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The Snow Angel

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The Snow Angel

by **Christine Jackson**

Greta's voice snaked along the murky corners of her dorm room. "When the police broke down the door, they found the kid staring at them from the middle of a pool of blood on the coffee table. Just the head."

"Ewww," Ann Marie and Tiffany responded on cue.

Ann Marie huddled on Greta's loveseat, legs up, arms wrapped around her fur-lined boots. Tiff was splayed out on a small floor rug.

"Cool," said Fort, a woman of few words. Her major was pre-med, and she preferred listening to talking.

I perched on the edge of the empty desk that once belonged to Greta's long-gone roommate. Outside, the wind whistled across a chaotic universe.

The five of us had settled in Greta's room, the largest on our dorm floor, trying to ignore the first nor'easter of the season. That morning, clouds had piled up and folded into each other, like a seismic upheaval. By noon, the storm burst in from the Atlantic, whipping white fury into the New England coast.

For various reasons, we had all returned to campus early after winter break. Greta told us she had flown home from Switzerland ahead of schedule. With her parents still in Basel and the New Hampshire house without staff, she figured school was a better option. Behind Greta's

back, we speculated that her haughtiness had annoyed even her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Money Bags, and they sent her packing to keep their own arrogance intact.

“Watch yourselves, girls,” Greta said, “because the police never found the head cutter. At any time, when we least expect it, any one of us could fall victim, because he’s still out there.”

“You can ratchet up the suspense,” I said, “but your story’s a bunch of bull. The killer is not still loose.”

Greta’s tight blonde curls bristled with indignation. “Maggie, are you calling me a liar?” Her head reared like a mongoose about to strike.

“You said it, not me. A guy named Dennis Bondurant was arrested for those murders,” I said. “I saw it on TV.”

I was back early at Crooked River to hit the books with both fists. My honors history seminar would demand big-time cramming. Like me, Ann Marie needed a head start on her next term in occupational therapy.

Tiffany returned ahead of time to be with her boyfriend. He was supposed to pick her up that morning, but three-foot snow drifts had blocked her knight in his shining Porsche armor. Zero visibility and a subfreezing wind-chill made driving the road to Crooked River impossible.

As for Fort, I suspected she had never left campus. Where she had spent nights before the dorm re-opened was a mystery she would never divulge. Now she sat backwards, motionless, on Greta’s desk chair. Fort was bundled up in a heavy fisherman’s knit sweater, chin resting on her folded arms. Because she rarely spoke, Fort had little reason to lift her head to free her mouth.

Due to a power outage, the dorm’s lights were out, and we had each cradled a flashlight. Now, as lamps flicked off one by one like dying fireflies, we regretted not rationing the pale beams. Greta produced extra batteries, but all were dead. Holding the last flash capable of illumination, Ann Marie switched it off to conserve power. Fortunately the prehistoric oil furnace in the basement continued to chug. We were in the dark, but warm.

“I saw that same show,” Tiff said. “The cops hauled in Bondurant, and he’s doing three life sentences up in Thomaston.” Tiff was an expert on prison stays. She had done a stretch herself at a juvie facility in Concord for attacking her shrink with a knife. No one believed her story that the knife was his. He had pinned her beneath him, blade against her throat to keep her quiet, but she lashed out. Her self-defense gave him twenty stitches. She was still on probation.

“All right,” Greta said, “but what about that guy over at Saint Andrew’s? He hung out in the woods behind the field house with a butcher knife. He used to ogle the freshman girls on their way to field hockey practice, and then one day, he went berserk.” She leveled a look at Tiff, prone on the floor. “I figure you especially would appreciate this one, Tiffany. Hey!”

Greta screamed as Tiffany grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her off the bed onto the floor. Greta's heel caught Tiff full in the stomach. The girl rolled on the rug in agony and gasped for breath.

I kneeled to help, clapping her on the back. "Tiff, you okay?"

She coughed and nodded.

"C'mon, Greta," Ann Marie said. "Lay off those chopper whoppers."

Greta had a high forehead with skin the color of buttermilk. Her lipstick was its usual three shades too red, and now her cheeks were the same color. "Oh, snap out of it, Tiffany. I didn't mean it."

I looked up at Greta and shook my head in disgust. "I don't believe you."

She sniffed. "That's not surprising. You don't believe in anything."

Sometimes I despised Greta, with her piles of money and protective family. It wasn't true that I didn't believe in anything. As a history major, I believed in exploring the past to figure out how things came to be. My dad had left our house when I was little, which explained why my mom was perpetually confused and I mostly had to fend for myself. It was still too soon for me to have a life mission. Right now, my main focus was to torture Greta.

For instance, I was the only who knew that a few months ago, Ethan Brock, the Student Council President, had mistakenly asked Greta out. Ethan later told me he wanted to sear each minute of that date from his memory. He could hardly wait to, in his words, "off-load the crazy bitch." I was glad when he did and began dating me.

While I was dying to broadcast Ethan's horrified accounts of Greta to the entire campus, I kept his counsel. Still, she knew I knew, and it tormented her. I wasn't above taunting her about other things. "How about the one you told about your grandmother being a guard at Auschwitz?" I said. "You *want* it known that your relatives were Nazis? How sick is that?"

"You'll make a terrible historian. Calling it sick doesn't make my story any less true," Greta said, splotches spreading across her face. "I can prove it."

"Yeah? How?" I issued the challenge. "Where's your evidence?" How close to the edge could I push her?

Greta reached toward a shelf over her head and withdrew a thick volume, a photo album. "Take this to the bank, ladies." She passed around a crumpled black and white picture. A woman with white hair stood in front of a barbed wire fence, the only well-nourished figure in a line of bony, ragged people, upright skeletons.

"Hmm," Tiff said. "We have only your word that this is Granny Dearest."

I agreed. "I'm sorry, but we need more." Having no father left me with no beliefs, but scoffing at the long parade of human quirkiness was my next best thing. "Truth is my motto."

Greta's already bulbous eyes bulged a little more. "My stories are all true, Maggie. Listen and learn."

"She's so right," Tiff said. "Whenever I listen to Greta, I learn that it's best to stay away from her."

We all laughed, even Fort, and Greta's mouth formed a pout blooming with rosy lip gloss. "I swear, you will regret that comment, Tiffany Harris."

"Really? I'm waiting."

"Girls, girls," I said. "Calm yourselves. I have a story about bizarre events on this very campus that will plunge you into the depths of human depravity."

Greta said, "Worse than a guy's severed head dripping blood on a coffee table?"

"I'm so over that," Tiff said. "What flavor of human depravity are you talking about, Mags?"

"Wait," Ann Marie said. "This better not be too scary." Ann Marie was from north Boston. Along with lessons of her Catholic girls' high school, she still wore a uniform of fastidious practicality that came from a dozen years of training from nuns. She adjusted her black velvet headband. "Did it happen recently?"

"A long time ago, so you don't have to be afraid."

"That makes it okay?" Greta said. "Like, you don't have to be afraid of my grandmother because the holocaust happened sixty years ago?"

"Shut your yap," Tiff said. "I want to hear Maggie's story." Tiff sat up, untied her head scarf, and shook out her long, wild hair. Even in the gloom, her turquoise earrings danced like a high wire circus act.

"Okay." I took a deep breath, savoring my moment. "This event happened in the dead of winter over half a century ago."

Fort piped up. "We're safe." Fort's honey-blonde hair curtained one side of her face.

"It happened to a teacher named Lavinia Nash in the attic of this very dorm."

"You mean on the fourth floor?" Greta said.

"No, there's a floor above that."

“Shut up,” Greta said. “You’re full of it, Maggie.”

“There actually is,” Ann Marie said. “I’ve been up there.”

“Maggie avoids believing in anything. Why should we believe her?” Greta said. The girl was herself a head cutter, in her own way.

“I have inside info. Facts. That same year, my mom’s Aunt Paula was a senior here, a history major in Lavinia Nash’s American History class.”

“Hmm. A history major. Just like you.”

“Lavinia was a prim old maid,” I continued. “She wore her hair twisted into a bun and sported those ugly, bat-wing glasses, but Aunt Paula said she was an inspiring teacher.”

“Your story says ‘bogus’ to me. No Lavinia whoosis ever taught here,” Greta said.

“Lavinia was legendary,” Tiff said. “My mom told me about her before I came to Crooked River. She was involved in some big scandal in the fifties, but I never learned the juicy details, so shut your pie hole, Greta.”

“All Lavinia’s students loved her,” I said. “She knew her subject and was passionate toward everything about the Civil War, especially poetry, by Whitman, Melville, and those guys.”

“You had us at ‘passionate,’” Fort said. “Go on.”

I played up the suspenseful pause. “The problem came when Lavinia fell in love but it turned sour. She hung herself from one of the rafters in the attic of this dorm. Students in the room below on the fourth floor heard this strange creaking, a kind of knocking.”

An unseen hand rapped on Greta’s door. Ann Marie flinched.

Greta glared at me. “You timed that.” She stood up in a huff. “Who is it?”

“Culligan,” said a man’s voice.

“For God’s sake.” She whipped open the door.

Cully was the college’s grizzled maintenance man. Wrapped in a cloth coat shaggy with ice, he looked like a mummy in need of a shave.

He stepped inside and ran a flashlight beam around the room, bringing in a cloud of stale tobacco and body odor. “I figured you girls had to be in here, biggest room and all.” He unsnapped the chin strap of his orange earmuff cap. “We can’t get the electric goin’ until the snow tapers off. It’s best if you all stay together. You’re the only ones here, you know.”

“We know, Cully,” said Tiff, rolling her eyes. “That’s how we planned it.”

“You better not be planning anything else.” He wagged the finger of a bright orange glove at Tiff. “We usually keep all dorms closed over intercession to save on heat. The school is doing you girls a favor opening early, so you will be model citizens, right? Don’t drink. Don’t fool with matches. And once the weather clears, don’t get it into your heads to play in the snow. It’s killin’ cold out there. And no skating. The pond looks frozen, but the ice hasn’t set.”

“We’re not here to ice skate,” I said. “We have to study.”

“See that you do. You’ll get bounced out of here nuthin’ flat if the slightest thing goes wrong, which it better not. Not on my watch.”

“You don’t have to get nasty with us,” Greta said, “just because you have to work.”

“This place open or this place closed makes no difference to me. I still get paid the same.” His mouth corkscrewed into a grin, revealing stained teeth. “Nuthin.”

“Explains a lot,” Fort said.

“I’ll ignore that, young lady.” Fatigue showed in his red-rimmed eyes. “Tonight I make rounds every few hours or so. Soon as the white stuff stops, I’ll be up early runnin’ the snow thrower. The phones are working, girls. If you need anything, give a holler.”

“Your boots are dripping,” Greta said, throwing him a towel.

###

Cully’s all-too-real visit left us with a greater thirst for fiction. We resumed our places.

“Paula was my grandmother’s younger sister on my mother’s side. After that bizarre spring at Crooked River when Lavinia died, Aunt Paula moved to upstate New York and never finished her studies. She always wanted to be a nurse, but life interrupted her. She married and had two children. One of them died young. Her husband died after that, leaving her alone.”

“That’s sad,” Ann Marie said.

“About five years ago, Aunt Paula herself passed away from a stroke. My mother and I went to the funeral.” I felt an inward shiver, remembering her gray, still face propped on the pillow in the coffin. “Anyway, in the summers, Paula used to visit, with my father gone, and one time, my mom went to the movies and Aunt Paula babysat me.”

“How old were you?” Greta asked, despite herself.

“About nine, I guess. She was old and slow. I remember her sitting on the pink quilt of my bed, her eyes magnified through those rimless glasses.”

'Time for you to head to dreamland, little miss.' She arranged my bed for me.

'I'm not sleepy yet.'

'Want me to read to you? You have a big stack of books here. Maurice Sendak, Judy Blume.'

'I don't want those. Tell me a true story, bright and shiny. It'll send me to dreamland better than anything.' "Even then I needed factually accurate accounts."

'A true story, Margaret? It might keep you awake.'

'Actual happenings have the power to carry me to sleep. No ghosts, only angels.'

'All right. I have a true story for you.'

"In the darkening room, her gray face was set and serious. Her next words sent alarmed, fluttery feelings skittering across my stomach. You know, like when you were out sick from school, and the world moved without you? You had to go back to the classroom without knowing your place in it. Remember?"

Tiff nodded. "We're listening."

"You sure know how to milk it," Greta said. "What story did she tell you, already?"

Aunt Paula bent close and said, "Did you ever do anything you were sorry for?"

"Whoa." From her position on the floor, Tiff came to life. "That's some weight to lay on a kid. What did you say?"

"I don't even remember. About a week before, I had stolen my sister's doll clothes and hidden them. At the time, I thought it was hilarious, but that night, I felt bad about being a thief. I figured Mom had told Paula about Barbie's missing outfits, so for sure a lecture was coming."

I shrugged. 'I didn't mean to take Barbie's clothes. She has so many.'

My aunt stroked my hair. 'You can regret when something happens, Margaret, but if you let the moment for confession go by, you never get it back. I had my moment, once, and it passed. You might think that bad things get better with time. They don't. They just get worse.'

"She had this strange expression on her face. Her mouth twisted, like she had a bad pain or something."

"So what was the story?" Greta said.

“She never got that far. Her words scared me so much that I started crying, and she stopped.”

“Damn,” Fort said.

“But later, after I decided to apply to Crooked River, my mother told me the rest of it. We were sitting on the side porch at home, filling out my college application forms on Mom’s laptop. I remember the afternoon sun warm on my face, shining in my eyes.”

Mom’s fingers tapped the keyboard. “There’s a blank here labeled ‘Major,’” she said. “What do you want to study?”

“Stories from the past.”

“Sounds like history to me.” Mom smiled. “Okay if I fill that in? You can change it later, if you want.”

I pursed my lips and nodded. “I love finding out why things happened the way they did.”

“This is destiny. You’re bound to get accepted at Crooked River, so you can carry on the family tradition. Your Aunt Paula went to Crooked River, and she started out as a history major.” Mom typed some more, her eyes on the computer screen. “She really wanted to go into nursing, though. When she was ready to graduate, she made an appointment with one of her professors to find out what new courses she had to take to get into nursing school. Dr. Detweiler, I think his name was. His office was in the oldest building on campus, which was torn down not long after. At that time in the fifties, the school was making cutbacks. Instructors had been let go, and all other faculty offices on that floor were empty.”

Paula approached the brick building. It stood by itself on the western edge of campus, all but abandoned. Only one window was dimly lit. The rest were like blank eyes.

She climbed the dank staircase and heard a voice coming from the end of the darkened hall. She crept toward the narrow cone of light spilling from the partially open door.

Standing outside, she prepared to knock, but halted.

‘Professor?’ she said in a croak barely above a whisper. She cleared her throat but then stayed silent, because her teacher was not alone. She could not mistake that soft gummy sound of lips touching and parting, the swishing rustle of clothes. Voices spoke low, in intimate tones. And then a change—

‘You’re not listening to what I’m telling you.’

Bradley Detweiler mumbled, hesitating.

Lavinia's voice charged ahead. 'How dare you lie to me? You wanted to hurt me the worst way you knew.'

'That's the last thing I want.'

'Tell me the truth. Are you in love with her?'

'What? No. It's not what you think.'

'Buddy Ramos told me I had the most votes to give the Teacher of the Year speech. I earned it. I should be up there. Instead, you arrange for them to give it to her. Why? It's not enough for her to steal my spotlight.'

“My Mom quit typing at this point. Aunt Paula found Professor Bradley Detweiler in a clinch with Lavinia, her revered history professor. Paula overheard them talking about things she didn't understand. She couldn't make out their words.”

“She should've told them to speak up,” Greta said.

“She didn't want the two lovebirds to see her, dolt,” Tiff said. “Keep going, Mag-pie. What happened next?”

The doorknob rattled, and we all twitched like a line of nerves.

“C'mon. Open up. I can't see shit.”

We looked at each other. It was Swanson.

Reluctantly, Greta rose and swung the door open to reveal the gloomy hall, where Olive Swanson stood in a red beret, dark hair wet and drooping from melting snow.

“Get in here, you,” Ann Marie said, hustling her inside. “You scared us out of our wits. What are you doing?”

“I couldn't get home to Chicago over break. No funds.” She dumped her knapsack. “President Carlyle and the wife put me up in their back bedroom. It's sort of a trial run for when I travel with them this summer. They are beyond boring. D'ya know they only eat organic food? When the electricity went out at five o'clock, he and the missus went out snowshoeing.” Olive stomped snow clumps off her boots. “I heard you guys were crashing here, so I escaped. I figured they'd never miss me.”

“What's it doing out there?” Ann Marie said. “Any let up?”

“It's bad, boys and girls. The wind is brutal. Can't see three feet ahead. The drifts are so high, I kept sinking in.” She began to toe off her boots. “What are we doing? Got any popcorn?”

###

“Okay. So Paula heard them getting cozy,” Olive said after we brought her up to speed, “but then what? Did Lavinia and Dr. D. ever get to the main attraction?”

“Mom never said. I don’t think Paula ever told her. Remember, my mother was her niece. Certainly tensions were high, because Lavinia went ballistic.”

“Smells like a broken romance to me,” Olive said.

“Paula either couldn’t make out what they were saying or couldn’t understand the drama,” Tiff said. “She probably fled in horror. What’s your theory, Mags?”

“Clearly Bradley was dumping Lavinia for somebody else,” I said, “but Paula didn’t hear enough to figure out who or why.”

“What about Buddy Ramos?” Olive asked. “If he was in a position to see election results for the award, he might have seen more.”

“I bet I know what Lavinia told Bradley that night,” Greta said.

“Of course you do,” Tiff said.

“The serious news that girls tell their guys,” Greta continued. “She was preggers.”

“Aw, forget that,” Tiff said. “This isn’t one of your dumb soap operas.”

“Lavinia’s autopsy would have shown if she was pregnant,” Ann Marie said. “Did they do one, Mags?”

“Even if they had, the students would never have known. Back then, they never talked about stuff like that.”

“Back then?” Ann Marie kicked in. “Even now, we keep our mouths shut.”

We all nodded, remembering Natty McCann, who had left school in November. Nobody really found out why, except Don, her morose boyfriend, and he stayed silent as a grave.

“Sounds as if Lavinia accused Bradley of having another woman, right?” I said. “The woman who won the award. I know how we can find her identity. Crooked River’s yearbooks are still stored in the basement of Thayer.” The Thayer Building housed the Drama Department and Crooked River’s only auditorium.

“How do we get in?” Olive asked. “That door is always locked.”

Ann Marie said, “Not to mention that we’d be trespassing, which Cully wouldn’t like.”

I fished a ring of keys from my purse. “I’m a trusted volunteer. I haven’t worked my butt off gathering theater props three years for nothing.”

Fort raised her chin off her arms. One cheek was mottled with a cable sweater imprint. “I’m in.”

###

The basement of Thayer smelled like a cold garage. The furnace was set on low, and it chugged out an oily heat. Encased in puffy down jackets with polar insulation, we descended, astronauts bobbing down the steps of a lunar lander.

“The archives storage room is down there,” I said when our boots touched down on the cement floor. The outline of a forbidding door loomed at the end of the corridor.

Along the way, Greta tugged on the door of a small closet. It contained a red gasoline can and boxes of rock salt. “Oops,” she said. “Cully’s stash of snow removal equipment.”

The large door to the archives creaked open. Ann Marie passed me the remaining working flashlight. I clicked it on.

The room was a tangle of snowshoes, wood, straps, and runners, odds and ends from the cross-country ski team. Pictures from forty years’ worth of amateur productions hung on the walls at rakish angles. On the opposite side of the room, stacks of boxes towered in the far corner. Against the wall in an opposite corner leaned an old long sled with steel runners, a Flexible Flyer.

“They don’t make them like this anymore,” Olive said, patting the sled. “Kids today twirl down hills in plastic flying saucers.”

“High tech crap,” Fort said.

Above us, the old building groaned, as a mean wind tested the century-old walls.

“Is that a stack of yearbooks?” Tiff said. “Shine the flash over there, Mags.”

We all moved toward the shadowy corner.

“Wow, World War I era.” Ann Marie plunged into the exploration, reading off the years. “Nineteen-sixteen, nineteen-seventeen. Nothing in the ‘fifties.”

“My feet are freezing,” Greta said.

Tiff said, “Should have worn your boots.”

“They’re still with my folks in Switzerland. My folks always look out for me, but they haven’t sent me new ones yet. I expect them any day.” She minced around on the cold cement. “My loafers are soaked, ruined. They’re Anne Kleins.”

“Who cares about your precious loafers?” Tiff pawed through the books. “Start searching.”

“We need someplace flat to work,” I said. “Let’s use that big desk in Vaughn’s office at the other end of the hall.”

Dr. Linwood Vaughn had taught theater history at Crooked River for over three decades and continued to crank out classes in Restoration drama. We each carried a box and dumped the contents onto his imposing mahogany desk. We pawed over the musty volumes, gleeful, chatting.

“What year do we need, again?” Tiff said.

“Nineteen-fifty-eight.”

“Here’s ‘fifty-nine.” Olive flipped the book open. “You’ll never guess the dedication. ‘To Lavinia Nash. In memoriam.’ Creepy. There’s even a picture.”

“What does she look like?”

Olive passed the open book to Tiff.

“Uck. Nice glasses, Lavinia.” Tiff studied the page. “Still, she’s exactly how I imagined. Attractive, in a wound-too-tight sort of way. Like a librarian who comes undone behind the book shelves—hair flying, poodle skirt whirling, saddle shoes up.”

“That’s what students wore in the fifties, not the teachers,” Greta said. “I’m almost certain that Lavinia wouldn’t have been caught dead in a poodle skirt. No, when they cut her down, she was in a tailored suit, I expect.”

“Please, ladies,” Ann Marie said, “focus. We’re looking for Bradley’s other woman, so we need to find ‘fifty-eight to see the winner of Teacher of the Year.”

“Hmm. Not here.” I flipped through the thin volumes. “Here’s ‘fifty-nine, ‘fifty-six, ‘fifty-seven, but no ‘fifty-eight.”

“You sure?” said Olive. “Let me try.”

We dug into piles of school collectibles from other decades. Nothing.

“I’ve had enough,” Greta said, “I have to get back and study.”

“You have another week,” Tiff said. “Quit belly-aching and help us.”

“I’m going to check out some of these other rooms.” Greta left.

“Good riddance,” Tiff said.

With gloved and mitten-insulated hands, we shoveled ever deeper through the layers, peeling back yellowing forms, requisition sheets for office supplies, blue-lined composition paper, and dog-eared manila folders plastered with three or four labels. Each new stratum into the discarded history released an ever more pungent mustiness, the smell of ancient New England education, exposed to the air and wafting into nothing.

“Hey!” Greta called from down the hall. “Come see this.”

“What now?” Tiff rolled her eyes. We abandoned the heaps of mimeographed sheets.

In another small storage room, Greta looked exuberant. “I found a bunch of Crooked River newspapers from 1958. This one has a headline for the school’s Commencement.”

“Let me see.” I grabbed the thin folded newspaper from her hand. The edges of the yellowed pages looked nibbled. “‘Sunday, May 11, 1958.’ This could be it.” My hands shook as I peeled it open. I sat on the frigid cement floor and crossed my booted legs.

“Easy,” Tiff said. “Those pages are fragile.”

I read aloud. “‘Crooked River College held its Commencement Ceremony yesterday on the College Green. Over one hundred students marched in the ceremony, which began at eleven o’clock. Admiral Frederick Adams delivered a rousing speech as the distinguished guest speaker. The address by Crooked River’s Teacher of the Year was delivered by faculty member—’” I couldn’t believe my eyes. “‘—Bradley Detweiler, Ph.D.’” I laid the paper down.

“You’re kidding,” Olive said. “How can that be?”

“Read it yourselves,” I said and followed a thought. “I wonder if the woman who stole the award from Lavinia was exposed after the suicide and had to leave Crooked River in disgrace, so Bradley filled in. That’s the only thing that almost makes sense.”

Tiff looked up from reading the article. “Hey, Maggie, what was your aunt’s last name? Same as yours?”

“No. It was Harrison, my mother’s maiden name. Why?”

“I thought you said your aunt never graduated.”

“She didn’t.”

“Then why was she at the ceremony? ‘A stellar student speech was delivered by honors history student Paula Harrison. To prepare for her speech, Miss Harrison worked with Bradley Detweiler.’” Tiff handed me back the newspaper. “You didn’t finish reading.”

I stared at the article, dumbstruck. What did it mean?

“Hey, guys.” Fort spoke from behind three, head-high stacks of boxes of copy paper. She emerged carrying a cardboard box. She supported it from the bottom, as it sagged with age. Across one of the top flaps was scrawled a word in black crayon: *Detweiler*. “There’s also an old suitcase back there.”

“Over here.” Ann Marie cleared a spot and we circled around.

“Ooof.” Fort set the box down.

Manila folders, notebooks, grade books. With Greta in charge of the only light, we set to work excavating Bradley’s papers for its secrets.

“I found something else.” Greta triumphantly held up a sheaf of pastel-colored envelopes. “Correspondence. Love letters, maybe.”

Tiff examined the bundle. “Hmm. Wrapped with a shoelace. What a ‘guy’ thing to do. I use a velvet ribbon myself.” She untied the lace and shuffled through the envelopes.

“Anything interesting?” I said, still trying to absorb Paula’s role in the graduation.

“All from people named Detweiler. Letters from home. Wah.”

“Here’s one.” With a mitten thick as a boxing glove, Fort reached into the box, withdrew a crumpled ball of paper, and handed it to me.

I took off my gloves and smoothed the crinkled sheet. “It’s dated January 8, 1958.”

“Whoa. Today is January eighth,” Ann Marie said, “in case you didn’t notice. Where are we, in the Twilight Zone? Give her the light, Greta.”

“Read it, Mags,” Olive said.

I held the flash over the yellowed stationery. “*My darling—I just returned from town. What we’ve feared for some time is true, so we must act quickly. The situation we find ourselves in demands action. Because of our feelings, I’m sure you agree. Once school lets out, we should move ahead with our plans. I love you.*” I turned the sheet over. “Unsigned.”

“Their plans?” Ann Marie looked closer. “What plans?”

“Don’t you get it?” Tiff said. “Lavinia wasn’t baking a cupcake in the oven. It was Bradley’s mystery woman. She was putting on the heat.”

From upstairs came a crack and cascades of splintering glass. “What the hell was that?” Greta said.

“A sign against us. It’s an invasion of privacy to read someone’s mail,” Olive said.

Ann Marie said, “We have offended the ghost of Bradley.”

The stifling room gave off the overpowering smell of wet animals as the snow melted from the fleece and wool of our coats, scarves, and mittens.

I broke the silence. “We should go see about that broken window.”

Ann Marie said, “If we can take the light, Olive and I will do it. You all stay here and keep looking.” She laughed. “If we’re not back in ten minutes, call the Marines. And make sure they’re cute.”

Once they left, Tiff and I tried to process our findings.

“According to the letter, the woman found out she was carrying in January.” In her shearling coat with the yellow fur lapels, Tiff looked like an Australian sheep herder. “She would have started showing by May. That’s why she had to book it out of town and couldn’t stay for the graduation.”

“You’re right,” I said. “And the woman pressured Bradley to marry her once school let out.”

“Except we don’t know who *she* is,” Tiff said. “She’s not mentioned in the news article. We may never know. Even if she taught home ec and wore aprons, she couldn’t have hidden it much longer. She had to leave town. The end.”

Greta disappeared behind the stacked boxes.

“Tiff, what about my Aunt Paula? How does she fit into the story?”

“Don’t forget this.” Greta lugged the suitcase around the stack of copy paper boxes. She brushed it with her gloved hand. Under the dust, the case was a rich brown, the color of horse chestnuts. Clearly, the leather piece had been expensive. “Probably Bradley’s resort casuals for their honeymoon. Maybe they planned to elope.” She fumbled at the latch. “Won’t open.”

Fort came forward with two long pins that looked like something to pick pieces from cracked walnut shells. She bent over the tarnished brass, and the latch snapped upward.

Greta flipped open the case. Inside was what looked like a bundle of rags. “Oh my God.”

Wrapped in the rags was an infant's skeleton.

###

I looked long enough to register a shriveled face the color and consistency of a piece of dried fruit then turned away. A flutter capered across my stomach, like when I was absent from school and had to endure the confusion of the next day.

Bradley's other woman was my Aunt Paula.

Tears stung my eyes, as I flashed on what might have happened. During Bradley's coaching sessions for her student speech, the two became involved. They made plans. That day outside Bradley's office, Paula overheard him telling Lavinia that they were through, Lavinia hanged herself in despair, and Paula blamed herself.

That's what she was trying to tell me that night, stroking my hair, urging me not to let a confessing moment pass. *Did you ever do anything you were sorry for?* All that claptrap about sharing the stage and the award came secondhand from my mother, her interpretation of a tale Paula used to obscure the past. Paula's account conflated sharing the spotlight with Lavinia, Bradley's previous flame, with her own guilt over Lavinia's death.

The evidence told a different story.

"We need to tell somebody about this—this—thing," Greta said. "Right now."

Tiff steadied me. "You okay?"

"Sometimes it's not worth digging up the past, you know?" I sniffed.

"What about your Aunt Paula's advice?" Greta insisted. "Bad things have to come out, one way or another."

"She was wrong." I left the storage room and stood in the hall. Overhead, the storm's gale force winds continued to batter the ribs of Thayer. I thought the building shuddered, but it could have been the profound cold seeping into my bones and the realization that the dead infant was probably Paula's.

What had happened? Did she miscarry? Was the child born alive, and she had abandoned it?

"The others should be back by now," Fort said. "We'd better go find them. Coming, Mags?"

I was following a line of logic to a ghastly end. Had Paula killed her child with her own hands?

“Give me a minute, will you?” This child was not the first of Paula’s to die. Another one had passed away, and so had her husband. I sank to the chilled floor.

After a few minutes, I returned to the cluttered store room, my brain just as cluttered. “Tiff? Greta?” Where were they?

Looming in the dark, Greta moved in a jerky dance. What the hell? I caught a whiff of sweetish gasoline, and my eyes adapted to see Greta upending Cully’s red gas can for the snow blower over the chestnut suitcase next to towers of boxed copy paper. Gasoline dribbled onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” I rushed toward her, flailing to grab her arm. “Are you crazy?”

“I’m not listening to you anymore, so you might as well shut up.” She jerked her elbow backward, chopping me in the throat.

My throat began to spasm, and I clutched my neck. “Stop—” My voice made the noise of a word if not the force of it.

She slopped a gasoline-drenched coil of rope at my shoulder, knocking me down. “I told you to shut up. You and Tiff, always bossing everybody, making us listen to your dumb stories and theories. What gives you the right? I was the one who found that dead baby. I should have the right to decide what happens to it.”

Greta’s voice whirled upward into a vortex of hysteria. I struggled to see her face in the murky room. I could make out her red lips, contorted and working soundlessly. Was she having some kind of psychotic break? Could the shock of seeing the tiny body have brought it on?

Negotiate, I told myself. The great statesman of history knew how to start with the opponent’s viewpoint and negotiate. “You can make that decision yourself, Greta, but later. You can’t burn the suitcase. These cardboard boxes are soaked with gasoline. The whole place will go up. The blizzard will whip the flames, and we’ll all be trapped. You don’t want that.”

“Maybe I want to die in an inferno. At least I’ll be warmer than I am now. I’ll pull a Lavinia and take you and Miss Jailbird down with me.” She pointed to the floor.

Tiff’s boots extended from the shadowy corner next to the sled. I swallowed back panic. “Tiff!” I started toward the prone figure.

“Don’t move, Maggie, or I’ll flick this lighter right now.” She still held the open gas can.

“Greta, don’t be stupid.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! I know you slept with Ethan. I confronted him, and he told me. He even wants to marry you, he says. If I light this flame, he can’t, can he? His plans will be shot to hell.”

A scrape caused Greta to whirl. A creature from the black lagoon, with seaweed hair and blood threading down its face, rose from the corner. Tiff lowered her bloody head and lunged, butting Greta full force in the mid-section. Greta fell against the boxes, toppling the petroleum tower. The gas can landed with a bang and rolled its tin rumble along the cement floor.

Greta grabbed the rope, and as she struggled to her feet lashed out at Tiff with the heavy coil. I edged closer but could barely discern who was who. Greta squirmed and yelled with manic energy. “Get away! I have fire, I have fire.”

“Stop,” Tiff’s voice said, her hands outspread. “Stay calm.”

A second later, Greta’s profile came into focus, as she reached into her coat pocket. Tiff charged again, slipped over the still gurgling gas can, and toppled forward. Greta fell backwards, and her head hit the cement floor with a mushy sound, like from a ripe watermelon. Her red mouth emitted a grunt, and her body went limp.

“We’re back,” Fort said.

“One of the window panes was broken,” Olive said. “We found some cardboard and taped it.”

“What’s all the racket? Do I smell gas?” Ann Marie said.

Tiff lifted herself off the prone girl. “Oh my God, Maggie. Something really bad just happened.”

###

The back of Greta’s head was a bloody pulp, and her red lips turned an odd purple. As a senior in pre-med, Fort took charge. She worked over Greta for a few endless moments. Then she stepped back, taking a deep breath. “No.”

Our cell phones were back in Greta’s room. She had the only key, which we could not find.

“We have to tell someone,” Ann Marie said. “Olive, can you get in the President’s house?”

“Not unless I broke in.”

“We should call the police,” Ann Marie said. “Cully told us that the phones are working.”

“Not in this building,” Olive said. “I tried. I also pulled the fire alarm. No luck there, either. No police or fire squads could make it in this weather anyway.” She covered her forehead with both hands. “Poor Greta. Oh my God. We are so screwed.”

“Cully,” Tiff said. “He said we’d be kicked out of school if anything happened. I’m still on probation. I’d have to go to the Detention Center, and I can’t go back there. I won’t. I’ll kill myself first.”

“We can’t leave her here,” I said. “Thayer is ready to blow from all the gas fumes.”

“We can’t move her, either,” Olive said. “I’m not on board with that.”

“We have to respect the dead,” Ann Marie said.

“Respect her?” Tiff spoke up. “She was ready to kill all of us. She kept threatening to set fire to the gas. We would’ve been seared meat.”

“You didn’t actually murder Greta, did you?” Ann Marie said, hand at her mouth.

“She didn’t mean to,” I said. “It was self-defense.”

Tiff sank to the floor and moaned. “No, no, not again.”

“The law won’t see it that way,” Olive said. “They didn’t believe Tiff before. This time, they’ll put her away for life. We have to get our stories straight.”

“Stop it, everyone. Let me think,” I said. “Fort, remember where we were after homecoming?”

She thought a minute. “Yeh.”

“Where?” the others wanted to know.

“After the football game with UConn, we were both bombed. We took the short way back from the field house through the cemetery. The caretaker’s shack was open, and we stayed in there a few hours with the rest of the bottle.”

“The shack was not exactly open,” Fort said.

“True. The lock hasp was rusted. We just helped it along.”

“So what do we do?” Ann Marie said. “Just leave her in the shack?”

“Until we decide what to do, yes. You have a better idea?”

“Are you people insane? A girl is dead. We have to do something.”

“What do you suggest we do, Ann Marie? I can’t stand this,” Olive said. “I just want it to be over.”

Fort pulled out one of Cully’s blue tarps, and we used the gas-soaked rope to tie the tarp around her, like a too tight prom dress. Olive hauled the sled up from the basement. Tiff discovered a small snow shovel in Dr. Vaughn’s closet. Ann Marie brought out a box of rock salt. “This might make our footing a little easier.”

We tugged the wrapped form, which I tried to think of as a pair of skis, up the basement stairs. Fort, Olive, and I struggled at the head; Tiff and Ann Marie held the foot-end. The shape wobbled and flopped. Weren’t dead bodies supposed to stiffen up? Death certainly took longer than on those TV hour crime shows. She did not feel dead, but more like a sack of wet laundry. Greta’s wealth had spared her many problems, but I never had to consider the weight of her life, until now.

When we reached the first floor, we laid her out in the center aisle of the auditorium. The cavernous space was cold and drafty. The wind rattled the mullioned windows, too old for insulated panes.

I peered out one of the frosted windows. Dents in the snow trailed across the college green, and the snow had nearly filled in Cully’s prints. He had made no rounds since we had seen him in the dorm.

“Before we go out,” I said, “make sure the coast is clear.”

Ann Marie hefted open the creaky door and peered out. “I can’t see a thing.”

Then we could.

A bobbing flashlight emerged from the blinding white snowscape. Bent against the wind, a dark-clad figure approached across the campus quad. Cully.

“What do we do, ladies?” I waited.

For a time, the silence was heavy with our thoughts.

“He’s liable to check on us at Greta’s, like before. What’ll he do when we don’t answer?” Tiff said.

“We’re sleeping.”

“If he decides to come in here, where do we put that?” Olive pointed at the wrapped tarp.

“These are library books. We’re carrying class work under this tarp.”

“He’s worked here forty years, Maggie,” Tiff said. “He knows what a sack of books looks like.”

“If he starts toward here, we’ll slide her into the ladies’ room.” That seemed to satisfy Olive, but I knew if Cully did come into Thayer, we’d be sunk.

The maintenance man passed behind the sign announcing *Thayer Theater, Department of Dramatic Arts*. His footprints made a feathery line in the snow.

Not ten yards from the Thayer entrance, he halted.

“No way,” Ann Marie said. “He’s still there.”

“C’mon, old man,” Fort said under her breath. “You have your nice warm office. Remember the one you couldn’t wait to get to? Head over there, damn you.”

Cully cupped an ungloved hand around a cigarette. That was when I noticed. Fluffy layers of snow covered everywhere, except the front steps of Thayer. Our own progress up the steps had trampled the virgin snow. I squeezed my eyes shut with a fervent wish that Cully could not see those flattened depressions that matched all our boots. I had an even more fervent wish that I could forget the prints originally made by Greta’s designer loafers.

My nerves jangled as Cully took more slow drags and flipped the cigarette butt into a drift. Then he tromped past Thayer toward his maintenance shed at the edge of the south lot.

I gave the signal. “Let’s go.”

Tiff bumped Greta like an old roll of carpet down Thayer’s snow-covered front steps. Ann Marie waited at the bottom holding the sled rope, and we talked out how to work the next phase.

“Put her facing downward, so the chin is balanced on the steering yoke,” Tiff said. “We used to ride a sled this way, flat on our stomachs, boots in the air. We could see where we were going.”

“Get a grip, Tiffany,” Olive said. “Whatever way we put her, Greta’s in no position to see a damn thing.”

A gust of Arctic wind flayed our exposed faces and chilled all air passages. We huffed in the cold air, our breath swirling upward in small clouds.

We eased the dreadful form onto the sled, with the head toward the back. I tried not to think of Greta’s feet in their soggy loafers. They would have hung over the front end, but the tarp lifted her ankles, keeping them together.

A northern gust clacked the bare limbs of maples lining the quad. The blast stole my breath, and I had to grab it back.

I wrapped the rope twice around the tarp, threading it under the wooden slats of the sled belly but above the runners. I didn't want a stray gust flapping it open. The snow settled into a small depression on the blue canvas. I nearly gagged. That would be Greta's neck.

"All set, Olive," I instructed with a huff.

As she pulled the sled rope, the sleigh sank into a drift and refused to budge. My heart sank with it. The tarp scraped under the snow's surface.

"Weren't there snowshoes in the storage room?" Ann Marie said. "We can place her on one of those, and use it like a toboggan or a rescue sled."

I looked at my watch. "No time. Cully will be coming back around. We have to do it this way. Tug hard."

"Mush," Fort said, pushing from the back.

The sled inched through the packed snow then gained traction, slipping over the drifts, building speed. The sled's steel cut into the crystal world, and the thing slid almost faster than we could trudge.

We slushed behind the theater and past the west lot, toward a stand of giant oaks. We entered the woods. The highest limbs still bowed and swooped in their macabre dance, but for us the chill wind had eased.

In the woods, broad trunks baffled the persistent wind. Between the trees, the wind had scoured bare patches of ground, and decaying leaves lacy with frost lay on the dark ground. I shuddered at how easily a pristine whiteness hid death. Paula had discovered how to hide her crimes. She was my aunt. Her blood of deception was in me.

The path lay under its snow blanket. We estimated its line and followed it, heading downward toward the cemetery caretaker's shack. Snow swirled into white cyclones around the monuments. Crystalline powder covered each headstone. A small angel statue stood atop a crypt, and white frosting covered the snow angel's head and tips of his wings. The name on the burial vault began with "DE." For a second, I thought that the body of Bradley Detweiler might also have been laid to rest on the campus of Crooked River, along with so many others. But this was not so.

"There's the shack," I said. The sled whisked to a halt.

I brushed the door with my gloved fingers, and my heart dropped. The rusty door sported a shiny strong combination lock capped with snow. Fort's picks were useless here.

What next?

Fort and I looked at each other. Tiff had her shovel. Ann Marie had the box of rock salt.

Our only remaining option was the unfrozen pond.

###

Later that night, from Tiff's room overlooking the quad, we crouched in darkness and watched Cully make his rounds. He waded through the new drifts of snow and checked the locked door to the auditorium. Snow fell through the night and into the next afternoon. It covered our footprints across campus, erasing our trampled route to the cemetery. It lay over the snow angel-shaped spot we had cleared on the pond shore, across from where the boat launch would open in the spring. The blizzard had left a white shroud expiating all our sins.

Once the electricity came on, there was still no panic about Greta's disappearance. We learned that in fits of pique with her parents, she had run away a few times before. Her travelling parents assumed that on the night of the storm, she had followed the pattern and vanished as if she had never been. Apparently, Greta's close family was as fraudulent as her many narratives.

Heavy snows blanketed the pond, adding layers to the sturdy ice cover. Cold grasped the earth in the time-honored New England process perfected over glacial eons. Six-inch snows followed by clear, frigid nights soon made the ice safe for skaters. When Ethan Brock asked me to a skating party on Valentine's Day, I declined. For me, the ice house over our secret was still not built.

In mid-April, instead of snow, the skies released bitter rain. Pond ice cracked and melted. And when the tiny buds formed on the tree limbs and the lilacs burst into lavender fragrance from heart-shaped leaves, I passed my history seminar, Fort was accepted into med school, and Ann Marie began her clinicals. Tiff's probation ended. She hitched home to California, made a CD, and landed a recording contract in Los Angeles. Olive finally scraped up enough money for airfare to the Windy City. The night of Greta's secret sleigh ride faded into white oblivion.

Every winter, when the first nor'easter blows, Ethan and I watch our kids getting ready for Christmas, excited about sledding, and a steel runner slides across my heart. My memory descends to that frigid basement where stacks of copy paper boxes conceal a gasoline-stained floor.

The story from Aunt Paula was wrong on many counts, but she was right about one thing. Old secrets never leave. They haunt with rasping whispers. *Did you ever do anything you were sorry for?* So many times, I tried to say, "Honey, I have something to tell you." I would, someday. Until then, nearly every hour brings that alarmed stomach flutter that the world has moved without me, and I have to live without knowing my place in it.