were inseparable. That thought comforted Holly and made her worry at the same time. One day, for whatever reason, Buster wouldn't be with them anymore. She didn't want to think about what that would do to Ben.

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Arms covered in soot, Steve was about to wash up at the kitchen sink when Maddie stopped him short.

"Do that in the bathroom," she called, glancing back from the front window long enough to shoot him a scornful look.

That was about as close to a thank you as he'd get for rushing right over to clean the flue.

Jenny, sitting on the sofa, gave him a knowing smile and blew him a kiss as he headed, arms black as night, to the downstairs bathroom. Maddie, satisfied he wasn't going to soil her countertop, turned her attention back to the heavy snowfall. Outside, Steve could hear the distant, but unmistakable sound of metal grating on pavement; the plows were already at it.

"I told you," Maddie said. "We're in for a good one. Wouldn't surprise me if this one tops the great storm of sixty-six."

That was a little before his time, but Steve could imagine, by the way she'd said it, that it was a whopper of a storm. If this one did get bad, then he was going to be a busy man.

Toweling off, he realized he'd left a mess. The soap dispenser was covered with black clumps and smears. The sink was littered with black oily streaks. The towel he'd just used, light blue with a white lily print, was blotted with wet pitch, like strange Rorschach images embedded in the high thread count cotton. He considered cleaning his mess and decided against it.

From the other room, he heard Jenny say, "Oh, Ma, it's just a little snow. It's beautiful, really."

Back in the living room, Steve found Jenny standing beside her grandmother, looking out the double-pane windows at the white blanket forming outside.

"A rose is pretty, too, 'til its thorns prick you." For emphasis, the woman gave Jenny a good pinch.

"I'm pretty sure snowflakes don't have thorns," Steve said, stepping up behind them. "Even if they did, they dare not prick you." In spite of his jest, the heavy snowfall was worrisome. It really was coming down hard and that would mean more work - pulling cars from ditches, dealing with fender benders, maybe more. *So much for meatloaf at Maybelle's.*

Jenny rubbed away the sting of her grandmother's pinch and met his eyes with a frown. "You're going back out, aren't you?"

"I better get back to the office. The phone's probably already ringing off the hook if Betty Jean doesn't have it tied up with the gossip girls. I can drop you off at the house on my way."

That comment prompted another scornful look from Maddie. Jenny interceded before her grandmother could give him the what's what.

"No," she said, "I'll drive myself before it gets too bad. I think I'll have dinner with Ma."

He never got tired of hearing her talk. Her voice was silky and sultry. She could read the telephone directory and make it sound sexy. Cradling her head, he brushed her wavy locks aside and planted a lingering kiss on her forehead.

"Don't wait too long. It's not going to get any better."

"She'll be fine. If it gets much worse, she can just spend the night here."

Given Maddie's gift for persistence, he knew that would be the more likely outcome. Just as well, Jenny didn't need to be out in this anyway. Besides, from the looks of it, he might be pulling an all-nighter.

"Okay, babe, I'll see you soon." He turned to Maddie and gave her an unwelcome hug. "Have a good night."

"Don't let the door hit you in the ass," she said, pushing him away.

"Love you, too, Ma," he called over his shoulder as he opened the door.

\* \* \*

Deputy Waller cradled the gas pump nozzle in its holder, grabbed the cup of coffee off the roof, and got back into his patrol SUV. Last year, the sheriff had traded in the Ford Explorers for Dodge Durangos. Sleeker in style and more robust in power, he still preferred the smooth ride of the Ford, but never complained.

The radio crackled.

"Dispatch to Waller."

Just my luck, he thought. Almost done for the day and in comes a call. Filling the tank and getting his evening coffee was normally his last stop of the night. By the time the cup was empty, he'd be home and done for the day.

Reluctantly, he pulled the handset from the cradle.

"Go for Waller. What's up BJ?"

"Why do you insist on calling me that? I prefer Betty or Betty Jean."

"I prefer BJ." Giving Betty a hard time always brought a smile to his chubby face.

"Sheriff says to call it an early day. He's already left for the night. Are you about done with your patrol?"

He burned his lips on the hot coffee, cursed himself, and replied. "I was about to go down to the lake to finish up. With the snow picking up, I think I'll at least do a quick drive by to make sure no one has run off the road. I'll call it after that."

"Roger that. I'm about to call it quits, too."

"Got your fill of the gossip girls club already?"

"You know I hate when the sheriff calls us that. We're just friends. We ladies need to keep abreast of what's going on around us. And, yes, I've got my fill."

"See you tomorrow, BJ."

She didn't respond and he could just imagine the exasperated look on her face. Betty Jean was a great dispatcher and a sweet woman. Though he'd pick and prod at her, he wouldn't trade her for the world.

With the wipers on high, the deputy eased out onto Main Street and turned west, heading for the lake. Already, the blades were packing the wet snow into slush piles at either end of the windshield.

\* \* \*

Betty Jean slipped on her coat and hefted her purse, big enough to hold a small child and heavy enough that it might, over her shoulder. She was about to cut the lights when the phone rang.

"Sheriff's office. Betty Jean speaking."

It was Holly Masters and she was all worked up. Betty couldn't understand a word she was saying.

"Slow down, dear. Take a deep breath and tell me what's going on."

Through the handset, she heard the girl snuffle, blow her nose, and take a long breath.

"It's Ben," Holly said urgently. "I can't find him. I've looked everywhere. He wouldn't just disappear. I'm so worried."

Betty had known Holly since she'd moved here. She'd watched little Ben grow up into a fine little boy. Her mother was right; he wouldn't just take off on his own. If he was out there lost or hurt with the snow coming down like this, he had scarce little time before the cold would get the better of him.

"Okay, Holly. We'll find him. Where was the last place you saw him?"

"Here, at the house. The Thompson kids stopped by wanting him to join them at the park to play in the snow. It's so close, I thought it would be okay. I made him take Buster with him and told him I'd walk down myself. I had a few things to do before I left." She started crying again. "I should have let it wait and gone with him. Oh God, if anything happens to him...."

"It's okay. Please don't get yourself worked up. That won't help anyone. Can you relax for me? I need you thinking clearly."

She sniffled again, but said, "Yes, I'm okay."

"Good. So, he went to the park with Ken and Maggie Thompson. I assume they weren't there when you walked down."

"No, they were gone. The park was empty. I yelled for him until my throat was sore, but

he never answered.”

Betty was jotting down some quick notes. Getting the details right the first time was crucial.

“How did they get to the park, Holly? Did they walk?”

“No, they rode their bikes. Bennie’s is blue, bright blue.”

“And what was he wearing?”

“He was wearing his winter parka and a ski mask, both white.”

She was starting to calm down a bit. That was good. The more information Betty could get out of her, the better the chances of finding the boy before dark. If he was still out there after that, finding him in the dark during a heavy snowfall would be far more challenging.

“Okay, good. White parka. White ski mask. Blue bike. Last seen heading from your place to Settler’s Park. Now, what about the Thompson’s? Have you checked with them?”

“First thing when I got back from the park. Ken and Maggie were home, but Ben wasn’t with them. Mr. Thompson said Ken brought Maggie home because she got one of her nosebleeds while they were at the park. They said Ben stayed behind because he was waiting on me.” She choked out more tears. “Oh God, it’s my fault. He was waiting out there for me.”

“It’s not your fault, dear. Things happen. I’m sure he’s fine. Buster probably ran off and he went after him. Deputy Waller is on patrol in the area. I’ll let him know and I’m sure he’ll find him in no time.”

“What if someone took him, Betty? He was alone in the park. If someone picked him up, they could be long gone.”

“Don’t think like that. It’s off season. The only people who’d be near the park this time of year are townsfolk, and none of them would do something like that. Here’s what I want you to do. Go wash your face, make yourself a hot cocoa, and wait by the phone.”

“No, I need to be out looking for him.”

“No you don’t. If he comes home and you’re not there, he may go right back out again to look for you. Let us handle it. You stay there by the phone and calm yourself. I’ll call you as soon as I have an update. Promise me you won’t go out.”

“Okay, I promise, but you’ve got to find him. Call me right away.”

“Will do. Now, let me get ahold of the deputy before he heads home. It’s going to be okay. Trust me.”

Betty disconnected. She sat her bag on the floor beside the desk, took off her coat, and quickly reviewed her notes before keying the microphone.

“Dispatch for Waller.”

“Go for Waller. Thought you were calling it a day? What’s up?”

“Better not call it quits just yet. Holly Masters just called. Her boy, Ben, has gone missing.”

“Missing? What happened?”

“He went to play at the park with Ken and Maggie Thompson. Holly was going to walk down to meet them. When she got there, they were gone. According to Mr. Thompson, Ken brought Maggie home when she got one of her nosebleeds. Ben stayed behind to wait for his mother.”

“Any sign of him at the park? Any signs of a struggle? Lost glove, that sort of thing.”

“No sign. He was wearing a white parka and white ski mask. Holly said he rode his bicycle there; it’s blue.”

“Okay, I’m not far. I’ll head that way. You might want to let the sheriff know.”

“He’s my next call. Oh, and Holly said Buster, their dog, is with him.”

“Good. Snow is thick enough now that I might be able to find their tracks. On my way. Deputy out.”

“Roger that. Dispatch out.”

Betty picked up the phone and dialed the sheriff’s cell.

\* \* \*

Sheriff Rawlins was halfway back to the office when he heard the call go out over the radio. He was about to key the handset to let Betty Jean know he’d heard when his cell phone rang.

“Hey Betty, I heard your transmission. I was on my way back to the office. I figured with all the snow, we’d start getting some calls.”

“Holly’s really worried. It’s not like Ben to wander off.”

“No,” he said, “it’s not. The snow’s really coming down out here. We need to find him before dark. I’ll touch base with Deputy Waller and run by the park to take a look around.”

“I’ll put on a pot of coffee. Sounds like it might be a long night.”

“Unfortunately, I expect it will.”

“Anything else I can do?”

“No. We’re on it. Just stick by the phone. I’m sure Holly’s won’t be the only call tonight.”

“Will do, Sheriff.”

Steve put his cell phone back in the dash cradle, hit the lights, and made a U-turn. The Durango held traction on the snow-covered pavement. Either the plows hadn’t made it this way yet or the snow was falling faster than they could keep up with. He hoped for the former.

Making his way toward Settler’s Park, he picked up the handset and keyed the mic, “Sheriff to Waller.”

No response.

“Sheriff to Waller.”

“Go for Waller.”

The reply sounded muffled, like a bad connection. “Can barely read you. What’s your twenty.”

“Sorry, Sheriff. I’m on my walkie. Dropped it in the snow. I’m at the bridge over Settler’s Creek. I found Ben’s bike by the side of the road.”

“Any sign of the boy?”

“No, but I found Buster, his dog. I’m guessing the dog ran off and Ben went after him. He can’t be far. There are tracks, but the snow’s covering them fast.”

“Good work. I’m in route. I was headed to the park, so I’ll come up from the south and work my way to you.”

“Roger that, Sheriff.”

“Hit me back if you find him. Sheriff out.”

Well, shit, Steve thought. Visibility down to just a few feet, nightfall approaching, and an asthmatic boy lost out in this mess. Here we go...what’s next.

He pressed the button on the cell phone, holding it until it dinged.

“Siri, call Jenny.”

“Steve?” She answered on the first ring.

“Hey babe. It’s getting pretty nasty out here and Holly’s boy has gone missing.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah, it’s going to be a long night. Why don’t you stay with your grandmother? I’d rather not have you out driving in this. I’ve got no clue when I’ll make it home, anyway.”

“No worries. You do what you need to do. Ma’s got a pot of cocoa warming. We’ll be fine. Find Ben,” she said. After a brief hesitation, she added, “Steve, be careful out there.”

“Will do. Gotta run. Love you.”

He disconnected before she could respond. Ben was out there, cold and alone. Now that he knew Jenny was going to stay in, the boy was his priority.

# Chapter 3

“Jen, turn that up. Looks like Dick is coming on with an update.”

Jenny had just hung up with Steve. She looked at the banner on the television - “BREAKING NEWS - SEVERE WEATHER WARNING.”

The remote for the TV was sitting on the coffee table. Her grandmother was sitting right next to it on the couch, but the thing might as well have been in another room.

Jenny walked over, picked up the remote, and turned up the volume.

“This is Dick Short with a Channel Nine Breaking News Update.”

A weather map filled the screen.

“As you can see, the storm, now officially named Winter Storm Amanda, has slowed along its path, but picked up in intensity. Crystal Falls is getting the brunt of it, where there has already been an accumulation of twenty-four inches. Currently, the snow is falling at a record-crushing rate of thirteen inches per hour. To put that into perspective, Connecticut’s 2013 Winter Storm Nemo, at its peak, had a snowfall rate of just six inches per hour.”

Jenny took a seat by her grandmother. She was thinking about little Ben, out there in this. Not religious by nature, she said a quick prayer for the boy.

“Based on the storm’s activity, we’re changing our earlier projections. As it stands now, Crystal Falls could see as much as four feet of snow before daybreak.”

“Good Lord,” Maddie said.

“Emergency crews from neighboring municipalities have been dispatched to assist with road clearing, but, at this point, they may be too late to have much impact.”

“I told you this was going to be a bad one,” Maddie said, matter-of-fact.

“Steve said Holly’s boy, Ben, has gone missing. They’re looking for him now.”

“Well, if they don’t find him soon, the boy will freeze to death. Happens all the time. People get stranded or lost out in the snow and freeze to death before anyone can get to them.”

“Ma!”

In confirmation of her grandmother’s pessimism, Dick Short chimed in. “We are now recommending that all residents of Crystal Falls remain indoors. If you venture out and get stuck in the drifts, emergency responders may not be able to reach you.”

Jenny looked at her grandmother, expecting an “I told you so,” but getting a grave look,

instead.

“What is it, Ma?”

“I’m not a spring chicken. I’ve been through more blizzards than most will ever see, but I’ve never heard of snow falling at this rate.”

Maddie was many things, but faint of heart was not one. Detecting a glimmer of fear on her grandmother’s face, Jenny’s concern heightened exponentially.

\* \* \*

The park was on the opposite side of town, so Steve had to backtrack. The sun had gone down and the gas lamps lining Main Street had come on, the soft light making the snow look like golden confetti twinkling around them. The shops were closed and the parking spaces in front of them empty.

Focused on the already treacherous road, he almost missed the man in front of The Funky Bean. Claude Connor, shoveling the sidewalk.

Steve pulled the Durango to the curb and let down the window, a burst of cold rushing into the cab.

“Claude, what the hell are you doing?”

“What’s it look like, Sheriff? Trying to clear a path. Otherwise, it’ll be a mess in the morning.”

He shook the snow from the hood of his parka and swatted at the flakes clinging to his beard. Steve had no idea how long he’d been at it, but the man already resembled a freezer-burned Popsicle.

“Why don’t you call it good, for now. Get back inside and warm up. I don’t think it’s going to let up anytime soon, so you’re just wasting your time.”

“Got to try. If I’m wasting my time, it’s my time to waste.”

The radio crackled. “Waller to Sheriff.”

“Claude, get back inside. I don’t think anyone is going to be beating down your door for coffee in the morning, and I don’t need any calls about a crazy man frozen to the pavement.”

Steve raised the window and pulled off, the blue and red lights of his truck dancing off the storefront windows.

“Go for Sheriff.”

“I found him, Sir. Down by the creek. Heard him calling out for Buster.”

“He okay?”

“He’s fine. We’re heading to Holly’s place now.”

Thank God, Steve thought. With the sun down and the snow picking up, a full-on search would have been difficult.

“Good work, Deputy. I’ll meet you there. Betty Jean, did you catch that?” He knew she did, but asked, anyway.

“Got it, Sheriff. I’ll call Holly to let her know.”

At Manville Lane, he took a left, leaving the storefronts and gas lamps of Main Street behind, trading them for the row houses and sulfur street lamps of the residential part of town. Holly’s place, Trent Walker’s old house, was just a few blocks away.

\* \* \*

“You getting warm yet?” He’d turned the heat up, but the boy was still shivering.

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

The kid was tough. He was obviously shaken by the experience, but was doing his best not to show it. When he’d found the boy, he’d been crying out for his dog in a panic, tears running down his crimson cheeks.

“What were you doing out there, anyway?”

It was dark now. The lights from the park were behind them, the lights from Main Street

a distant glow ahead. Even with the wipers on high, visibility was no more than a few feet, at best.

“We went to the park to play in the snow. Me and Kenny and Maggie. She got a nosebleed, so Kenny took her home. Momma said she was going to walk to the park, so I waited.”

“Buster ran off? Is that why you wandered away?”

“Yeah. There was a noise down by the lake. It was probably an owl, but it sounded like someone yelling. I told him to stay, but he took off.”

Not surprising. A squirrel runs by or an owl hoots and a dog will go after it on instinct.

“Well, you’re both safe now.”

That turned out to be a bit premature. As the deputy rounded the bend at Settler’s Creek, a young deer ran out in front of them. The right move would have been to hit the deer. Instead, he hit the brakes and spun the wheel. The SUV hydroplaned into the embankment and rolled.

Buster whimpered and Ben screamed. James Waller, unconscious from the blow that shattered the driver’s side window, heard neither.

Upturned at the edge of the creek, the Durango’s wheels spun, slinging slush into the night while the engine whined.

Somewhere out by the lake, a man’s call for help went unheard.

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