

Chill Factor

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Published by Hodder

Extract

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CHAPTER

I

THE GRAVE WAS SUBSTANDARD.

The storm was forecast to be a record breaker.

Little more than a shallow bowl gouged out of unyielding earth, the grave had been dug for Millicent Gunn—age eighteen, short brown hair, delicate build, five feet four inches tall, reported missing a week ago. The grave was long enough to accommodate her height. Its depth, or lack thereof, could be remedied in the spring, when the ground began to thaw. If scavengers didn't dispose of the body before then.

Ben Tierney shifted his gaze from the new grave to the others nearby. Four of them. Forest debris and vegetative decay provided natural camouflage, yet each lent subtle variations to the rugged topography if one knew what to look for. A dead tree had fallen across one, concealing it entirely except to someone with a discerning eye.

Like Tierney.

He took one last look into the empty, shallow grave, then picked up the shovel at his feet and backed away. As he did, he noticed the dark imprints left by his boots in the white carpet of sleet. They didn't concern him overmuch. If the meteorologists were calling it right, the footprints would soon be covered by several inches of frozen precipitation. When the ground thawed, the prints would be absorbed into the mud.

In any case, he didn't stop to worry about them. He had to get off the mountain. Now.

He'd left his car on the road a couple hundred yards from the summit and the makeshift graveyard. Although he was now moving downhill, there was no path to follow through the dense woods. Thick ground cover gave him limited traction, but the terrain was uneven and hazardous, made even more so by the blowing precipitation that hampered his vision. Though he was in a hurry, he was forced to pick his way carefully to avoid a misstep.

Weathermen had been predicting this storm for days. A confluence of several systems had the potential of creating one of the worst winter storms in recent memory. People in its projected path were being advised to take precautions, stock provisions, and rethink travel plans. Only a fool would have ventured onto the mountain today. Or someone with pressing business to take care of.

Like Tierney.

The cold drizzle that had been falling since early afternoon had turned into freezing rain mixed with sleet. Pellets of it stung his face like pinpricks as he thrashed through the forest. He hunched his shoulders, bringing his collar up to his ears, which were already numb from cold.

The wind velocity had increased noticeably. Trees were taking a beating, their naked branches clacking together like rhythm sticks in the fierce wind. It stripped needles off the evergreens and whipped them about. One struck his cheek like a blow dart.

Twenty-five miles an hour, out of the northwest, he thought with that part of his brain that automatically registered the current status of his surroundings. He knew these things—wind velocity, time, temperature, direction—instinctually, as though he had a built-in weather vane, clock, thermometer, and GPS constantly feeding pertinent information to his subconscious.

It was an innate talent that he had developed into a skill, which had been finely tuned by spending much of his adult life outdoors. He didn't have to think consciously about this ever-changing environmental data but frequently relied on his ability to grasp it immediately when it was needed.

He was relying on it now, because it wouldn't do to be caught on

the summit of Cleary Peak—the second highest in North Carolina, after Mount Mitchell—carrying a shovel and running away from four old graves and one freshly dug.

The local police weren't exactly reputed for their dogged investigations and crime-solving success. In fact, the department was a local joke. The chief was a has-been, big-city detective who'd been ousted from the department on which he'd served.

Chief Dutch Burton now led a band of inept small-town officers—yokels outfitted in spiffy uniforms with shiny badges—who had been hard-pressed to catch the culprit spray-painting obscenities on the trash receptacles behind the Texaco station.

Now they were focused on the five unsolved missing persons cases. Despite their insufficiencies, Cleary's finest had deduced that having five women vanish from one small community within two and a half years was, in all probability, more than a coincidence.

In a metropolis, that statistic would have been trumped by others even scarier. But here, in this mountainous, sparsely populated area, the disappearances of five women were staggering.

Further, it was a generally held opinion that the missing women had met with foul play, so finding human remains, not the women themselves, was the task facing the authorities. Suspicion would fall on a man carrying a shovel through the woods.

Like Tierney.

Up till now, he had flown under the radar of Police Chief Burton's curiosity. It was crucial to keep it that way.

In pace with his footsteps, he clicked off the vital statistics of the women buried in the graves on the summit. Carolyn Maddox, a twenty-six-year-old who had a deep bosom, beautiful black hair, and large brown eyes. Reported missing last October. A single mom and sole supporter of a diabetic child, she had cleaned rooms at one of the guest lodges in town. Her life had been a cheerless, nonstop cycle of toil and exhaustion.

Carolyn Maddox was getting plenty of peace and rest now. As was Lauren Elliott. Single, blond, and overweight, she had worked as a nurse at a medical clinic.

Betsy Calhoun, a widowed homemaker, had been older than the others.

Torrie Lambert, the youngest of them, had also been the first, the prettiest, and the only one not a resident of Cleary.

Tierney picked up his speed, trying to outrun his haunting thoughts as well as the weather. Ice was beginning to coat tree limbs like sleeves. Boulders were becoming glazed with it. The steep, curving road down to Cleary would soon become unnavigable, and it was imperative that he get off this goddamn mountain.

Fortunately, his built-in compass didn't fail him, and he emerged from the woods no more than twenty feet from where he'd entered it. He wasn't surprised to see that his car was already coated with a thin layer of ice and sleet.

As he approached it, he was breathing hard, emitting bursts of vapor into the cold air. His descent from the summit had been arduous. Or perhaps his labored breathing and rapid heart rate were caused by anxiety. Or frustration. Or regret.

He placed the shovel in the trunk of his car. Peeling off the latex gloves he'd been wearing, he tossed them into the trunk as well, then shut the lid. He got into the car and quickly closed the door, welcoming shelter from the biting wind.

Shivering, he blew on his hands and vigorously rubbed them together in the hope of restoring circulation to his fingertips. The latex gloves had been necessary, but they hadn't provided any protection against the cold. He took a pair of cashmere-lined leather gloves from a coat pocket and pulled them on.

He turned the ignition key.

Nothing happened.

He pumped the accelerator and tried again. The motor didn't even growl. After several more unsuccessful tries, he leaned back against the seat and stared at the gauges on the dashboard as though expecting them to communicate what he was doing wrong.

He cranked the key one more time, but the engine remained as dead and silent as the women crudely buried nearby.

"Shit!" He thumped both gloved fists against the steering wheel and stared straight ahead, although there was nothing to look at. A sheet of ice had completely obscured the windshield. "Tierney," he muttered, "you're screwed."

CHAPTER

2

THE WIND HAS PICKED UP, AND THERE'S ICY STUFF FALLING out there," Dutch Burton remarked as he let the drape fall back into place over the window. "We'd better start down soon."

"I need to empty these few shelves, then I'll be done." Lilly took several hardcover editions from the built-in bookcase and placed them in a packing box.

"You always enjoyed reading when we came up here."

"That's when I had time to catch up on the latest best-sellers. Nothing to distract me here."

"Except me, I guess," he said. "I remember pestering you until you put your book aside and paid attention to me."

She glanced up at Dutch from where she sat on the floor and smiled. But she didn't pursue his fond recollection of how they'd spent their leisure time in the mountain retreat. Initially they had come here on weekends and holidays to escape their hectic schedules in Atlanta.

Later they'd come here simply to escape.

She was packing what remained of her personal belongings to take with her when she left today. She wouldn't be coming back. Neither would Dutch. This would be the last page written—an epilogue, actually—of their life together. She had hoped to make their

final farewell as unsentimental as possible. He seemed determined to stroll down memory lane.

Whether his recollections of times past were designed to make him feel better or to make her feel worse, she didn't want to engage in them. Their good times together had been so eclipsed by their bad ones that any memory reopened wounds.

She steered the topic back to pragmatic matters. "I made copies of all the closing documents. They're in that envelope, along with a check for your half of the sale."

He looked down at the manila envelope but left it lying on the oak coffee table where she had placed it. "It's not right. My getting half."

"Dutch, we've been through this." She folded down the four sections of the box top to seal it, wishing she could close the argument as easily.

"You paid for this cabin," he said.

"We purchased it together."

"But your salary made that possible. We couldn't have afforded it on mine."

She pushed the box along the floor to the door, then stood up and faced him. "We were married when we bought it, married when we shared it."

"Married when we made love in it."

"Dutch—"

"Married when you served me my morning coffee wearing nothing but a smile and that afghan," he said, motioning in the general direction of the knitted throw on the back of the armchair.

"Please don't do this."

"That's my line, Lilly." He took a step closer to her. "Don't do this."

"It's already done. It's been done for six months."

"You could undo it."

"You could accept it."

"I'll *never* accept it."

"That's your choice." She paused, took a breath, brought the volume down. "That's always your choice, Dutch. You refuse to accept change. And because you can't, you never get over anything."

“I don’t want to get over you,” he argued.

“You’ll have to.”

She turned away from him, pulled an empty box nearer the bookcase, and began filling it with books, although taking less care with them than before. She was now in a hurry to leave, before she was forced to say more hurtful things in order to convince him that their marriage was, finally and forever, over.

Several minutes of tense silence were broken only by the sighing of the wind through the trees surrounding the cabin. Branches knocked against the eaves with increasing frequency and force.

She wished he would leave ahead of her, preferred he not be there when she left the cabin. Knowing that it would be for the last time, he might have an emotional meltdown. She’d been through such scenes before and didn’t want to experience another. Their leave-taking didn’t have to be bitter and ugly, but Dutch was making it so by resurrecting old quarrels.

Although clearly it wasn’t his intention, his rehashing of these arguments only underscored how right she’d been to end the marriage.

“I think this Louis L’Amour is yours.” She held up a book. “Do you want it, or shall I leave it for the new owners?”

“They’re getting everything else,” he said morosely. “Just as well throw in a paperback book.”

“It was easier to sell the furnishings along with the cabin,” she said. “The furnishings were bought specifically for this place and wouldn’t look right in any other house. Besides, neither of us has extra space, so what would I have done with it? Move it all out only to sell it to someone else? And where would I have stored it in the meantime? It made more sense to include everything in the sell price.”

“That’s not the point, Lilly.”

She knew the point. He didn’t want to think of strangers living in the cabin, using their things. Leaving everything intact for someone else to enjoy seemed to him like a sacrilege, a violation of the privacy and intimacy they’d shared in these rooms.

I don’t care how sensible it is to sell the whole kit and caboodle, Lilly. Screw sensible! How can you bear to think of other people sleeping in our bed between our sheets?

That had been his reaction when she'd told him her plans for the furnishings. Obviously her decision still riled him, but it was too late for her to change her mind even if she were so inclined. Which she wasn't.

When the shelves in the bookcase were empty, save for the lone Western novel, she looked around for anything she might have missed. "Those canned goods," she said, pointing to the grocery items she'd placed on the bar that separated the kitchen from the living area. "Do you want to take them with you?"

He shook his head.

She added them to the last box of books, which was only half full. "I scheduled the utilities to be disconnected, since the new owners won't be occupying the cabin until spring." Doubtless he already knew all this. She was talking to fill the silence, which seemed to become conversely weightier the more of herself she removed from the cabin.

"I have some last-minute items in the bathroom to gather up, then I'll be out of here. I'll shut off everything, lock up, then, as agreed, drop off the key at the realtor's office on my way out of town."

His misery was evident in his expression, his stance. He nodded but didn't say anything.

"You don't have to wait on me, Dutch. I'm sure you have responsibilities in town."

"They'll keep."

"With an ice and snow storm forecast? You'll probably be needed to direct traffic in the supermarket," she said, making light. "You know how everyone stocks up for the siege. Let's say our good-byes now, and you can get a head start down the mountain."

"I'll wait on you. We'll leave together. Do what you need to do in there," he said, indicating the bedroom. "I'll load these boxes into your trunk."

He hefted the first box and carried it out. Lilly went into the next room. The bed, with a nightstand on each side, fit compactly against the wall under the sloping ceiling. The only other furnishings were a rocking chair and a bureau. Windows made up the far wall. A closet and small bath were behind the wall opposite the windows.

Earlier she had drawn the drapes, so the room was gloomy. She checked the closet. The empty hangers on the rod looked forlorn. Nothing had been overlooked in the bureau drawers. She went into the bathroom and collected the toiletries she had used that morning, zipped them into a plastic travel case, and after checking to make certain that she'd left nothing in the medicine chest, returned to the bedroom.

She added the bag of toiletries to her suitcase, which lay open on the bed, then closed it just as Dutch rejoined her.

Without preamble of any kind, he said, "If it hadn't been for Amy, we'd still be married."

Lilly looked down and slowly shook her head. "Dutch, please, let's not—"

"If not for that, we'd have lasted forever."

"We don't know that."

"I do." He reached for her hands. They felt cold in his hot clutch. "I take full responsibility for everything. Our failure was my fault. If I'd have handled things differently, you wouldn't have left me. I see that now, Lilly. I acknowledge the mistakes I made, and they were huge. Stupid. I admit that. But, please, give me another chance. Please."

"We could never go back to the way we were before, Dutch. We're not the same people as when we met. Don't you realize that? No one can change what happened. But it changed us."

He seized on that. "You're right. People change. I've changed since the divorce. Moving up here. Taking this job. It's all been good for me, Lilly. I realize that Cleary is a far cry from Atlanta, but I've got something to build on here. A solid foundation. It's my home, and the people here know me and all my kinfolk. They like me. Respect me."

"That's wonderful, Dutch. I want you to succeed here. I wish that for you with all my heart."

She did indeed want him to succeed, not only for his sake but for hers. Until Dutch had reaffirmed himself as a good cop, especially in his own mind, she would never be entirely free of him. He would remain dependent on her for his self-esteem until he was once again confident about his work and himself. The small community of

Clearly afforded him that opportunity. She hoped to God it worked out well.

“My career, my life,” he said in a rush, “have been given fresh starts. But that won’t mean anything if you’re not part of it.”

Before she could stop him, he put his arms around her and pulled her tightly against him. He spoke urgently, directly into her ear. “Say you’ll give us another chance.” He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head aside.

“Dutch, let go of me.”

“Remember how good we used to be together? If you’d ever let down your guard, we’d be right back where we started. We could forget all the bad stuff and return to the way we were. We couldn’t keep our hands off each other, remember?” He tried again to kiss her, this time grinding his lips insistently against hers.

“Stop it!” She pushed him away.

He fell back a step. His breathing was loud in the room. “You still won’t let me touch you.”

She crossed her arms over her middle, hugging herself. “You’re not my husband anymore.”

“You’ll never forgive me, will you?” he shouted angrily. “You used what happened with Amy as an excuse to divorce me, but that’s not what it was about at all, was it?”

“Go, Dutch. Leave before—”

“Before I lose control?” He sneered.

“Before you disgrace yourself.”

She held her ground against his mean glare. Then, turning away quickly, he stamped from the room. He grabbed the envelope on the coffee table and snatched his coat and hat off the pegs near the door. Without taking time to put them on, he slammed the door behind himself hard enough to rattle the windowpanes. Seconds later she heard his Bronco’s engine start and the scattering of gravel beneath its oversize tires as he peeled away.

She sank onto the edge of the bed, covering her face with her hands. They were cold and trembling. Now that it was over, she realized that she’d been not only angry and repulsed but afraid.

This Dutch with the hair-trigger temper was not the disarming man she had married. Despite his claims to have made a fresh start,

he looked desperate. That desperation translated into frightening, mercurial mood shifts.

She was almost ashamed of the relief that washed over her from knowing that she never had to see him again. It was finally over. Dutch Burton was out of her life.

Exhausted by the encounter, she lay back on the bed and placed her forearm across her eyes.

She was awakened by the sound of sleet pellets striking the tin roof.

Go-rounds with Dutch always had left her exhausted. The tense encounters they'd had during the past week, while she was in Cleary to finalize the sale of the cabin, must have taken more of a toll on her than even she had realized. After this last one, her body had kindly shut down her mind for a while and allowed her to sleep.

She sat up, rubbing her arms against the chill. The cabin bedroom had grown dark, too dark for her even to read her wristwatch. She got up, went to the window, and pulled back the edge of the drapery. It let in very little light but enough for her to see her watch.

The time surprised her. She'd slept deeply and dreamlessly but, actually, not that long. As dark as it was, she had expected it to be much later. The low clouds enwrapping the mountaintop had created a premature and eerie darkness.

The ground was now covered with an opaque layer of sleet. It continued to fall, intermingled with freezing rain and what meteorologists call snow grains, tiny chips that look more menacing than their lacy cousins. Tree branches were already encased in tubes of ice, which were growing discernibly thicker. A strong wind buffeted the windowpanes.

It had been careless of her to fall asleep. That mistake was going to cost her a harrowing trip down the mountain road. Even after she reached Cleary, weather would probably factor into her long drive back to Atlanta. Having dispatched her business here, she was anxious to get home, return to her routine, get on with her life. Her office would be a bog of backed-up paperwork, e-mail, and projects, all demanding her immediate attention. But rather than dread her return, she looked forward to tackling the tasks waiting on her.

Besides being homesick for her work, she was ready to leave

Dutch's hometown. She adored Cleary's ambience and the beautiful, mountainous terrain surrounding it. But the people here had known Dutch and his family for generations. As long as she was his wife, she'd been warmly received and accepted. Now that she had divorced him, townsfolk had turned noticeably cool toward her.

Considering how hostile he'd been when he left the cabin, it was past time for her to leave his territory.

Acting hastily, she carried her suitcase into the front room and set it beside the door. Then she gave the cabin one final, rapid inspection, checking to see that everything had been turned off and that nothing belonging to her or Dutch had been overlooked.

Satisfied that all was in order, she put on her coat and gloves and opened the front door. The wind struck her with a force that stole her breath. As soon as she stepped onto the porch, ice pellets stung her face. She needed to shield her eyes against them, but it was too dark to put on sunglasses. Squinting against the sleet, she carried her suitcase to the car and placed it in the backseat.

Back inside the cabin, she quickly used her inhaler. Breathing cold air could bring on an asthma attack. The inhaler would help prevent that. Then, taking no time for even one last, nostalgic look around, she pulled the door closed and locked the dead bolt with her key.

The interior of her car was as cold as a refrigerator. She started the motor but had to wait for the defroster to warm before she could go anywhere; the windshield was completely iced over. Pulling her coat more closely around her, she buried her nose and mouth in the collar and concentrated on breathing evenly. Her teeth were chattering, and she couldn't control her shivers.

Finally the air from the car's defroster became warm enough to melt the ice on the windshield into a slush, which her windshield wipers were able to sweep away. They couldn't, however, keep up with the volume of freezing precipitation. Her visibility was sorely limited, but it wasn't going to improve until she reached lower elevations. She had no choice but to start down the winding Mountain Laurel Road.

It was familiar to her, but she'd never driven it when it was icy.

She leaned forward over the steering wheel, peering through the frosted windshield, straining to see beyond the hood ornament.

On the switchbacks, she hugged the right shoulder and rocky embankment, knowing that on the opposite side of the road were steep drop-offs. She caught herself holding her breath through the hairpin curves.

Inside her gloves, her fingertips were so cold they were numb, but her palms were sweaty as she gripped the steering wheel. Tension made the muscles of her shoulders and neck burn. Her anxious breathing grew more uneven.

Hoping to improve her visibility, she rubbed her coat sleeve across the windshield, but all that accomplished was to give her a clearer view of the dizzy swirl of sleet.

And then, suddenly, a human figure leaped from the wooded embankment onto the road directly in her path.

Reflexively she stamped on her brake pedal, remembering too late that braking abruptly was the wrong thing to do on an icy road. The car went into a skid. The figure in her headlights jumped back, trying to get out of the way. Wheels locked, the car slid past him, the back end fishtailing wildly. Lilly felt a bump against her rear fender. With a sinking sensation in her stomach, she realized he'd been struck.

That was her last sickening thought before the car crashed into a tree.