

# **Tale Half Told**

*a Christmas Ghost Story*

Tale Half Told:

M & K Traynor

Also by Killarney Traynor:

*Summer Shadows*

*Necessary Evil*

*Michael Lawrence: the Season of Darkness*

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*a Christmas Ghost Story*

*Story by:*

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*There in seclusion and remote from men  
The wizard hand lies cold,  
Which at its topmost speed let fall the pen  
And left the tale half told.*

- *Longfellow*

*“How it is that I appear before you in a shape that you can see, I may not tell. I have sat  
invisible beside you many and many a day.”*

- *Dickens, ‘A Christmas Carol’*

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Cast of Characters:

1946:

Charles Reynolds, *the war veteran, deceased*

Helene Reynolds, *his war-bride, deceased*

Lionel Reynolds, *Charles' grandfather, deceased*

Rachel Reynolds, *Charles' great-aunt,*

Jacob North, *the orphan, Lionel's ward*

Irene Simmons North, *Jacob's wife, deceased*

1971:

Michael Wright, *a distant cousin of the Reynolds*

Susan Wright, *his wife, a nurse*

Linda Vincent, *Susan's school friend, also a nurse*

Johnny Vincent, *Linda's brother, a Vietnam War vet*

William Emery, *a local cop*

## Prologue

*Article in the Triple Town Sentry, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1971:*

### ***Reynolds Mansion Slated for Demolition***

*The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder-suicide of Charles and Helene Reynolds may be celebrated by the leveling of the historic Reynolds mansion.*

*Reynolds Development Corporation has expressed interest in developing the Reynolds estate on Winnabenaki River into a resort. While this would be a boon for a region with little industry or tourism, some of the locals hope the old mansion, known as River House, will be spared.*

*“River House is a part of our history,” said Gloria Stark, owner of a small farm on the outskirts of town. “I remember the fine parties they used to have there when I was a child. I know we need the tourism, but I don’t know why anyone would want to destroy the house. It’s part of the landscape now. If it weren’t for that incident, they would still be using it.”*

*This December 23<sup>rd</sup> marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder-suicide that rocked the state. Charles Reynolds, son and heir to the Reynolds land development empire, was a war hero freshly returned from Germany. Reynolds killed his wife, Helene Reynolds, during the family’s annual Christmas party, and then threw himself into Winnabenaki River. The current president of the company, Jacob North, was also present that night and nearly drowned in an attempt to save Charles. Guests at the party were united in grief. The tragedy earned the nick-name, the Othello killing, as it was thought Charles had killed his wife out of jealousy regarding her supposed affair. The affair was never proven, making the murder seem all the more tragic. Local legend claims that River House is now haunted by the ghost of Charles Reynolds, who wanders the halls in eternal regret of his rash actions.*

*On being questioned about the ghostly legend, Mrs. Stark laughed. “Sane people don’t believe in ghosts anymore, do they?”*

*The Othello murder-suicide is not the only tragedy connected to River House. Jacob North’s wife, Irene Simmons North, fell to her death ten years ago when she lost her footing on a staircase. The house has since been deserted and now sits as a lonely, haunted reminder of past opulence and tragedy.*

*Development of the property hinges on the decision of Rachel Reynolds, the current owner of River House and its last occupant. It is rumored the current project proposal has been rejected by Ms. Reynolds, however details are difficult to confirm. She is currently in Tampa, Florida, and was unavailable for questioning at the time of publication.*

## PART ONE:

### Isolation

## Chapter 1

It was Michael's idea to make the detour. It was mid-afternoon on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, a bright and sunny day that was starting to turn gray with the promise of snow. He and his wife, Susan, were driving with their two friends to her parent's summer house on Winnepesaukee to spend the Christmas holiday. They had only a half hour left to their trip when he suggested it.

The idea did not have much appeal to his passengers. They had all been in the car for several hours since leaving Massachusetts and had only stopped once to gas up and get lunch at a small diner in New Hampshire. The farther north they went, the colder it got, until even the sedan's fine heating system struggled to keep the levels comfortable.

Michael Wright, a tall, lanky man with energy that belied his rather mundane profession of accountant, was desperate to get out of the car and stretch his legs. 1971 had been a very good year for him. He had married, moved into a house in a nice neighborhood, and, having worked for the prestigious Reynolds Development Company for two years, qualified for a promotion and a fat Christmas bonus. The Wright star, he was convinced, was on the rise and he was as eager as a child to explore some place new.

"It'll be a quick stop," he promised his passengers who were wedged tightly between bags, wrapped presents, and Tupperware filled with snacks for the upcoming holiday. "It's only twenty minutes out of our way."

Susan, Michael's girlfriend since Boston University and wife since June, objected. "It's going to storm tonight. I don't want to be caught out in the road in a nor'easter. Let's stop on the way back."

"We aren't coming back this way," he said. "We're taking the coastal route home, remember? And take a look at that sky. It's not going to snow for hours. What do you say, Linda, Johnny?" He addressed the semi-comatose couple in the back. "Want to see a haunted house?"

"Oh, *Michael!*" Susan punched him lightly on the shoulder.

Linda Vincent, reclining in the back seat with a magazine and a cigarette, leaned forward with sudden interest. Her reddish-brown hair, stick straight as modern style would have it, gleamed in the afternoon light, highlighted by the navy blue wool jacket she wore. Leather boots, a denim skirt, and a gold-colored turtleneck sweater completed her outfit.

"Haunted?" she asked, her tired brown eyes suddenly alight with new energy. "Come on, don't be an idiot, Michael."

"What?" He grinned at her in the rearview mirror. "Nurses aren't supposed to believe in the paranormal?"

“We’re trained in the sciences,” Susan reminded him. “Science doesn’t trust the unprovable.” She twisted in her seat to face Linda. “Michael doesn’t want to see it because he believes in ghosts. It’s the old River House itself that he’s interested in.”

Linda’s brother, Johnny, sat up now. He was a stocky man with a close-cropped haircut that betrayed his military profession. His eyes were a murkier shade than his sister’s. Johnny was only a year out of Vietnam and Susan thought that if anyone ought to be kept away from a haunted location, it was him.

“I’ve read about this place, haven’t I?” he asked, showing his first sign of interest in anything since the Wrights picked him up earlier that day. “Wasn’t there something in the news about River House?”

“Yeah, a gossip article in one of the papers,” Michael replied, shifting briskly. “There was a lot of talk in the office about whether the Old Man had seen it yet.”

The Old Man was Jacob North, president of Reynolds Development Company, where Michael worked.

“Tacky of them, mentioning his wife’s accident like that,” Susan said.

“Yeah, the guys in marketing weren’t too happy about it.”

“So what’s the story about this place?” Linda asked. “I don’t know a thing about it.”

“It’s the Reynolds family estate, held in trust by the last surviving member, Rachel Reynolds,” Michael said, pleased to be able to tell the story again. “The Reynolds own practically that whole stretch of river, you know, and RDC is going to build the vacation destination of the North East; fishing and canoeing in the summer, easy access to skiing in the winter. The place is a gold mine.”

“Michael’s been talking about nothing else for months.” Susan gave her husband an affectionate shove.

Even so, she worried about this turn in the conversation. It had been her idea to invite the Vincents for Christmas. Linda was her best friend, orphaned at a young age, and coping with a brother whose night terrors were so intense as to require occasional hospitalization. Susan thought that they could use an excuse to get out of the city and to some place without a personal history.

Now she wondered if this trip was a good idea. Johnny was reported to be doing better lately, but was spending a Christmas holiday in an isolated house really the best therapy for him? Looking into his eyes, Susan doubted it. She could see he was haunted by reality as well as nightmares.

*Mom’s house will be full of people*, she reminded herself, adjusting her suede coat and pressing a hand against her slightly nauseous stomach. *At least Linda won’t have to cope alone.*

“So you want to go and just pay this Rachel Reynolds a visit?” Johnny asked skeptically. He was dressed entirely in black, except for his jeans, and he rolled his gloves in his hands as he spoke.

“Rachel’s in Florida,” Michael replied. “The place is empty.”

Of the four, he was the one best dressed for the holiday: tan coat over a bright holiday sweater and slacks. He drove with the ease of someone who had been raised in long, hard winters where four months of snow-covered roads were a given.

“Why do you want to see this place?” Linda asked. “What’s in there, buried treasure?”

“Not very likely – North’s as tight a man as you’ll ever meet. If there was treasure he would have found it somehow. Being wheelchair-bound the past fifteen years hasn’t slowed him down a bit.”

“Then why?”

“I’ve been reading and studying about it for months. I’m curious, but they don’t send accountants to check on the properties.” He shifted again, slowing as the bends in the road became sharper. “I’ll tell you one thing, though: the engineers who went up to survey the property didn’t like River House. They called it spooky – wouldn’t even go inside it.”

“Given its reputation, I’m not surprised,” Johnny said. “How long has Rachel been gone?”

“Ten years,” Michael said. “It’s been boarded up and left to rot ever since Mrs. North fell down that flight of steps. It’ll be completely empty, I promise. No one will even know we’ve been there.”

“Isn’t that breaking and entering?” Susan asked fretfully.

“Not if we don’t break anything,” Michael said. “Oh, look, here’s the turn.”

And he took it.

## Chapter 2

It was, as Michael had promised, only twenty minutes to the old house.

Linda yawned and shifted in her seat. She had just come off of an overnight shift at the hospital and catnapping in the cramped sedan was not enough to restore her energy. Judging from the drawn look on Johnny's face, he was tired too, although he would never have admitted it. Weakness was something that Johnny despised, especially in himself. Ever since childhood he had tried making himself into a stoic superman. In Linda's opinion, this mindset was Johnny's greatest obstacle to coming to terms with whatever had happened overseas.

For now, however, he looked as peaceful as he ever did. He spoke with Michael, leaning forward, his eyes glinting with interest.

*Good, Linda thought. He's coming out of himself.*

She leaned back and looked out the window. Snowdrifts piled high along the sides of the road. Bare, black elms and maples jutted up from the snow to claw at the sky, while evergreens provided welcome green relief. The sky was blue with heavy, gray clouds moving in from the mountains. Susan was right, as she usually was, about the storm coming. It was going to be a doozy when it got here.

Susan had twisted around in her seat to talk to Johnny. Her face was framed by thick blond ringlets, artfully left out from her bun, and her huge brown eyes were serious. She was four years younger than Linda and her best friend since college, Linda having started her schooling late. Of the two, Susan was the mother hen, with a loyal heart, a fiercely protective nature, and the looks of a TV star. At times Linda was intimidated by her. Susan was one of those girls who always knew what she was doing, where she was going, and how she was going to look when she got there. By contrast, Linda's life was a train wreck.

Once Linda had hoped they would be in-laws. Susan and Johnny were the same age and they would have been a handsomely matched set. But her brother, despite his sensitive side, had always been an army-man in the making. Anyway, once Michael appeared on the scene, Susan could see no one else.

*Probably for the best, Linda thought now, looking at Johnny. His condition would be an overwhelming challenge for newlyweds. not that Susan couldn't handle it. She can handle anything.*

It was not the first time Linda found herself relieved not to have the Perfect Woman for a sister-in-law. Despite this, Susan was a good friend and her marriage to Michael hadn't changed

her relationship with Linda, which was something of a miracle. Everyone knew that marriages were the death knell for single-friendships.

When River House came into view, Linda could see at once why the locals thought it haunted. It was a large, rambling Victorian, shuttered and dark with a profile that would have given Vincent Price the creeps. Standing on top of a small rise, it towered over them as Michael carefully worked his way up the steep, unplowed drive. When the house's shadow touched the car, Linda felt a sudden drop in temperature. But it was only Michael, lowering his window for a better look.

"There she is," he said, in a hushed tone that would have been ominous had he not been grinning like a kid. He threw on the brakes, turned off the car, and waved towards the building. "The old Reynolds Manor, site of so much fear, terror, and tragedy."

"You shouldn't joke about it, Michael," Susan snapped. "It was a terrible thing."

The note in Susan's tone was abnormally harsh. She looked ashen when Linda glanced at her.

"What happened here, exactly?" Johnny asked. His voice was quiet and taut.

"Murder and suicide," Michael said and then he was out the door, wading through the shifting snow piles toward the front door.

"What is he doing?" Susan asked fretfully. She was stroking her stomach again, Linda noticed.

Johnny was getting out, too.

"Come on, Lin," he said, just before he slammed the car door shut. "Let's stretch our legs."

The two women sat in the car alone, watching the men make their way up the path to the front porch. Overhead, the wind moved the trees, making the cold wood creak. The house was a silent black silhouette on the gray and white landscape. When one could tear their eyes off of the house, Winnabenaki River spread out before them in serene, frozen glory, with New Hampshire's famed mountains in the background. It was a sight that should have inspired awe. It served, instead, to remind Linda of how isolated they were.

Linda leaned forward and touched Susan's shoulder, apologizing automatically when the woman jumped.

"What's going on here, Susie?" she asked.

Susan sighed deeply and her warm eyes looked sad. "Michael's been obsessed with this place for weeks," she said. "It's all to do with that stupid development project. He's just the accountant on it, but he's thrown himself into it heart and soul. He's been talking about nothing else."

"That's understandable, I guess," Linda said. "He's related to the Reynolds, isn't he?"

She nodded. "He's a distant cousin. I don't know why he's so keen on the story. It's awful."

On the wrap-around porch, the two men tried the front door, then some of the windows before moving toward the back of the house.

"Is it one of those unsolved mystery things?" Linda asked.

"No, not at all. Twenty-five years ago, around Christmas time, in front of a houseful of guests, Charles Reynolds knifed his pregnant wife, then drowned himself in the river. It was a

senseless tragedy that nearly destroyed the Reynolds family. It's not," Susan said firmly, "something to laugh off."

"Why did Charles do it?"

"They said he thought that his wife was cheating on him, that the baby wasn't his own. They call it the Othello Affair because it wasn't true; she was faithful."

Linda tapped her chin thoughtfully. "There has to be more to it than that. Lots of women cheat on their husbands and the husbands don't all go crazy and kill people."

Susan hesitated and Linda knew she was not telling all of it.

"What else, Susan?"

At that moment, Michael reappeared on the porch, waving them in.

"Come on!" he called.

To Linda's surprise, Susan immediately opened the door and began trudging through the snow towards her husband.

She watched her friend make her careful way up to the porch and thought, *What on earth could be so terrible about this case that she wouldn't want to tell me?*

"Linda!"

Michael was waving for her, too. Rather than be left behind in the car, Linda got out and joined them.

### Chapter 3

Michael recognized Susan's unhappiness as she came up the steps to join him. He took her gloved hand and gave it a sympathetic squeeze.

"Johnny found a way in." He lowered his voice. "Just a quick look around, sweetheart, then we'll go, I promise."

When she looked up at him, her solemn expression marred with worry, he could think of nothing reassuring to say. He knew his wife did not like his recent pre-occupation with the Reynolds murder, but he could not help himself – there was something about the story that drew his attention and absorbed him in a way that nothing else ever had. He had become the resident expert on the case in the office to the obvious discomfort of his colleagues, many of whom found his fascination to be tasteless and a possible deterrent to his advancement within the company. This detour was more than a pilgrimage to a site of family interest. Michael was convinced that if he could just see River House before it was torn down he could get the Reynolds murder-suicide out of his system for good.

Standing here, in the shadow of the house that he had read so much about, he was sure that he was right. However, he could not explain all of this to Susan, not with Linda standing only a foot away. So he smiled, brushed a quick kiss on her cheek and then led them around the porch to where Johnny was waiting.

"You'll like this place, Linda," he called out as they walked. "It's a sturdy old house, built in the 1880s by the Venerable Josiah Reynolds, esquire. Lots of history here."

"I'm a nurse, Michael, not a historian," she quipped and he laughed as they drew around the corner.

Johnny stood, arms folded, staring out at the broad expanse of river, his expression inscrutable. He was at the head of the stairs, where the generous porch led out onto a snow covered patio. Michael knew from his familiarity with the house's blueprints that there was a path and a staircase leading down to the old boat house and the infamous dock from which Charles Reynolds had thrown himself into the river in a fit of mad repentance.

The old boat house, battered and worn with time, was large and still showed evidence of the scallop trim and peeling brown paint matching the somber house above. Unlike River House, however, the boat house had been breached; a rotted old pine had crushed the roof, leaving only three walls to sag in final defiance.

*Regardless of what happens to River House, Michael thought, the boat house would have to come down. But the dock looks as sturdy as if it were only a few years old.*

Johnny did not seem to notice their approach until Linda came up to his side and nodded at the dock.

“I guess that’s where it happened, huh?” She shoved her hands deeper into her coat.

Johnny looked startled.

“I guess,” he said, and turned away. He stepped past Susan and wrenched open the back door. “Let’s get inside before we freeze.”

As Johnny disappeared through the doorway, Susan shot Michael a concerned look. The wind toyed with her hair and sent threads of ice through Michael’s clothing. He shivered and gestured towards the house.

“Come on,” he said.

Linda followed her brother, burying her chin into the thick collar of her coat. Susan looked around as though seeking an excuse not to enter. The wind whistled through the tree tops. At the sound, she lunged for the doorway. Michael followed her, shutting the door behind him.

The room spread out before them vast and cavernous. Inside was not appreciably warmer, but they were at least sheltered from the wind. Michael unbuttoned his top button gratefully and looked around.

“What a *room!*” Linda exclaimed. She stood in the middle, turning in a slow circle. “It’s *huge.*”

This back room took up nearly the entire rear half of the house. The wall facing the river was lined with long windows, each with its own window seat, and two sets of French double doors. The windows were all still intact, courtesy of the shutters, which remained mostly shut. Some, weakened by wind, time, and wear, flapped open to allow light to pour in. An enormous fireplace dominated the wall facing opposite the windows. The floor was parquet, worn and warped in spots, but still gleaming. A chandelier, shrouded in cobwebs and dust, clinked with the unexpected movement of air. A grand piano, draped with a dust cloth, sat in a place of honor in one corner of the ballroom. River House, Michael knew, had been built to impress. Despite twenty years of neglect, the room still performed.

“Amazing.” Linda shook her head, whistling in admiration.

Johnny wandered around the edges of the room, his hands jammed in his pockets, warily scanning the walls and furnishings.

“It’s in good condition,” Susan said, her voice sounding stronger and more relaxed. She had been unusually touchy all day and on the brink of car-sickness the entire trip. Caught up in this moment of exploring, she looked more like herself.

*Maybe she just needed to get out of the car,* Michael thought.

“It’s still beautiful,” Susan continued. “In a creepy, rundown way, I mean.”

“It is,” Michael agreed, looking around himself. “It’d be a crime to tear this down.”

“Why, Michael!” Johnny grinned. “Such disloyalty. What *would* Mr. North say?”

Linda, meanwhile, had found the light switches and pressed a few, but nothing happened.

“I don’t suppose anyone brought a flashlight?” she asked.

“I wasn’t expecting to go house hunting,” Johnny returned.

Michael, who had been a Boy Scout, fished his pocket lamp out of his jacket and turned it on. The stream of light was sharp and bright. Even so, it seemed weak compared to the gloom that threatened to overwhelm even the bright sunshine pouring through the windows.

“Always prepared,” Michael said and was rewarded with a grin from Susan. She went over and tucked her arm through his.

“It is kind of exciting,” she whispered to him. “Like being a kid again.”

Susan always seemed pretty to Michael. She had that girl-next-door look with a touch of majesty in her short stature and absolutely the best taste in clothing that he had ever seen in a girl. She had been called ‘The Queen’ on campus, but it was her kind heart and gorgeous smile that had first drawn him in. Even at her most disheveled, Susan was always appealing to him. But at that moment, peering up at him through the half-light, her eyes aglow with a sudden return of confidence and unusual mischievousness, she looked more than pretty – she was radiantly beautiful.

“We aren’t just going to stay in here, are we?” Linda’s voice sliced through the fragile moment. “I thought someone promised me ghosts.”

“Well, if its ghosts you want,” Johnny reached the double doors leading out of the room and threw them open with a jerk. “Let’s go and find some!”

If it was dim in the ballroom, the entryway beyond was a black hole, absorbing what little light illuminated the foursome. Even Johnny, who had seemed prepared to charge into anything, hesitated at the edge of the darkness.

There was a hissing noise. Susan gasped, but it was only Linda, sucking air through her teeth.

“If there were any such things as ghosts,” Susan whispered. “They’d be in there, all right.”

Then Linda said, in a stilted tone, “It’s weird. It’s like... I can almost hear Christmas music.”

Johnny snorted and turned. “For a woman of science, you sure spook easily.”

Johnny’s figure in the doorway reminded Michael of something. He pointed the flashlight just over Johnny’s shoulder, causing the soldier to flinch and look at him in askance.

“It was right there,” Michael said. He had not meant to whisper. With effort, he cleared his throat and spoke normally. “Right there is where Charles Reynolds came into the party that night, exactly at midnight, twenty-five years ago.”

Susan squeezed his arm. Linda and Johnny were looking at Michael with such interest that he was encouraged to go on. He let go of Susan and went to stand next to Johnny. Outside, the wind sung about the eaves, trees bobbing under its influence. The room seemed to come alive with their dancing shadows.

“Right here,” Michael continued, raising his voice to be heard about the increasing noise. He turned to face the two women. “Imagine: the room is filled with light and sound. A small band plays. Servants pass around drinks while elegant people in diamonds and silks dance. The war is over. It’s 1946 and everyone is still celebrating. Suddenly, in comes Charles Reynolds, wearing a blood-spattered coat and no tie.”

Johnny stepped away from the door and moved back towards the windows, rubbing his shoulders as though feeling a draft. Michael barely noticed. He had become wrapped in the details of the story and the tale rolled out of him without encouragement.

“He’s just come down from his wife’s room. He’s gray, panicked, agitated - he doesn’t quite understand what’s happened. His nightmares are mixing with reality and he can’t distinguish one from the other anymore. In his confusion, he still has the razor - his wife’s Christmas gift to him, an old fashioned thing with a long wooden handle. His initials are carved in it, pressing against his palm. It’s dripping with Helene’s blood when he enters the ballroom. Someone screams and everyone stops, horrified. Charles is confused, then he realizes what he has done. He has killed the woman he loves. It’s a crime. He decides then and there that punishment must be severe and irrevocable. With an unearthly cry, he lifts the razor... and runs through the terrified crowd to the dock, the river, and his own destruction.”

As though on cue, the wind caught one of the rotting shutters and slammed it against the window near to Johnny, making him jump. Linda shrieked involuntarily. Michael came to with a start and realized, with a sort of shock, that he had taken a few unconscious steps forward, lifting his hand into the air in imitation of the long-dead man.

Linda pressed a hand to her beating heart and then looked at Johnny. He stood frozen at the window, staring at the quivering shutter that cut off his view of the river and dock. Even in the dim light, they could see his fists were clenched. Only Susan, standing silently where Michael had left her, seemed unaffected.

“Really, Michael,” she said patiently. “Isn’t it a little early for spooky tales?”

Her practical question broke the uneasy spell and Linda laughed in relief.

“I’ll say,” she said. “I think you’ve missed your calling, Mikey. You ought to write for the Alfred Hitchcock Magazine.”

Michael chuckled uncomfortably. It was not like him to be so dramatic and he was embarrassed.

“This place certainly has atmosphere,” he said.

Linda responded with an enthusiastic, “It sure does! Reminds me of those creepy old Nancy Drew novels I used to read. Anyone want to explore?”

“Not without another flashlight,” Susan said. “Look, Michael, yours is dying.”

She was right. Already the beam was losing its battle against the shadows which were gathering at an astonishing rate. Michael looked out one of the open windows. The sky, which had been blue with some clouds before, was now a solid ceiling of steel-gray.

*This doesn’t make sense, Michael thought. The storm isn’t supposed to hit until around ten...and I put fresh batteries in this before I left the house.*

“The storm’s coming in quickly.” Johnny said. His tone was flat, emotionless. “We ought to leave now.”

“Not yet!” Linda cried. She was peering into the darkened entryway with childlike interest. “Ten minutes more won’t make a difference. Don’t you have another flashlight, Michael?”

“In the glove compartment,” Michael said.

Johnny said sharply, "I'll get it."

"Oh, good!" Linda said.

When Johnny returned, stomping the snow off of his boots and shaking flakes out of his hair, he looked grim.

"It's getting bad out," he reported. "How much farther to Susan's place?"

"An hour," Susan said.

Michael said, "The storm can't be that far along. We've got hours yet, according to the weather bureau."

"We ought to go now." Johnny handed Michael the heavy flashlight. "Before it gets worse."

Michael was about to protest when Susan laid her hand on his arm.

"Please, Michael," she said. "I don't want to be caught in a snow storm."

The wind roared as if to second her motion. Something slammed against the roof above them. This time even Susan jumped.

Linda chirped in fright and hurried over to the rest of the group. "Okay, okay," she said. "That's enough for me. Let's go before we get stuck here all night."

With that the matter was settled. They filed out into the gathering storm.

Michael was the last to leave. He stole a lingering glance behind him before he stepped out. The room lay silent and still. Nothing breathed, nothing moved, nothing bid him stay. Yet, as he shut the door, he could not help but feel as though he was leaving someone behind.

## Chapter 4

There was in the air a sense of impending battle. Johnny knew it like he knew the scent of napalm. The world was conspiring against them, gathering forces, preparing to strike. The wind was the first line, whipping up the light snow from the ground and sending it, stinging, into their faces as they struggled through the drifts towards the car. Johnny took the lead and Michael brought up the rear. It was not snowing yet, but Johnny could taste it in the air and he did not like it. The storm was moving much too fast.

He pulled open the passenger door and helped Linda in while Susan moved around the front of the vehicle towards her door. Michael stumbled next to him, fumbling for the handle.

“You’re right,” he said to Johnny, raising his voice to be heard above the wind. “Let’s get out of here before a tree falls.”

There was an audible sigh of relief when the doors were shut. After turning over twice, the engine started. Michael shifted into reverse and pulled backwards as the wind, roaring in defeat, slammed into the side of the car, causing the entire vehicle to shudder.

“Good grief!” Linda said. “What is with the weather today?”

No one answered her. Michael had gone too deep into the drifts behind them and was gently trying to ease the spinning tires back onto pavement. Susan looked ill again. Johnny found himself sitting at attention as though expecting an attack at any minute.

*Stop it*, he told himself, and then said aloud to Linda, “It’s just the wind coming off the river, that’s all. Want me to get out and push, Mike?”

Even as he said it, the tires caught traction and they began moving towards the road.

“We’re on our way now,” Michael said heartily. “Just a little bit of New England weather.”

His white knuckle-hold on the constantly shifting steering wheel belied his confident tone. They knew better than to reply. Even the backseat passengers could feel the shift of the slipping tires while they were still on flat ground. All around them, the wind whipped up the sugar-like snow, casting drifts and fresh layers onto their path.

The driveway was only a few hundred yards long, ending in a sharp downslope to the road. Michael slowed as he reached it, until the tires caught ground and held.

“It’s slippery,” Susan warned.

Michael said, “I know, honey, I know,” as he eased the car forward. They reached the lip of the incline and the car tipped.

“Easy does it...” Michael said, just before the tires touched ice.

The car hurtled down the slope, picking up speed and twisting as Michael fought for control. Johnny braced himself and reached out for Linda, who had one hand clasped to her mouth. Susan was climbing up into her seat, bracing her legs against the dashboard, repeatedly crying, “Michael, the tree! Michael, the *tree!*”

The car turned despite Michael’s frantic struggle with the wheel and pounding on the brakes. They slipped down the end of the driveway, slid across the road and tipped over the edge into the ditch. Susan’s scream was cut off abruptly when they hit the trees with a crescendo of breaking glass and the bone-crunching sound of metal wrapping around wood.