

*December 5, 1979 -*

A blast of frigid air ripped through the parking lot whipping Janet's long, dark hair. She gripped the front of her coat, pulled it tight around her, and ran for the entry door of the banquet hall. Shaking her head to sluff the snow out of her hair, she opened the door and stepped inside to the warmth of the lobby. There, she removed her gloves, shoved them in her pockets, and made her way through the lounge to the reception hall.

She was an hour late and most of the one hundred or so guests for her brother's wedding were already there. Her gaze swept over the sea of white linen-covered tables and searched for her father. When she saw him, she took a deep breath and headed in his direction.

"Where've you been?" he said, getting up to greet her. He pulled her into a practiced hug as if they saw each other every day. But the fact was, he hadn't seen her in over six months.

"Traffic," she said. She flashed a smile toward his wife, Christine, and said, "Sorry I missed you at church. Love the gown." She took in Christine's long, black, strapless formal and the necklace of gold winking back at her, wondering how much they set her father back.

"Thanks. How've you been?" Christine replied.

"Not bad. Nice place."

"Nothing but the best for your brother," Christine said, flashing a pretentious smile at her husband. When Janet saw her father frown, she wondered what was going on between the two of them.

Janet's father said, "This is John and Sarah Barrett, friends of Christine's. They're loaning their beachfront house to Craig for his honeymoon. Isn't that nice of them?"

"Yes, very," Janet said.

"So, you're Craig's sister! The picture on your father's mantel doesn't do you justice," Sarah said.

Janet took the compliment in stride, trying to figure out just what picture that might be.

"My daughter here is a freelance photographer for one of those nature magazines out west," Janet's father said. "Is that what they call them these days?"

"Close enough, Dad."

"All very exciting, I'm sure," Christine said.

"Ah, there's my boy," Janet's father said, cutting in. His graveled voice stormed across the room. "Hey, Craig, come over here and tell your sister about that new job of yours." To Janet, he winked and said, "He hooked himself up with a firm down in West Palm Beach."

Craig looked up from talking with the band and started for them. "Hey, Janny," he said, giving her a brotherly hug. "Damned weather. Sorry we missed you at the church. How was the flight?"

"It was." Janet said eying her brother affectionately. She had long gotten over her envy of her father's favoritism toward her brother. It wasn't Craig's fault her father had always favored him over her. Craig was his shining star. A high school football legend and M.I.T. graduate, Craig had carved a place out in his father's heart long before she arrived on the scene and it was a place she could never fill.

At six-foot three, his sleek, muscular frame towered over her. "Yeah, I know, shitty," Craig said. "But you're here and that's all that counts."

Janet pulled away from him, straightened his tie, and patted the lapel of his tux. Even though he was eight years older than her, she'd always thought of him as a little brother who needed looking after. "So, Dad tells me you have a new job."

"Yeah, and I'm gonna need it 'cause Belinda has lots of plans."

"I bet," Janet said, knowing Belinda came from a large family.

"Say look, I gotta get back to her. Catch ya later?"

"Of course," Janet replied and gave him the thumbs-up.



The snow continued to fall throughout dinner, and with each glance out the window, Janet grew more wary of the drive back to her hotel. She nibbled at her dessert as the chatter flowed around the table, much of it about people she didn't know--high society friends of Christine's and their various exploits.

As she pulled her black sweater cape off the back of her chair and wrapped it around her shoulders, her father leaned toward her, and said, "So, how's things with June's estate?"

"It's in probate. Shouldn't be much longer, a couple more months maybe," Janet said.

"Any idea what you're going to do with another house and a rental cottage?"

"I haven't thought about it, to tell you the truth."

Her father finished the last of his cake and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Well, you'd better start. The sooner you get them on the market, the better."

Janet frowned. "I'm not sure I want to sell."

"Well, what are you gonna do with all that property?" her father asked, eying her pointedly.

Janet didn't want to talk about it. It had only been five months since her beloved aunt passed away, and she missed her terribly. "Dad, can we change the subject please?"

"Yeah, sure." He was quiet a moment then nodded toward the window. "Wow, it's coming down pretty hard out there. You're welcome to crash at our place."

"Thanks, but no."

Now it was his turn to frown. "What is it with you, Janny? Do you hate Christine that much?"

Janet set her fork down. "I don't hate her, Dad. I just don't like everything I do being judged."

"Judged?"

"Yes." Janet sighed. "I'm sorry, but it's the way she makes me feel."

"I see." He turned and started for the bar.

Janet rose, collected her purse, and followed him. When she caught up next to him, she said, "Dad, I love you, you know that, right?"

Her father shot her a tight smile. "Right. Don't worry about it, Skeeter, it's okay." He glanced toward the windows. "You'd better get a move on. Don't forget to say goodbye to your brother."

*Why does it always end like this?* Though, in truth, she knew the reason. It was her always slapping away his helping hand. But then, it was a little late for his helping hand. Where was he when she needed him? "Yeah, right. I'll call you later. Maybe we can do something tomorrow."

"Sure," he said. "Sounds like a plan."

Janet looked off, biting back the urge to say, forget it, then reached up and pecked him on the cheek. "I'm gonna go find Craig. Love you."

He studied her a moment, as if he were trying to decide whether she meant it, then nodded. "Me, too."



Twenty minutes later, Janet was driving down the snow packed highway trying to avoid the deep ruts that were running along the shoulder of the road. The car skated back and forth, drifting dangerously close to the snow packed shoulder of the road. She backed the wipers off as the exit ramp from I-80 neared. On it was a semi moving at a fair clip. As it merged onto County Route 82, she moved into the passing lane.

"Just what I need," she growled. Her heart raced as she braced her hands on the wheel. The truck sprayed slush at her windshield. The road suddenly disappeared. Thunk! The wheel jerked loose in her hands and the car dove, knifing into the darkness until it jolted to a halt.

Janet sat shaking for several minutes. Her throat burned, and the taste of bile swam in her mouth. She swallowed, forced it down, and gulped a deep breath. The sound of her heart thumped in her ears. Her head ached. *Am I Okay?* Gingerly, she moved her legs and then her arms. Nothing hurt. That was good. She pulled the key out of the ignition. Sat back. Tried to make sense of what had happened.

Truck--slush--windshield--can't see--steering wheel--ouch. Her wrist. It hurt. She rubbed it. The car? Shit! Was there a huge gash on the front end? A tire turned under like a broken ankle? She brought her hands to her head. Kneaded her aching neck.

She looked out the driver's side window. Snow was up to the rear-view mirror. Getting out that way was impossible. She crawled across to the passenger side and peered out, put her shoulder to the door and pushed it open.

Outside, the wind whipped across the median and icy grit slapped her face. She burrowed her head into the lapel of her coat and trudged through the knee-deep snow. *Think, Janet, think.* But the only thing that came to mind was to walk. But to where?

She ground her hands into her pockets and kicked at a chunk of hard packed snow. Tears collected in her eyes and slipped over her cheeks. "What am I gonna do? I'm so screwed," she muttered, plopping back against the rear of the car.

As she stood there, a pair of bright headlights came over the crest of the road. A moment later, a large pickup slowed down and pulled up behind her. The driver's side window slid down.

"You okay?" said a voice from inside.

She nodded as the door opened and a man got out. He was big, towering over her. In the dark of night, he looked like a monster out of a B-budget movie. She backed up keeping her distance.

He put up his hand. "It's okay. I'm here to help. You look like you're freezing. Why don't you get in my truck while I call a wrecker?"

"No, I'm okay, really."

He trudged closer and she saw a ruddy hard-bitten face. Mysterious, dark eyes stared back. A bushy mustache spilled out under a broad nose. A mop of short, curly hair tickled his ears. Add a beard and a red suit and she could easily imagine him being Santa Claus. But he wasn't Santa Claus, and he was there with her on a dark road in the middle of the night. There was nothing between them except the wind and her long distance running legs, which were one step away from being jelly.

"Alright," he said. "At least let me get you a blanket." He went back to his truck and brought her a thick woolen wrap reeking of smoke. He handed it to her with an outstretched hand. "So what happened?"

"I was run off the road by a semi," she said, pulling the blanket around her shoulders.

The man shook his head. "Damn cowboys!" He eyed her then the car, then back at her again. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." She backed up a step and turned around, sizing up the damage to her car. It didn't look like there were any dents or creases. It was buried. *If I could just get it out, no one would ever have to know. But doing it will need his help. That means . . .* She chewed her lip. "You think we could pull it out of there?"

"The car?"

"Yeah."

"Not without chains."

"You wouldn't happen to have any would you?"

The man's brow wrinkled. "I do, but I don't know. You're buried in there pretty good. I think it's best to call a wrecker."

"Cept it's a rental," Janet said.

He drummed his fingers on the hood of his truck. At last, he said, "We can try it, but I can't guarantee anything." He waded out into the snowy median and surveyed the car. After a once around, he came back. "I really think it's better to call a wrecker. I could end up doing more harm than good."

She looked up at the blackened sky and closed her eyes.

After a relenting sigh, she heard him say, "Okay, you go around and climb in while I see what I can do." He stepped over to the back of his truck as she got in her rental, and two minutes later, she heard him pawing around underneath her car. It seemed like he was under there forever before he finally knocked on her passenger side window.

She rolled it down.

"Okay," he said. "When you see me flash my lights, you give her the gas, alright? Don't stop until you feel the wheels grip the road."

She nodded and watched him trudge back through the snow. A moment later, the truck's lights flashed in her rear-view mirror. She stepped on the pedal, pushing it to the floor. The car lurched backward as the tires spun, screaming into the night.

Suddenly, the tension between the two vehicles eased. The pickup's lights flashed, and shortly afterward he was at her window again. "We made a little headway, but I just don't have enough traction. One last time and if you're not out, we call a wrecker."

She nodded. *Please, please. Just once, give me a break.* The truck's headlights flashed, and her foot slammed on the accelerator. The car shimmied and moved back inch-by-inch. She gripped the wheel, as if doing so would make the car try harder. *Don't stop, please don't stop!* The acrid smell of burning rubber drifted through the open window as the rear of the car shifted and came to a grinding halt.

The man got out of his truck and trudged back to her window. "You're half way out," he said, "but that's as far as you're gonna get."

"Just one more time . . . please?" she muttered.

He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Okay, one last time."

He grabbed his shovel, dug more snow out around her tires, and got back into his truck. The lights flashed, and a moment later Janet's rental car lurched back, breaking free of the deep snow. Relieved, she sighed and got out as the man pulled his tow chain free.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said.

"Forget it. I have a daughter your age. I'd hope someone would do the same for her if she were in your shoes." He bent down and started clearing her snow-packed wheel wells. "You live around here?"

"I'm heading into the city."

"Alright. When I'm through, I'll follow you in. Make sure you get where you're going."

"That's alright, I'll be fine." She dug into her purse. Pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Here."

He looked up and frowned. "Put it away."

*Great, now I've insulted him.* "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He stood up and dusted the snow off his jeans.

"Thanks. I'm Janet."

He put his shovel in the back of his truck. "Neil, Neil Porter."